

CONCORDIA

OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2022–23



INFORMATION

RELATIONS DIPLOMACY

PROCEDURAL COMMUNITY

PROMOTE INDEPENDENT IMPARTIAL

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RECOMMENDATION CONCERNS

TACT REASONABLE COACHING



OMBUDS OFFICE

September 1 , 2023

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 **2022-2023 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University.**

We have provided an overview of the year's activities from May 1, 2022 to April 30, 2023, with several examples of our files. This year the report includes some minor recommendations.

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

The Ombuds Office at Concordia University was established in 1978 to promote fairness in the University by addressing individual concerns, looking at systemic issues and offering recommendations when appropriate.

The Ombuds Office reports directly to the Board of Governors and is supervised by the University Secretariat.

The day-to-day role of the Ombuds Office is to:

- Listen to student, faculty and staff concerns;
- Advise community regarding the application of policies and procedures;
- Investigate incidents of alleged unfairness;
- Following investigation and when appropriate, recommend changes to policies, rules and procedures;
- Provide a sounding board for students, faculty and staff seeking advice on academic matters;
- Coach community members regarding improved communication; and
- Together with colleagues, offer skill-building workshops.

The Ombuds Office continues to adhere to the core values of impartiality, accessibility, and confidentiality,

Ombuds Office 2022-2023

This year saw some changes to the staffing in the Ombuds Office.

In February 2023, our Department Assistant, Andreea Constatinescu, accepted a new position in the President's Office. We thank her for her outstanding contribution and wish her the best of luck in her new endeavor.

In April 2023, our Associate Ombudsperson Dorothee Beaupré-Bernier returned from parental leave. She had been replaced by Nicole Marie Macoretta who accepted a new position in the university. Nicole was an excellent addition to the team, and we wish her continued success.

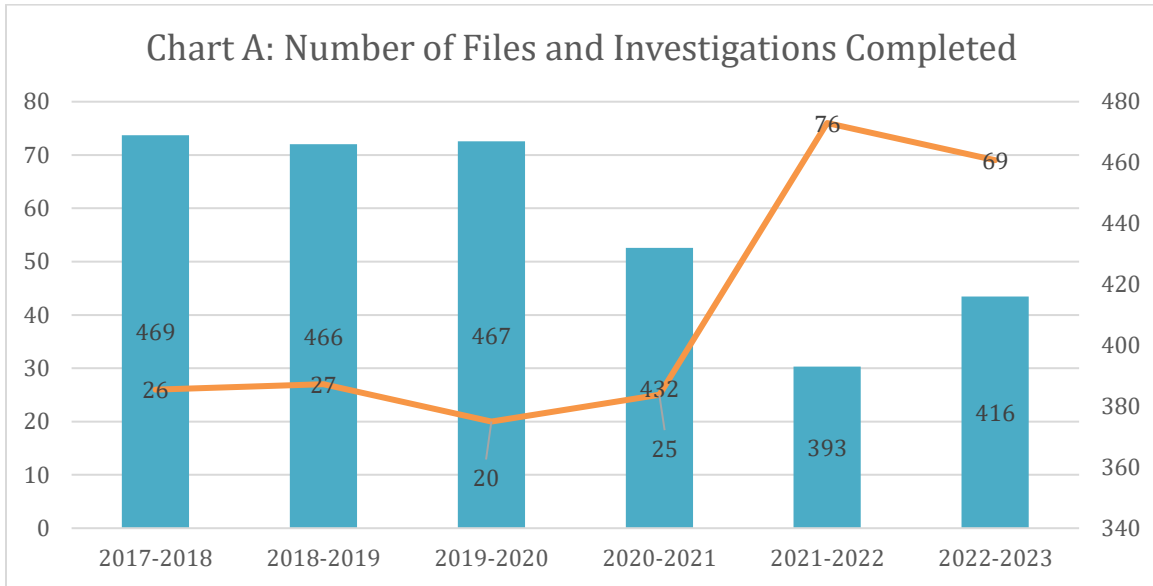
Amy Fish has been the Ombudsperson since 2016, and in 2022 she was officially confirmed for another (renewable) five year term.

