

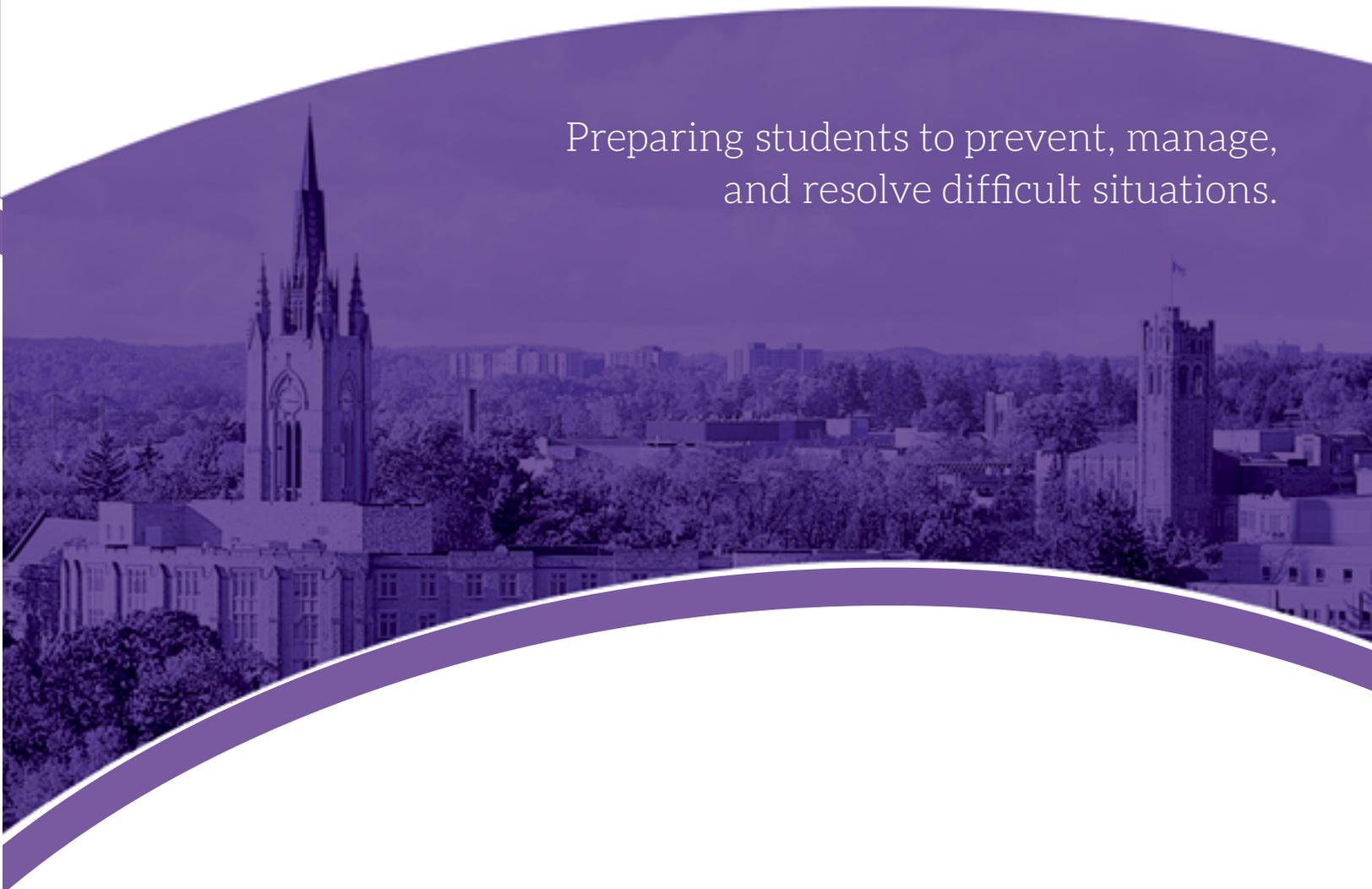


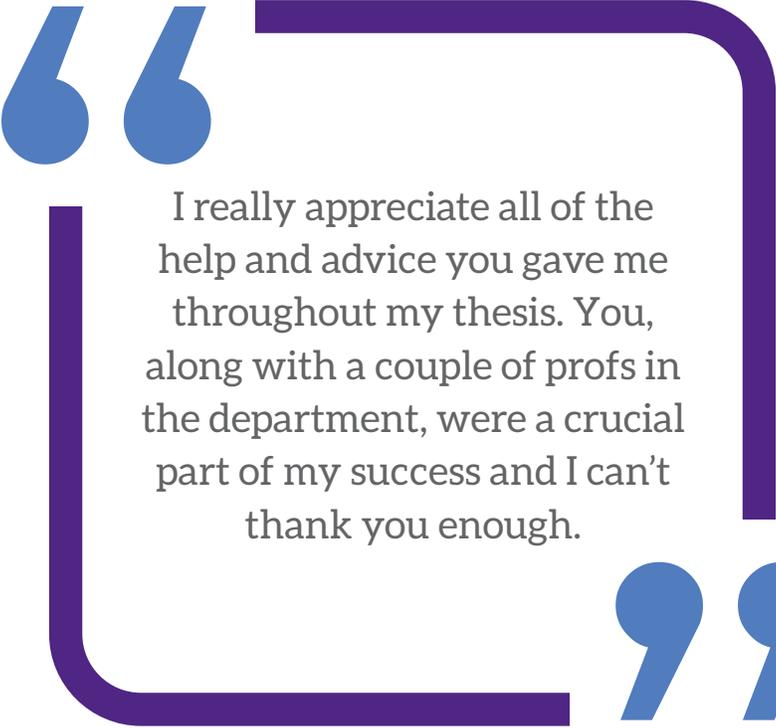
OFFICE  
OF THE **OMBUDSPERSON**

# ANNUAL REVIEW

2016/2017

Preparing students to prevent, manage,  
and resolve difficult situations.





I really appreciate all of the help and advice you gave me throughout my thesis. You, along with a couple of profs in the department, were a crucial part of my success and I can't thank you enough.



“You have no idea how much you're helping me! I appreciate you and everything you do.”



I thank you immensely for your help! The suggestions you have given me are excellent! The appeal is much easier to follow, it's incredibly well edited, and the points are much clearer. I will use your suggestions in the appeal.



# ABOUT THE OMBUDSPERSON

## **INDEPENDENT.**

We do not report to any administrative office at the University.

## **IMPARTIAL.**

We are co-funded by students and the University.

## **CONFIDENTIAL.**

We will only speak about a case if we have a student's permission to do so.

## **INFORMAL.**

We are not an office of record for the University and make minimal notes. We figure out what happened, discuss what you would like to see happen next and then figure out what you/we can do to make that possible.



