
Student Advisor Winter 2008 Term Report

In accordance with the criteria for the Term Report set out in the Memorandum of Agreement, please find below an account of the following:

1. Statistics on number of cases, including a distinction between new and continuing cases
2. Statistics on types of cases
3. Statistics on offices to which referrals were made or from which information was provided
4. Description of follow-up taken

1. Statistics on number of cases

- 26 students total
- 21 new cases
- 5 continuing cases (carried over from fall term)

2. Statistics on types of cases

- 3 involved a (potential) appeal against an academic decision: two were resolved informally in the student's favor (one through the efforts of another advisor); the third sought initial advice and has not followed up with our office – I am not aware of the outcome.
- 1 involved a potential appeal of an assigned grade; the student sought initial advice only.
- 1 involved an informal notice of a pending charge of academic dishonesty; the student sought initial advice, and the charge was withdrawn and never pursued.
- 16 involved various administrative inquiries (questions about SGSR or department policies, program requirements, how to change programs, funding eligibility, thesis completion, medical or parental leaves, admissions, thesis defence scheduling, etc.).
- 4 involved health/disability accommodation.
- 5 involved potential discrimination issues (all were advised of the HRO service)
- 9 involved TA/TF or university employment issues (including hours, leaves, working relationship, funding consequences of refusal, termination pay, and problems arising from lack of a written contract) .
- 6 involved funding problems or questions.
- 4 involved leaves of absence.
- 16 involved stress & personal issues (usually in addition to other issues).
- 8 involved conflicts with a supervisor, department head, or other faculty member.
- 2 involved issues relating to a change of program.
- 1 involved concerns resulting from the death of a supervisor.

3. Statistics on offices to which referrals were made (including discussed or suggested as options) or from which information was provided

- Ban Righ Centre: 2
- Department office/website: 14
- Dept head/grad coordinator: 11
- Government website (EI): 2

- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 5
- Human Rights Office: 5
- Queen's International Centre: 5
- SGSR (deans/registrar/staff/website): 12
- Student Awards: 5
- Other Student Advisors: 6
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 5
- Queen's Legal Aid: 2
- QUFA: 1
- SGPS: 5
- Library: 1
- Career Services: 2
- Private lawyer: 2
- Upper-level Queen's administration: 2

Description of follow-up taken:

- Only one case this term involved extensive follow-up, which included correspondence and numerous meetings with six different faculty members, a department head, the director of Health/Counselling and Disability Services, two counselors, dispute resolution coordinator, Human Rights office, QUFA, and various levels of university administration (SGSR and Art/Sci). I have recently followed up with this student, who informed me that she is thriving academically, and that she likely would not have remained in her program if not for the service provided by our program.
- The other four cases carried over from the fall term required only monitoring, as the students involved practiced self-advocacy and kept me informed of their situation.
- The relatively minimal follow-up that other cases this term required was: conducting research (online or by telephone) before responding by email or telephone to various questions, sending follow-up emails to see if students required any further assistance, making telephone calls to offices (mostly the HRO or SGSR) while the student was present in the Advisor office, and, in one case, personally walking a student over to the Human Rights Office (which is very difficult for many people to find).
- In several cases I had initial contact with a student, and another Student Advisor ended up taking carriage of the file and conducting any necessary follow-up.

Note: Our program's policy of promoting self-advocacy (while providing people with helpful resources and strategic advice) results in the Student Advisors not finding out how many of the cases we deal with are finally resolved. Students who meet with us are given initial advice and this usually involves working out a plan for how they will address their problem in the immediate future. I would then tell them to feel free to contact me, at any point, should further problems arise or they feel they could use additional support. I also mention that they should feel free to send an email, if they want to, just to let me know when the situation is successfully resolved. Few students have ever done this, unless I have met with them multiple times; I usually only hear from a student again if further difficulties do indeed arise and they need more extensive assistance.

Recommendations:

I will leave more extensive and considered recommendations regarding the program to my upcoming annual report. At this point, I will just mention a few areas of concern that have come to my attention this term.

- **TA/TF issues:** this term has been marked by a rising number of students with concerns about their rights and responsibilities as TAs (or, less frequently, TFs). While many of the potential institutional safeguards that one would expect might protect university employees are non-existent for TAs, others that have been adopted at the level of Graduate School policy (such as the signing of TA contracts) do not appear to be consistently implemented at the department level. The TAs we counsel often feel helpless and are afraid to speak out about their concerns because they fear they may lose funding or damage their relationship with their department. I will discuss this concern at greater length during my annual report. However, it is encouraging to hear that people in the SGSR and SGPS are giving increased attention to this area of graduate student life, and looking for ways to improve the current system.
- **Access to funding, particularly beyond the fourth year:** as long as I have been a Student Advisor, this has been a major concern of the graduate students who use the program, and I am sure it is no surprise for those who would be reading this report. That said, it seems that this general problem seems to be disproportionately borne by international students, who often have far less access to the usual financial resources (such as bank loans) when their funding runs out. When we held a workshop for international graduate students this term, of the approximately 20 people who attended, all but one came to raise concerns about access to funding. I think it is reasonable to expect that this problem will be exacerbated by the coming tuition increase, which will also be disproportionately borne by international students.
- **Workplace harassment of graduate students that is not based (or with out a sound evidentiary basis for alleging that it is based) on a prohibited ground of discrimination:** I have discussed this problem in many previous reports, and it is an ongoing one, particularly for international students. There are no remedies available to students who are harassed by their supervisors or fellow graduate students, unless that harassment can be framed in Human Rights terms. The same is not true for faculty, who, through QUFA, have a policy protecting them against workplace harassment (it is also my understanding that QUFA is negotiating a policy that would protect faculty from harassment by students). International students less familiar with the academic culture of Queen's are particularly vulnerable to bullying and other forms of harassment by persons in authority. There is a great and urgent need for a generalized and enforced grievance policy and procedure to ensure that graduate students are free to pursue their work and studies in an environment free from psychological abuse and exploitation. Unfortunately, given the present power imbalance, aggravated by the fact that a unionized faculty is loathe to tolerate any policy that might have disciplinary consequences for its members, I suspect that this protection may not be institutionally feasible until graduate students are in a position to negotiate such a policy as part of a collective agreement.

Indeed, I would think that this sort of policy would be one of the most attractive aspects of potential unionization for those in the hard sciences and professional schools, who, while least financially insecure, appear hardest hit by such abuse.

- Student Advisor Program awareness: judging by our numbers this year, it would appear that graduate student awareness of the Student Advisor Program is decreasing. Obviously, we must take primary responsibility for correcting this situation. Advertisements for the Gazette (targeted to faculty members) and the Journal have been created and submitted this month. We are actively considering a variety of other promotional efforts, including meetings with individual graduate coordinators, to raise overall institutional awareness about us in the departments. It would be helpful, given the SGSR's ongoing financial support for the program, if the SGSR could assist us in making graduate students aware of our services when they come to the deans, or other staff, with a problem that is within our jurisdiction. I have now spoken to a number of students who had meetings with an Associate Dean of the SGSR, but were not made aware of the availability of our service until they were eventually referred to us by the Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms or the Human Rights Office. They have all been disappointed not to have been made aware of our confidential, supportive, and student-centered service sooner. While many department-level administrators may not be aware of our program (a situation we hope to rectify), those at SGSR are fully aware of the services we provide. I believe they would serve students well by ensuring that those who come to the SGSR with concerns are informed of the existence of the Student Advisor Program and that they may contact a confidential Advisor if they wish.