



# OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2015–16





## OMBUDS OFFICE

February 1, 2017

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 **2015-2016 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University.**

The purpose of this report is to provide you with:

- an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the Ombuds office;
- a description of the year's activities from May 1, 2015 to April 30, 2016;
- key statistics regarding the community we serve;
- the status of previous years' recommendations; and
- a summary of recommendations from this year.

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 role of the Ombudsperson is to promote fairness in the university. This includes but is not limited to:

- investigating possible complaints or allegations of unfairness;
- recommending changes to policies, rules and procedures where appropriate;
- informally mediating simple disputes to prevent escalation;
- providing a sounding board for community members seeking advice; and
- offering workshops to equip participants with a comfort level in dealing with possibly challenging situations.

The Concordia University Ombuds Office was created in 1978 following the merger of Ombuds Offices of Sir George Williams University and Loyola College. The principles of impartiality, confidentiality, independence and accessibility were as important then as they are today.

The Ombuds Office reports directly to the Board of Governors to maintain its independent status. The reporting structure is illustrated in Appendix A.

The Ombuds Office Terms of Reference is presented in Appendix B.

## Changes in the Ombuds Office 2015-2016

This year brought some change to the staffing at the Ombuds Office.

In November 2015, Kristen Robillard stepped down as Ombudsperson after over 15 years of devoted service to the University. Julie Boncompain, Associate Ombudsperson, was responsible for the office for several months until Amy Fish was appointed.

Amy Fish began her mandate in March 2016.

## Highlights of 2015-2016

### Increase in Files

In 2015-16, there was an increase in files to 514 from 427 during the previous year.

At first glance, this may seem like a significant jump, however it still represents less than 1% of the student body.

Also, the increase in volume may be explained in several ways.

First, when there is a change in Ombuds staffing, there is often an increase in files. Some clients return to the office and hope that they will have a new person take a look at their concerns with new results.

Second, this may be due to a procedural change. In the past, files were kept open for a longer period of time such that multiple concerns were, in certain instances, treated in the same dossier. With a view to facilitating future bench-marking activities and observing relevant trends, we have now adopted a more incident-based approach. Therefore, the same client may have several files open over a year, which may impact our statistics.

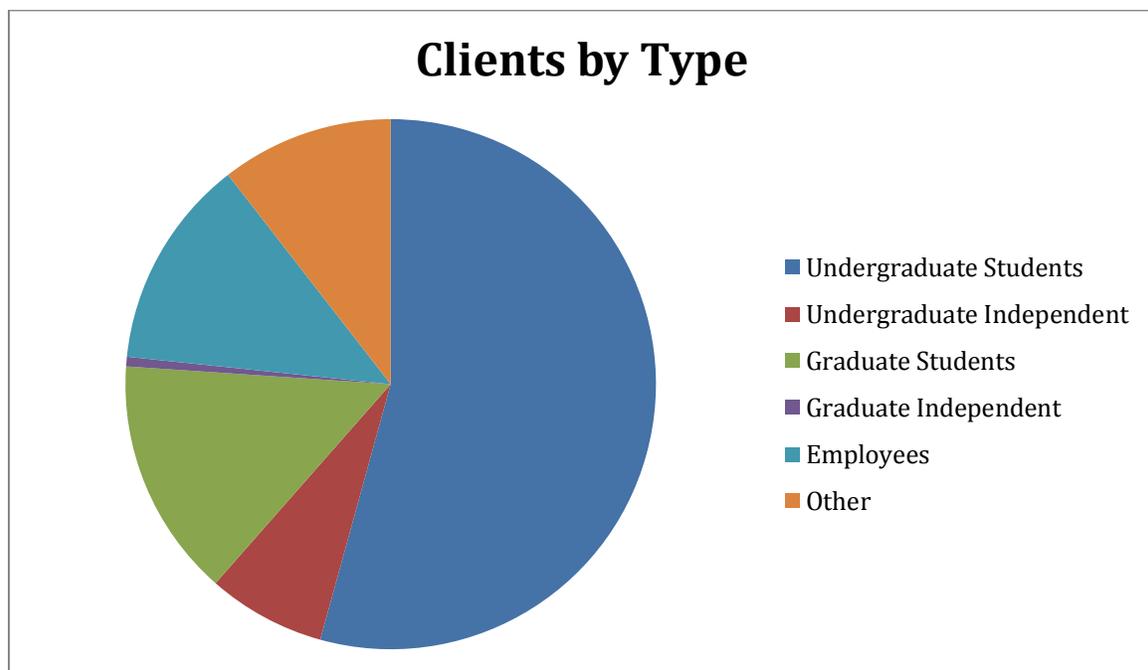
Third, the Ombuds staff has been increasing its outreach which may have resulted in more visits to our office.