Looking at our files from 2017- 2023, we see two interesting trends. After a decline in overall files during the pandemic, the volume of files is trending upward this year, from 393 to 416. We believe this correction will continue until pre-2020 levels are reached.

Interestingly, while the number of files declined, we saw an increase in the number of investigations. From 2017 to 2020, we had an average of 25 investigations per year. However, since 2020, we have been averaging 73 investigations per year. The details are in Chart A, below.

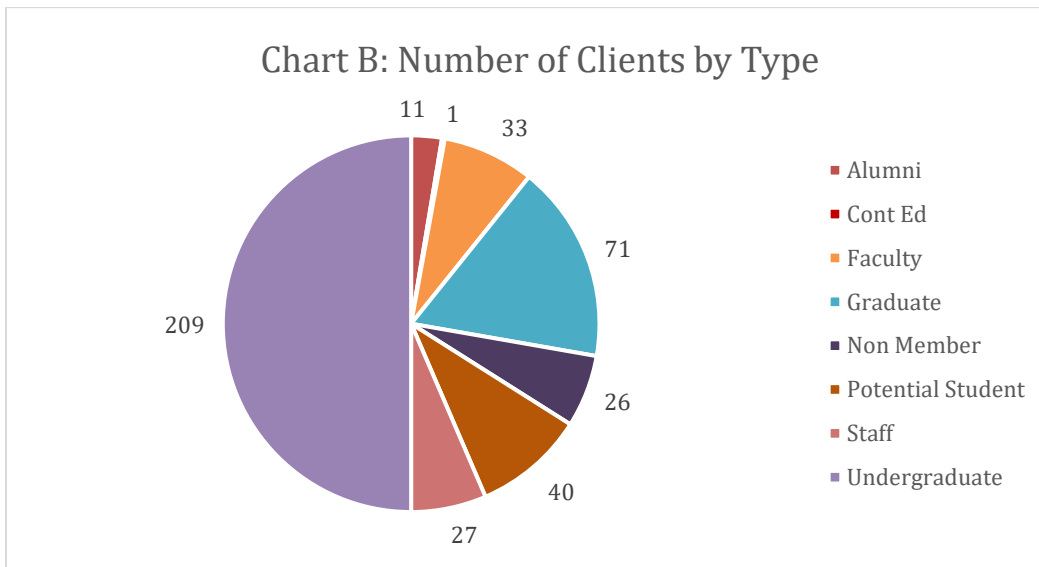
We believe that the increase in investigations has been brought about by the increased complexity of files in the past few years. The more complex a dossier the more likely it will

generate an investigation. Given the complexity of the dossiers that came to our office, an increase in investigation would be expected.



Community Overview

Please see Chart B below, for a breakdown of what type of clients came to our office.



As in past years, the majority of our files are from Undergraduate students, followed by Graduate students. We had one Continuing Education student this year.

After current students, our next largest category was potential students. Potential student concerns normally relate to whether an application was fairly evaluated. Individuals who reach out to our office with questions regarding the admission process (deadlines, documents, International

Students, etc.) would also be put in this category. Faculty and staff consulted with our office as well. We also had 26 non-members contact us with concerns.