# THANK YOU

**for picking up, or clicking on, the Ombudsperson's 2016/17 Annual Review.** Western's Office of the Ombudsperson is a confidential office that guides ALL students – main campus, affiliate, grad and undergrad – through difficulties on campus. A student's concern might pertain to a disappointing grade, a conflict with their graduate supervisor, or the termination of their residence contract. We point students in the right direction, review appeal letters, and sometimes just provide an empathetic ear. We do intervene sometimes – but only with the student's written consent, and when we feel it is appropriate.

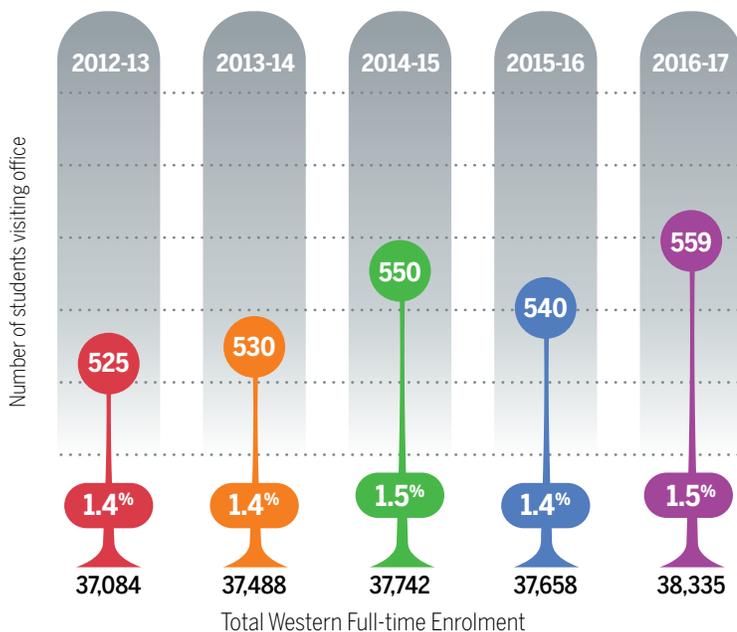
An important element of what makes an ombuds office unique is that we do not report to any administrative office at Western. Instead, the Office of the Ombudsperson Advisory Committee meets three times a year to review strategic initiatives the Ombudsperson proposes. Thank you to the members of the 2016/17 advisory committee: Jamie Cleary, Tamara Hinan, Curtis Jenkin, Ken Meadows, Joe Michalski, and Dan Shrubsole (Chair).

