

Student Advisor Winter Term/Annual Report – 2008/2009

Introduction

It is important to note that each of the three Advisors independently draft their term and annual reports based on their own experiences serving students. The statistical information provided below does not reflect all students served by the program this fall, but only those that I served directly.

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

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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
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1. Number of cases (Winter Term)

- 29 cases total
- 27 new cases (1 potentially ongoing)
- 2 continuing/reopened cases (carried over from fall term)

2. Statistics on types of cases (Winter Term)

(Note: total number exceeds number of cases because some cases involve multiple issues)

- 9 cases involved conflicts with a supervisor or faculty member
- 6 cases involved a disputed grade or disputed evaluation process
- 5 cases involved potential human rights issues
- 5 cases involved assistance locating or accessing another campus service
- 4 cases involved supervisor/program change
- 4 cases involved funding challenges or request for a tuition refund
- 3 cases involved housing issues
- 3 cases involved assistance with a voluntary withdrawal
- 3 cases involved non-discriminatory harassment
- 2 cases involved intellectual property issues

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- 2 cases involved TA/RA employment issues
- 1 case involved a conflict with a research ethics board
- 1 case involved a conflict re an exchange of emails between students

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

- Dept head/grad coordinator: 13
- SGSR (deans/registrar/staff/website): 5
- Department office/website: 3
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 5
- SGPS: 2
- Human Rights Office: 5
- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 3
- Student Awards: 4
- Queen's Legal Aid: 2
- Other Student Advisors: 2
- Apartment & Housing Services: 1
- Legal Aid Ontario/Lawyer Referral Service: 1
- International Centre: 2
- Ban Righ Centre: 2
- Chaplin's Office: 1
- Queen's website: 1
- QCRED: 1
- Town Gown: 1
- Government Website: 1
- SHRC: 1
- IT Services: 1

4. Description of follow-up taken:

- 24 cases involved some or all of the following:
 - Online research
 - Contacting various campus offices (SGSR, Student Awards, QUIC, SGPS, etc.) to request information on behalf of an (often anonymous) student
 - Providing information, advice or communication and dispute resolution skills coaching
- 3 cases involved multiple meetings with the student concerned. All of these matters were resolved to the students' satisfaction.
- Only one case this term required my direct intervention. This case involved a purported comprehensive exam failure, and a possible recommendation to withdraw. Due to the relatively obvious nature of the procedural irregularities involved, the matter was successfully resolved in the student's favour at step one of the SGSR's academic appeal policy.
- One case involved a group of students with a series of questions relating to housing disputes and their rights and responsibilities as tenants. In this case, I prepared and delivered a brief workshop to the group of students, and answered questions from the group.

- One case is potentially ongoing. While the initial matter in this case was successfully resolved, it appears there may be further difficulties arising. I have briefed one of my co-advisors on this case, who has met with the student to discuss the new situation. I have provided my contact information to the co-advisor, should my further assistance be required regarding the history of the case.

Because our program strives to empower students to self-advocate, we are often unaware of the specific results obtained by students. I always encourage students to contact me again if they are unable to resolve matters on their own, if new difficulties arise, or if they want to let me know that everything was resolved. Most, I never hear from again. Those who do contact me again, generally do so require need more assistance or support. Rarely has a student that I have only briefly advised contacted me to let me know that a matter has been successfully resolved.

In accordance with the criteria for the **Annual Report** set out in the Memorandum of Agreement, please find below an account of the following **totals for the Fall and Winter terms**:

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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
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1. Statistics on total number of cases

- 55 cases total
- 52 new cases (1 potentially ongoing)
- 3 continuing/reopened cases (carried over from previous year)

2. Statistics on types of cases (total Fall/Winter)

- 17 cases involved conflicts with a supervisor or faculty member
- 8 cases involved a disputed grade or evaluation process
- 8 cases involved supervisor/program change
- 7 cases involved funding challenges or a request for a tuition refund
- 9 cases involved potential human rights issues
- 6 cases involved housing issues
- 6 cases involved non-discriminatory harassment
- 5 cases involved intellectual property issues
- 5 cases involved assistance locating or accessing another campus service
- 4 cases involved TA/RA employment issues
- 3 cases involved assistance with a voluntary withdrawal
- 2 cases involved possible email harassment
- 1 case involved a conflict re lab responsibilities