Type of Contact

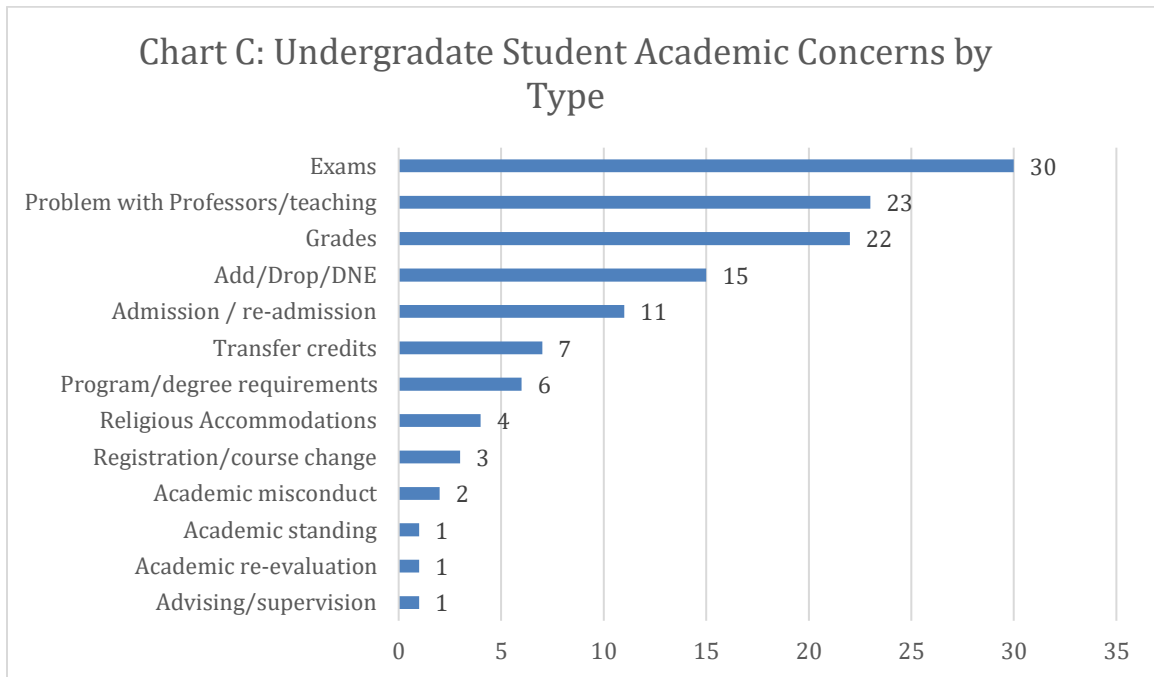
We continued to offer Zoom drop-in sessions this year. The volume is small but consistent and we believe this promotes the accessibility of our office. Most of our files come to us via email and almost all community members request zoom meetings rather than in-person. We do, however, continue to offer in-person meetings as an option.

Student Concerns

This year's concerns are similar in type to what the Ombuds Office has seen in past years. Undergraduate and Graduate students' files are presented separately below.

Undergraduate Student Academic Concerns

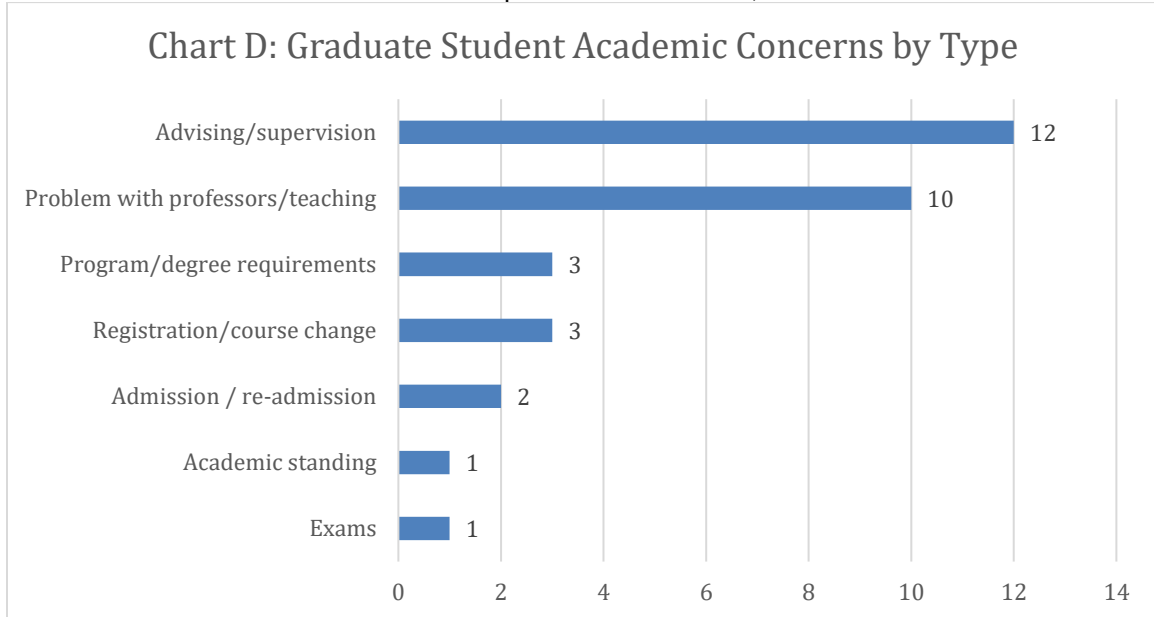
The main types of undergraduate concerns are presented in Chart C, below.



