

Ombudsperson for Students

***McGILL UNIVERSITY***



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**Thirty-Fifth Annual Report**  
(June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 – May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022)

**Patricia Faison Hewlin, PhD**  
**Ombudsperson for Students**

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Ombudsperson for Students  
McGill University  
3610 McTavish Street  
Suite 14 (Main Floor)  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
H3A 1Y2

Telephone: 514 398 7059

E-mail: [ombudsperson@mcgill.ca](mailto:ombudsperson@mcgill.ca)

Website: [www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson](http://www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson)

Submitted to the McGill University Senate<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the terms of reference of the Office: Approved by McGill University Senate, April 23, 1986, Minute 84; Approved by the Board of Governors, May 26, 1986, Minute 6085; Amended by Senate, December 9, 1992, Minute 32. Amended by Senate, January 21, 2009, Minute 5; Approved by the Executive Committee, May 19, 2009, Minute 4.2.

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## Introduction

This report covers the activities of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students (“Office”) from June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 to May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022, during which Professor Patricia Faison Hewlin undertook her second year of a five-year mandate as Ombudsperson for Students that started on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

### 1.1 Mandate

The mandates of University Ombudspersons vary from institution to institution in Canada and abroad. Each academic institution’s approach to the role of the ombudsperson has unique features; however the essence of the mandate is generally universal. A document on the Standards of Practice produced by ACCUO (Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons) can be found at: [ACCUO - Standards of Practice](#)

The role, function and scope of activity of the McGill Ombudsperson for Students are specified in the Mandate available on its website: [Mandate](#)

Article 1.1 of the Mandate states the following:

*The mandate of the Ombudsperson for Students (OFS) shall be to:*

- (i) provide an independent, impartial and confidential process through which a student may seek the just, fair and equitable resolution of any university-related concern where normal non-adversarial administrative channels for addressing such matters are inappropriate in the circumstances or prove ineffective;*
- (ii) where appropriate, review University policies, guidelines and procedures affecting students and make recommendations for change normally to the relevant University administrative officer;*
- (iii) where appropriate, promote discussion of University-wide student related concerns.*

When issues arise, the McGill Ombudsperson is asked to provide assistance to students to avoid recourse to the more formal grievance processes of the University; thus McGill’s Office of the Ombudsperson for Students offers informal dispute resolution services, and it is not a University “office of notice” (as per article 5.2 of the Mandate).

### 1.2 The Process

The process at the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students is as follows:

Students contact the Office by email to request an appointment. The Office schedules a zoom appointment and requests information so that the Ombudsperson has an initial understanding of the issue. If the student prefers to speak to the Ombudsperson without providing any information before the meeting, the student’s preference is respected.

Requests determined to be outside of the mandate of the Office of the Ombudsperson are referred by staff to the appropriate offices, and for this reporting period there were forty-nine of these requests.

Once the student provides details of the concern, the Ombudsperson gives advice and/or offers possible options, depending on the nature of the concern. Students are always informed that all conversations within the Office are held in strict confidence. If additional intervention by the Ombudsperson is necessary, the student is asked for specific permission to do so.

Attempts to arrive at a resolution may require several days, including a dialogue with concerned parties, and follow-up conversations with the student. Concerned parties typically include various unit Directors or Associate Deans of Student Affairs, Chairs, Professors, Graduate Program Directors, Advisors, Supervisors and other academic and non-academic members of the University.

The Ombudsperson also makes referrals, explains University policies and procedures and serves as a sounding board for students who are uncertain about how to deal with a situation. Frequently, students resolve their situations on their own by following advice given by the Office. In some cases simply being given the opportunity to speak openly and confidentially will result in the resolution of the student's concern. The Ombudsperson may also provide feedback to university members (academic and non-academic) and units regarding issues that have been raised.

### **1.3 Visibility**

As a form of outreach, the Office staff attend virtual student orientation activities where information regarding the Ombuds Office is available. In addition, the Ombudsperson for Students meets on a regular basis with key unit directors to promote a better understanding of the function/role of the Ombuds Office.

