

OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2017–18



OMBUDS OFFICE

July 8, 2018

Members of the Board of Governors
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montreal, QC
H3G 1M8

To the Board of Governors;

As per article 29 of the Terms of Reference of the Ombuds Office, I am pleased to submit the **2017-2018 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University**.

The purpose of this report is to provide you with:

- a description of the year's activities from May 1, 2017 to April 30, 2018;
- statistics illustrating our service to the community; and
- some examples of recommendations offered.

I look forward to presenting this report to you in person.

Sincerely,

amy fish

Amy Fish, MHSc.

Ombudsperson

Concordia University / Université Concordia

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Ombuds Office Overview

Concordia University was one of the first Universities in Canada to establish an Ombuds Office. The office was founded in 1978, on the principles of impartiality, confidentiality, independence and accessibility.

The Ombuds Office reports directly to the Board of Governors to maintain its independent status.

The Ombudsperson is responsible for promoting fairness in the University.

This objective is achieved through:

- investigating allegations of unfairness;
- assisting community members in conflict de-escalation;
- recommending improvements to policies and procedures where appropriate; and
- developing training workshops and materials for the University community with respect to resolving conflict related issues.

Ombuds Office 2017-2018

This year was stable in terms of staffing, budget and mandate. Highlights of 2017-2018

File Volume Steady

This year, the Ombuds Office treated 469 files, as compared to 470 the previous year.

Very few of these files became formal or serious complaints.

Since 2013-2014, the Ombuds Office has treated approximately 500 files a year. Generally, the volume of Ombuds files is expected to be approximately 1% of the student population. When you consider that our office also accepts files from faculty and staff, our file volume is exactly what we would expect for a university the size of Concordia.

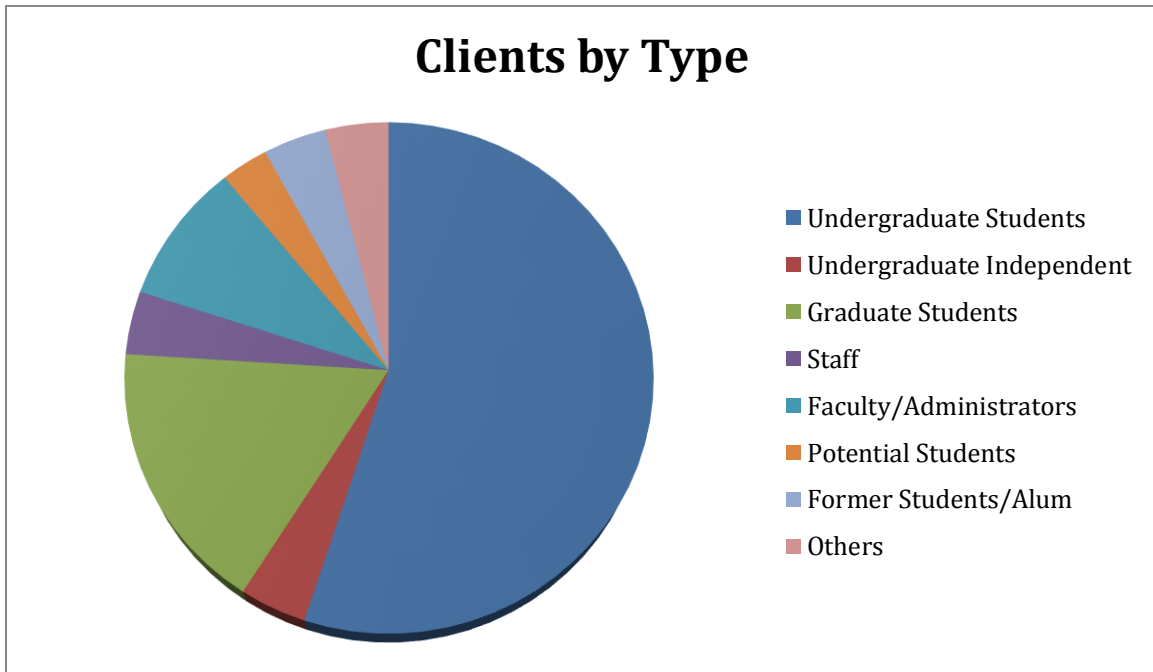
Terms of Reference Update

In Fall 2017, an Ad Hoc Committee was struck to review the Terms of Reference of the Ombuds Office. There were no significant changes. Revisions included updating terminology (e.g., website instead of newspaper) and using gender neutral language. The updated Terms of Reference were presented to and approved by the Board.

Client Overview

469 concerns were brought to the Ombuds Office this year, 76% of which came from students. Please see Chart A, below for a breakdown of what type of clients came to our office.