I hope you will enjoy reviewing this snapshot of who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson between August 1, 2016 and July 31, 2017 and what type of issues they brought.

# VISITOR OVERVIEW

## Visitors over time

The Office of the Ombudsperson addressed 596 student issues between August 1, 2016 and July 31, 2017. We saw 559 students or one point five percent of the total student population (graduate; undergraduate; main campus; and Brescia, Huron and King's University Colleges.) This percentage has remained consistent over time and is slightly higher than the percentage of the total student population seen by Ombudspeople at other Canadian universities and colleges. This is not to say Western students have more concerns than any other institution. Rather, we work hard in the Office of the Ombudsperson to get the word out about our services.



## Degree level of students

Of the students that came to our office in 2016-17, 12% were graduate students and 87% were undergraduate students.

**87%**

Undergraduate

**8%**

Master's

**4%**

Doctoral

**1%**

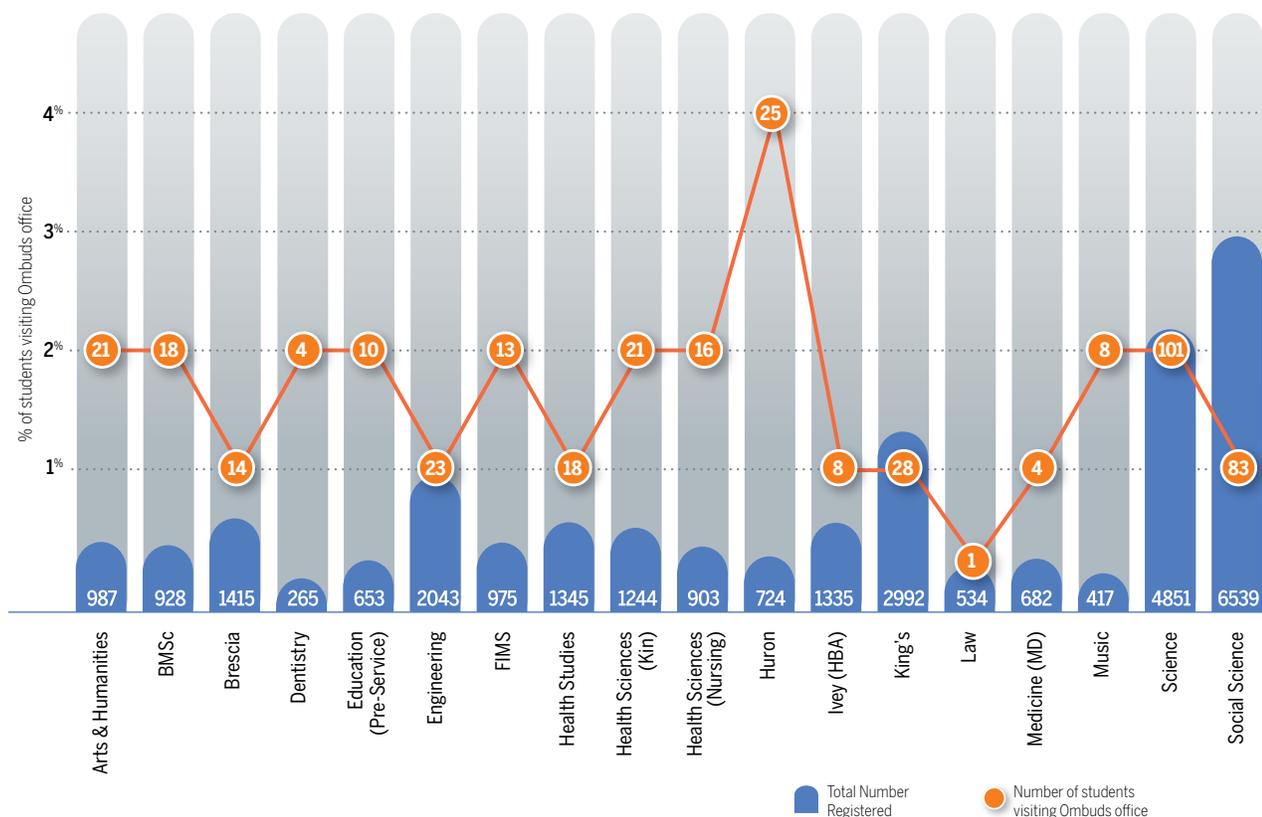
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# ACADEMIC DATA

