

# CONCORDIA

## OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22



INFORMATION  
RELATIONS DIPLOMACY  
PROCEDURAL COMMUNITY  
PROMOTE INDEPENDENT IMPARTIAL  
OMBUDSMAN SUPPORT ADVICE  
FAIRNESS SEEK INVESTIGATION  
ACT DEFENDER SENSITIVITY  
RECOMMENDATION CONCERNS  
TACT REASONABLE COACHING



**OMBUDS OFFICE**

October 1, 2022

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 **2021-2022 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University**.

We have provided an overview of the year's activities from May 1, 2021 to April 30, 2022, with several examples of our files. This year the report does not include recommendations.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "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.

The role of the office is to uphold the principles of impartiality, accessibility, confidentiality, and independence and to promote fairness throughout the University. The Ombuds Office continues to abide by these core values.

The Ombuds Office has several responsibilities, such as:

- Investigate unfairness and offer recommendations where suitable;
- Recommend changes to policies, rules and procedures where appropriate;
- Informally mediate simple academic disputes to prevent escalation;
- Provide a sounding board for community members seeking advice on academic matters;
- Coach undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff members regarding improved communication; and
- Offer hands-on workshops to build skills in dealing with possibly challenging situations.

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

## Ombuds Office 2021-2022

### Changes in the Ombuds Office 2021-2022

This year again brought some changes to the staffing at the Ombuds Office.

In February 2022, our Department Assistant, Sraddha Bista, accepted a new position in the Access Centre for Students with Disabilities (ACSD) office. We thank her for her contribution and wish her the best of luck. We welcomed a new Department Assistant, Andreea Constantinescu who has already been a great contributor to the team.

In April 2022, our Associate Ombudsperson Dorothee Beaupré-Bernier left on parental leave, and was replaced by Nicole Marie Macoretta. Dorothee will be returning in April 2023.

### Amy Fish, Ombudsperson

Amy Fish has been the Ombudsperson since 2016. In 2022, Amy was up for renewal. In accordance with the Ombuds Office Terms of Reference, a committee was struck to oversee the process. An external review was conducted, and feedback was solicited from the University community.

Amy prepared a self-assessment, was interviewed by the committee as well as by an external reviewer (an Ombudsperson at a comparable university).

As of the writing of this document, it has been recommended that Amy Fish remain as Ombudsperson, however we are still awaiting official notification.

### Change in Work Flow

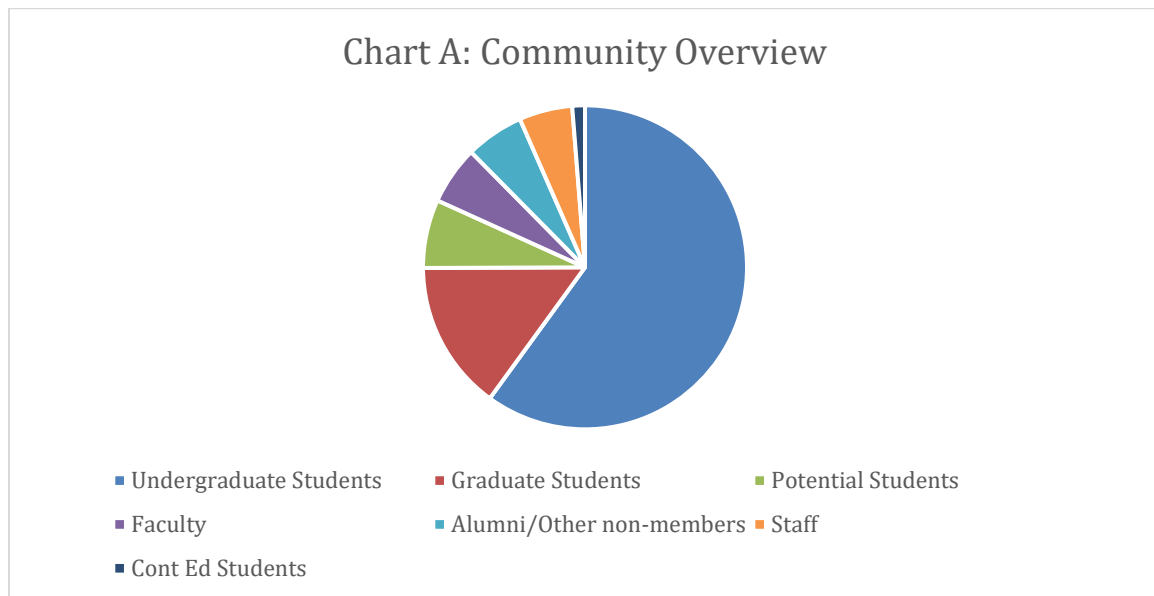
Over the past three years, we have noticed a trend where the volume of our files is decreasing but the complexity is increasing. 393 concerns were brought to the Ombuds Office in 2021-2022, a reduction of approximately 10% since 2020-2021. However, our files have become significantly

more complex. This is best measured by the proportion of investigations compared to total number of files. In 2019-2020, we had only 12 investigations, whereas this year we had 68. Each investigation requires a document review and multiple interviews in addition to an analysis and writing of a letter. We are seeing our work move from being asked advice to conducting in-depth enquiries on a wide variety of issues.

Consulting with our colleagues at other universities, some are seeing an increase in visits while others, like Concordia, are seeing an overall reduction. We believe that as students become more involved on campus, we are more likely to see an increase in volume in our office. We have also been invited to multiple orientation meetings and have presented to faculty and students across the university. We are expecting our volume to return to previous levels over the next year or two.

### Community Overview

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



The distribution of files is similar to what we have seen before:

- 83% of files come from students;
- 11% come from Faculty and Staff; and
- 6% come from non-members.

### Type of Contact

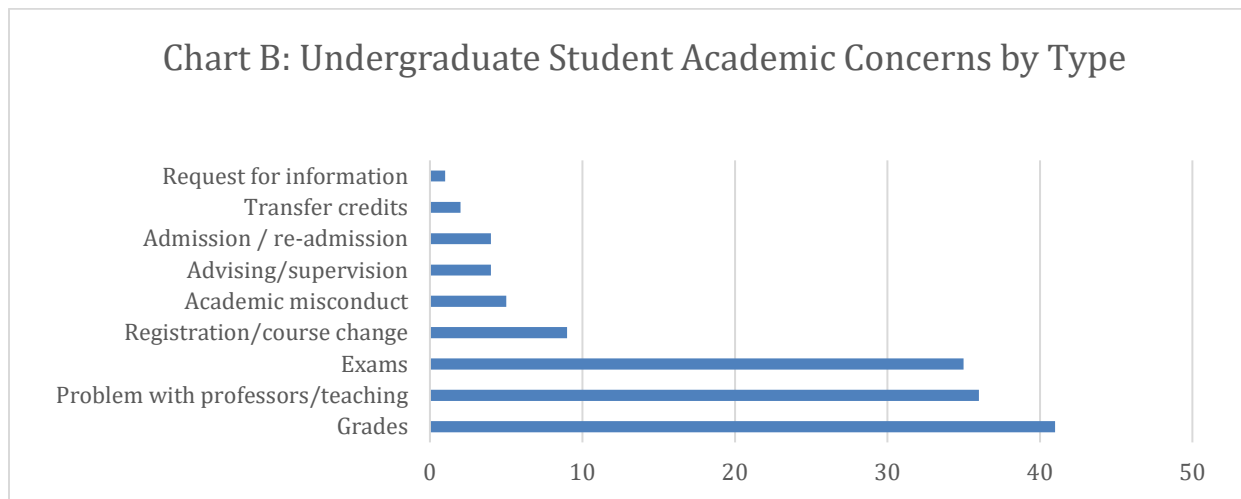
This year we began hosting weekly Zoom drop-in sessions where no appointment is needed to receive general consultation. Staffed by our Department Assistant, this is an opportunity for members who need assistance with their intake forms or who are not sure if we are the correct place to assist them to get some help. We have had some students and faculty members come to the Zoom drop-in for advice and to book further consultations. While the volume is modest, we believe this is an important service that offers additional accessibility for our community, and we will continue to offer it even though students have returned to campus. Community members mainly access our service by completing our Intake Form (available on our website) and e-mailing it to us. We also receive requests for assistance over the phone.

## 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 B, below.



The top reason undergraduate students visited the Ombuds Office this year was Grades, consistent with previous years. Last year, Exams was the next largest category, likely because of the struggles with online exams during the Covid-19 lockdown. This year, Problems with Professors and Teaching is second, just ahead of Exams. It is interesting to note that the three top categories are closely distributed, and the next type of issue (Registration/Course Change) is significantly less prominent.

Some examples of what the Ombuds Office sees in terms of Grades are:

- A student's concern that their exam was not graded correctly;
- A student who believes they were given an unfair grade in a group project or participation mark;
- A student who has tried repeatedly to contact their Professor regarding a grade and have not had a response; and/or
- A student who did not pass a course and is wondering what their options are to improve their grades.

Problems with professors and teaching could include the following types of issues:

- Students who are unsatisfied with the teaching for practical reasons (i.e., they can't hear the Professor, too many classes were cancelled, handouts are incomplete);
- Students who are philosophically not aligned with a particular faculty member; and/or
- Students who would like explanations regarding variations in the way material is taught in multiple sections of the same course.

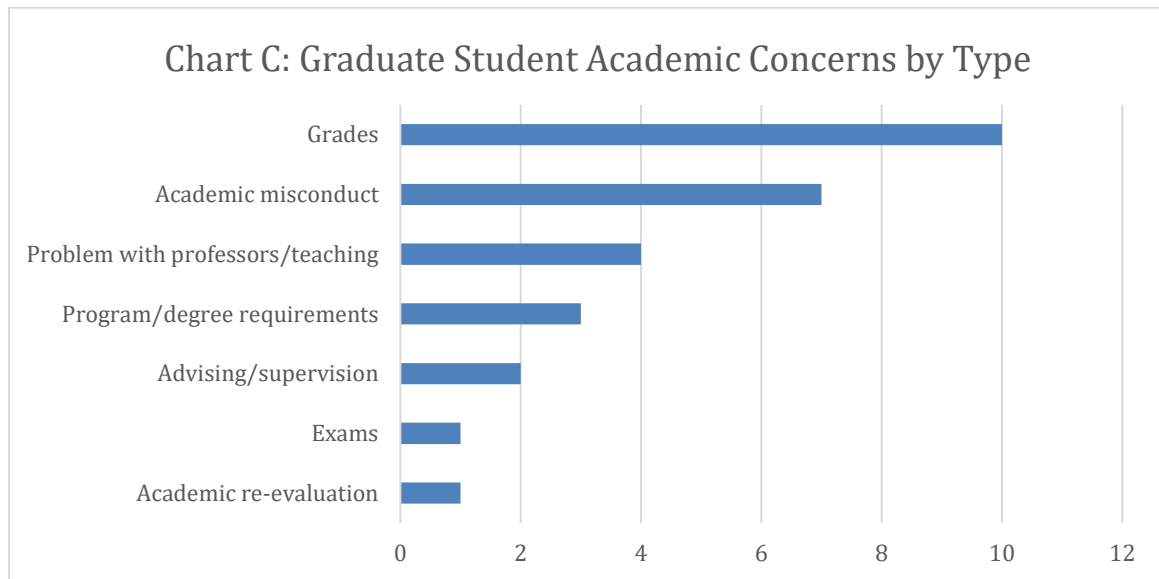
Some examples of what was brought to the Ombuds Office regarding exams are:

- Students who arrive late to an exam or miss an exam would like information regarding next steps;

- Students who believe an exam did not cover material as described in the course outline; and/or
- Complaints about an exam that was exceedingly rigorous (i.e., higher than expected failure rate).

### Graduate Student Academic Concerns

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



Last year, Consultation and Request for Information was tied with Advising/Supervision for the most common reasons to contact the Ombuds Office. This year, the most popular reasons were Grades and Academic misconduct, followed by Professors/Teaching, Program degree requirements and Advising/Supervision. There was one file about Exams and one about Academic Re-evaluation.

With respect to Grades, the Ombuds Office could help a Graduate Student determine whether they have been treated fairly, what their options would be going forward and might offer coaching regarding the best way to communicate with the Faculty member involved.

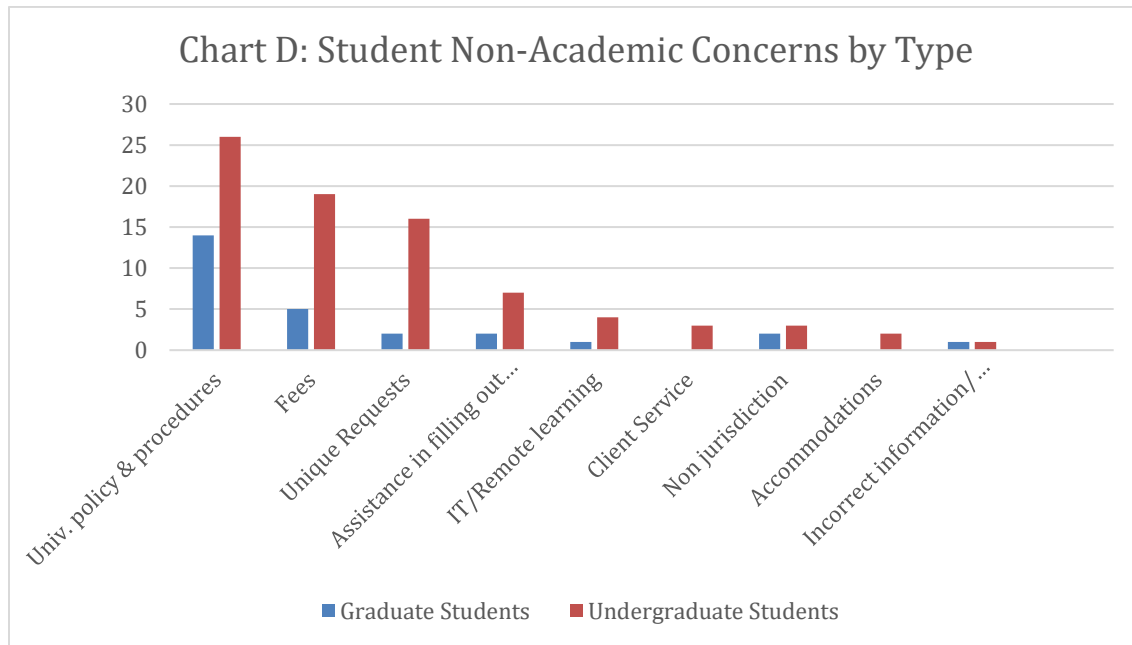
For Academic misconduct, the Ombuds Office does not interfere with University processes. In these cases, our role would be to listen and refer the student to the appropriate office for assistance. For example, the Ombuds Office might recommend that the student request support from one of the Student Advocacy Offices on Campus.

Concerns regarding Professors vary considerably from differing expectations on an assignment to the tone of correspondence in an email exchange.



## Student Non-Academic Concerns

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



As in past years, University Policy and Procedures was the top non-academic category for both Graduate and Undergraduate students followed by Fees.

Students come to us with a wide range of questions regarding University Policy and Procedures, ranging from concerns about emotional support animals on campus to questions regarding Quebec study permits. Student concerns regarding fees are normally specific issues being faced by that particular student such as how their fees are calculated or why they were charged for a course that they believed they dropped.

This year we added a new category called “Unique Requests” to capture some of the files we have that represent one time only issues. Here are some examples:

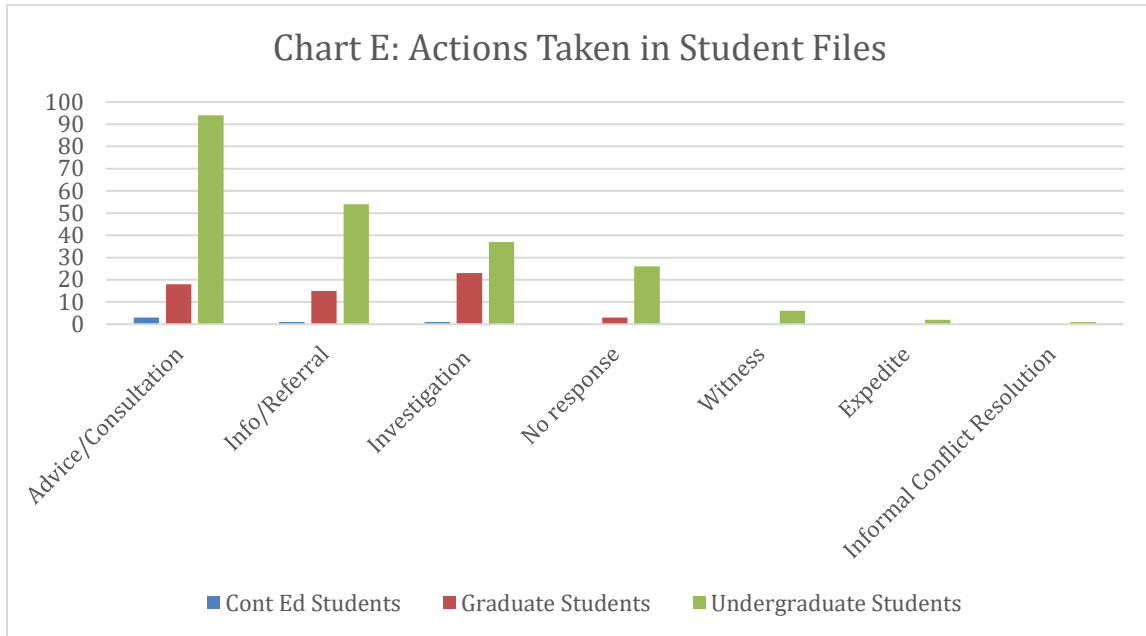
- Allegations that an outdoor water fountain at Loyola Campus was stagnant and breeding mosquitos;
- Concern about excessive construction noise on campus; and
- Questions about the fairness of the timing of certain classes.

Only four files were judged to be outside our jurisdiction this year. These would be cases where, after listening to the student’s concerns, the Office concluded that we are not the most appropriate resource. The community member would then be referred to another office in the University that could better meet their needs.



## Resolution of Student Files

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

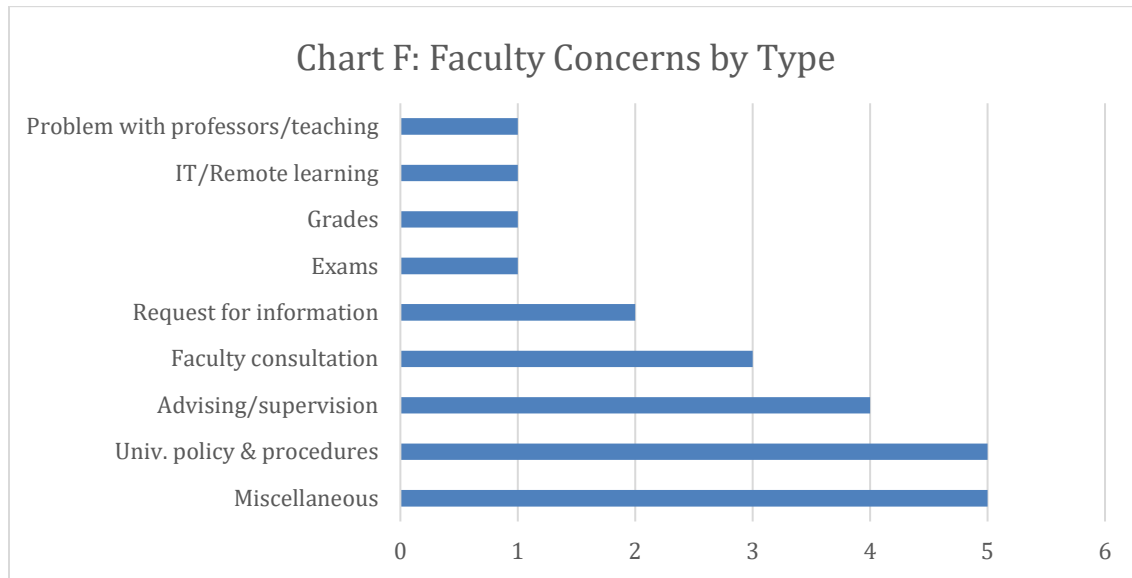


In the vast majority of cases, the Ombuds Office offers advice and consultation to students. This has remained consistent for several years.

The exponential growth of investigations compared to previous years is likely due to the increasing complexity of files which require additional inquiries and analysis. In most cases, no recommendations are offered, however getting to that point requires a comprehensive review of the issue. The increase in multi-faceted files is best explained by the general complexity brought on by a post-Covid-19 learning environment. The additional struggles that so many are facing, as well as necessary policy changes and workflow modifications have likely impacted the number of investigations we are seeing.

## Faculty and Staff Concerns

Since the last Annual Report, the decision was made to review Faculty and Staff concerns separately.



### Faculty Concerns

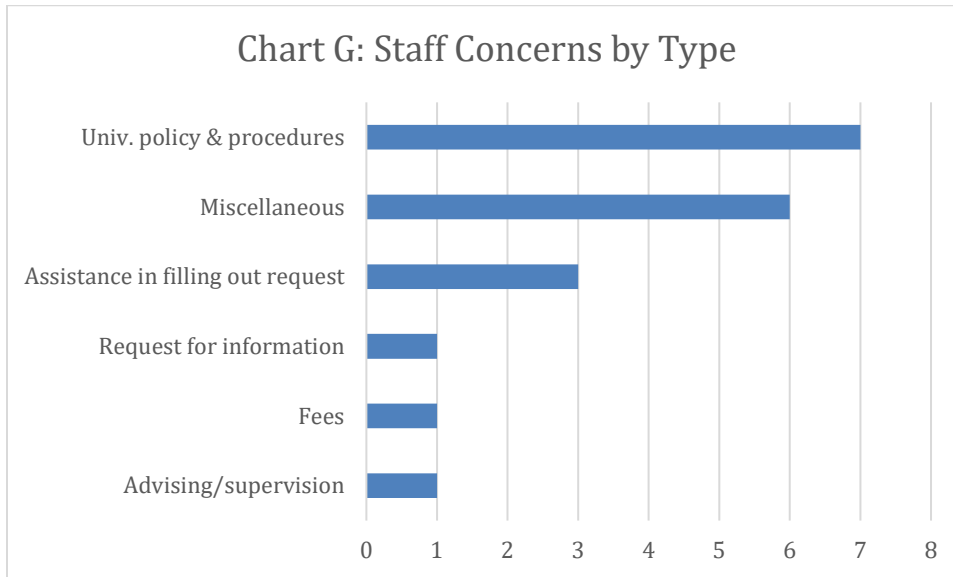
The distribution of types of files brought by Faculty members is very much in line with previous years and is what we would have expected. As a proportion of overall files, those brought to us by Faculty has grown. Last year there were 13 Faculty concerns, this year there were 23. This is because we have been encouraging faculty to consult with our office. We believe that the Ombuds Office has a role to play in preventing conflict. By speaking to us when there is only a gentle miscommunication, we are often able to step in and prevent escalation.

Some examples of Faculty concerns are:

- How to handle conflict in peer study groups;
- Request for advice regarding how to tell a student they are not going to pass; or
- Looking for a sounding board regarding Department level decisions.

## Staff Concerns

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



The majority of questions relate to University Policies and Procedures as in previous years. It is worth noting that there were six requests that fell into the Miscellaneous category. These were mainly related to return to work following the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. For example, staff wanted to make sure that their requests to work from home were fairly evaluated.

## Review of Prior Recommendations

In 2020-2021 there were two recommendations. One related to accessibility of Graduate Studies and the Recommendation that accessibility for diverse students be prioritized. We are happy to report that this has been taken very seriously by the School of Graduate Studies and we consider the recommendation to have been implemented.

The second recommendation had two aspects. The first related to online exams, and it is our understanding that this has been resolved. The second related to faculty members not responding to student or internal emails. We appreciate that this was taken seriously however we are still experiencing challenges in this area. The Ombuds Office understands that e-mail volume remains at an all-time high, however, the lack of responsiveness is not acceptable. For that reason, we will renew this recommendation and keep it open until next year.

## Recommendations for 2021-2022

There are no new major recommendations this year.

## Examples of Assistance Provided for 2021-2022

To offer context regarding our work, here are some examples of cases our office has treated. Please note that some identifying details have been changed.

### **Example 1: Potential Student**

A potential student contacted our office for assistance because they applied to a program at Concordia and they were not accepted. They believed that they had all the correct qualifications and they wanted to know why they did not get in. The Ombuds Office explained that we could not interfere with the Admissions process, but we could check to make sure that the application was received and fairly evaluated. We contacted the Department and they had very clear records indicating that the application and portfolio were looked at closely. They shared with us the rubric used and the ranking of applicants, and we were able to see that this potential student's application was fairly treated. The Department also told us that the student was a strong candidate but that it had been an unusually competitive cohort. They suggested that we tell the student to keep applying as they may have more luck in a future semester. We let the student know and while he was disappointed, he did have some comfort in confirming that he was given a fair chance. I share this file with you for a few reasons. First, I think it is important to know that Potential students can contact the Ombuds Office if they believe there has been an unfairness in the evaluation of their application. Second, because the Department had excellent records and was open to working with us, which made our job so much easier. And then finally, it is important to note that sometimes the Ombuds Office does not suggest changes to the outcome of a file, but simply by providing information we are able to offer assistance to our community members.

### **Example 2: International Student**

An international student came to our office for assistance because he was deregistered from his courses and he believed it was unfair. We investigated and found that in spring 2021, the Quebec government announced that students were expected to return to Montreal in time for the beginning of the Fall semester on September 2021. Concordia clearly communicated this to all students multiple times. Unfortunately, this student did not submit the required paperwork to the International Students Office (ISO). Despite several extensions, by November 2021, the student had still not provided Concordia with the appropriate immigration documents. Therefore, Concordia was left with no choice but to deregister this student from his courses. The Ombuds Office agreed with Concordia's decision and had no recommendations. I bring you this example because Concordia was in the difficult position of having to follow Quebec laws and support its students. In this case, the University had no choice but to deregister students who were not compliant with the needed paperwork. We confirmed that this message was communicated clearly and on many occasions. We appreciate that the University is consistent with all students and that deadlines are held to.