Chart A: Percentage of Clients by Type



Overall:

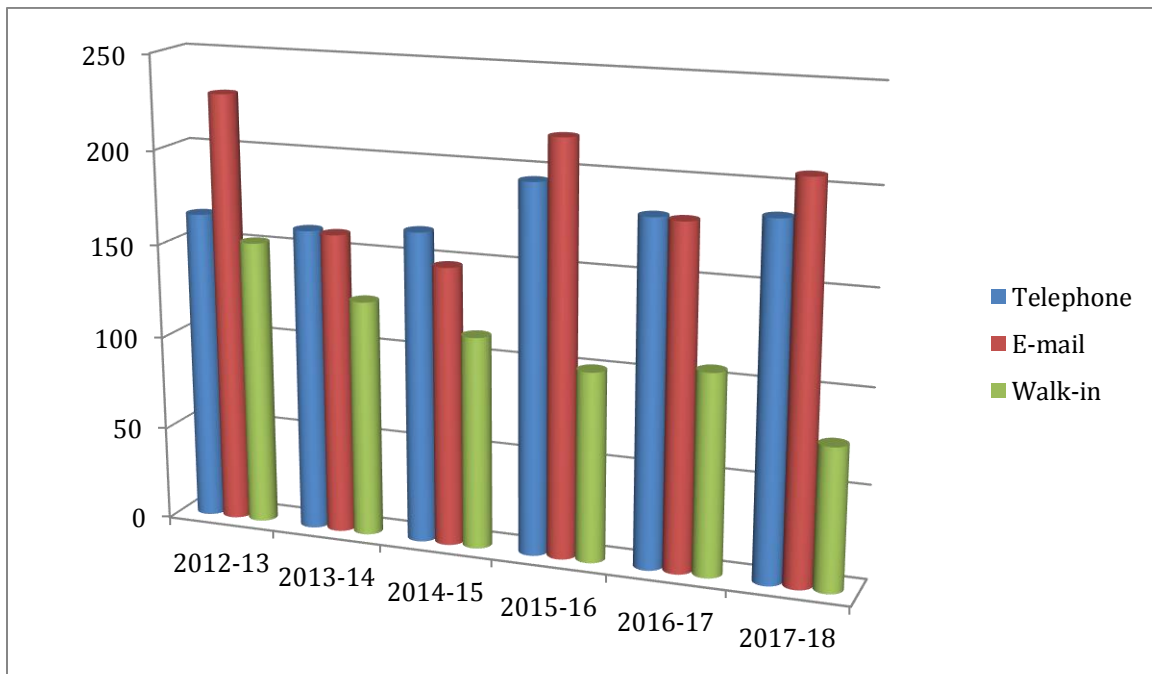
- Consistent with previous years;
- 76% of the concerns were brought forward by students;
- 13% came from faculty members or staff; and
- 11% came from other parties (e.g, alumni, potential students).

The 11% from “other” parties is exactly the same as last year. This group includes former students with specific concerns as well as alumni with extenuating circumstances.

Means of Initial Contact

The Ombuds Office receives complaints and concerns through telephone calls, e-mails and walk-ins. We conducted an analysis of the past six years to see if there were any major changes in this area. Please see findings below, in Chart B:

Chart B: Means of Initial Contact by Year (2012-13 to 2017-18)



This chart represents only the first point of contact. Once the clients reach out to us, we schedule a follow up in person or over the phone, depending upon both their preference and the nature of the issue. Clients that walk-in are seen immediately whenever possible, or given a follow up meeting within the next few days.

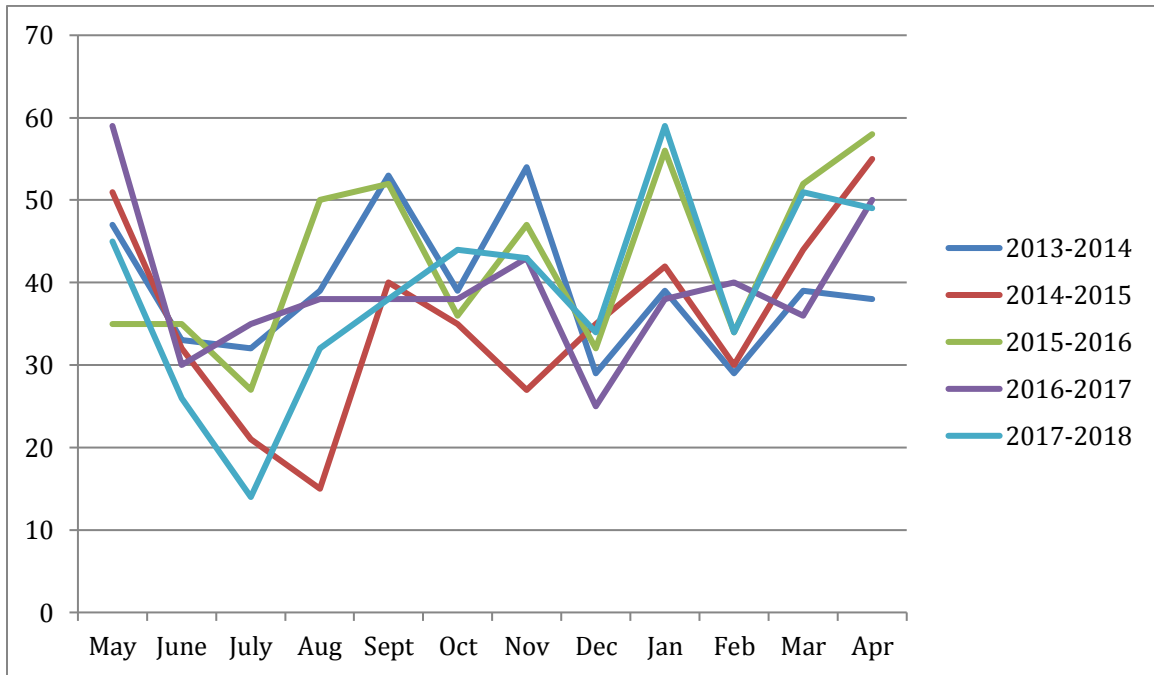
This year we saw fewer walk-ins than in previous years. There was a decline from 107 in 2016-17 to 76 in 2017-18. This was a surprise to our office because we welcome community members who come to our office, even without an appointment. We will continue to observe this situation and look for reasons for this change.

