

2019/2020

# Annual Report



OFFICE OF THE **OMBUDSPERSON**

**Western**  
UNIVERSITY • CANADA



# Western's Office of the Ombudsperson

Preparing students to  
prevent, manage and  
resolve difficult situations.

To the University Community:

I am happy to present the 2019-20 Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report. The Annual Report provides a statistical summary of the caseload and a summary account of cases.

**Between August 1, 2019 and July 31, 2020, Office staff met with 814 students regarding 875 concerns.** During the previous year, Office staff guided the same number of students through 879 concerns. Two percent of all students at Western visited the Office of the Ombudsperson. The majority of these students (69 percent) visited the Office for *Advice*. Ombuds staff *Intervened* in only two percent of cases, and only with the student's permission. The remaining students (29 percent) needed *Information* such as to whom they should appeal or where to locate a policy.

The Ombuds Office also met with 76 non-students, including faculty, staff, parents and alumni.

In addition to guiding students through policies and procedures, Ombuds staff led conflict management workshops for graduate students as part of the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies' Own Your Future program and also spoke to groups of postdoctoral scholars about best practices for handling conflict. Activities such as these are critical to helping students proactively manage conflict and other situations they encounter.

Ombuds staff transitioned easily to working remotely at the beginning of March and were able to seamlessly provide assistance to students via email, phone and Zoom™. The University Students' Council helped reach out to students by posting infographics advertising our services. Throughout the Spring, we held on-line conflict management workshops through the Graduate Student Life portfolio in Student Experience.

In June, Western's Associate Ombudsperson Anita Pouliot retired after 30 years. Anita guided thousands of students and worked with three Ombudspeople – Frances Bauer, Adrienne Clarke and myself. Anita also volunteered extensively with the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspeople, most recently serving as Treasurer.

Whitney Barrett joined the Office in July, coming from the Faculty of Engineering where she was the Graduate Officer. Whitney's experience with the complex issues faced by graduate students is a welcome addition.

A major initiative during 2019/20 was the review of the Memorandum of Understanding. The Memorandum of Understanding sets forth the conditions for the operations of the Ombuds Office. The first Memorandum was signed in 1987 and the document has been revised and updated periodically since, most recently in 2009. The 2020 version updated language to be more inclusive and clarified who the Memorandum was among. A sub-committee of the Ombuds Advisory Committee, chaired by Dr John Mitchell of Brescia, met through the Fall and Winter and the final, revised version was distributed to signatories in August. The next review of the Memorandum will be in 2025.

I hope you find this glance at our operations interesting and encourage you to contact me should you have questions or concerns.



Jennifer Meister,  
Ombudsperson, Western University

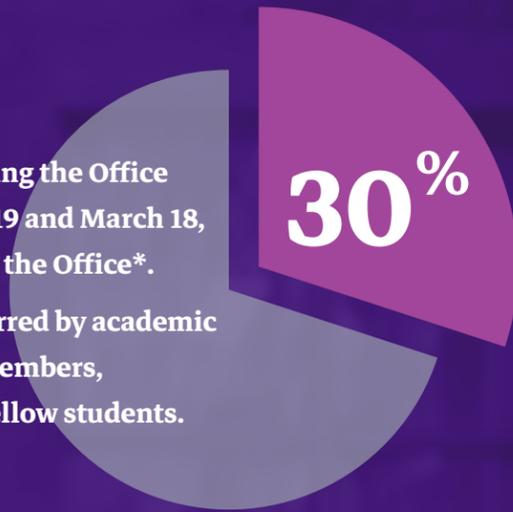
**814**  
STUDENTS

**875**  
CONCERNS

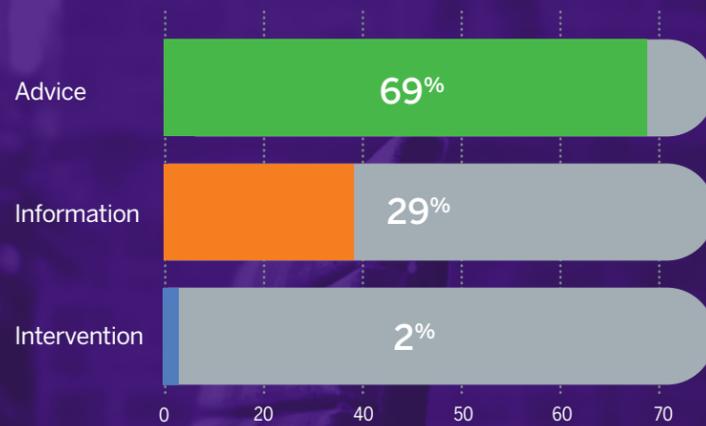


30% of students visiting the Office between August 1, 2019 and March 18, 2020 were referred to the Office\*.