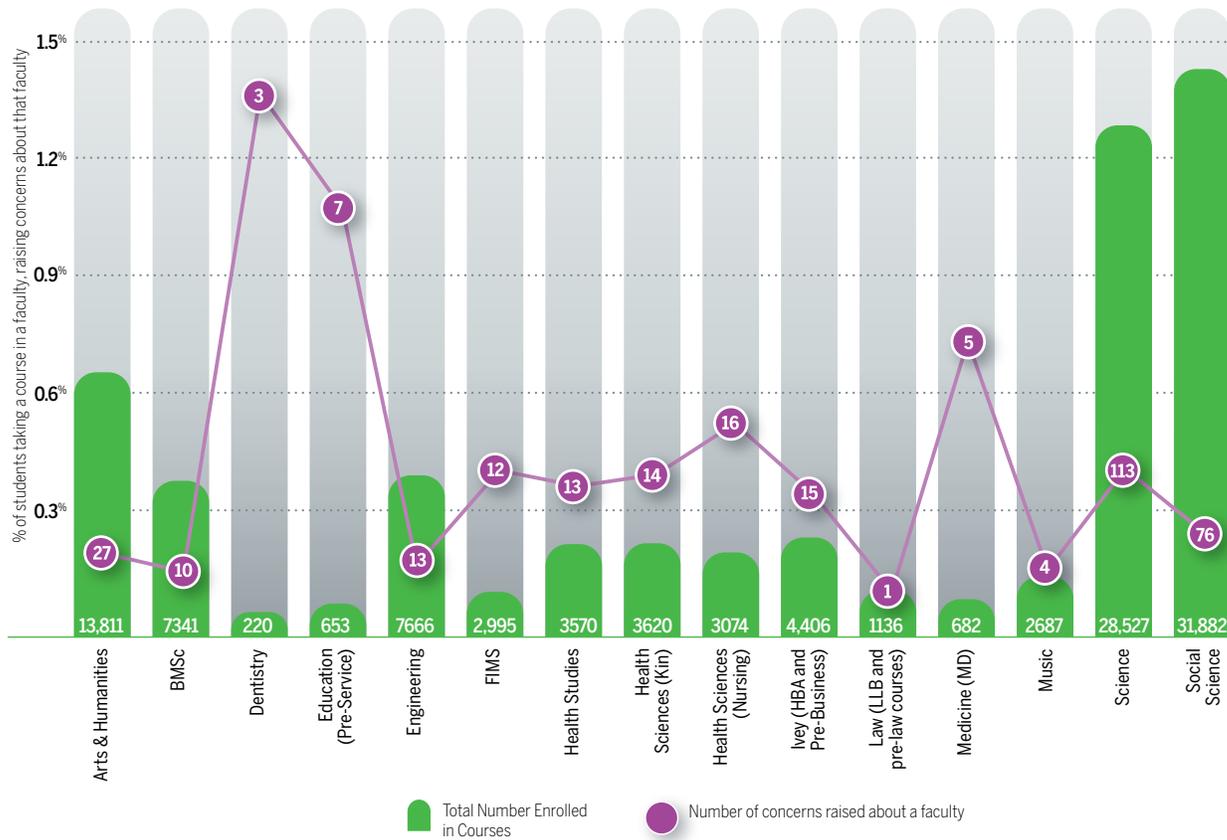
## Undergraduate Students

The following two graphs illustrate the number of undergraduate students visiting the Office of the Ombudsperson. The first illustration is the number of students from each faculty that we provided service to in the 2016/17 year. The second is the number of students who raised concerns about a specific faculty. Note that Brescia (eight concerns), Huron (24 concerns) and King's (24 concerns) are not included in the latter graph because the number of students taking their courses is not commonly available. There were five concerns raised regarding Continuing Studies courses and four Continuing Studies students visiting the Office.

Undergraduate student visits by home faculty



## Undergraduate students by faculty of concern



## Undergraduate concerns – academic and financial

The following chart illustrates the academic and financial concerns that were raised by undergraduate students who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson.