Consistent with previous years, the top three reasons students come to the Ombuds Office are Exams, Teaching and Grades. Interestingly, this year there were four files brought to our attention for religious accommodations. We appreciate the support of the Provost's Office, the Equity Office and the University Chaplain in finding fair solutions for these students.

Graduate Student Academic Concerns

A full breakdown of academic concerns is presented in Chart D, below.



This year, the top two reasons that Graduate students came to our office were Advising/supervision and Problems with professors/teaching. Students have a variety of concerns in these areas, for example:

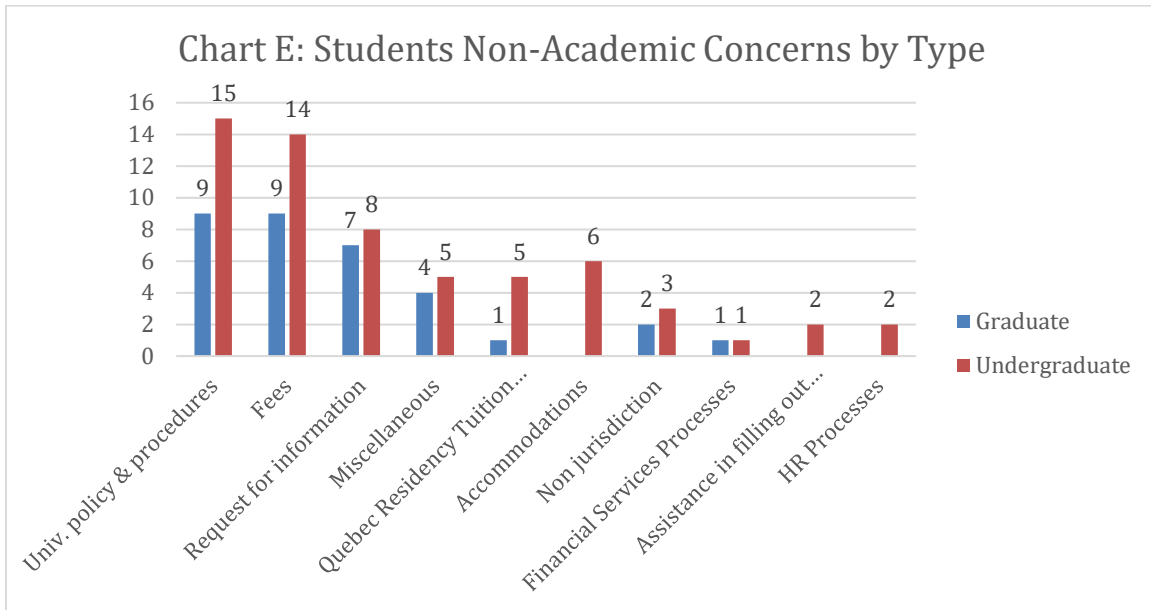
- Request for assistance in communicating with supervisor;
- Lack of clarity regarding supervision expectations; or
- Conflict regarding research goals and objectives.

In these situations, we encourage students to get support from the Graduate Program Director and/or the School of Graduate Studies. The Ombuds Office normally assists with coaching and/or suggestions going forward.

With a view to continuous improvement, the Ombudsperson was invited to be a panelist at the School of Graduate Studies' Supervision workshops. These workshops provided an opportunity to discuss some of these issues with faculty members.

Student Non-Academic Concerns

The Ombuds Office can also assist students regarding issues that are not purely academic in nature, as shown in Chart E, below.



For several years in a row, University Policy and Procedures was the top non-academic category for both Graduate and Undergraduate students, in all cases followed by Fees.