Finally, it is worth noting that very few of these files went on to become formal or complex complaints.

### Client Overview

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

Chart A: Clients by Type



Overall:

- 77% of the concerns were brought forward by students;
- 13% came from faculty members or staff; and
- 10% came from other parties (e.g, alumni, parents, citizens).

The 10% from “other” parties is expected to decline next year. Based on the Ombuds Office Terms of Reference (TOR), alumni are not one of the categories who can bring forth a complaint. Also, according to the TOR, private citizens are outside the Ombuds Office jurisdiction. For example, in previous years, if a citizen took a gym class at the Concordia fitness facility and

encountered an issue, he or she might have had the Ombuds investigate on their behalf. Similarly, if alumni attended an event at Concordia and were not satisfied with the way it was handled, they could bring this concern forth to the Ombuds Office. In the future, this type of concern will be closely evaluated regarding the jurisdiction of the Office based on the TOR, and if needed, the client will be referred to a more appropriate resolution office.

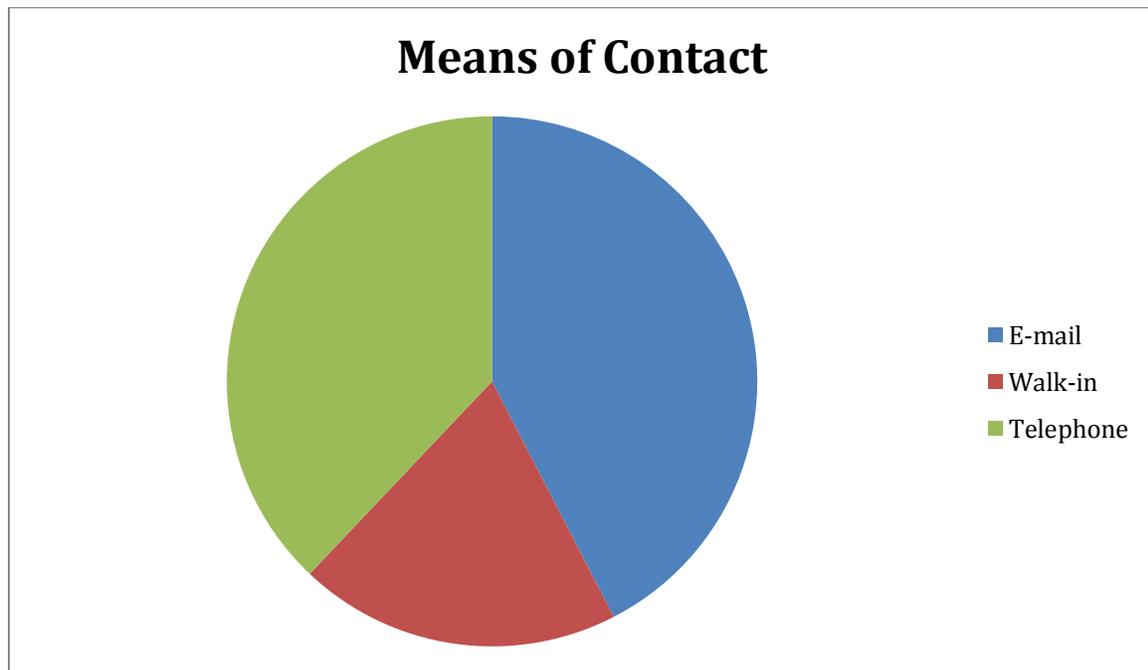
Also, until now, parents have been classified separately from students. This classification has been eliminated as of the 2016-17 academic year. Since a parent can only bring forward a concern with the express written approval of their child, any parent concern will be taken as representing the voice of that student and will be classified according to the student's profile. For example, if a parent calls to see why their Undergraduate student did not qualify for graduation, and the student has approved the communication, this will be seen as if an Undergraduate student contacted the Ombuds Office. Please note that the Ombuds Office prefers to deal with the students directly and will make every effort to contact the student whenever possible.