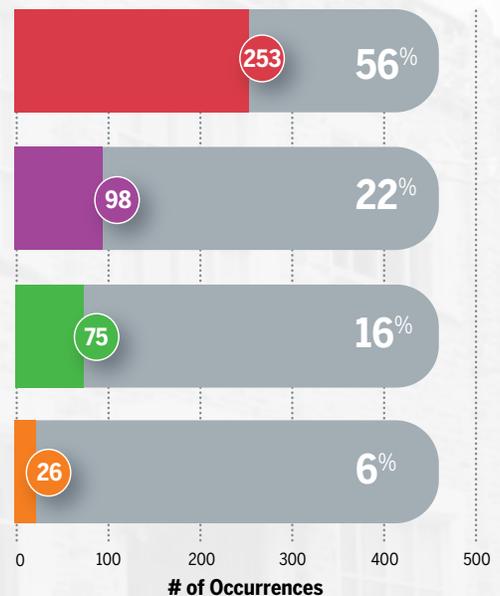
### Category of concern

General academic related, e.g. course management, grade issues, program requirements, scholastic offenses

Administrative procedures other than appeals, e.g. admission, readmission, required to withdraw

Academic appeals

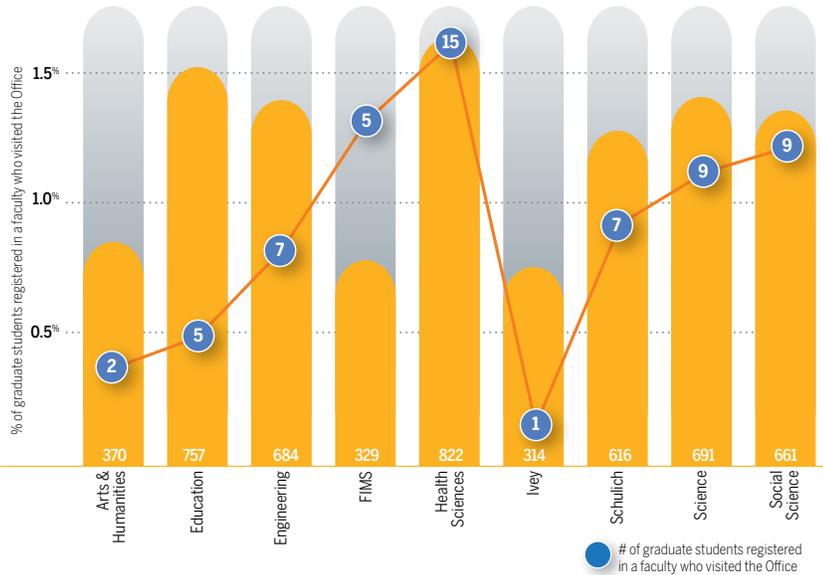
Financial including fees, financial aid, scholarships, work placement



# Graduate Students

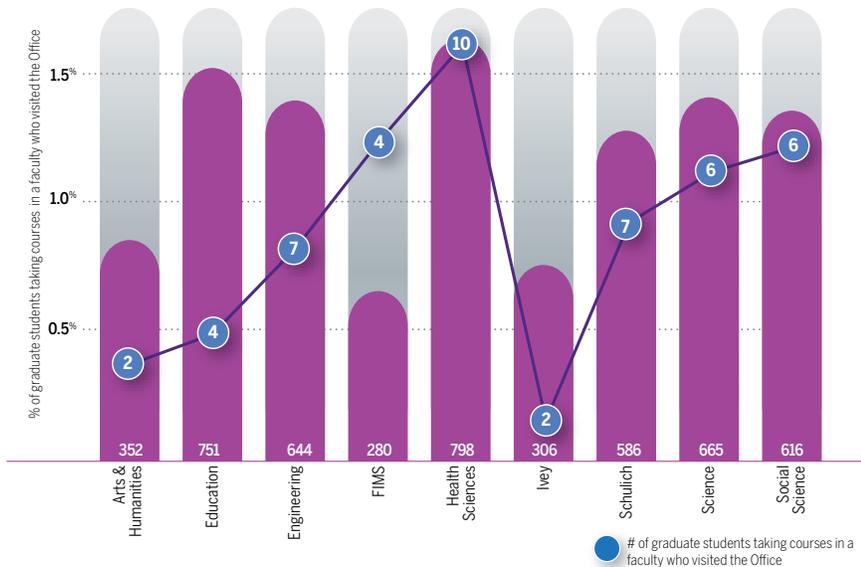
Although graduate students register in the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, when they visit the Office of the Ombudsperson we record the faculty hosting their program. The first graph below shows the number and percentage of Doctoral and Master's students visiting the Office from various disciplinary faculties. Note: There were 14 students who did not identify their discipline.

