

Ombudsperson for Students

McGILL UNIVERSITY



Thirty-Sixth Annual Report
(June 1st, 2022 – May 31st, 2023)

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ⁱⁱⁱ 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 1st, 2022 to May 31st, 2023, during which Professor Patricia Faison Hewlin undertook her third year of a five-year mandate as Ombudsperson for Students that started on May 1st, 2020. Professor Hewlin ended her mandate on October 31, 2023, and Professor Christopher Moraes was appointed interim Ombudsperson for Students at that time. While this report is presented by Professor Moraes, it primarily covers activities during Prof. Hewlin’s tenure.

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 or in-person 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.

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 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](#)
- [Get Ready! - McGill University](#)
- 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

Type	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Student Requests	234	186	233
Student Requests/Immediate Referral (1) (not included in tables/figures)	---	49	51
Groups	2	2	2
Faculty & Staff	4	6	7
Community Requests	6	9	14
Total	246	252	307

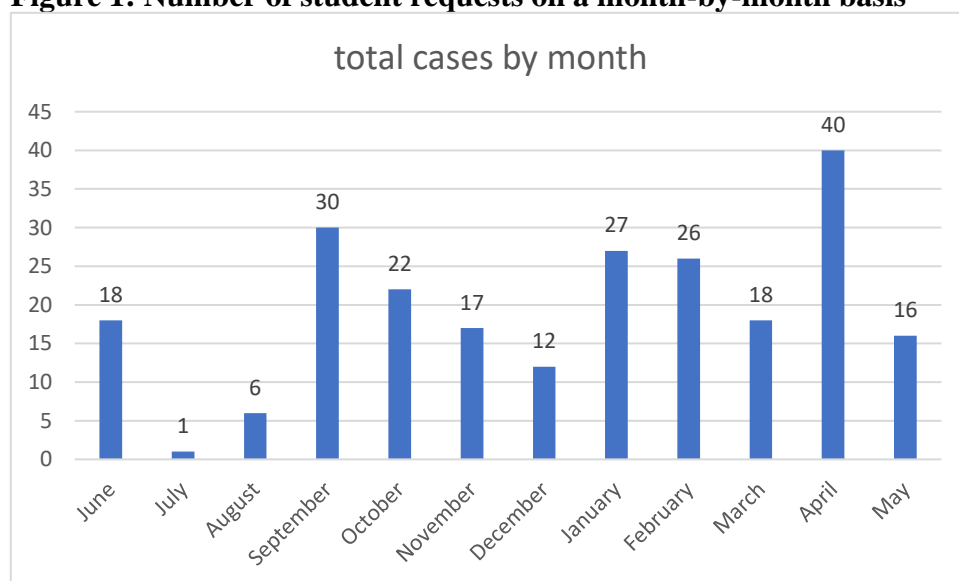
(1) Requests determined to be outside of the mandate of the Office of the Ombudsperson referred by Office staff to the appropriate offices.

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.*¹

2.1.1 Patterns of Use of the Office

Figure 1 shows a month-by-month pattern of when the 233 student requests for assistance were received in 2022-23.

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



¹ [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	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023	
Undergraduate	120	51%	84	45%	81	35%
Graduate	107	46%	96	51%	126	54%
Resident/ Fellow	2	1%	4	2%	21	9%
Postdoc	5	2%	1	1%	5	2%
Other	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%
Total	234	100%	186	100%	233	100%

3. Nature of Student Requests and Resolutions

3.1 Categories of Requests

As noted in Table 3, the overall number of concerns raised by students returned to similar levels as 2020-2021 after a 20% decrease in 2021-22. Since then, there have been notable increases in concerns around Academic Advising, Courses/Programs and Examinations. The number of issues related to inter-personal difficulties remains high, particularly between graduate students (see Table 2) and their research / thesis supervisors (Table 3) which constitute the majority of cases involving these inter-personal conflicts. The number of concerns around finances has decreased considerably, likely reflecting more clarity and certainty compared to the early years of the pandemic.

