



Memorandum

Office of the Ombudsperson for Students
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TO: Senate

FROM: Dr. Spencer Boudreau, Ombudsperson for Students

SUBJECT: Office of the Ombudsperson for Students, Annual Report 2010-2011

DATE: January 18, 2012

DOCUMENT #: D11-32

ACTION REQUIRED: INFORMATION APPROVAL/DECISION

ISSUE: The annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students is presented for information.

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE: Section 10.1 of the terms of reference for the Ombudsperson for Students (OFS), found in the 2010 *Handbook on Student Rights and Responsibilities*, states:

10.1 The OFS shall annually provide to Senate a report, including relevant statistics, concerning such matters as:

- (i) the number of inquiries for information, advice or assistance;*
- (ii) the general subject matter of such inquiries;*
- (iii) the number of complaints;*
- (iv) the nature of the complaints;*
- (v) the source of the complaints;*
- (vi) the resolution or other disposition of the complaints; and*
- (vii) other information deemed appropriate by the OFS.*

Pursuant to the terms of reference, the Ombudsperson for Students submits the annual report for the 2010-1011 year.

MOTION OR RESOLUTION FOR APPROVAL: N/A

PRIOR CONSULTATION: N/A

NEXT STEPS: N/A

APPENDICES: Appendix A: Ombudsperson for Students Annual Report 2010-2011
Appendix B: Intake Form

McGILL UNIVERSITY



Twenty-Fourth Annual Report

(June 1st, 2010 – May 31st, 2011)

Prepared by:

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Ombudsperson for Students

January 2012

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Submitted to the McGill University Senate¹
Presented January 18th, 2012

¹ 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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I. Introduction

This report covers activities of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students from June 1st, 2010 to May 31st, 2011, during which Dr. Spencer Boudreau undertook his second year of a five-year mandate that started September 1st, 2009.

1.1 Mandate

The mandates of University Ombudspersons vary from institution to institution in Canada, the rest of North America and abroad. The role, function and scope of activity of the McGill Ombudsperson for Students are specified in the Handbook on Student Rights and Responsibilities 2010, Chapter 16, pages 77-81:

<http://www.mcgill.ca/files/secretariat/Handbook-on-Student-Rights-and-Responsibilities-2010.pdf>

In the revised Terms of Reference, Article 1.1 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.*

The McGill Ombudsperson is a Faculty member and is asked to be of assistance when an issue first arises in order to avoid recourse to the more formal processes of the University. Other institutions may regard the Ombuds Office as the final step in a long process. The services offered by McGill's Office of the Ombudsperson for Students are informal, and it is not "an office of notice" (as per article 5.2 of the Terms of Reference). Each academic institution's approach to the role of the ombudsperson has unique features; however the essence of the mandate is generally universal.

1.2 The Process

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

Students normally contact the office by phone or email and request an appointment. Others come by the office to make an appointment. A meeting is scheduled and some information is requested so that the Ombudsperson has an understanding of the issue. If the student prefers to speak to the Ombudsperson without providing any information before the meeting, her or his preference is respected. Students fill out an Intake Form (see Appendix B), which is available at the Office or from our website.

Once details of the situation have been provided by the student, she or he is given advice or information, depending on the nature of the concern. Students are always reassured 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 authority 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, 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 concerned about how to deal with a situation.

It is important to note that 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 problem.

The Office may also provide feedback to units regarding issues that have been brought to the Ombudsperson for Students' attention.

1.3 Visibility

Students learn about the existence of the Office in a variety of ways (Table 1). In addition, Office staff is present at orientation activities where information regarding the Ombuds Office is made available.

Table 1: Sources of awareness of services (%)

Referred By	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Website	12.2	19.7	11.6	14.9	21.5
Student Handbook/Calendar	15.0	2.1	3.6	4.9	2
Poster	0.4	0.4	1.4	18.3	0.4
Staff (academic/non-academic)	9.1	10.5	13.4	3.0	11
Student/Friend	25.2	21	16.3	0.7	11
Student-run Org.	2.8	3.4	1.1	1.5	5.3
Student Services	7.1	4.2	6.9	12.3	6.5
Other	5.1	10.5	9.8	6.0	7.7
Unknown	23.2	28.2	35.9	38.4	34.5
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total number of students	254	238	277	268	246