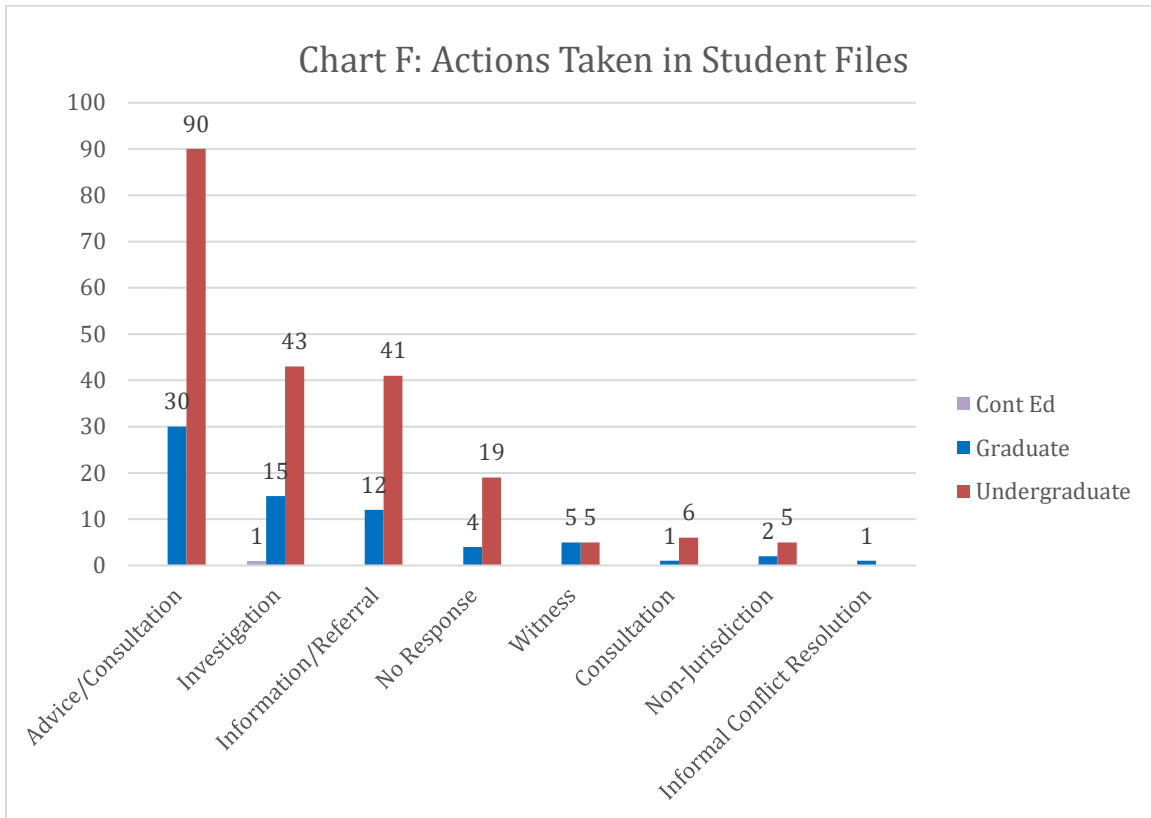
Policy and procedure questions can range from how to apply for an academic re-evaluation to specific departmental policies about internships or co-op placements. In those files, we point students to the correct information and continue to support them until the matter is resolved.

Issues with Fees could be questions relating to how or why certain fees were calculated, or students who believe they should be paying Quebec fees and would like assistance correcting their accounts.

We had five files outside our jurisdiction this year. Before we can clearly determine that something is outside of our jurisdiction, we meet with the students to get more information. This year, we received several files regarding incidents that occurred five or more years ago, and therefore we were unable to investigate those matters. We also saw a few files regarding issues that happened outside of Concordia University and were therefore deemed outside of our jurisdiction. Whenever possible, we offer students or former students another office to consult.

Resolution of Student Files

The Ombuds Office normally provides advice and information to students, as shown in Chart F, below.