The Office is also listed as a student resource in various University services/publications, providing contact information/link to the Office website. These include:

- [Student Life and Learning](#)
- [I've Been Accepted](#)
- [First Year Office – Undergrads, Grads and Postdocs](#)
- Student Rights and Responsibilities: [Dignity](#); [Resolving Disputes](#); [Research Ethics](#); [Research Supervision](#); [Conflicts of Interest](#); [Freedom from Harassment](#); [Contact Us](#)
- [Academic Advising](#)
- Grads and Postdocs: [Responsibilities](#); [Supervision](#); [Skillsets](#)
- [Post Graduate Society of McGill University \(PGSS\) online Hand Book](#)
- [Undergraduate Medical Education](#)

## **2. Service Statistics**

### **2.1 Individuals and Groups Served**

The following table shows the distribution of individuals and groups who requested the services of the Office:

**Table 1: Total number of requests for assistance**

Type	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-2022
Student Requests (Applying, Current/Returning, Former)	188	161	234**	186***
Groups	0	3	2	2
Faculty & Staff	1	8	4	6
Community Requests	10	7	6	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>203</b>

\*\* During activity year 2020-21, the Office received 51 (22%) student requests for assistance that were related to the COVID measures.

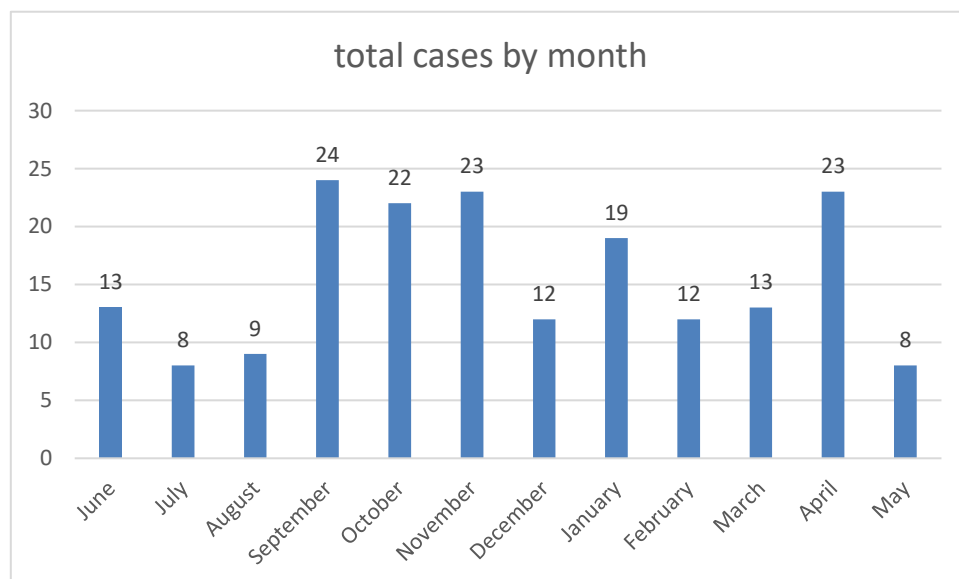
\*\*\* During activity year 2021-22, the Office received 23 (12%) student requests for assistance that were related to the COVID measures.

The mandate of the Ombudsperson for Students, in Article 1.2, defines ‘student’ as follows: *‘Student’ means a person who is, or within the past twelve months was, registered in the University as a student, whether or not as a candidate for a degree, diploma or certificate.*<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1.1 Patterns of Use of the Office

Figure 1 shows a month-by-month pattern of when the 186 student requests for assistance were received in 2021-22.

**Figure 1: Number of student requests on a month-by-month basis:**



<sup>2</sup> [Mandate](#)

## 2.1.2 Summary of Students' Requests

The following table provides information regarding the distribution of requests by students:

**Table 2: Student requests for assistance by educational level**

Education Level	2019-2020		2020-2021		2021-2022	
Undergraduate	84	52%	120	51%	84	45%
Graduate	69	43%	107	46%	96	51%
Resident/ Fellow	4	2%	2	1%	4	2%
Postdoc	3	2%	5	2%	1	1%
Other	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 3. Nature of Student Requests and Resolutions

### 3.1 Categories of Requests

As noted below in Table 3, the overall number of concerns raised by students decreased by 20.5% from 2020-2021 (234) to 2021-2022 (186). Thus, the 2021-2022 number of concerns generally reflect the higher end of the number of issues raised prior to the pandemic. There are notable decreases in academic issues related to admissions from 12 to only 1 request. The practicum/field work/stage category fell from 9 to 2 requests; the finance category also experienced a large decrease in requests from 25 to 7. The number of interpersonal concerns between students and their research or thesis supervisors increased from 15 to 24. This category along with concerns related to courses/programs (34 issues) and discrimination (24 concerns) remain of the highest categories.