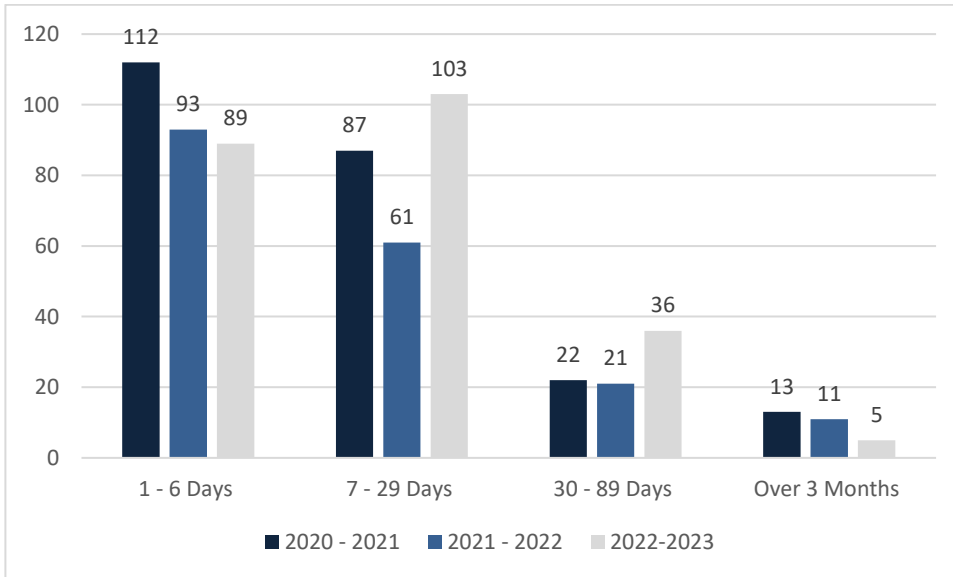
Table 3: Requests by issue-type

Issue Type	Issue	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Academic	Admission	12	1	1
	Advising	1	3	9
	Courses/Program	36	34	52
	Examinations	10	8	15
	Inter / intra faculty transfer	1	0	1
	Marks/Grades	29	22	24
	Practicum/Field Work/Stage	9	2	13
	Probation/Exclusion	0	0	0
	Other	9	4	2
	Subtotal		107	74
Inter-personal	Administrator/academic	1	2	5
	Administrator /non-academic	0	2	3
	Course Instructor / TA's	15	15	12
	Invigilators	0	0	0
	Lab instructor/ demonstrator	5	3	5
	Other Student (s)	4	4	1
	Research / Thesis Supervisor	15	24	28
	Other	1	3	1
	Subtotal		41	53
Finances	Loan / Bursary	2	0	0
	Quebec Residency fee status	2	1	0
	Scholarship	10	2	6
	Student Fees	10	3	7
	Other	1	1	1
Subtotal		25	7	14
Student Services		4	5	3
University Units		8	7	11
Student-run Org.		0	1	0
Residence Life		0	0	2
Student Discipline	Academic offense	11	6	0
	Non-Academic offense	1	0	1
Procedural Issues		1	2	4
Intellectual Property		0	0	1
Harassment		7	6	9
Safety/Security		0	1	0
Discrimination		28	24	16
Other		1	0	0
TOTAL		234	186	233

3.2 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 student requests, along with the number of requests associated with a given period.

Figure 2: Number of requests per duration of assistance



3.3 Resolution Categories

Student requests during the current activity year fall within the following categories:

(1) Student Requests	233
<i>Information/advice:</i> (listening; suggesting an approach/coaching; determining options; referrals; explaining policies)	170 (73%)
<i>Intervention:</i> (individual or multi-party discussions and proposals)	63 (27%)
(2) Student Requests/Immediate Referral	51
(Determined to be outside of the mandate of the Office of the Ombudsperson and referred by staff to the appropriate offices)	

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 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

As interim ombudsperson, I cannot comment directly on Prof. Hewlin's experiences during the time frame covered by this report. With that caveat, I will draw on my more recent experiences to provide some context for the data presented here.

The areas that continue to have the highest number of requests within the past two years are Inter-Personal conflicts between students and their research/thesis supervisor. 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. Uneven power dynamics remains a challenge, and while the current committee-based approach for assessing graduate student progress does help, perceptions that even the committee can be 'manipulated' by a supervisor often arise. Whether real or not, this perception of uneven power dynamics hinder 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, without which the caseload would likely be even higher.

While cases around harassment and discrimination are numerically fewer during this reporting period than in previous years, their personal and community impact does require additional consideration. Challenges have frequently arisen around the different reporting and support mechanisms available to students, particularly given other options available through student-run societies. Although not included in this reporting time frame, the recent geopolitical situation has exacerbated these issues, and highlight a broader need to learn how we might all engage in difficult and charged discussions with respect, empathy, and consideration for due process in a university system, particularly given the unique position universities can occupy in today's society.

Beyond facilitating a resolution to a student's concern, we often engage with relevant individuals (e.g., Deans, Program Directors, Faculty, etc.) 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.

While the case numbers presented in this report do speak to ongoing challenges that exist within our university environment, it is also encouraging to note that the number of times these issues are being raised via the Office of the Ombudsperson has been steadily increasing over the last decade. This speaks to the approachability and supportive services provided by former Ombudspersons and their staff who have served in this role; and more broadly highlights a general willingness and desire shared by all members of our community to seek out collegial and informal resolutions to their difficulties.

6. Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to and appreciative of 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. Christopher Moraes
Ombudsperson for Students (Interim)