We have not received a letter through the mail in three years, and we expect that this method of correspondence has been replaced entirely by e-mail.

Caseload per Month

Chart C, below shows a month by month breakdown of our caseload for the past five years. As you can see, the busiest times are April and May due to exams, graduation and program degree requirements. July, August and December are consistently lower in volume.

Chart C: Caseload by Month (2013-14 to 2017-18)



Student Concerns

Students bring a wide variety of concerns to our office. We separate the concerns into academic and non-academic issues. A full breakdown of academic concerns is presented in Chart E, below.

Student Academic Concerns

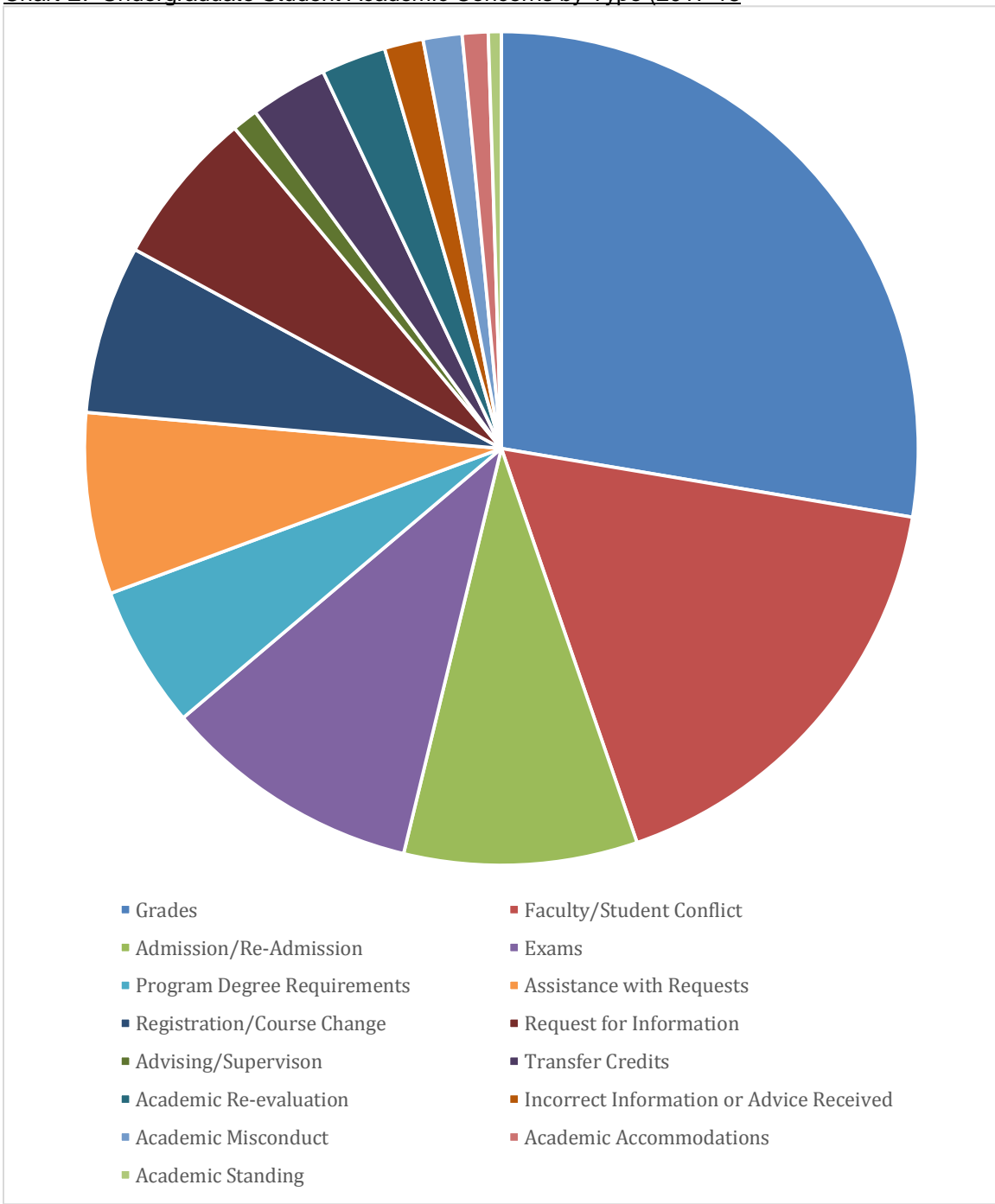
Over 50% of the work of the Ombuds Office relates to Student Academic Concerns. Last year, the decision was made to modify the data collection categories. The purpose of the change was to collect more detailed information regarding student concerns. For example, in previous years, Grades and Course Management made up the highest amount of concerns brought forward. The new list has more specific categories such as Academic Re-evaluation, Accommodations, Registration/Course Change, etc to better capture what happened. Also, the categories of Intellectual Property and Missing Exams/Papers were eliminated because they had been representing less than two cases per year. The new list is presented below in Table D:

Table D: Updated Categories for Data Collection, Academic Concerns (Alphabetical Order)

2012-13 to 2016-17	2017-18 -
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Misconduct • Academic Standing • Admission • Advising/Supervision • Course Management • Exams • Grades/Re-evaluation • Intellectual Property • Missing Exams/Papers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Misconduct • Academic Re-evaluation • Academic Standing • Accommodations • Admission/Re-admission • Advising/Supervision • Assistance in Filling Out Requests • Exams • Faculty/Student Conflict • Grades • Incorrect information/advice received • Program Degree Requirements • Registration/Course Change • Request for Information • Transfer Credits

These categories were applied to both Undergraduate and Graduate students. The data will be presented separately to better illustrate where the concerns lie.

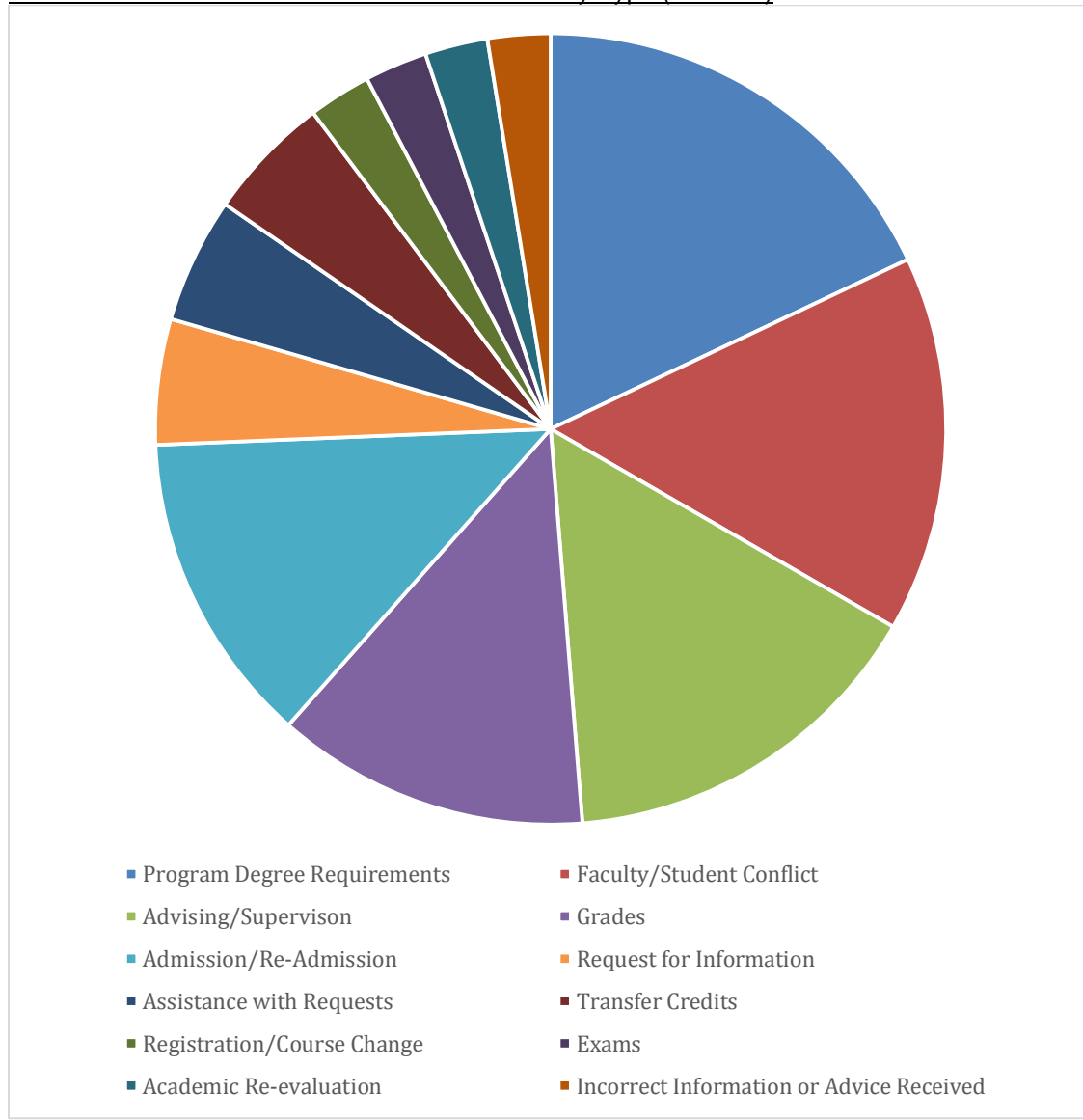
Chart E: Undergraduate Student Academic Concerns by Type (2017-18)



