

## **Student Advisor Annual Report 2008-09**

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

1. Case statistics:
  - a. statistics on number of cases
  - b. statistics on types of cases
  - c. statistics on referrals
  - d. description of follow-up taken
2. Recommendations for improving existing policies/procedures related to the program

### **1. Case Statistics**

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#### **a. Statistics on number of cases**

Since the Memorandum of Agreement that was in effect for the Fall term did not require a record of case statistics, the case statistics provided here reflects the period between January and September 2008. In that period, I advised on 32 cases in total: 20 in the Winter Term and 12 in the Summer Term. Of those 32 cases, 17 required extended follow-up.

#### **b. Statistics on types of cases**

Of the 32 cases between January and September 2008:

- 4 involved an appeal against an academic decision: all 4 were resolved informally in the student's favor
- 1 involved an appeal of an assigned grade and was resolved in the student's favor
- 21 involved administrative inquiries such as inquiries about SGSR and departmental policies and procedures, program requirements, funding criteria and structure, thesis completion
- 10 involved health/disability accommodation
- 5 involved suspicion of discrimination
- 9 involved TA issues
- 14 involved funding issues
- 3 involved program conflicts(i.e. changes to the program & procedural violations)
- 13 involved stress & personal issues
- 14 involved supervisor-conflicts

### c. Statistics on referrals

- Ban Righ Centre: 5
- Department/faculty: 11
- Department head or graduate coordinator: 9
- Government office or website: 6
- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 10
- Human Rights Office: 4
- Queen's International Centre: 5
- SGSR Registrar: 8
- Student Awards: 8
- Writing Centre: 2

**d. Description of follow-up taken:** Follow-up on the 17 continuing cases involved research on policies and procedures; e-mails, meetings or phone conversations with the client; meetings with the client and the department (i.e. supervisor, professor, department head or graduate coordinator); phone calls or letters written on behalf of or in support of the client.

## 2. Recommendations

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### a. Policies on Graduate Supervision

I was very pleased to see a number of initiatives taken by the SGSR around graduate supervision. These include the Expanding Horizons workshop for graduate and professional students held in September and the "Focus on Graduate Supervision" workshop for supervisors forthcoming in April. I was also impressed by the initiative taken by David Rappaport in the summer to confer with the Advisors on this issue.

I am concerned, however, that the Advisors have not been granted a more active role in these workshops. In the case of the Expanding Horizons workshop, the Advisors were not invited by SGSR to take any part in it until they invited themselves. They were then relegated to the Question & Answer period rather than integrated into the workshop as a whole. If the purpose of the workshop was to arm students with strategies for successfully negotiating the complex supervisor-student relationship, it seems a disservice to those students to exclude those who have the most experience in helping students negotiate that relationship *from the student's perspective*. While the SGSR's perspective is equally important, it is necessarily limited, since the majority of conflicts resolved through the Student Advisor's office is resolved at the lowest informal level and therefore does not reach the SGSR's office or that of the Associate Dean. If the SGSR takes seriously the concerns about graduate supervision voiced by graduate and professional students via the Student Advisors office, then, it seems to me, the SGSR would enlist the services of the Student Advisors to find solutions to these conflicts, rather than exclude them from the forums in which they seek such solutions. I believe that both students and faculty members would not only benefit from hearing the Advisors' perspective on these issues, but also be keenly interested in it.

In addition to these proactive solutions such as workshops for students and professors, I believe an additional measure must be taken to protect students from those professors who fail to fulfill their responsibilities as supervisors—whether or not they've attended the workshops. As I have mentioned in past reports, this failure on the part of the supervisor seriously threatens the student's academic success and survival at Queen's, and by extension, the reputation of Queen's

graduate programmes overall. I therefore repeat my recommendation of past reports: that the SGSR develop, endorse and enforce policies and procedures that will protect the interests of both student and supervisor. In past reports, I have recommended a two-pronged approach of a) requiring faculty training for supervision and b) maintaining departmental records about supervision that would promote an expectation of accountability for supervisors. Whatever the final policies, I recommend once again that they are developed in close consultation with both faculty and graduate student members who are familiar with the common conflicts and potential pitfalls of graduate supervision. Such members might be the current or former Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms and a current or former SGPS Student Advisor.

### **b. Eligibility for the Student Advisor Position**

Having participated in two separate rounds of hiring for the two Student Advisor positions for 2008-09, I am convinced that subjecting the Advisor position to the terms and conditions of the Dean's Award seriously undermines the Program's efficacy by excluding from the position those best able to fulfill the Program's mandate. Where the Program's mandate is to provide students with information, advice, advocacy and support in the myriad of challenges they may face at Queen's, it is the upper-year doctoral students who have the deepest and most extensive experience of Queen's graduate life from which to draw in order to provide information, advice, advocacy and support. While this applies equally well to upper-year doctoral students who are still funding-eligible, our recent experience of hiring under the terms of the Dean's Award (as opposed to previous years, when this condition was not met) suggests that such students simply do not apply for the position. This is understandable: the third and fourth years of the doctoral program are those in which students must focus entirely on their dissertation in order to complete on time. TAs and TFs add to that workload. Indeed, I do not recall seeing an application from even a second-year doctoral student in either of the two recent rounds of hiring. This too is understandable, since it is generally in the second year that comprehensive exams take place. The result is that our pool of candidates is almost exclusively made up of Masters students and first-year doctoral students, whose experience with the challenges of graduate life is generally narrower than those at a more advanced stage in their academic program. I acknowledge that this is not necessarily the case, but that it is generally the case is attested by the fact that we could not find two adequately qualified individuals in our first round of hiring, which compelled us to repost the second position. It seems to me that it would benefit everyone—students, faculty and SGSR alike—if we opened our pool of candidates to those with the most experience in graduate life, which often translates into a deeper understanding of the issues, and therefore greater success in mediating between professors and students in resolving those issues. I therefore strongly urge the SGSR to remove this condition from their funding commitment in order to strengthen the Advisor Program and Queen's graduate programmes overall.

### **c. Case Statistics**

After recording and reporting on the case statistics required by the new Memorandum of Agreement for two terms now, I would like to highlight a significant gap in these statistics. While they identify the number and types of cases handled by each Advisor, they don't reflect the time spent on each case. As a result, the highest number of cases are those which require the

least amount of time and follow-up (those requiring only information or referral), while the fewest cases are those that are the most serious and require the most amount of time and follow-up (those requiring mediation or advocacy). Indeed, some last an entire term and may even resurface later in the year, though they are reported as a single case. It is not clear to me what the purpose is for these particular statistics, so I cannot suggest an alternative method that would satisfy that purpose. All I can say is that the current statistics do not accurately or adequately reflect the needs of the students we serve, the conflicts they face, or the work we do.