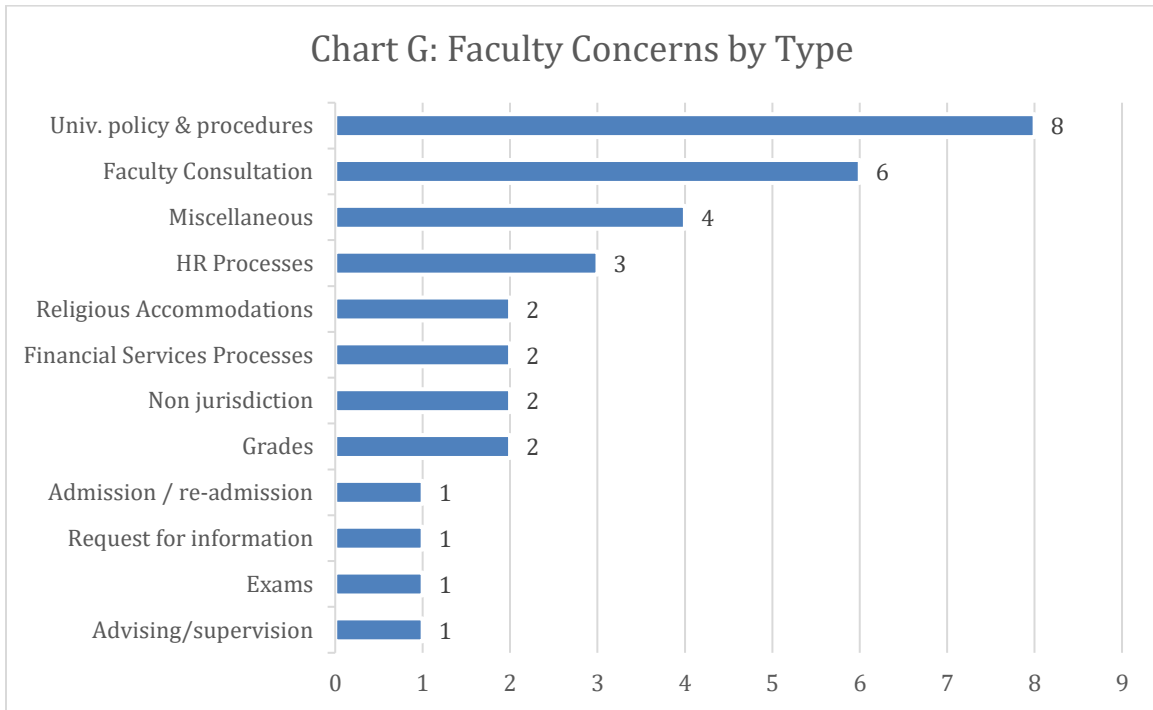


By far, the most common action taken in student files is advice and consultation. Advice might include clarifying correspondence, suggestions for alternate approaches or appealing University decisions. If the student is working with a student advocate, the Ombuds Office might meet with both at the same time.

When the Ombuds Office investigates an issue, that means that the initial meeting has shown a possibility of unfairness and an inquiry is necessary before conclusions can be drawn or recommendations offered. An investigation includes a review of all necessary documentation, interviews with key personnel and a deep analysis. Students receive a written summary of their call as well as a written notice of conclusion. If recommendations are offered, they would appear in the notice.

Faculty Concerns by Type

This is the second year that Faculty and Staff concerns are presented separately.