Grades remain the number one issue that brings students to the Ombuds Office. Faculty/Student conflict is the next largest category with approximately 17%. This can include preventing escalation of a conflict, or advice regarding how to speak to a Faculty member when the student has an issue. The next largest group of issues relate to Exams, Assistance Completing Request Forms (such as Appeals procedures), Admission and Re-admission issues. Finally,

Undergraduate Students bring forward concerns such as Registration, Program Degree Requirements and Requests for Information. Requests vary widely from students asking whom to tell when their classroom is too cold to students asking for advice regarding where to get peer tutors. Other concerns represent less than 5% of the total.

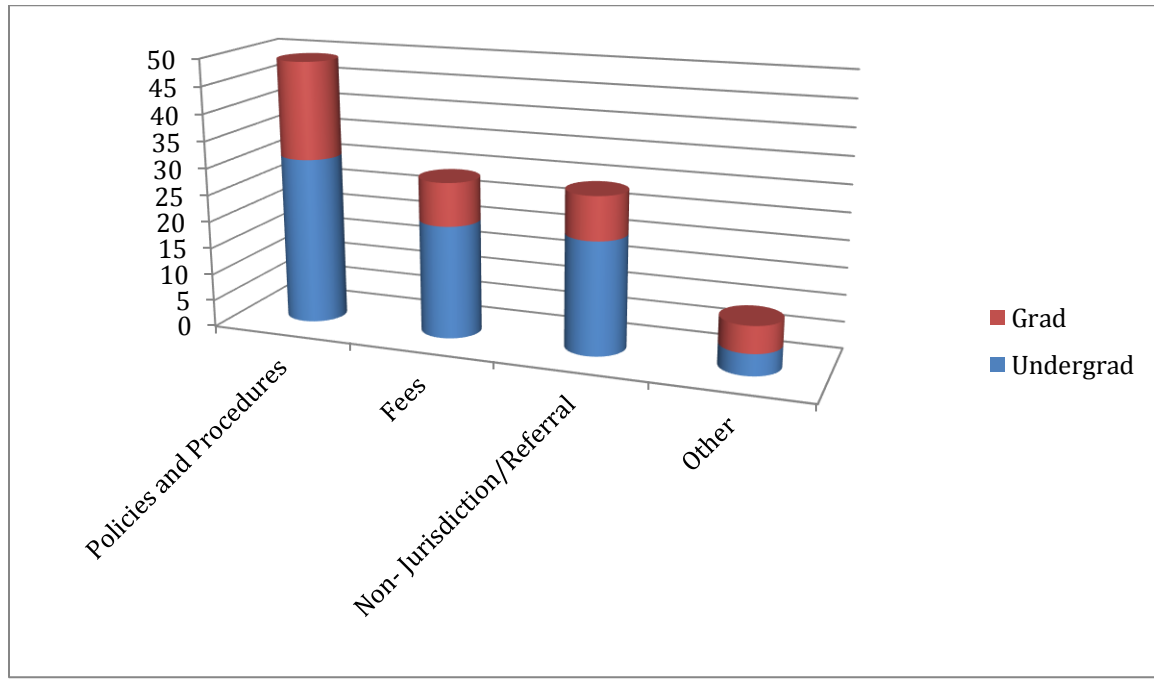
Chart F: Graduate Student Academic Concerns by Type (2017-18)



For Graduate students, the main concerns relate to Program Degree Requirements. For example, sometimes the requirements for graduation may be unclear. Or, sometimes a graduate student may want to be exempted from a requirement such as a language proficiency. The second greatest concerns relate to Supervision and Faculty/Student Conflicts. We have been working with the School of Graduate Studies to create improvements in these areas.

Student Non-Academic Concerns

Chart G: Student Non-Academic Concerns by Type (2017-18)



The majority of non-academic concerns for both Undergraduate Students and Graduate Students relate to Policies and Procedures and Fees. These complaints range from questions regarding whether a student can appeal an Academic Re-evaluation decision to how graduate funding is disbursed. All of the calls or emails that were referred to other departments for a response have been grouped together under the heading “Non-Jurisdiction/Referral.” Some examples of these might include questions about the shuttle schedule and/or concerns regarding library hours. There were a few complaints that do not fit into any of these categories and that were not Academic in nature but were still appropriate to be treated by the Ombuds Office. This might include a concern regarding housing or athletics that could be looked at by our office but would not be academic in nature.