II. Ombuds 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	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Students (Applying, Current/ Returning, Former students)	254	238	277	268	246
Groups	3	7	1	2	4
Faculty & Staff	5	4	5	14	5
Community Requests	4	4	5	9	6
Total	266	253	288	293	261

It should be noted that the mandate of the Ombudsperson for Students, in Article 1.2, defines 'student' as follows:

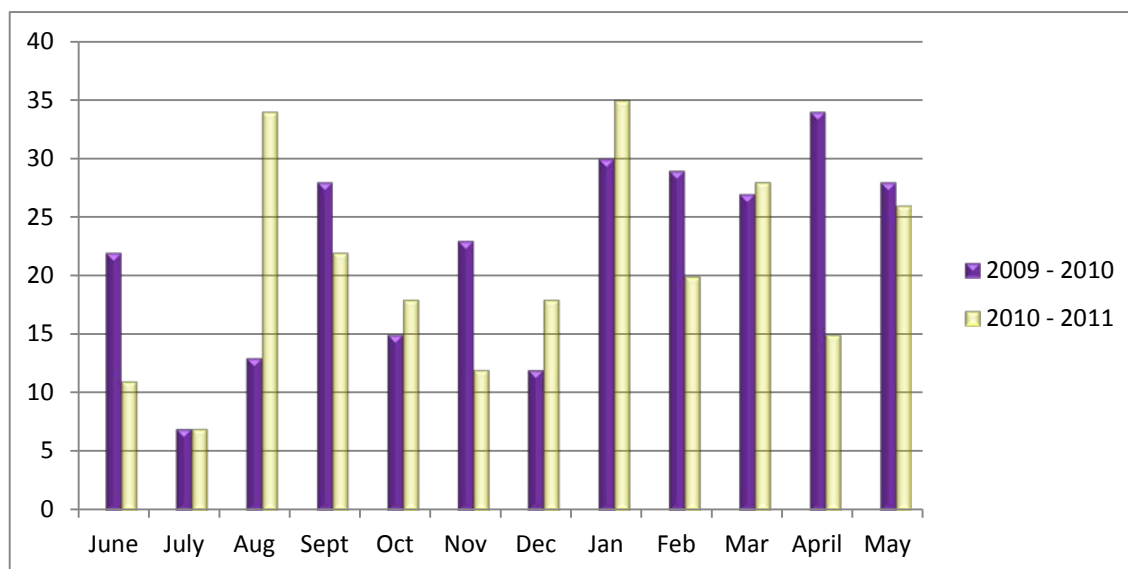
*'Student' means a person who is, or within the past twelve months was, registered in the University as a student, whether or not as a candidate for a degree, diploma or certificate.*²

² Handbook on Student Rights and Responsibilities 2010, page 77.

2.1.1 Patterns of Use of the Office

Figure 1 shows a month-by-month pattern of when requests for an appointment or assistance were received over the last two activity years.

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



2.1.2 Student Requests Summary

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

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

Education Level	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Undergraduate	64.2 (163)	55.9 (133)	56.6 (157)	59.3 (159)	47.6 (117)
Graduate	31.1 (79)	39.1 (93)	40.9 (113)	38.8 (104)	48.8 (120)
Fellow / Resident	2.0 (5)	2.5 (6)	1.3 (4)	1.1 (3)	1.6 (4)
Postdoc	2.0 (5)	2.1 (5)	0.8 (2)	0.4 (1)	0.4 (1)
UNKNOWN	0.8 (2)	0.4 (1)	0.4 (1)	0.4 (1)	1.6 (4)
Total	100 (254)	100 (238)	100 (277)	100 (268)	100 (246)

It is important to note that graduate students account for 48.8% of the requests for assistance from the Office, even though they make up 22.7% of the student population (as per Enrolment Report, Fall 2010, provided by Enrolment Services). My recommendations in this report are an attempt to address this situation.

III. The Nature of Student Concerns

3.1 Categories of Concerns

The following table presents the distribution of categories and issues.