Faculty Concerns

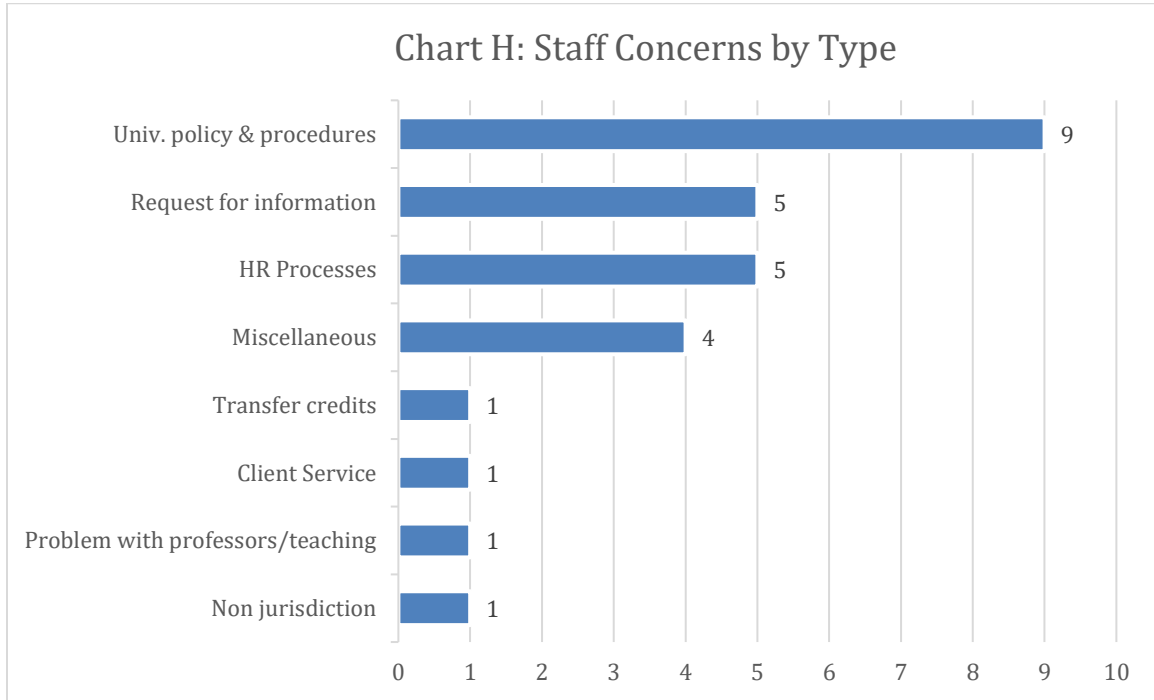
Last year there were 23 Faculty concerns, this year there were 33. In all likelihood this is because we have been encouraging faculty to consult with our office and have presented at New Faculty orientation. We believe that the Ombuds Office can prevent escalation by being involved early.

Faculty members come to us for reflection regarding whether policies and procedures are fair and being applied fairly. Consultations range considerably – they might relate to students who have requested an exception to a rule or colleagues who might disagree about process.

We introduced a new category this year called HR Processes. These files are mainly about payroll queries and other Unity concerns.

Staff Concerns

A summary of staff concerns by type is presented in Chart H, below.



As in previous years, the majority of questions relate to University Policies and Procedures. The new category of HR processes was relevant for staff files as well.

Select Recommendations 2022-23

The Ombuds Office has made several recommendations this year. A few examples are provided below.

1. Review communication regarding payroll issues and concerns.

There were 11 inquiries regarding payroll in the past year. When the Ombuds Office escalated these issues, we were promptly replied to, and information was offered to community members. We understand that the implementation of Unity, as well as short staffing in the sector, has made it difficult to respond to multiple questions. For this reason, the Ombuds Office recommended that Human Resources review their communication strategy. This recommendation was well received, and we are optimistic that this issue is being addressed.

2. Appropriate documentation must be used when providing information to third parties (such as parents).

Some parents can be persistent in their request for information or desire to discuss their child's information. Concordia has a form that can be used when information can be released to a third party. However, we do not have a blanket document where a parent or spouse can "act on behalf of" one of our students. We have seen parents draft their own documents and try to use them in an effort to gain access to student information. This recommendation was to caution staff, faculty and administration to exercise extreme caution regarding personal information. We offered

support to departments who are facing this challenging situation, and we know that this recommendation has been implemented.

3. Find a safety net for specific student application errors

When a student is put on failed standing and they are ready to return to Concordia, they must first apply back to the department where they failed. This year, we learned that if a student inadvertently applies to the wrong program, this error may not be caught, and the student might not receive an error message. This issue arises because of the automated way in which re-admission applications are processed. While every effort is made to remind students of the process, it is our understanding that occasionally instructions can be missed. For this reason, we have recommended that this be looked into in more detail to find an appropriate solution such as an audit. We have been told that this has been taken very seriously and a variety of solutions are being looked at to avoid this problem in the future.

4. Review procedure for awarding credits for Technical DEC's

Upon admission, student files are evaluated and where applicable credits or exemptions are offered. We noticed that for students entering Concordia with a Technical DEC, there were some discrepancies in the way their CEGEP credits were appearing. The end result was that sometimes corrections had to be made to student files after they had completed several semesters toward their degree. We recommended that this problem be looked into and we have been told that the issue is currently being evaluated with solutions in mind.