Resolutions of Student Cases

Depending upon the nature of the file brought to our office, we may use one of several techniques to provide assistance. For example, we might:

- Provide information and/or referral to a more appropriate resource;
- Offer coaching and/or advice;
- Assist with informal conflict resolution such as mediation; or
- Follow up on an issue and expedite where possible.

In some cases, following our initial consultation, the client may decide not to proceed with an investigation. Other times, the issue may resolve itself independent of the Ombuds Office’s efforts. These used to be considered “Withdrawn” however this category has been renamed to better reflect the actions taken.

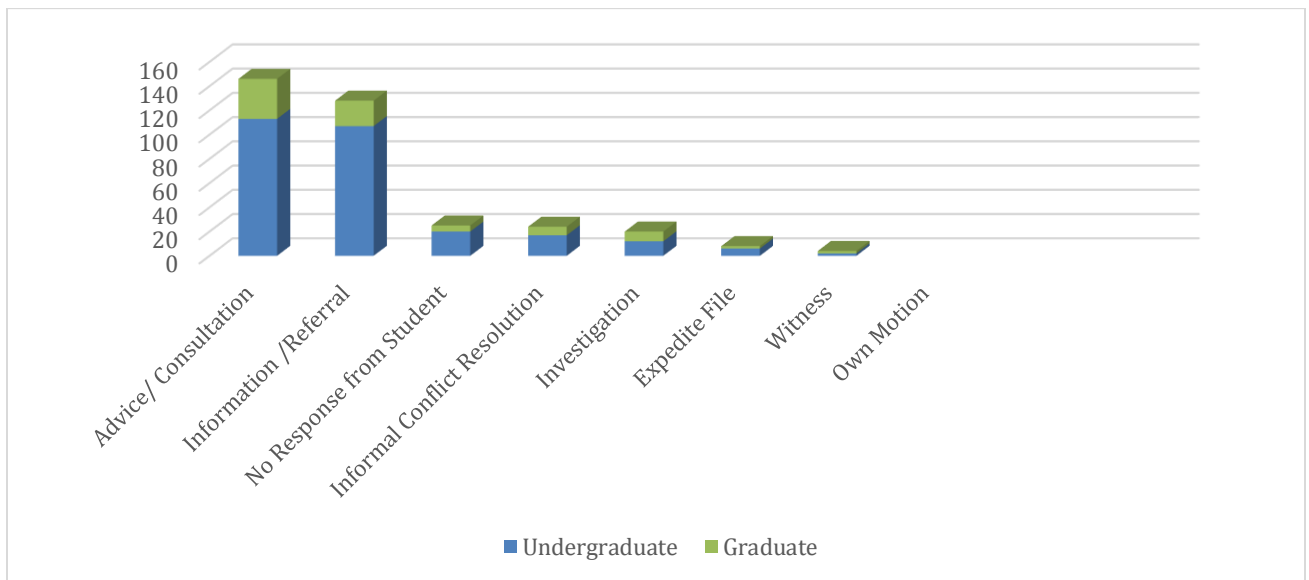
As of this year, actions can be selected from the following list (presented alphabetically):

- Advice/Consultation;
- Expedite File;

- Informal Conflict Resolution
- Information/Referral;
- Investigation;
- Non-Jurisdiction/Referral;
- No Response from Student;
- Own Motion; or
- Witness;

Please see Chart H, below for the breakdown of actions taken in student cases by type of student 2016-17,