Table 4: Cases by categories and issues

Issue Type	Issue	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Academic	Admission	25	19	12	15	9
	Advising	1	3	8	1	0
	Courses/Program	37	28	25	39	32
	Examinations	22	11	16	14	16
	Inter/intra-faculty transfer	0	0	0	3	2
	Marks/Grades	50	39	37	53	39
	Practicum/Field Work/Stage	7	5	13	9	7
	Probation/Exclusion	7	13	14	7	12
	Other	15	18	23	15	14
	Subtotal		164	136	148	156
Inter-personal	Administrator/academic	0	0	1	4	3
	Administrator /non-academic	1	0	0	1	1
	Course Instructor/TA's	7	4	7	10	6
	Invigilators	0	0	0	1	0
	Other Student(s)	0	8	6	2	1
	Research/Thesis Supervisor	25	24	26	17	34
	Other	3	2	1	11	3
	Subtotal		36	38	41	47
Finances	Loan/Bursary	0	4	4	1	4
	Quebec Residency fee status	6	5	4	5	4
	Scholarship	6	7	3	4	1
	Student Fees	9	10	16	18	18
	Other	1	0	8	5	2
	Subtotal		22	26	35	33
Student Services		4	8	4	2	5
University Units		8	5	9	1	9
Student-run Org.		0	3	2	2	0
Residence Life		0	0	0	4	2
Student Discipline	Academic offense	5	9	6	10	4
	Non-Academic offense	2	1	1	1	0
	Subtotal	7	10	7	11	4
Procedural Issues		1	3	4	4	1
Intellectual Property		0	2	0	1	3
Harassment		3	3	2	1	3
Safety/Security		0	0	0	2	1
Other		6	6	20	5	10
TOTAL		254	238	277	268	246

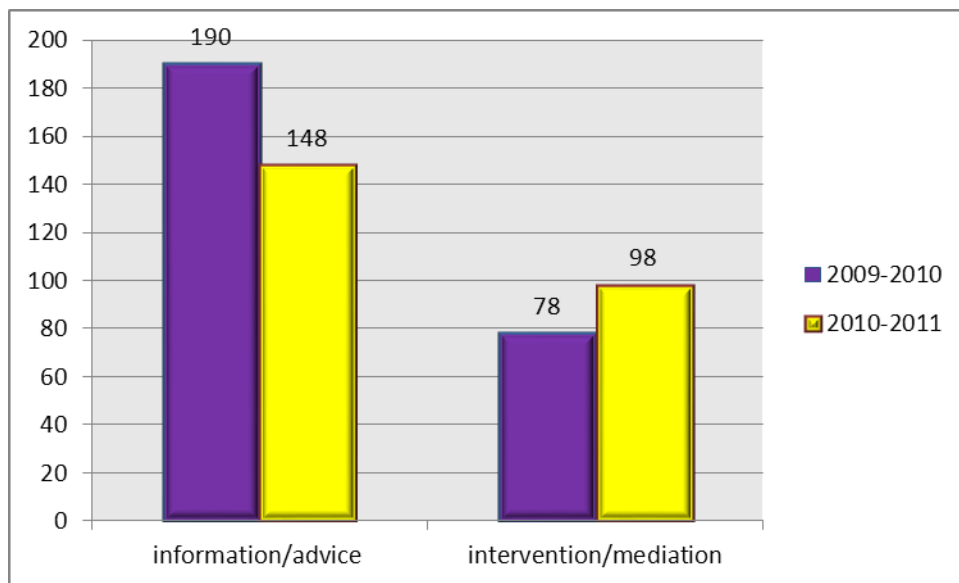
3.2 (a) Resolution Categories

The student requests for assistance are broken down into two categories of resolution:

- (i) information/advice: listening; suggesting an approach; explaining policies;
- (ii) intervention/mediation: individual or multi-party discussions; proposals and/or negotiations.

The figure below shows the distribution of the student requests per these two categories for the past two activity years:

Figure 2: Number of Students per Resolution Category

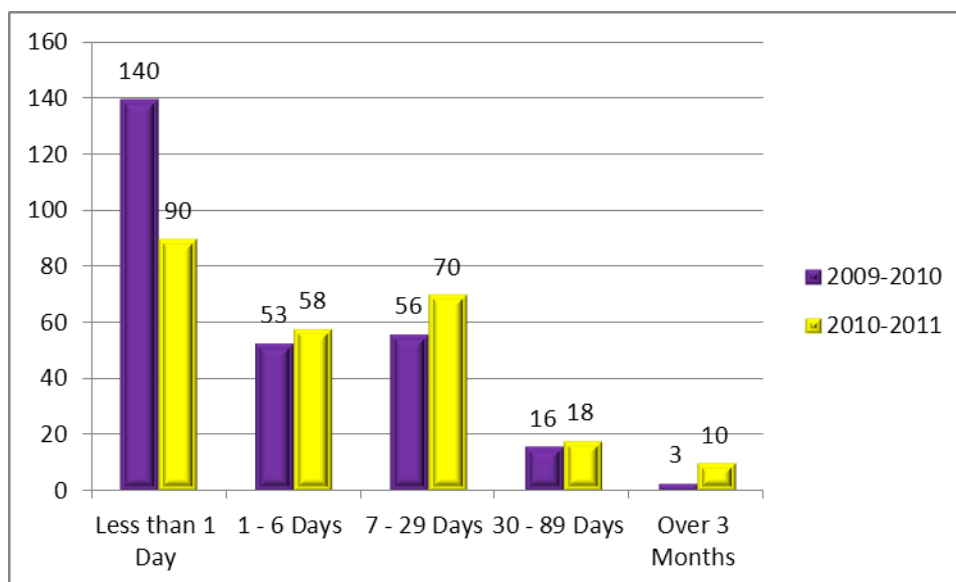


The Office of the Ombudsperson for Students refers many students to other University units. As the Office is well networked with these units, it can often expedite a resolution by contacting them directly.

(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 and duration of assistance



IV. Ombuds Professional Activities

Attendance at meetings with Ombudspersons from other universities, particularly with colleagues from Quebec universities, and active participation in those meetings continue to be an important commitment of the Office. Discussions regarding student issues result in fruitful sharing of policies and experiences.

This Office is a member of the following associations: Association des Ombudsmans des Universités du Québec (AOUQ); Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO); Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO). During the reporting period, the Office has participated in meetings and/or conferences organized by the AOUQ, the ACCUO, and ENOHE (European Network for Ombudsmen in Higher Education).

V. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations Regarding Graduate Student Supervision

Rationale:

In October, 2010, the Conseil Supérieur De L'Éducation du Québec produced a brief for the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports entitled: *Toward an Updated Vision of Graduate and Post-Doctoral Studies*. The Conseil's consultation process included every Quebec university.

One of the three objectives of the brief included an examination of the mentoring of graduate students. In its recommendations it calls for universities:

To foster individual success at the graduate level through relevant programs, financial support and optimal conditions for mentoring, the quality of which is fundamental to graduate student persistence and the fulfillment of individual education goals within a reasonable period of time. (p. 2 of summary)

The document calls for the concerted effort of various players and in the section entitled *Fostering Graduate Student Success in an Optimal Time Frame*, the Conseil refers to the challenges that arise from the relationship professor/employer and student/employee:

In a context where the growth rate of the graduate student population has surpassed that of the faculty, issues related to the availability of supervisors to mentor graduate students have been observed. Moreover, challenges can also arise from the dual relationships between professor/employer and student/employee: In a case where the latter receives payment for his or her participation in a research project of the former, the objectives of training and the production of outcomes may come into conflict. (p.5)

The Provost's white paper (June 2006) on McGill's *Strengths and Aspirations* has as a target a "guarantee [of] high quality supervision across every graduate program and [a commitment to] improve all aspects of graduate studies." (p.iv)

This is also clearly in-line with one of the goals of the report of the Principal's *Task Force on Student Life and Learning* - that is: "to provide students with the support and opportunities they need to achieve their full potential while at McGill and to ensure that all members of the community share in this goal. McGill is only as great as what it can offer to students, to society and to the advancement of knowledge; and in that respect, the life and learning that each of our students experiences while at the University is a measure of its success". (Executive Summary, p. 4)

McGill's Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies office has clear and explicit guidelines regarding graduate student supervision and the role of the graduate program directors (or other designated members of units). Their role is "to monitor the progress of students throughout the

graduate program ... and to advise them how to resolve problems which may arise during their program". (McGill Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies 2008-09 10.1.i) The policy prescribes that "there must be clear procedures established in every unit by which students receive guidance and constructive criticism on their progress on a regular basis through the program" (Idem 2.v)

The policy on Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking is mandatory and "students may grieve against a department that fails to adhere to the policy and procedures..." (Policy on Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking 10.2 7.) This policy reinforces the application of article 18 of Chapter 1, of the *Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities*: "The University has an obligation to make reasonable efforts to provide adequate research supervision for graduate work, with due regard for the preference of the student."