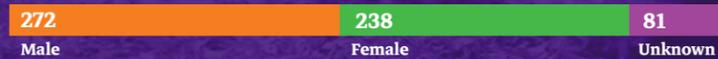
Individuals were referred by academic counselors, faculty members, administrators and fellow students.



**Reason student approached office:**



**1 out of every 49 students contacted us in 2019/20**



(\*This data was not tracked while working remotely.)

# Visitor Overview

The following pages paint a picture of who came to the Ombuds Office in 2019/20 and why.

## Student visitors over time

(Note: Some students come to the Ombuds Office for more than one concern. The number of concerns brought to the Office was 875.)

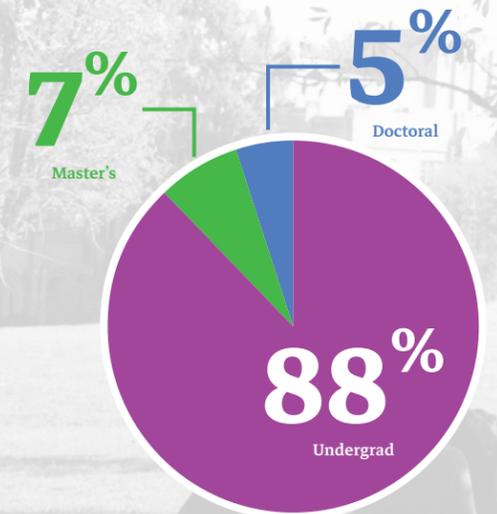


\*Enrolment numbers are taken from Western's Institutional Planning and Budgeting Five-Year Enrolment Comparison located at [https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/2020\\_five\\_year\\_enrolment\\_comparison.pdf](https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/2020_five_year_enrolment_comparison.pdf)