### Means of Contact

The Ombuds Office receives complaints and concerns through telephone calls, e-mails and walk-ins. We are open to receive correspondence by mail, although it is unusual. The last letter was received in 2014-2015.

Below in Chart B, please find the means of contact by type for 2015-16.

Chart B: Means of Contact

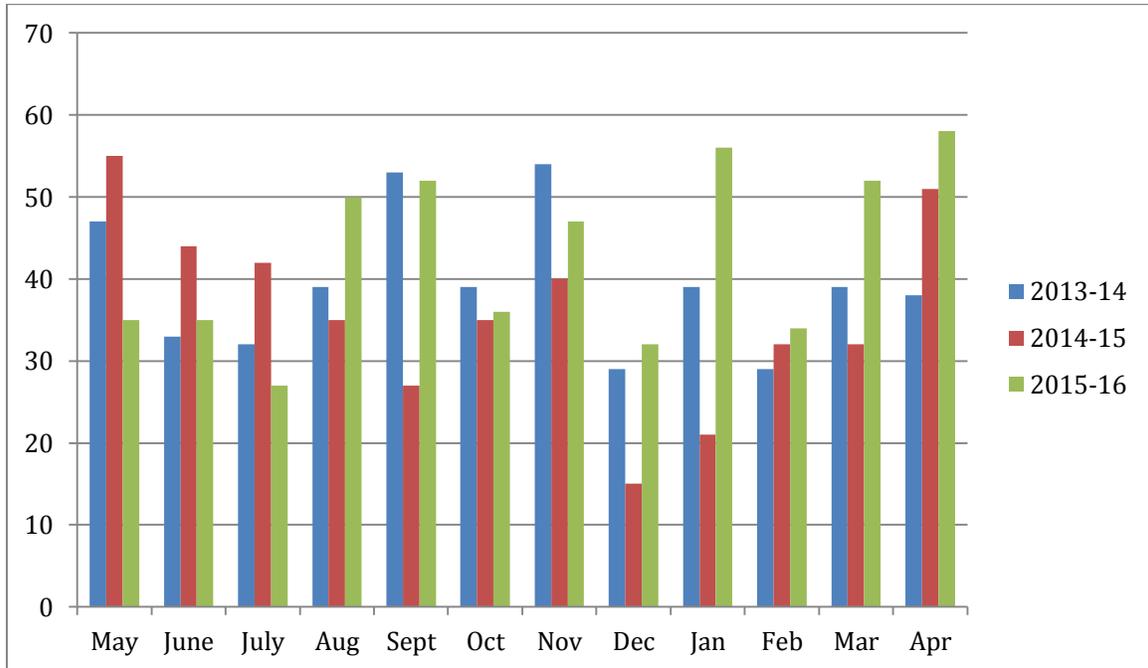


As you can see, e-mail is the most common method of communication, followed by phone calls. This is important because e-mail allows us to remain accessible for students at both campuses and students who attend mainly evening classes even though our office is only open during standard business hours. Walk-ins represent approximately 20% of our volume, and we see these students immediately whenever possible.

### Caseload per Month

Anecdotal evidence suggests that certain times of the academic year (e.g., post-final exams) should bring in a higher volume of files. Please see Chart C, below for a month by month breakdown of our caseload.

Chart C: Caseload by Month (2013-14 to 2015-16)



There is more variability than expected in the distribution of concerns by month. July, December and February are slower months, possibly because these are break times for the university. April, May and September are higher volume times of the year. This is helpful for the office when planning our staffing insofar as possible. In addition, this helps us organize our workload so that our investigation and turnaround times are as efficient and effective as possible.