## Concerns per student's home faculty



## Concerns per course faculty

The next graph represents the number and percentage of Master's and Doctoral students taking courses in a faculty, raising concerns about that faculty.



## Graduate concerns – academic and financial

The following chart illustrates the academic and financial concerns raised by graduate students who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson.



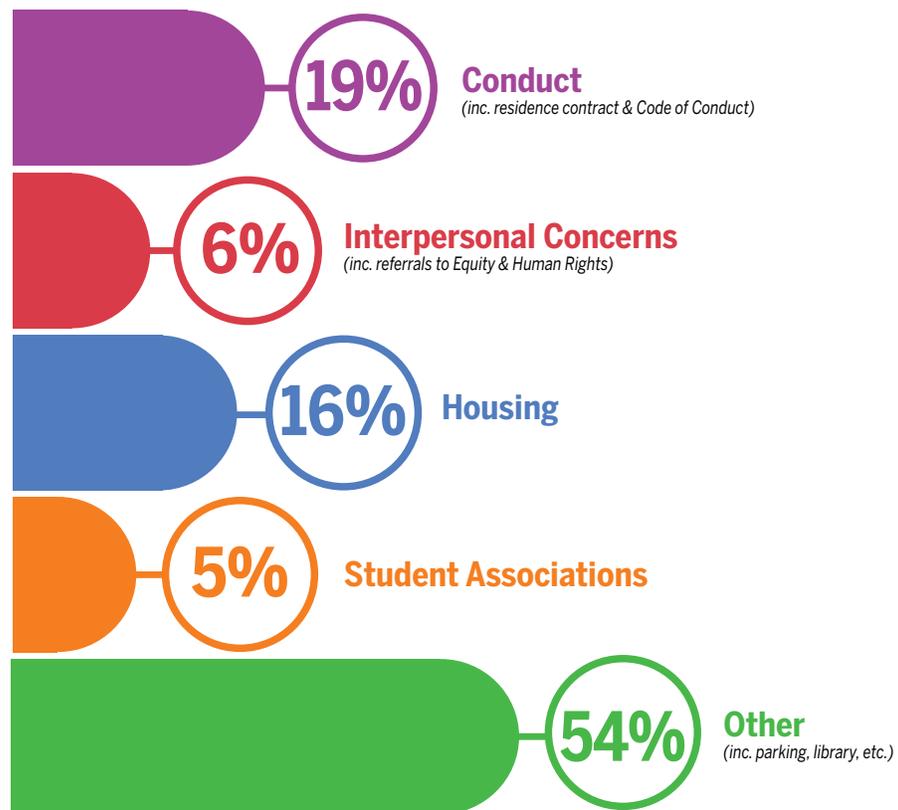
\*Note that some of the academic issues pertain to supervisory issues. In turn, some of these may involve funding. Therefore, the number of financial concerns may actually be higher.

# UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE

## Non-Academic Concerns

The Office of the Ombudsperson also guides students through non-academic concerns, including Code of Conduct violations, residence and residence conduct issues, and library and parking experiences.

As a % of total non-academic and financial occurrences (59)