In addition to the concerns raised by the Conseil Supérieur de L'Éducation du Québec, University Ombudspersons at the provincial, national and international levels have also raised the issue of the challenges faced by graduate students – in particular doctoral candidates. Some of the issues raised in McGill's Office of the Ombudsperson for Students by graduate students (which are quite similar and even identical at times to issues raised by graduate students in other universities) include:

- lack of regular access to the graduate supervisor;
- lack of constructive feedback on progress and/or advising;
- lack of assistance from the graduate program director;
- access to stipend payment;
- intellectual property/authorship issues;
- supervisors' research priorities vs. students' progress;
- interpersonal conflicts;
- inappropriate behavior.

Students feel very vulnerable when trying to resolve these issues for fear of alienating the supervisor and thereby possibly jeopardizing their academic progress and even access to their stipend. Because of this fear, they rarely request direct intervention by the Ombudsperson and are generally seeking advice on how they can meet the challenge they are facing. Often there is no simple solution.

Recommendations:

Therefore, since McGill's policies regarding its commitment to quality mentoring and supervision of graduate students is clearly and explicitly articulated, and due to the fact that there is a need to find effective means to decrease the gap between the *de jure* and the *de facto* situation regarding this commitment, I recommend:

- 1) That all new academic hires without prior experience of graduate supervision be required, as part of their academic duty, to attend a supervision workshop organized by the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies office in their first academic year at McGill before being assigned the supervision of graduate students;
- 2) That graduate program directors (or the individual designated by the academic unit) actively monitor the progress of the graduate students of their unit and intervene when there is a lack of progress or the compulsory policy on tracking progress is not adhered to;
- 3) That graduate program directors organize information meetings with graduate student supervisors in their unit regarding McGill's policies and guidelines on graduate supervision and invite exemplary supervisors to share their "best practices";
- 4) That graduate program directors strongly encourage their graduate student supervisors to attend the workshops on graduate student supervision organized by GPS;
- 5) That GPS strongly encourage graduate program directors, particularly those newly appointed, to attend a workshop organized by GPS, on their role in their particular units.

5. 2 Recommendation Regarding the Mental Health of Our Students

Rationale:

The issue of the mental health of university students has become a focal point for discussion among Ombudspersons at meetings in Quebec, Canada, and Europe. The Director of McGill's Office for Students with Disabilities has noted a growing clientele of students with mental health concerns in disabilities service units across North America. The Director of the McGill Mental Health Service and the Director of the McGill Counselling Service have also noted a significant increase in clientele experiencing mental health issues. In addition, it has been noted that it is often difficult to provide services to students dealing with mental health issues since there is frequently a reticence on their part to seek help. In encountering students in my office regarding a particular academic matter, I also often perceive that they are experiencing a mental health issue and that they are not always aware of the services available to them at McGill. It has also been noted by several members of the McGill community that provide counselling or mental health services to students that there is a need for an increased awareness by professors, administrators and staff on how to appropriately interact with students dealing with mental health issues.

Recommendation:

Therefore, due to the nature of mental health issues, and the consensus of student services providers regarding their frequency, I recommend:

That there be an annual Mental Health Awareness Week for McGill students organized by the pertinent student services units in order to increase awareness about mental health issues and the services provided for the McGill Community.

VI. Conclusion

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.

My second year as Ombudsperson for Students has been a very enriching experience. I have greatly appreciated the numerous expressions of gratitude from students who sought help from the office. I am sincerely grateful for the cooperation I have received from McGill administrators, staff and professors in the endeavour to resolve student concerns. I also am most grateful for the availability of those responsible for providing services to our student community whenever I have called upon them for consultation. My recommendations in this report have been articulated after wide consultation with my McGill colleagues who provide those services. Finally I would like to mention that the 2011-2012 academic year is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Students at McGill, and a modest celebration of this anniversary is planned for this year.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Spencer Boudreau". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Spencer Boudreau, PhD
Ombudsperson for Students

Description of your request for assistance:

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Others Consulted:

Name / Title / Office

Authorization:

I understand that the Ombudsperson will treat my complaint in a confidential manner as appropriate, with the utmost care and respect for me and those individuals concerned.

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

Signature:

Date: