

Senate Question Regarding Disparities in Ratios of Faculty Advisors to Students
For 18 March 2015 Senate meeting

What are disparities in the ratio of students to advisors in each Faculty caused by?

What is McGill doing to address these disparities and ensure that all students have equal access to advising, regardless of their Faculty?

Answers provided by Prof Anthony C. Masi, Provost, and Prof Ollivier Dyens, Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning)

We would like to thank Senator Greenspon for this question.

We recognize that there is disparity in advising among Faculties. We also recognize that NSSE survey results for McGill on advising is below that of our peers. This being said, we have made conscious efforts in the last few years to address this area and have put in place a long series of measures and initiatives to improve advising at McGill for all students (see the list of initiatives below). The Canadian University Survey Consortium shows that satisfaction rates with advising at McGill have increased from 75% to 82% for first year students and from 61% to 72% for senior students between 2009 and 2013.

It is important to note that evaluating advising is not an easy task. Data, for example, can be difficult to translate. The table included in submission to Senate includes enrolment data from two years ago (2013). Current enrolment figures by Faculty do not vary substantially, but we point out the importance of validating data and being clear about sources. Moreover, the total number of registered students indicated in the table includes graduate students whose principal advisors are their individual faculty supervisors.

This being said, while the number of advisors is important, it is not the only resources available to students. There are many hundreds of people on campus whose professional roles include student advising, both within and beyond specific Faculty contexts. OASIS, the Office of Advising and Student Information Services, identifies dozens of departmental advisors, both faculty and staff, available to counsel students. The Faculty of Arts also supports a very active Internship Office to help students find off-campus placements and build networks among Arts Alumni. The Arts Undergraduate Society runs a peer advising program.

Beyond the bounds of individual Faculties, Service Point on the ground floor of the Redpath Library has been greatly expanded in recent years. Student Services supports Campus Life & Engagement, the Career Planning Service (CaPS), a Counselling Service, First Peoples' House, International Student Services, A Mental Health Service, the Office for Students with Disabilities, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, Scholarships and Student Aid, the Student

Health Service, and a Tutorial Service, all designed to meet the various and particular needs of students.

McGill does indeed believe that “advising services are essential for students’ academic success” as was well articulated by the Principal’s Task Force on Student Life and Learning at McGill.

The University has put in place a series of measures to ensure that all students have access to the same quality of advising.

List of Initiatives

The [Ask an Advisor](#) resource is an important component of our overall advising strategy. This online resource enables undergraduate students in all faculties to direct their academic advising questions to a central resource when they’re not sure who or what office to contact. Students receive a response from an Advising Consultant within 48 hours with either an answer or a referral to the right person or place. While the Consultants are not experts in every program and service, they are the experts on the advising landscape itself. If necessary, they research the most appropriate way of addressing a student’s question to ensure that they contact the right resources in local units.

By more effectively triaging advising needs, we avoid students having to bounce around to multiple offices before finding the right answer or the right person to help them. This both improves the efficiency of the system, by avoiding multiple efforts from several offices addressing the same issue multiple times, and reduces the stress on the student, as they are able to more easily access the advising answers and services that they need. To date, Ask an Advisor has responded to over 3800 inquiries from students in all faculties. Beginning in Winter 2014 semester, the program expanded to include in-person drop-in hours for students at the beginning of each semester, during the course change (Add/Drop) period to increase accessibility during peak periods of need.

In collaboration with Campus Life and Engagement, The Office of the Dean of Students also produced two short videos directed at incoming students, to explain the different types of advising offered at McGill and the importance of meeting with academic advisor(s) regularly. These videos are included as part of the [McGill 101](#) initiative, which is a “course” that all new students are enrolled in that provides academic and student services information timed to synchronize with the student life cycle throughout the year.

The Office of the Dean of Students also developed an [advising checklist](#) (available in both English and French) to help guide new students through the first year at McGill, including reminders about registration, available student services and supports, and when to contact an advisor. The checklist was included on the main Newly-admitted Students website, as well as through the Advising website, Student Affairs Offices, Campus Life and Engagement and the Enrolment Services’ registration website. This document will be updated and distributed annually.

In partnership with Enrolment Services, IT Services, and other units, we developed two new electronic tools in the past year, both of which have components to help support academic advising at McGill: AskMcGill and the McGill app.

[AskMcGill](#) is an interactive database of frequently asked questions that will make it easier for students, current and prospective, as well as parents and staff, to find information about student life and academic issues. There has been significant content included related to registration, student services, program and degree information, as well as finding and accessing academic advising services.

The new [McGill app](#) (available in both iOS and Android versions) includes a tile, or section, on Academic Advising, listing the contact information for all advising offices on campus, as well as a link to Ask an Advisor and the new Advising Checklist. The app will facilitate access for students to the advising offices that they may need to contact and will help make students aware of all the resources at their disposal.

Professional development and training opportunities for advisors are being expanded regularly. In the past year, there have been a number of workshops for advisors, including: sessions of the Mental Health First Aid course and updates from International Student Services and Career Planning Service. The [Leadership Development Program](#) (LDP) offered by Organizational Development continues to include an Advisor Stream, which is open to Management-level staff who have an advising or frontline student service role. To date, 35 advisors and other staff members have completed or are enrolled in this program.

We are currently working with Human Resources to develop a new [Principal's Award](#) to recognize excellence in academic advising. The goal is to have this new award included in the 2015 Awards. Leading up to this, the 2014 round of Principal's Awards – the winners of which were announced in October – gave special consideration to nominations in all categories that included an academic advising component.

Early Alert

At the start of the 2014/2015 academic year, a new [Early Alert tool](#) was integrated into myCourses, McGill's course management system. This tool allows course instructors to quickly and easily contact the Office of the Dean of Students if they have a concern about a student, either due to academic performance, well-being, or behaviour.

Outdoor Advising Day

The second annual Outdoor Advising Day event was held in October 2014. This event brings advisors from undergraduate faculties, as well as representatives from the Service Point office, to a central and visible outdoor location on campus, and works on the principle that advisors should be available where students are. The initiative allows students to get to know the advisors and the advising resources available to them in a casual manner and increases the visibility of academic advising at the University. This year's event received positive feedback

from students, some of whom commented that this type of outreach was effective and that they appreciate the chance to meet advisors outside of the usual office environment.

Staff-Student Mentoring Program

The Staff-Student Mentoring Program continues to expand every year. Mentees and mentors can be randomly matched or matched on criteria that mentees provide that may include language, global volunteer and work experience, or specific skills such as networking and public speaking. The past year also saw the successful inclusion of a graduate student component, which now allows for graduate-undergraduate student pairings within the program. In 2013-2014, there were 96 staff-student pairings and 31 graduate-undergraduate pairings.