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- 1 case involved part-time status issues
- 1 case involved medical leave
- 1 case involved immigration issues
- 1 case involved a conflict re use of a listserv
- 1 case involved a conflict with a research ethics board
- 1 case involved a conflict re an exchange of emails between students

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

- Dept head/grad coordinator: 23
- SGSR (deans/registrar/staff/website): 12
- Department office/website: 9
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 10
- SGPS: 7
- Human Rights Office: 9
- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 6
- Student Awards: 7
- Queen's Legal Aid: 5
- Other Student Advisors: 5
- Apartment & Housing Services: 3
- Legal Aid Ontario/Lawyer Referral Service: 3
- International Centre: 4
- Town Gown: 3
- Kingston Immigrant Services: 1
- City Councillor: 1
- Ban Righ Centre: 3
- Chaplin's Office: 2
- Queen's Website: 2
- Government Office: 2
- AMS: 1
- QCRED: 1
- IT Services: 1
- SHRC: 1

Recommendations:

- **Workplace harassment of graduate students:** I applaud the ongoing efforts to address this issue through an expansive interpretation of QUFA's collective agreement. It is my understanding that procedures are being designed and developed to create a formal "informal" process for raising and addressing such complaints on a case-by-case basis. I would encourage future advisors to keep abreast of these developments and familiarize themselves with these policies, as complaints of this nature continue to arise with alarming regularity.

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- **Institutional memory of the Student Advisor Program:** One of the most serious weaknesses of the program (and the SGPS, more generally) is a lack of institutional memory. For a Student Advisor, knowledge is power – the more one knows about university practices, policies, resources and people, the more effectively one can advise and advocate for students. It takes several years as a student advisor to get a thorough understanding of how to approach and use the many offices and institutions on campus to achieve positive results for students. The program's high turn-over limits its overall effectiveness. This high turn-over is to some extent institutionalized by the requirement that two of the three advisors qualify for Deans Awards. Fortunately, it has been four years since the program faced a situation where all three Advisors were new to the position in a single year, and next year at least one Advisor will be returning.

One solution to this problem would be to create a permanent Student Advisor position (20-35 hours/week), one that would be capable of attracting and holding a qualified candidate for more than a couple years. Such a position would allow the program to dramatically increase its institutional memory and achieve a higher level of internal organization with respect to such matters as training, outreach and file management. The downside of this solution is that it would involve significant additional expense, and would require a renegotiation of the program's Memorandum of Agreement. One possible means of addressing the additional expense would be to combine the new role with that of the equity commissioner positions. This would give the program a clear dual mandate to address student concerns on a case-by-case basis, while also drawing attention to and actively seeking solutions to systemic problems.

Given that it is unlikely that such a position will be created in the next year, other steps that could be taken to improve the institutional memory of the program include:

- In addition to the training that takes place at the initial transition meeting(s) between the outgoing and incoming Advisors, consider retaining experienced Advisors from previous years to conduct "advanced" training sessions later in the fall, once the newer advisors have had an opportunity to get their feet wet. Such sessions could include complex topics such as grade appeal advocacy, negotiation strategies in the advisor context, or effectively supporting and managing difficult student/clients.
- Start an internal advice/tips book to be kept in the Advisor Office. Advisors could record pieces of information, approaches, ideas, or experiences that would be helpful to other advisors and save them time in the future.
- Create a series of FAQ documents for common areas of concern, such as supervisor conflicts, medical leaves, funding problems, grade appeals, etc. (For example, the document on supervisor conflicts would discuss the university's obligation to provide supervision, while addressing the factors and circumstances that can make it more or less difficult in practice for some

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students to change supervisors, such as faculty-member-specific funding in the sciences, or the presence or absence of another faculty member willing to assume a supervisory role.) These documents would save Advisors from having to reinvent the wheel every time one of these common situations arose. They could also be used as a basis for workshops or for a regular column in the SGPS newsletter.

Conclusion:

I have been consistently impressed by the abilities and dedication of my colleagues, and I thank them for their hard work and commitment to making life better for Queen's students. I would also like to acknowledge the strength and courage of the many students who have used the program, particularly those who chose to calmly insist on being treated fairly under circumstances of considerable adversity.