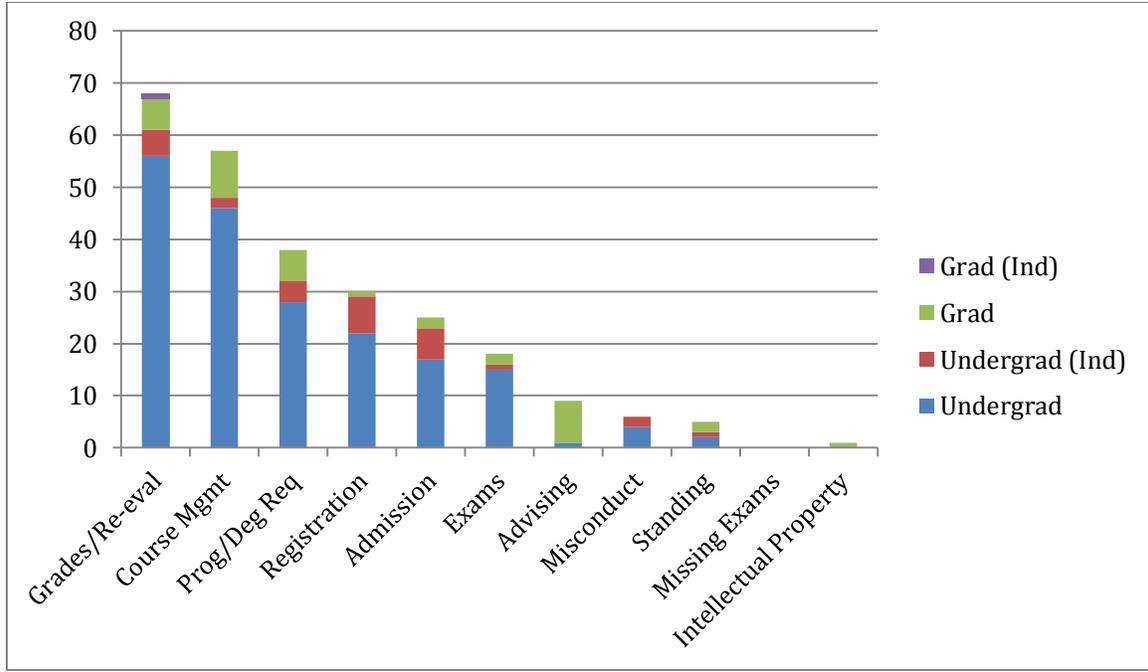
As mentioned earlier, in 2015-16 there was a spike in complaints following the installation of the new Ombudsperson. This spike was anticipated.

### Student Concerns

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

## Student Academic Concerns

Chart D: Student Academic Concerns by Type (2015-16)



This breakdown indicates that grades and other course management issues are the most frequent cause of concern for students. Most of these cases represent minor disagreements regarding grades (e.g., how curves were applied, how grades are calculated in different classes and the like). The second group of concern relates to confusion regarding program and/or degree requirements and registration. It may be desirable to look into opportunities for adding additional clarity to, and improving communications regarding these processes.

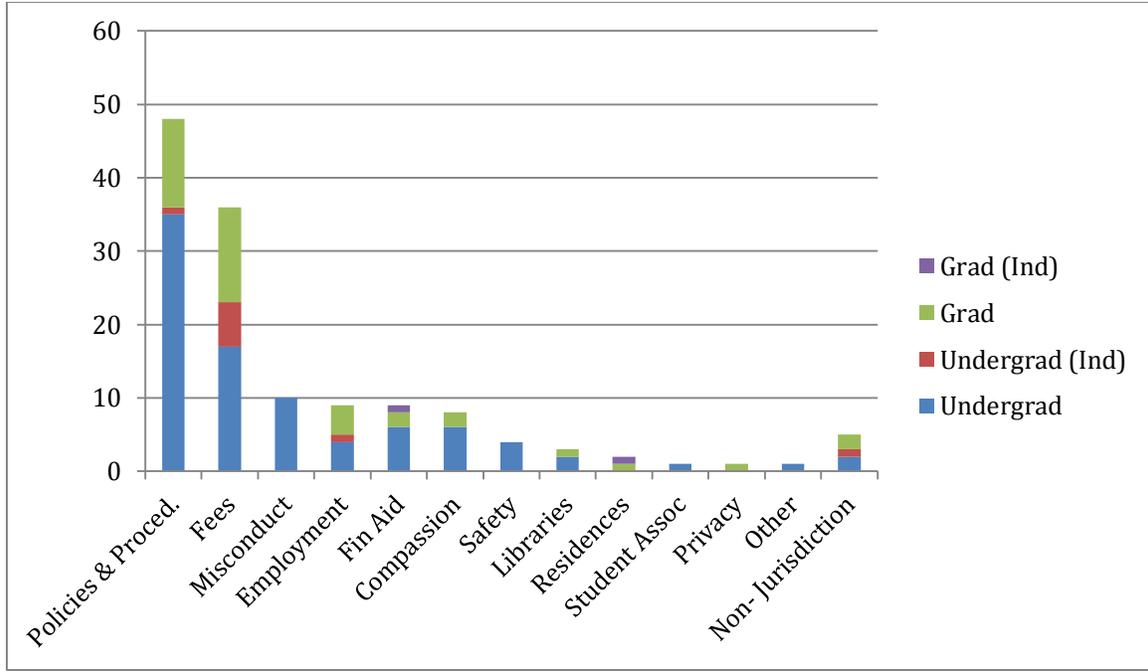
For graduate students, advising is an important concern. This relates mainly to changes in advisor, advisors not being as accessible as the students may like or, on occasion, interpersonal conflicts.

Only one case of intellectual property was brought to our office this year. No cases of missing exams were brought to our attention in 2015-16. These categories remained in our database for historical reasons and may be revised for 2016-17.

In addition to these academic concerns, there were 137 non-academic concerns brought to the Ombuds Office and these are displayed by type in Chart E, below.

## Student Non-Academic Concerns

Chart E: Student Non-Academic Concerns by Type (2015-16)



As one would predict, other than academic concerns, students this year needed assistance from the Ombuds Office with University policies and procedures and fees. The volume of other issues is very small. For example, there were two issues with the residences and three with the library.

## Resolutions of Student Cases

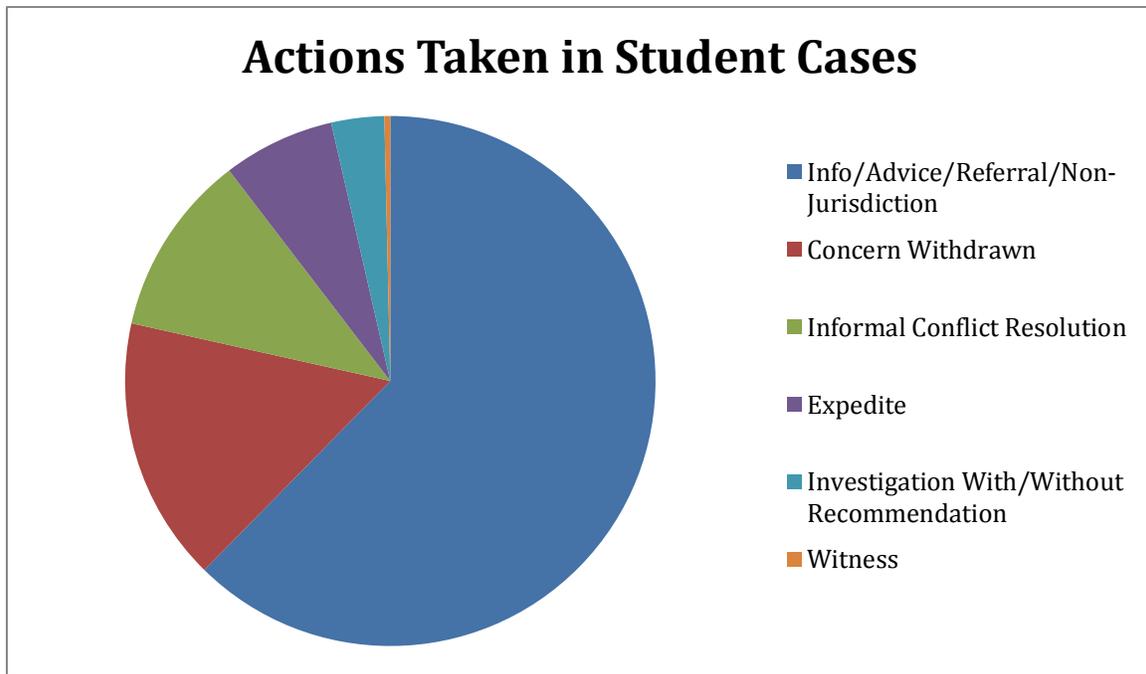
Below, you will find several ways that the Ombuds Office can be of assistance when working on a file:

- Offer information and/or advice;
- Refer the client to another resource;
- Assist with informal conflict resolution;
- Expedite a response; and/or
- Simply listen and be a witness to a conversation.

Not every file will make its way through the Ombuds Office in the same manner. In certain instances, after a thorough analysis, the Ombuds Office may determine that the matter is not within its jurisdiction. In other instances, a client may withdraw his/her concern in the middle of the process and, in other instances, the Ombuds Office may offer the client a summary and analysis without any specific recommendations.

Please see Chart F, below for the breakdown of actions taken in student cases 2015-16.

Chart F: Actions Taken in Student Cases 2015-16



In most cases, the students were given information or advice or were referred to another office. Because these categories were combined and because they represent the greatest volume of resolutions, our data collection strategy is currently being modified to better capture how concerns and complaints are resolved.

There were a greater number of concerns withdrawn than would have been expected and the reasons for such withdrawals are unknown. Rather than speculate regarding these reasons, we believe that this is an area requiring investigation and analysis. Accordingly, in 2016-17 and 2017-18, more time will be spent investigating the reasons for withdrawal of concerns.

### Faculty and Staff Concerns

Of the 514 files treated this calendar year, 66 were from this category. Faculty, staff, academic administrators and casual employees also bring both academic and non-academic concerns to the Ombuds Office.

#### Academic Concerns

There were 10 academic concerns brought forward this year which break down as follows:

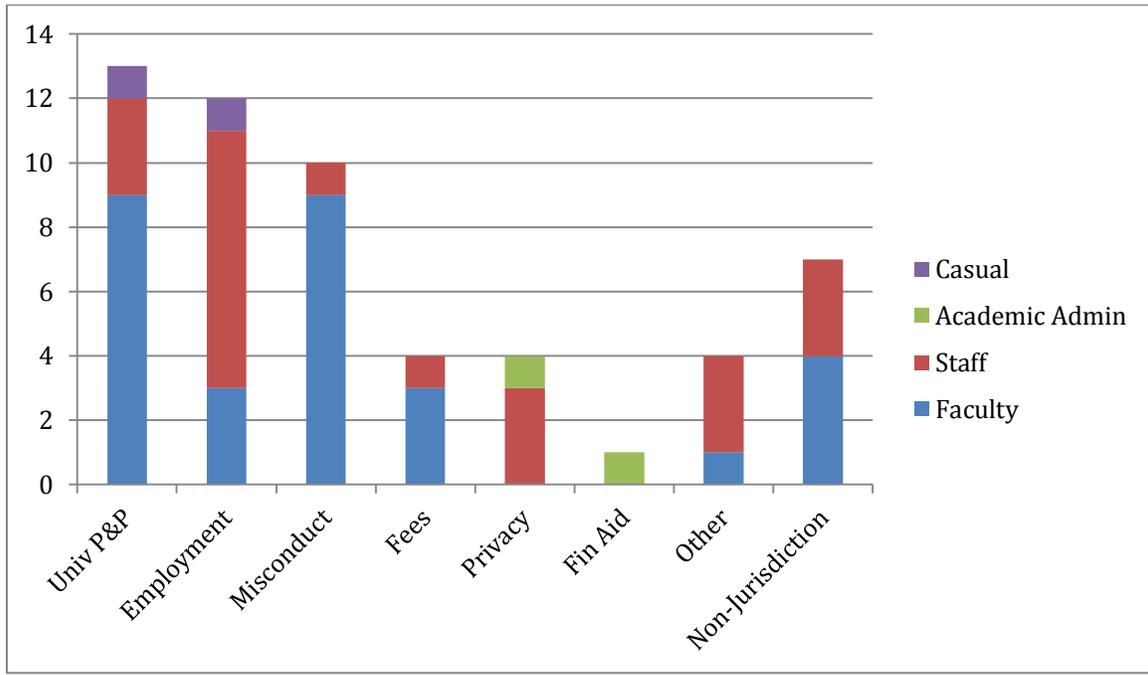
- Advising/Supervision: 5
- Course Management: 2
- Grade Re-evaluation: 1
- Academic Misconduct: 1; and
- Program/Degree Requirements: 1.

Because the numbers are so small, an analysis of the type of client was not relevant and therefore will not be part of this report.

### Non-Academic Concerns

The remaining 55 files relate to a variety of concerns as presented in Chart G, below.

Chart G: Faculty/Staff Non-Academic Concerns 2015-16



Here too, the numbers are very small. Policies and procedures are the biggest category with 13 files, followed by employment and misconduct.

There were no complaints from contract employees this year. As well, there were zero complaints regarding safety and/or humanitarian situations.

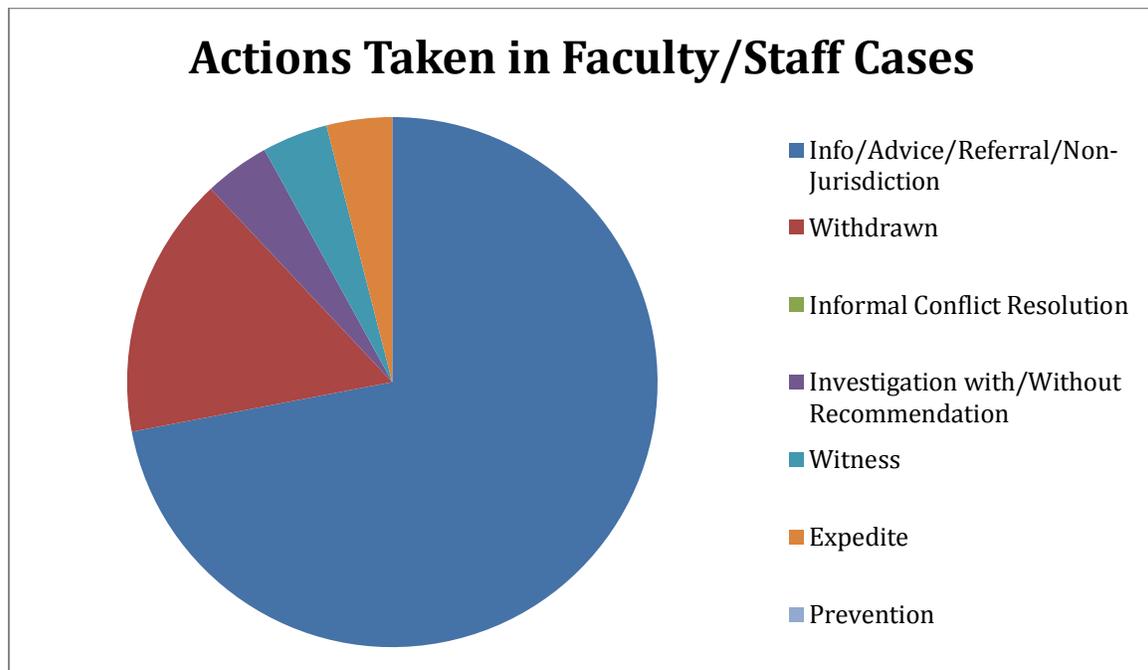
We will continue to encourage faculty and staff to consult with our office regarding concerns or challenging situations with the intention of improving communication and preventing future complaints.

### Resolutions of Faculty and Staff Cases

As with student cases, the Ombuds Office can be of assistance.

Please see Chart H, below for the breakdown of actions taken in faculty/staff cases 2015-16.

Chart H: Actions Taken in Faculty/Staff Cases 2015-16



Just as with the student cases, the main action of the Ombuds Office was to offer information, advice and/or refer to another area for assistance.

Six cases were withdrawn before completion compared to 0 in 2014-15 and 3 in 2013-14. Because this number is still quite low, I do not consider this number of withdrawals to be noteworthy or any cause for concern. That said, if the number continues to climb, more investigation may be warranted.

### Concerns Brought in By Others

Traditionally, the Ombuds Office has been flexible in receiving and investigating concerns brought in by various members of the Concordia University community.

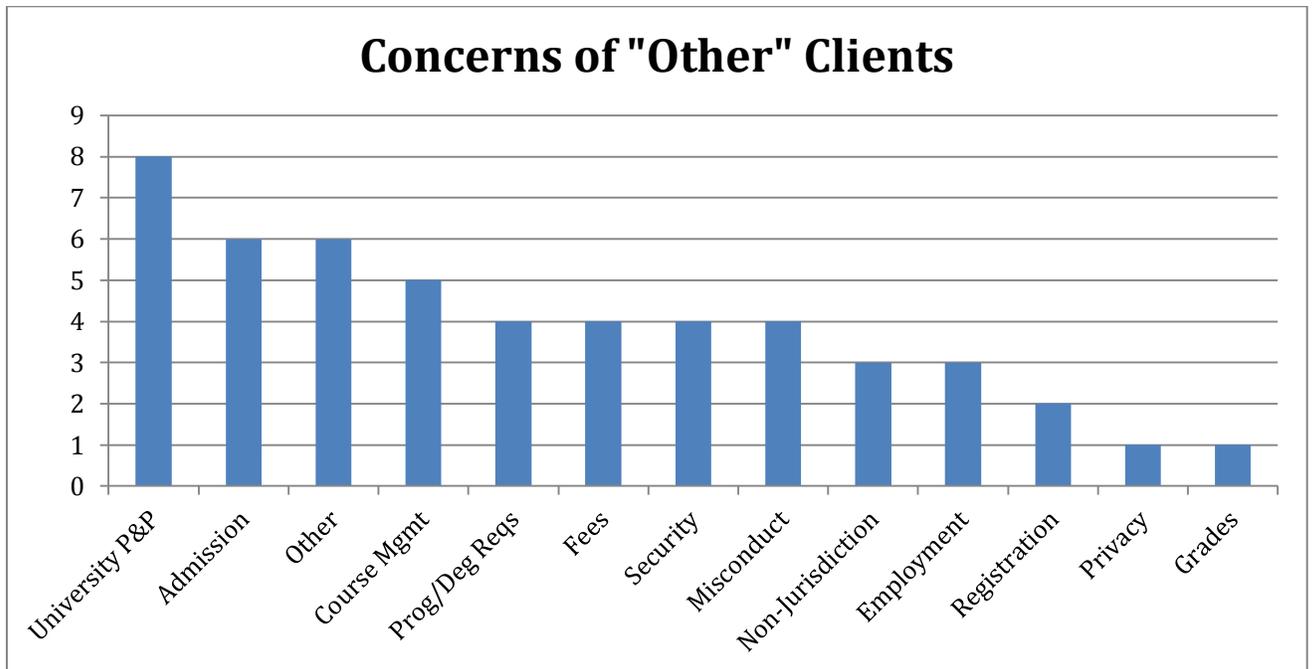
In 2015-16, 54 concerns came from:

- Parents;
- Family members;
- Friends of students;
- Former students;
- Alumni;
- Anonymous clients;
- TAs;
- Potential students;
- Private citizens;
- Representatives of other private/public institutions;
- CSU advocates;

- GSA;
- Continuing education students; and
- Visiting students.

Please see Chart I, below for the concerns brought forward by this diverse clientele.

Chart I: Concerns of "Other" Clients 2015-16



Files in this category are all very low volume. Concerns regarding policies and procedures again, represent more files than other issues. While these files may point to possible challenges communication, they are usually settled without formal recommendations. Course management and program requirement concerns often relate to either challenges interpreting or misinterpreting the regulations or standards that change over time. Other areas such as privacy and fees constitute less than a handful of concerns from this group.

### Alumni and Former Students

The purpose of receiving concerns from alumni and former students is to avoid missing an important concern which is expressed shortly after graduation or departure from the university. That said, leaving this category open poses a risk that the Ombuds Office will be looking into issues that are technically out of our jurisdiction. Therefore, as previously mentioned, this category will be reviewed and volume in this area is expected to drop in the next year.

### Continuing Education and Visiting Students

While these clients are technically Concordia University students, because there are so few of them, there is a concern that their voices would not be heard if they were put together with the general Undergraduate or Graduate population.

### **Review of Prior Recommendations**

Over the past eight years, the Ombuds Office has offered many recommendations in the Annual Reports. A thorough review of these recommendations has been conducted. I am happy to report that all of the recommendations have been satisfied. Therefore, none will be carried forward for this year.

### **Recommendations for 2015-16**

Over the course of this year, the Ombuds Office has assisted many clients with their concerns. However, no major incidents of unfairness were discovered. Therefore there are no recommendations for this year.