**Table 3: Requests by issue-type**

Issue Type	Issue	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
<b>Academic</b>	Admission	6	7	15	12	1
	Advising	1	0	2	1	3
	Courses/Program	18	25	14	36	34
	Examinations	7	16	11	10	8
	Inter / intra faculty transfer	4	2	0	1	0
	Marks/Grades	20	22	21	29	22
	Practicum/Field Work/Stage	10	6	11	9	2
	Probation/Exclusion	4	5	5	0	0
	Other	15	16	5	9	4
	<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>85</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>107</b>

<b>Inter-personal</b>	Administrator/academic	1	2	0	1	2
	Administrator /non-academic	2	0	0	0	2
	Course Instructor / TA's	6	14	14	15	15
	Invigilators	0	0	0	0	0
	Lab instructor/ demonstrator	0	0	0	5	3
	Other Student (s)	9	7	3	4	4
	Research / Thesis Supervisor	22	24	20	15	24
	Other	2	1	2	1	3
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Finances</b>	Loan / Bursary	3	4	1	2	0
	Quebec Residency fee status	0	0	0	2	1
	Scholarship	2	0	2	10	2
	Stipend	0	4	0	0	0
	Student Fees	8	9	8	10	3
	Other	2	2	2	1	1
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>7</b>
	Student Services	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
	University Units	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>
	Student-run Org.	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
	Residence Life	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Student Discipline</b>	Academic offense	5	6	7	11	6
	Non-Academic offense	1	1	2	1	0
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>
	Procedural Issues	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
	Intellectual Property	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
	Harassment	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>
	Safety/Security	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
	Discrimination	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>24</b>
	Other	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>186</b>

### 3.2 (a) Resolution Categories

The total number of student requests for assistance during the current activity year of 2021-22 is 186. The type of assistance falls within two categories of resolution:

(i) *information/advice*: listening; suggesting an approach/coaching; determining options; referrals; explaining policies: 148 (80%)

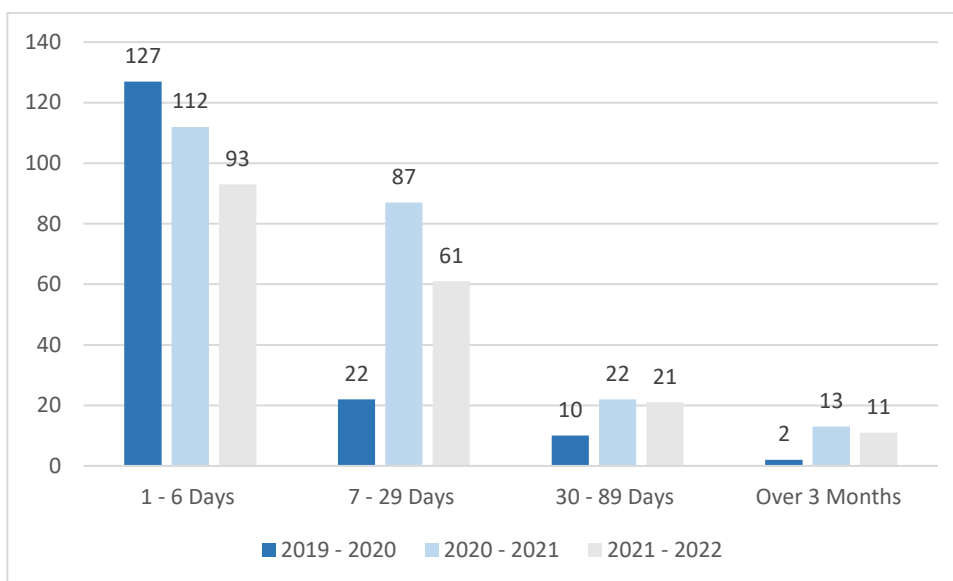
(ii) *intervention*: individual or multi-party discussions and proposals: 38 (20%)

### (b) Duration of Assistance

Figure 2 illustrates a three-year historical view of the approximate length of time from the opening to the closing date of a file, along with the number of requests associated with a given period.



**Figure 2: Number of requests per duration of assistance**



## 4. Professional Activities

The McGill Ombudsperson for Students is a member of the following associations: *Association des Ombudsmans des Universités du Québec* (AOUQ) and Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO).

During the reporting period, the Office participated in virtual meetings and webinars organized by the ombuds associations. Attendance at meetings with ombudspersons from other universities and active participation at these meetings continue to be an important commitment of the Office, resulting in a fruitful sharing of policies and experiences, in addition to providing opportunities for professional development in the field.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Three areas that continue to have the highest number of requests, particularly within the past two years are: (1) Research/Thesis Supervisor; (2) Courses/Programs; and (3) Discrimination. The Research/Thesis Supervisor category primarily refers to relationships between graduate students and their supervisors, including thesis and dissertation committee chairs. Of the students who request ombuds services, a small number simply need advice regarding how to properly navigate their relationships. Most students have raised concerns that include difficult interpersonal interactions that interfere with research and academic work in general. In prior reports, I've referred to the uneven power dynamics that cause students to refrain from sharing their concerns directly to their supervisors. Students have also conveyed their perceptions of uneven power dynamics among faculty members as well as between faculty members and staff. Students have reported that they perceive these power dynamics as hinderances

to the extent to which students seek and receive the support they need. The Office acknowledges increased efforts and initiatives from Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies to address these concerns.

Regarding the Course/Programs category, students sought ombuds services regarding program or course policies and requirements, as well as course material. In many cases, students are waiting for a reply, and they seek intervention. As noted in my prior reports, prolonged delays in response to student inquiries readily prompt students to solicit support from our office. Students have also reported the communication of unclear expectations or the enforcement of rules inconsistent with existing policies. Given that many University policies were conceived many years ago, I recommend that the University continues to take notice of old as well as new policies that tend to raise concerns among many students, as well as those that may appear to affect only a few. Focus attention on the different ways certain policies and norms within and outside of the classroom may disadvantage students within certain categories such as national origin, mental health, native tongue or language of preference, race, religion, physical ability, gender, sex, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, etc.

With the above said, students continue to bring concerns to the Office about experiencing a disadvantage or witnessing actions they perceived to be disadvantageous toward other students based on one or more of the above-noted identity-related categories. The students shared these concerns in the context of classroom interactions with other students, as well as with faculty and staff members who support the student experience.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond facilitating a resolution to a student's concern, we often engage with relevant individuals (e.g., Deans, Program Directors, Faculty, etc.) with the permission of the student (but often anonymously conveyed) to share emergent trends. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Students is keen to offer this information to support efforts to identify *systemic* and/or *collective behavior* (deliberate and implicit) that negatively affects students or groups of students. In so doing, our office and the University can effectively partner to improve the overall student experience.

## 6. Acknowledgements

I remain indebted and appreciative to Carmela Parzanese and Holly Smith for their continued diligence and invaluable contributions to the Office. Their sensitivity, commitment and thoughtful engagement with this important work are invaluable assets to the students and the overall McGill community. Their knowledge, experience, and approach to which they handle concerns are beyond measure.

The success of the Ombudsperson for Students relies upon the goodwill, appropriate flexibility, and responsiveness of relevant parties. I sincerely appreciate the engagement and cooperation from McGill administrators, staff, and professors in our collective endeavor to resolve student concerns.

Respectfully Submitted,

Prof. Patricia Faison Hewlin  
Ombudsperson for Students

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<sup>1</sup> Our Office frequently refers students to the Office for Mediation and Reporting. The Ombudsperson for Students' Terms of Reference precludes the Ombudsperson from advising on matters under the provisions of the Policy of Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Discrimination Prohibited by Law.