**890**  
TOTAL VISITORS

**91%** student visitors (814)  
**9%** Non-student visitors (76)

## DEGREE LEVEL OF STUDENT VISITORS

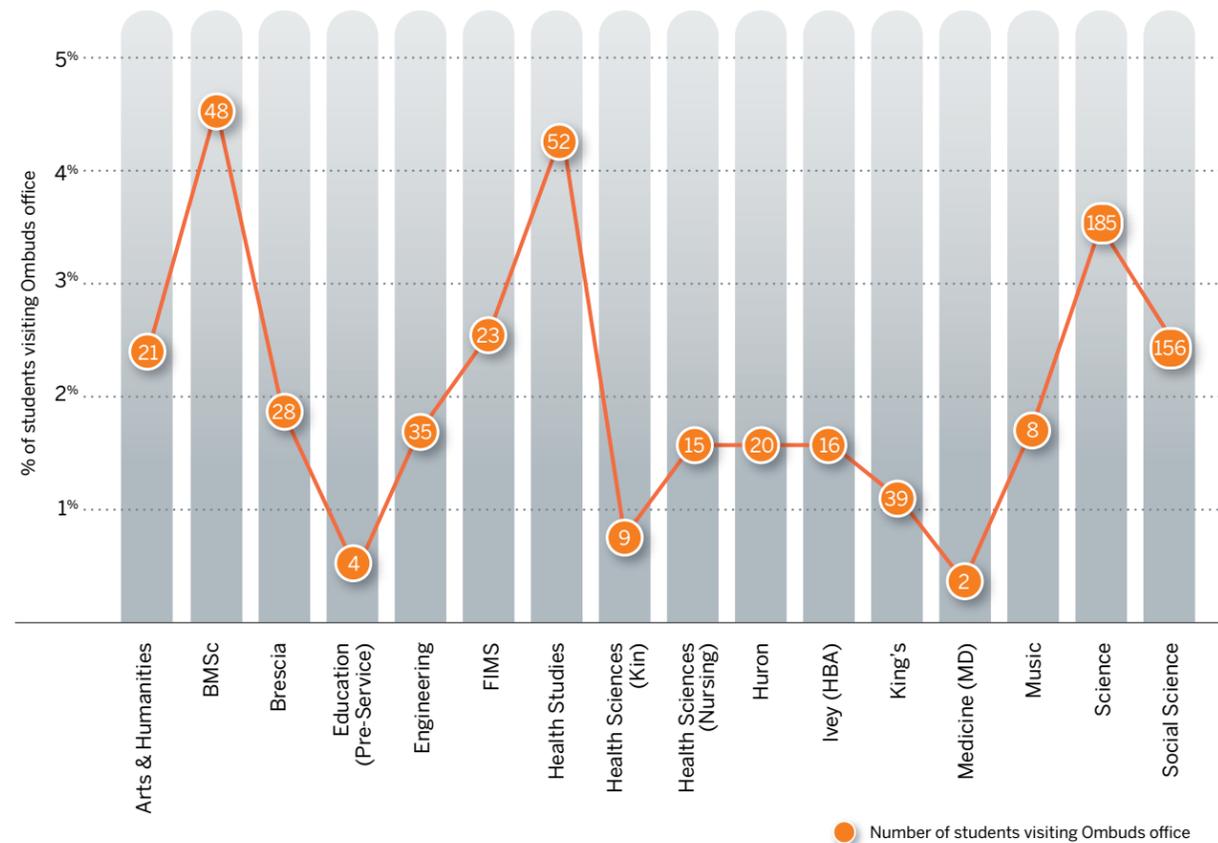


# Undergraduate Student Visitors

Undergraduate students take courses across Western faculties and the affiliates. For that reason, we track a student's home faculty or affiliate as well as the faculty or affiliate in which their concern resides. By tracking how many students come from each faculty or affiliate we can see where we might need more outreach. By tracking the faculty or affiliate of concern, we can see where there may be a systemic issue.

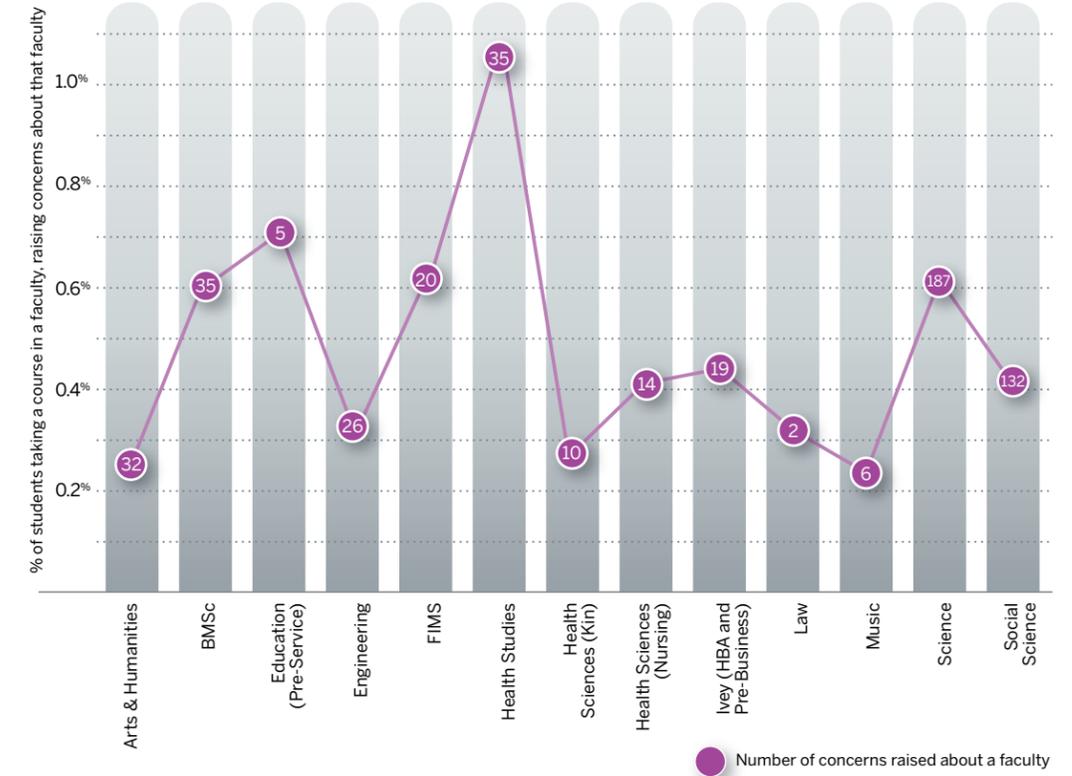
## Undergraduate student visits by home faculty

The following graph illustrates the home faculty of undergraduate students visiting the Office (Note: Not all students tell us their program so they are not included below, but are included in the overall count of student visitors earlier in this report.)