Chart H: Actions Taken in Student Cases by Type of Student 2017-18



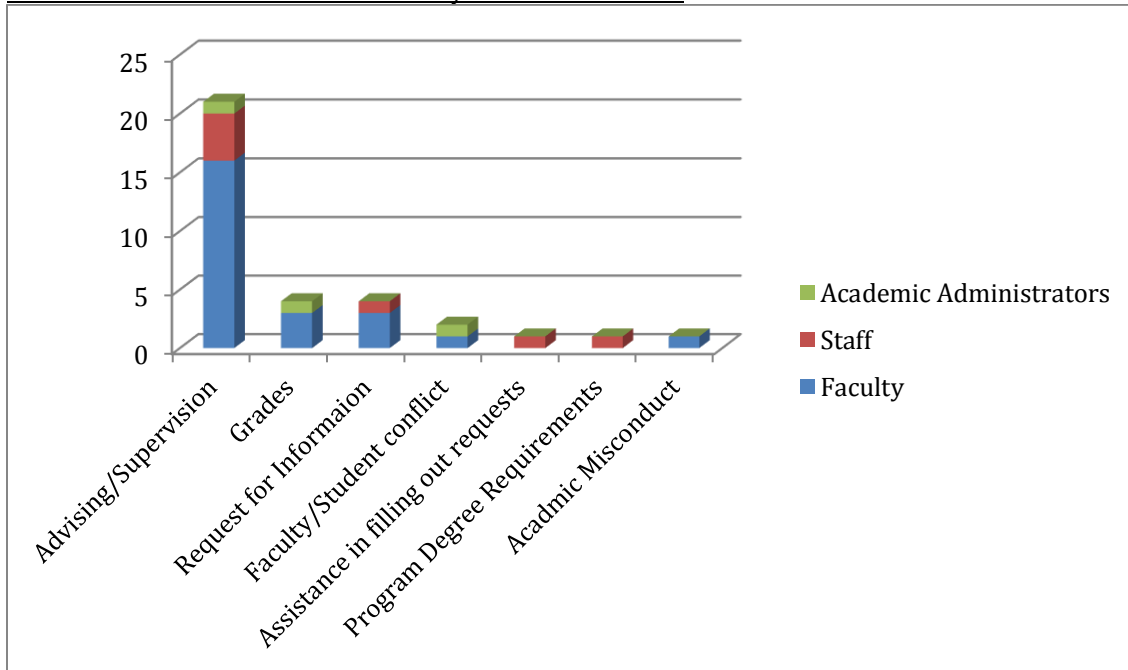
The most common action taken by the Ombuds Office is Advice and/or Consultation. This means that we meet with the student and offer suggestions regarding how to proceed. The second most common action is providing information and referral. Together, these categories represent 77% of our cases. We investigate about 20 complex cases every year, and offer informal conflict resolution in about 24 cases. Infrequently we are called on to witness an exchange. This might be when we are asked to read a series of e-mails to make sure that policy and procedure are followed even if no action is required in this case.

In 2017-18 the Ombuds Office did not have any “Own Motion” Investigations. This is when the office, on its own initiative, looks into a particular issue to determine if it was fair.

Faculty and Staff Concerns

Faculty and Staff concerns represent 13% of the files brought forward this year. These represent both academic and non-academic issues.

Chart I: Academic Concerns of Faculty and Staff 2017-18



Academic Concerns

This year saw an increase in academic concerns from faculty and staff, from 8 last year to 31 this year. This could be because I was invited to the Graduate Supervision Day to speak about Success Factors in Graduate Supervision. This attendance may have encouraged faculty members to contact the Ombuds Office for advice before an actual problem arose. The type of concerns reflect this theory as follows:

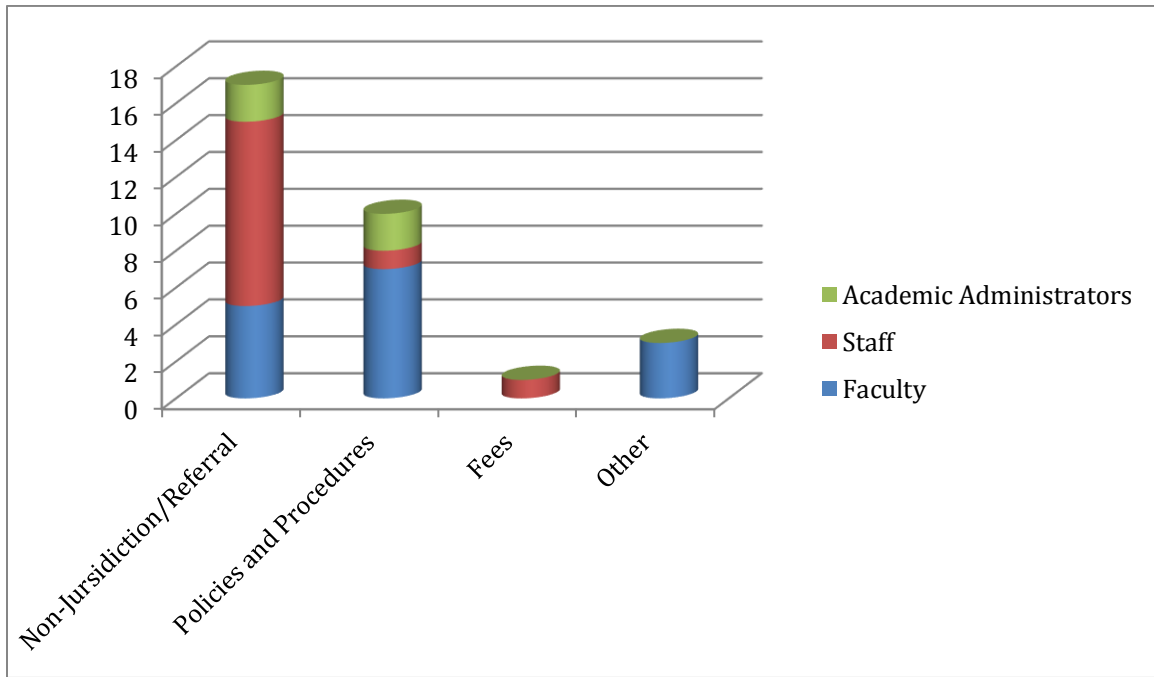
- Advising/Supervision: 21;
- Grades: 4; and
- Request for information: 4.