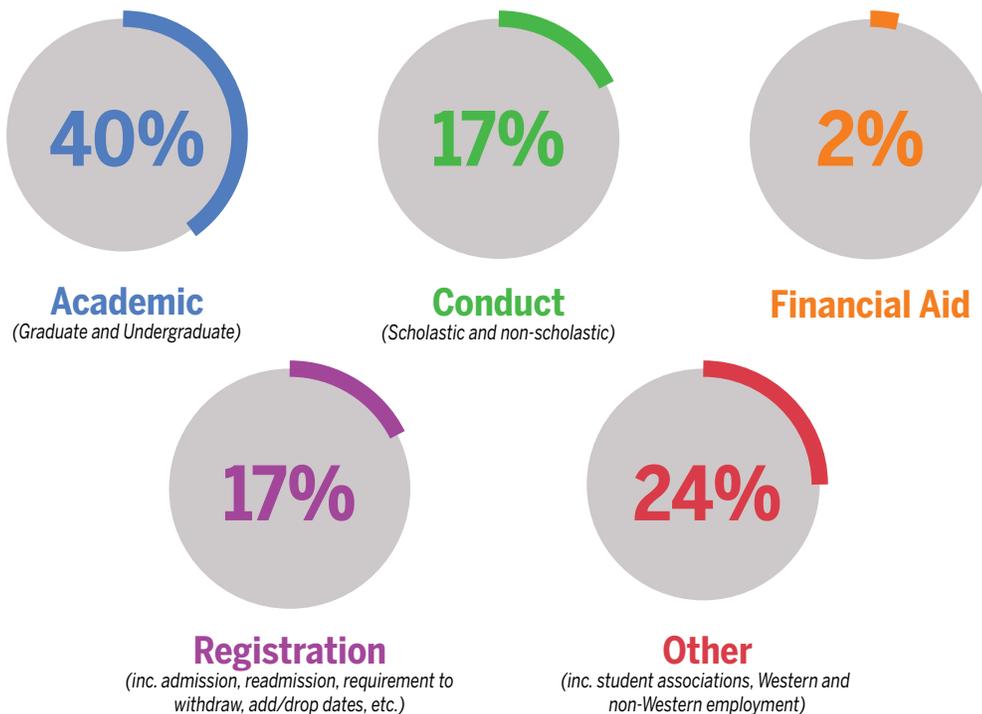


# NON-STUDENT DATA

Staff in the Office of the Ombudsperson also provide advice to faculty members and administrators on specific student-related concerns. Often decision makers will contact us concerning requirements related to withdrawal or granting of Dean's Waivers. Sometimes the administrator will have made a decision but wants to ensure it is fair before notifying the student. Parents of students who have questions about a policy or something their student is experiencing also contact us. We do not speak to parents about a specific situation without their student's permission, although we will give general information regarding university policies.

In 2016/17 we heard from 42 faculty, staff, family members of students, and members of the London community. Below are the categories of individuals and the concerns they had.

As a % of total non-academic occurrences (42)





# SCENARIOS

Students and administrators often ask what type of cases we deal with. Following are two scenarios we dealt with in the period between August 2016 and July 2017. All identifying information has been removed to ensure confidentiality.

## A Caring University

Graduate studies can be stressful at the best of times, but throw in conflict with a supervisor and it can be unbearable. The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS), the Society of Graduate Students (SOGS), Equity and Human Rights Services and the Office of the Ombudsperson (OO), work hard to ensure conflict is addressed early on so that students have a good experience at Western. In fact, SGPS provides a graduate supervision handbook with clear guidelines regarding the responsibilities of the program, supervisor and committee. This past year, the Graduate Education Council passed revised student and supervisor guidelines. Regardless, sometimes the relationship breaks down as in the following example.

Matheus was a student in the second year of his

PhD program. He had done well in his course work, but as the time came closer to write his comprehensive exams his supervisor told him that he didn't have what it takes to do a PhD and should withdraw. A friend and fellow student referred Matheus to the Office of the Ombudsperson to discuss how he could address the problem. Matheus and an Ombuds staff member discussed the conflict, creating a chronology of events. The supervisor's opinion of the student seemed to have changed when he asked to go home to Brazil for a few weeks in the summer to attend his sister's wedding and visit family. Matheus explained that he had asked his supervisor for the time off as vacation and that he felt he would be able to study for his comprehensives while at home. OO staff pointed out that he had done nothing wrong by asking for vacation and that all full-time graduate students may take two weeks

of vacation at a time mutually agreed upon by the student and supervisor. Matheus said that his supervisor started commenting on his English skills soon after he arranged to take his vacation. The supervisor suggested his English was not good enough to study at a North American school, which confused Matheus because he had attained undergraduate and Master's degrees in English-language universities in the United States. Even with his supervisor's negativity, Matheus decided to write his comprehensive exams during the scheduled time. Matheus passed the exams but was told by his supervisor that he had barely passed and that many members of the examining committee didn't want to pass him, that his supervisor had stood up for him.

Feeling increasingly disillusioned, Matheus mentioned his concerns to another graduate student. The student, who was almost finished their degree, was not surprised. According to this student, Matheus's supervisor did not like working with International students.

