

# Memorandum

**Office of the Ombudsperson for Students**

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**TO:** Senate

**FROM:** Professor Dimitrios Berk, Ombudsperson for Students

**SUBJECT:** Annual Report of the Ombudsperson for Students (2017-2018)

**DATE:** February 20, 2019

**DOCUMENT:** D18-46

**ACTION REQUIRED:** ☒ INFORMATION ☐ APPROVAL/DECISION

<b>ISSUE</b>	The annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students is presented for information.
<b>BACKGROUND &amp; RATIONALE</b>	<p>Section 10.1 of the Terms of Reference for the Ombudsperson for Students (OFS) states that the OFS shall annually provide to Senate a report, including relevant statistics, concerning such matters as:</p> <p><i>(i) the number of inquiries for information, advice or assistance;</i> <i>(ii) the general subject matter of such inquiries;</i> <i>(iii) the number of complaints;</i> <i>(iv) the nature of the complaints;</i> <i>(v) the source of the complaints;</i> <i>(vi) the resolution or other disposition of the complaints; and</i> <i>(vii) other information deemed appropriate by the OFS.</i></p> <p>Accordingly, the Ombudsperson for Students submits the annual report for 2017-2018.</p>
<b>PRIOR CONSULTATION</b>	None.
<b>SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS</b>	The Office of the Ombudsperson for Students has a sustainable framework in place to fulfill its mandate.
<b>IMPACT OF DECISION AND NEXT STEPS</b>	N/A
<b>MOTION OR RESOLUTION FOR APPROVAL</b>	This item is presented for information.
<b>APPENDICES</b>	Appendix A: Ombudsperson for Students – 31st Annual Report (2017-2018) Appendix B: Intake Form



# ***McGILL UNIVERSITY***



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## **Thirty-First Annual Report**

(June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 – May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018)

**Dimitrios Berk, PhD**  
**Ombudsperson for Students**

**February 2019**

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Submitted to the McGill University Senate<sup>1</sup>  
Presented February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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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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# 1. Introduction

This report covers the activities of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students from June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 to May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, during which Professor Dimitrios Berk undertook his fourth year of a five-year mandate as Ombudsperson for Students that started on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014.

## 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 Colleges and Universities Ombudspersons) can be found at:

<http://accuo.ca/resources/publications/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:

<https://mcgill.ca/ombudsperson/files/ombudsperson/ombudsperson-students-english.pdf>

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 McGill University Office of the Ombudsperson for Students is generally as follows:

Students contact the office by phone or email to request an appointment. A meeting is scheduled and some information is requested 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. Students fill out an Intake Form (see Appendix B), which is available at the Office or from the website: <http://www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson/forms>

Once details of the situation have been provided by the student, information, advice and/or possible options are discussed, 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 and include a dialogue with concerned parties. These typically require contact with 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 brought to his attention.

## **1.3 Visibility**

Students learn about our Office in a variety of ways. Table 1 below summarizes the information provided by the students who requested our services in 2017-18.

**Table 1: Sources of awareness of services (%)**

Referred By	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Website	27.2	26.2	27.9	27.5	27.1
eCalendars	2.9	0.7	0.5	0	0.6
Poster	0.5	0	0.5	0	0.6
Staff (academic/non-academic)	11.7	11.4	14.9	11.3	8.4
Student/Friend	14.1	12.1	12.9	11.9	11.5
Student-run Org.	1.9	1.3	5	3.8	5.4
Student Services	3.4	11.4	8.5	4.4	9
Other	8.3	12.8	10	9.3	7.8
Unknown	30	24.2	20	31.8	29.5
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

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

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

- [eCalendars](#): (Undergraduate; Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies; School of Continuing Studies; Health Sciences; Summer Studies)
- [Post Graduate Society of McGill University \(PGSS\) online Hand Book](#)
- Student Rights and Responsibilities: [Dignity](#); [Resolving Disputes](#); [Research Ethics](#); [Research Supervision](#); [Conflicts of Interest](#); [Freedom from Harassment](#); [Contact Us](#)
- [Academic Advising](#) (listed under Resources for Students: Who's Who)
- [Undergraduate Medical Education](#)
- [Faculty of Medicine: FAQs Equity & Diversity](#) (listed under Harassment & Discrimination)
- [Skillsets](#) (listed under Partners/bottom right)
- [I've Been Accepted](#)



## 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 2: Total number of requests for assistance \*\***

Type	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Students (Applying, Current/Returning, Former students)	206	149	201	160	166
Groups	2	1	1	1	5
Faculty & Staff	8	12	3	2	2
Community Requests	5	8	6	7	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>180</b>

\*\* The 180 cases represent about 0.5% of the total student population. A review of the annual reports of the Ombuds Offices at the University of Toronto, Concordia University, Université de Montréal and Université de Sherbrooke showed the number of cases fluctuated around 1% of their total student population.