Other concerns included Academic Misconduct, Program/Degree Requirements and Faculty/Student Conflict.

Non-Academic Concerns

This year there were 27 non-academic concerns brought to the Ombuds Office by Faculty and Staff as presented in Chart J, below.

Chart J: Faculty/Staff Non-Academic Concerns 2017-18



The majority of files were regarding matters that would be best assisted by other departments such as questions regarding pensions and assistance with other Human Resource matters. 10 files were brought forward regarding questions in policies and procedures, for example assistance interpreting the rules regarding religious accommodations for students.

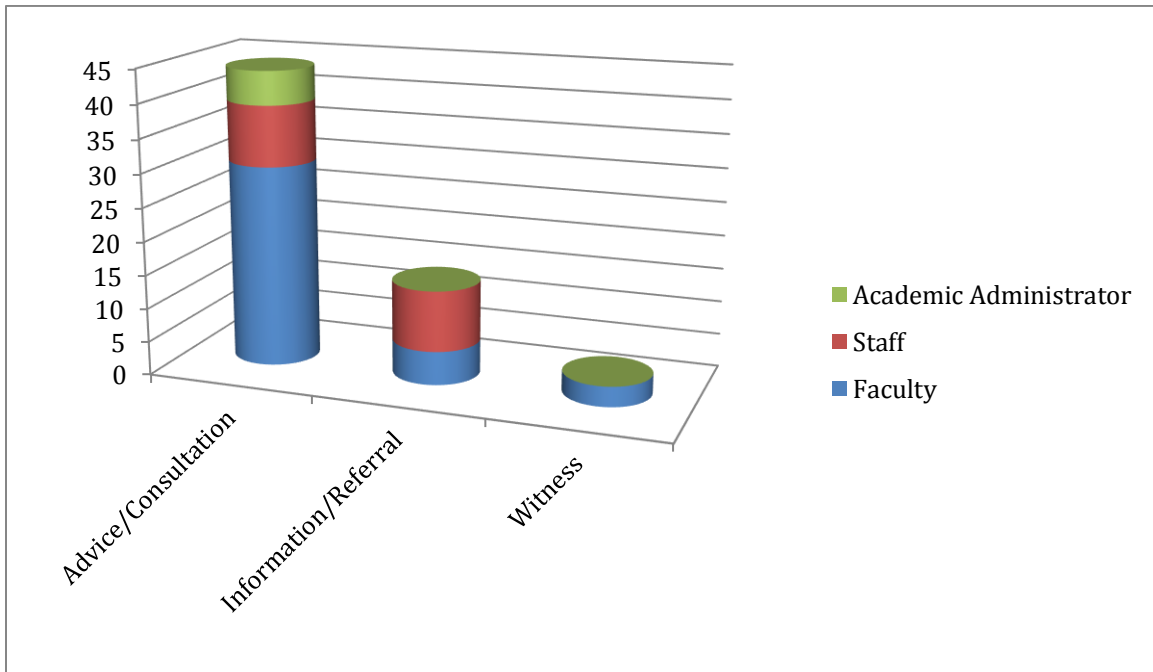
There was one file regarding fees, and three other files which could relate to things like access to information, or safety and security.

It is our goal to encourage faculty and staff to continue to consult with our office regarding concerns or challenging situations. Our intention is to continue to improve communication and to prevent the escalation of complaints at Concordia University.

Resolutions of Faculty and Staff Cases.

Chart K below shows the actions taken in faculty/staff cases 2017-18.

Chart K Actions Taken by Type for Faculty/Staff Cases 2017-18



Here, too, the main function of the Ombuds Office is to offer advice and consultation. Information and Referral is one of our main services, and in some cases (three this year) we are asked to witness a conversation or e-mail exchange.

Review of Prior Recommendations

No formal recommendations were made in 2017-18.

Examples of Assistance Provided for 2017-2018

Over the course of this year, the Ombuds Office has assisted many clients with their concerns. Some examples follow, with a few details changed to preserve confidentiality:

- A graduate student was unable to complete her degree because of interference from her former spouse. She succeeded in leaving an abusive domestic situation and attempted to return to Concordia. Unfortunately, she was given incorrect advice by several different offices and believed she would have to re-apply and re-take the courses she had already completed. Our office was able to assist the student in re-applying and getting the relevant credits transferred into the new dossier.
- A group of students came to our office because a new program degree requirement (a competency exam) was introduced after their admission and they believed they should not have to take it. The students were correct and the requirement was waived for their cohort. The undergraduate calendar was updated to reflect the new requirement.
- A faculty member contacted our office for advice regarding a student that had requested a religious accommodation so that they could vacation with their family because that is how they celebrate this particular holiday. The student had requested an additional paper in lieu of a presentation to the class. We advised the faculty that according to our Religious Accommodations Policy, we give accommodations for religious reasons, but it is up to the professor to determine what the accommodation should be. Therefore, the professor can require that the presentation take place prior to the student's holiday.