Staff in the Office of the Ombudsperson suggested Matheus meet with his supervisor to discuss the conflict, focusing on common interests such as the benefits of the research the student was doing; and that Matheus outline to his supervisor some of the things he was feeling. OO staff suggested that if the meeting did not result in changes, Matheus should speak with the graduate chair. A week later, Matheus came back to the OO saying that the supervisor had become aggressive in the meeting and suggested that Matheus should admit he isn't cut out for a doctoral program and shouldn't be coming up with excuses. The OO sent Matheus to the graduate chair to discuss the situation, but Matheus wasn't confident anyone in the program would listen. With that in mind, and with the student's permission, the OO contacted the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in the Faculty hosting the program and

discussed the problem. The Associate Dean was upset that this was happening in his faculty and asked to meet with the student and graduate chair to better understand the problem. Following the meeting with the student, the Graduate Chair spoke with the supervisor and the supervisor stated their opinion that Matheus was not capable of completing a PhD. When the Graduate Chair mentioned that Matheus had passed his comprehensive exams and had a high average in his course work, the supervisor became angry, saying that the Graduate Chair would have to find Matheus a new supervisor.

Discouraged by the outcome, the Graduate Chair asked the Graduate Coordinator to retrieve Matheus's comprehensive exam. The Grad Chair read it and thought it was quite good. There certainly weren't many language problems. The Graduate Chair then spoke to someone on the comprehensive committee to determine what exactly happened at the comprehensive meeting. The Graduate Chair was told that in fact the supervisor had been very negative toward the student, saying Matheus did not have the academic skills needed to be a doctoral student and that he was worried about Matheus's commitment to the program.

The Graduate Chair spoke to the Associate Dean and together they decided it was probably best for the Graduate Chair to find Matheus another supervisor. It wouldn't be overly difficult because Matheus had just begun the research component of his degree. The program found another supervisor for Matheus and his funding was maintained. Matheus may take a bit longer to complete his degree, but if he does he can speak to his supervisor or the Graduate Chair about additional funding given that the switch in supervisor could have been a contributing factor in his progression delays.



## The case of the Winter holiday

Emily was a third year undergraduate student. She had a plane ticket to travel to the Caribbean with her family for a one-week vacation prior to Christmas. Her ticket was for December 15. When the Registrar's Office released the exam schedule in November, Emily found out that she had an exam scheduled for December 17. Emily spoke to the professor who was willing to let her write the make up in January; and the previous summer, academic counseling had allowed Emily to move an exam so she could attend a concert. Given those facts, Emily was surprised that this time academic counseling was not permitting her to move the exam.

When Emily visited the Office of the Ombudsperson, staff told her that travel reservations (whether for vacation or a trip home) were not grounds for having an exam moved. However, the fact that academic counseling had permitted Emily to move a summer exam, and that the professor was willing to allow her to write the makeup, convinced the OO staff to contact the associate dean in the student's home faculty to

discuss the situation. The associate dean explained that the academic counseling office had been overrun with requests to move exams because of pre-arranged travel plans and would not budge on any of them. The associate dean also explained that rules are lax in the summer because there are fewer exams being written.

This situation is a good example of 'practice' vs 'policy'. There is no written policy that says students can not use travel plans as a reason to write a make-up exam. There are sometimes statements on academic counseling website and the Registrar's web site but a student could argue that the University is not being procedurally fair by enforcing a practice rather than a procedure or policy. Practices need to be enshrined in policy.

As a side note to this, the Registrar's Office has released the final examination schedule for December 2017 significantly earlier than in the past, allowing plenty of time for students to make travel arrangements. Also, at the time of publishing this annual review in December 2017, faculties were considering deferred exam requests more broadly.

# GETTING THE WORD OUT

Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot and Ombudsperson Jennifer Meister enjoy getting out of the office and talking about how we can guide students through their concerns. You may have seen us at one of the following events during the 2016/17 year:

## Booth Participation

New Faculty Orientation  
Residence Staff Orientation  
Graduate Student Orientation  
SOGS Amazing Race event  
Student Success Centre Concrete Beach Orientation Week event  
Mental Health Awareness Day

## Presentations

Coordinator of Summer Academic Leaders Conference panel on appeals

## Courses/Conferences

Association of Canadian Colleges and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO)/Forum of Canadian Ombudsman Joint Conference, Ottawa  
CACUSS webinar on students with episodic disabilities

## Other programs

Regular meetings with SGPS  
Participation in graduate studies Own Your Future program





Thanks for all the support  
you gave me this summer.  
I truly appreciate it.

“I cannot thank you enough for your  
kind assistance and support throughout  
this ongoing ordeal.”



“Thank you for all your help! I  
really appreciate it. This appeal  
was really hard on me, and you  
were really nice to me.”

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