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>

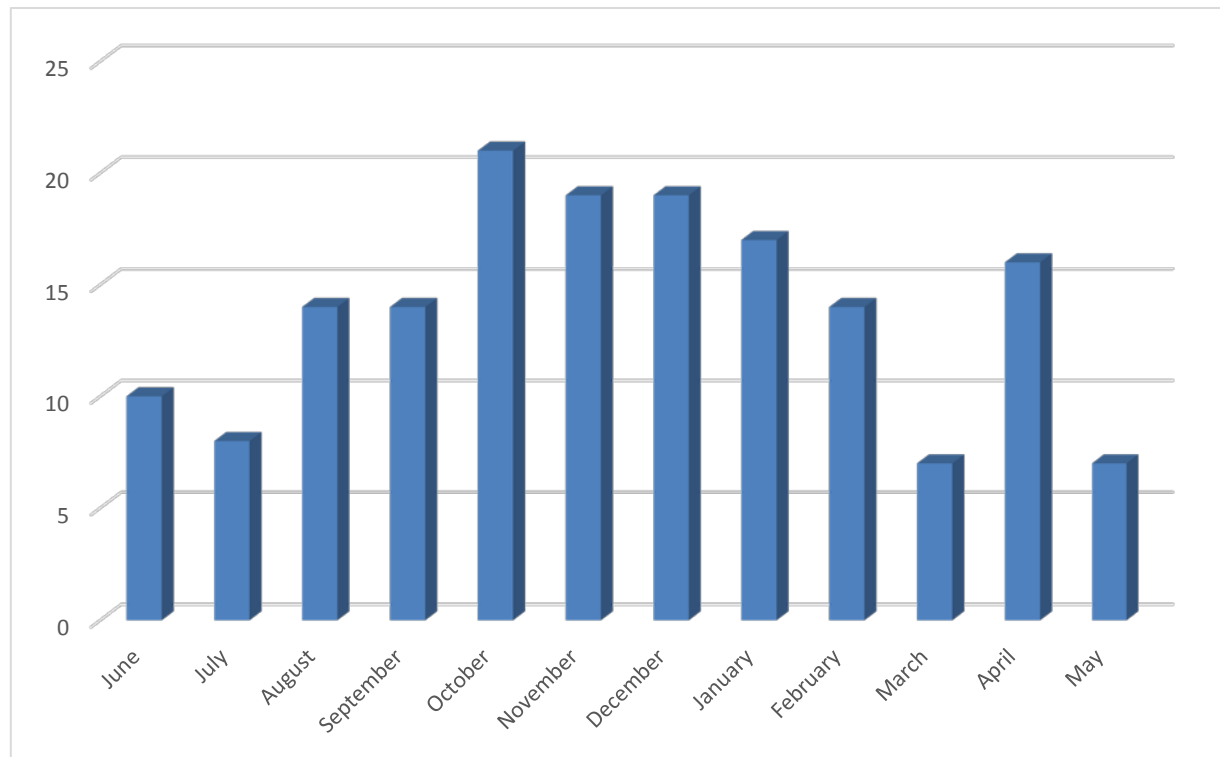
#### 2.1.1 Patterns of Use of the Office

Figure 1 shows a month-by-month pattern of when student requests for assistance were received in 2017-18.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson/files/ombudsperson/ombudsperson-students-english.pdf>

**Figure 1: Number of student requests on a month-by-month basis in 2017-2018**



### 2.1.2 Summary of Students' Requests

The following table provides information with regard to the distribution of requests by students:

**Table 3: Student requests for assistance by educational level in % (number)**

Education Level	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Undergraduate	49.8	56.9	57.8
Graduate	45.8	40	38.6
Resident/ Fellow	0.5	0.6	0.6
Postdoc	2	2.5	3
Other	2	0	0
Total	100 (201)	100 (160)	100 (166)

