

Student Advisor Fall Term Report – 2009

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 Fall term:

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1. Statistics on number of cases, including a distinction between the 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. Statistics on number of cases

- 6 cases total
- 6 new cases

2. Statistics on types of cases

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

- 1 case involved conflict with a supervisor or faculty member
- 1 case involved a lack of academic accommodation from graduate coordinator/department head
- 3 cases involved a lack of accommodation for health issues documented by HCDS
- 1 case involved a TA/RA employment issue
- 1 case involved admission conditions
- 1 case involved a supervisor/program change

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

- Dept head/grad coordinator: 4
- SGS (deans/registrar/staff/website): 1
- Department office/website: 2
- Coordinator of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: 2

- Health, Counseling and Disability Services: 2
- Other Student Advisors: 1

Description of follow-up taken:

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- Most cases involved some or all of the following:
 - Online research
 - Contacting an admin/staff/SGPS person to ask general questions on behalf of an anonymous student
 - Providing information, strategic advice or communication skills coaching
 - Clarifying or finding SGS/Senate policies regarding a certain situation
- One case involved multiple in-person meetings with the student concerned. Two other cases involved a single in-person meeting. The remaining two cases involved emails & phone calls.
- Students were referred to Health, Counselling, Disability Services not only for counselling help but also for the purposes of documenting health conditions like stress.
- Only one case this term potentially required my direct intervention, however, the student decided against Advisor intervention, as they felt confident in pursuing their case alone.
- To the best of my knowledge, all cases were resolved. However, the lack of a follow-up policy and uninitiated follow-up from students means that we have little knowledge of how cases are resolved.

(Advisor, 2008-2009) wrote in his report:

“As I have mentioned in previous reports, our program’s policy of promoting self-advocacy 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 and formed a relationship; I usually only hear from a student again if further difficulties do indeed arise and they need more extensive assistance.”

I would echo this past SA’s frustration at the lack of follow-up from students. I believe this is partly due to the lack of a standard follow-up policy among the Student Advisors.

Recommendations:

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- **Program Awareness:** Our VP-Graduate, and our Executive Director, have been very active at supporting the Advisor program and publicizing it. Blurbs about the Advisor program have been sent out on the Queen's University International Centre, the Ban Righ, and the SGPS newsletter. The Executive Director has created a shortlink to the Student Advisor website, so that students don't have to search for the Advisors page on the SGPS website. The Advisor page can now be accessed at: <http://www.sgps.ca/sa>. In addition, the Executive Director and I have set up a "Resource" page at <http://www.sgps.ca/advisors> that is still under development. The page provides links to relevant SGS and Queen's Senate policies as well as policies around the Advisor program. Once complete, the page will include a Frequently Asked Questions list, a relevant University contacts list, and past Student Advisor reports. The page is supposed to be a resource not only for the Advisors and SGPS staff, but also for our members.

While the SGPS strives to raise awareness about the program among its membership through newsletters and council, our capacity to educate faculty about the services provided by the program is more limited, and any assistance the SGS can offer in this area would be much appreciated.

- **Standard practices for "standard" policies:** There are many policies in place at both the Senate and SGS level regarding everything from authorship to grade disputes to funding guarantees. However, the Advisors have noted that the practices of departments, faculty, and supervisors do not often fall in line with existing policy. Other times, the policy is intentionally vague in an attempt to not bog down students and supervisors into prescriptive policies. Rather, policy stakeholders are encouraged to stick to the "spirit" of the policy or implement practices in a collegial manner. The problem with vague policies is that departments or supervisors often make policy interpretations to the disadvantage of students. This is especially a problem for international students who are not aware of their rights or fear the power differences between themselves and their supervisors. The Advisors recommend either that policies be made more prescriptive after consultation with the SGPS or that students be allowed to have more advocacy in discussion of practices. **There should be a drive towards not only have standard policies but also standard practices.**
- **Follow-up to Advisor reports:** The Advisors have been writing reports since 2004. Many of the issues discussed in the Advisor reports have been repeated over several years by different Advisors. Yet, those problems remain since students come to see us with the same issues. It seems that the recommendations of the Advisor reports are not taken seriously or not enough is being done by SGS to meet the recommendations of the Advisors. **As such, it would be helpful for the Advisors to receive feedback from SGS regarding the recommendations made by the Student Advisors.**
- **Lack of accommodation to health issues:** This term I saw many students approach me with issues involving a lack of accommodation for a variety of health issues (stress, medical problems in the immediate family, emotional distress) that

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prevented them from accomplishing their research work or from doing well in a class. All of these students felt that their supervisors or course instructors had not appropriately accommodated them even though they had gone to HCDS for proof of their condition. These issues were only resolved once students had brought their concerns to the department head or the graduate coordinator. These cases show that supervisors and course instructors lack the training required to accommodate students dealing with health issues. The SGS should partner with HCDS to develop a blueprint which could be followed by supervisors or course instructors to accommodate students with health issues especially "soft" issues such as emotional distress or stress.