### 3. Nature of Student Concerns and Resolutions

#### 3.1 Categories of Concerns

Table 4: Cases by issue-type

Issue Type	Issue	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Academic	Admission	18	14	14	12	6
	Advising	1	1	4	0	1
	Courses/Program	23	8	16	18	18
	Examinations	9	6	10	9	7
	Inter / intra faculty transfer	0	2	1	1	4
	Marks/Grades	31	20	36	21	20
	Practicum/Field Work/Stage	10	7	6	9	10
	Probation/Exclusion	6	5	6	1	4
	Other	8	6	12	15	15
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>85</b>
Inter-personal	Administrator/academic	3	2	3	4	1
	Administrator /non-academic	2	0	2	0	2
	Course Instructor / TA's	12	11	13	16	6
	Invigilators	0	0	0	0	0
	Lab instructor/demonstrator	1	1	0	0	0
	Other Student (s)	1	2	2	2	9
	Research / Thesis Supervisor	30	31	31	23	22
	Other	9	2	6	5	2
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>42</b>
Finances	Loan / Bursary	2	1	0	0	3
	Quebec Residency fee status	1	0	1	0	0
	Scholarship	8	2	4	1	2
	Stipend	0	0	1	0	0
	Student Fees	8	10	9	2	8
	Other	6	1	1	4	2
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>15</b>
Student Services		1	3	6	2	2
University Units		4	4	7	6	4
Student-run Org.		1	0	0	0	1
Residence Life		2	1	1	2	4
Student Discipline	Academic offense	2	1	7	0	5
	Non-Academic offense	1	1	0	0	1
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>
Procedural Issues		1	1	1	0	1
Intellectual Property		1	4	0	0	0
Harassment		2	1	0	1	2
Safety/Security		1	0	0	0	2
Abuse of power		0	0	0	0	0
Discrimination		0	0	1	3	1
Other		1	1	0	3	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>206</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>166</b>

### 3.2 (a) Resolution Categories

The total number of student requests for assistance during the current activity year of 166 is broken down into two categories of resolution:

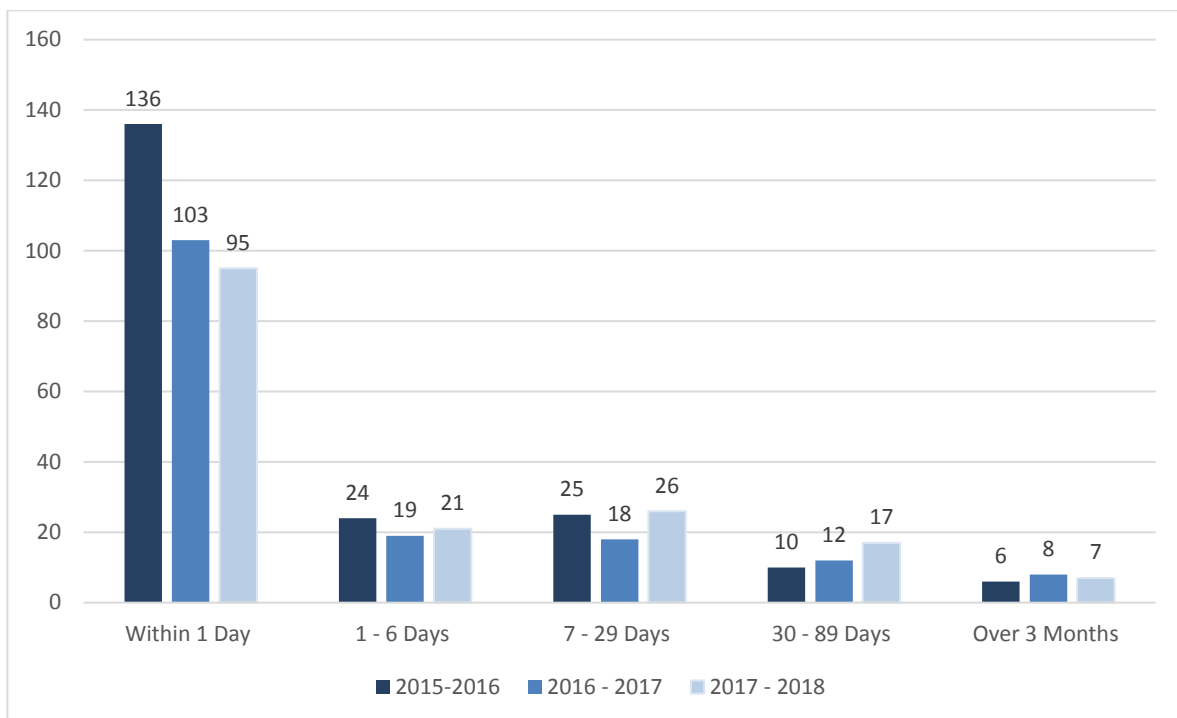
(i) *information/advice:* listening; suggesting an approach/coaching; determining options/referrals; explaining policies: 85%

(ii) *intervention:* individual or multi-party discussions and proposals: 15%

### (b) Duration of Assistance

In order to provide an indication of the length of time it takes the Office to deal with issues brought forth, Figure 3 below describes the approximate length of time from the opening to the closing date of a file.

**Figure 3: Number of students 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). Since 2010, Ms. Carmela Parzanese, Assistant to the Ombudsperson, holds a position on the Executive Committee of ACCUO.

During the reporting period, the Office has participated in meetings and/or conferences organized by various 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

According to the mandate of the Office and based on the issues raised by students, the Ombudsperson makes recommendations, informally and on ongoing basis, to the appropriate units. It is important to note that a key element in reducing tension and preventing issues from escalating is to be as clear as possible when communicating information to students especially in direct written exchanges. These include student-supervisor expectations, grade assessments in course syllabi, accommodations, and on-line information on processes such as appeals, student exchanges, transfers, scholarships and admissions.

## 6. Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge senior administrative officer Carmela Parzanese's invaluable contribution to the Office. Students greatly benefit from her experience, knowledge and pedagogy when communicating with the Office. I also wish to thank Sara Cornett for her assistance.

Also the numerous expressions of gratitude from students who sought help from the office and the cooperation from McGill administrators, staff and professors in the endeavor to resolve student concerns are gratefully acknowledged.

Respectfully Submitted,

**Dimitrios Berk**  
Ombudsperson for Students

## McGill University

**Office of the Ombudsperson for Students**

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Email: [ombudsperson@mcgill.ca](mailto:ombudsperson@mcgill.ca)Website: [www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson](http://www.mcgill.ca/ombudsperson)**Mandate**

The Office of the Ombudsperson offers confidential, informal and independent dispute resolution services to McGill students involving University matters. The Ombudsperson is an advocate for a fair process (and not an advocate for the individual or for the administration), acts solely in an advisory and intermediary role, and does not make University policy or replace formal channels. Communication with the office does not constitute notice to the University. For a full description of the mandate, please consult the website.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Is this the first time you have contacted the Ombuds Office? ☐ Yes ☐ No (Month:\_\_\_\_\_ Year:\_\_\_\_\_)**Personal Information**

<b>Last Name</b> _____			
<b>First Name</b> _____			
Address _____		Apt. _____	City _____
Province/State/Country _____		Postal Code _____	
Home Phone:	[     ] _____	Messages:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Alternate Phone:	[     ] _____	Messages:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Email: _____			

**McGill Student Status \*\***

_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Current/Returning Student
Student Number	<input type="checkbox"/> Former Student - last session attended _____
	- graduated (degree/year) _____

\*\* Status will be confirmed by accessing academic record

**Referred by**

<input type="checkbox"/> Website	<input type="checkbox"/> Poster	<input type="checkbox"/> Student Services	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff (academic/non-academic)
<input type="checkbox"/> Radio	<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/> Student-run Org	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> eCalendars		<input type="checkbox"/> Student/Friend	

CONTINUE ON BACK -&gt;

Last updated: February 2018

**Description of your request for assistance****Others Consulted (name / title / office)**


**Authorization**

I understand that the Ombudsperson will treat my request in a confidential manner, with the utmost care and respect for me and all individuals concerned.

I authorize the Ombudsperson, or his/her associate, to communicate with all persons involved with my request and to access all official files held by the University and third parties as deemed necessary by the Ombudsperson to fulfill his/her function.

Signature:

Date:

Last updated: February 2018