## Undergraduate students by faculty of concern

The following chart illustrates visitors who have concerns about courses in a faculty other than their home faculty.

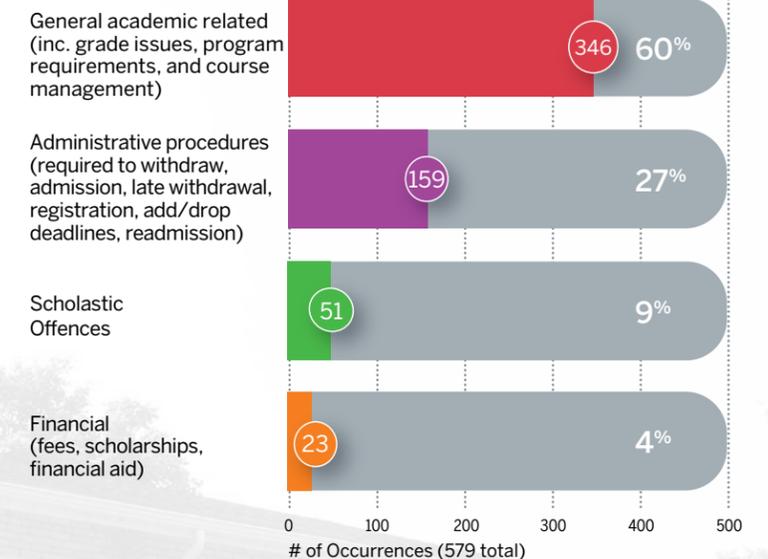


\*Brescia (20 concerns), Huron (20 concerns), and King's (37 concerns) are not included in this graph because the teaching activity at the colleges is not publicly available.

## Undergraduate concern breakdown

The chart to the right illustrates the academic and financial concerns raised by undergraduate students who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson. In addition, there were students who raised concerns specific to policies surrounding COVID. These included postponement of make-up exams due to syllabus changes, access to technology for remote learning, and use of Proctortrack for invigilation. These concerns are addressed in the second chart (next page).

### Category of concern



## COVID-related concerns

COVID-19 presented a unique challenge for students, staff, faculty and administrators. There were students who raised concerns while discussing other topics, such as grade appeals or being required to withdraw, and scholastic offences that occurred once courses went online. Those concerns are recorded as part of the overall data on page five.

The 52 concerns tracked below are from students who contacted the Ombuds Office specifically because of a COVID-19 situation.

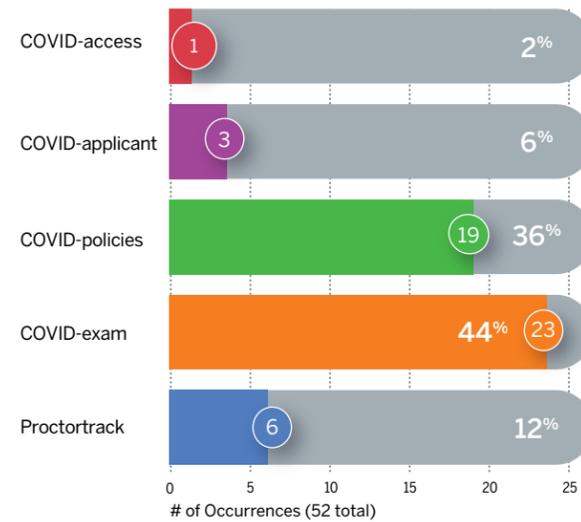
*COVID-access* refers to a student who had difficulty completing course work in March due to poor internet access. The Faculty was able to accommodate the student with alternate assignments and the problem was alleviated.

*COVID-exam* refers primarily to students who had their plans for make-up exams stymied because of COVID-19. Some students had the weight of a pre-COVID mid-term exam transferred to the final exam in a course because of either a self-declared or accommodated absence. Changes to course syllabi meant that many final exams were simplified or done away with completely. For this reason, some departments and/or faculties stated that the student could not receive a numerical grade for a course. They were only eligible for a Pass/Fail grade. Students who wished a numerical grade were given an incomplete (INC) in the course and permitted to write the exam the next time the course is offered (December 2020 or April 2021). Decisions pertaining to graduating students who would be unable to write at a subsequent offering were made on a case-by-case basis, usually under appeal to the Associate Dean.

*COVID-applicant* refers to applicants to Schulich's MD program and to the Internationally Trained Dentist Program. In both cases, significant changes were made because of COVID and applicants felt they were disadvantaged.

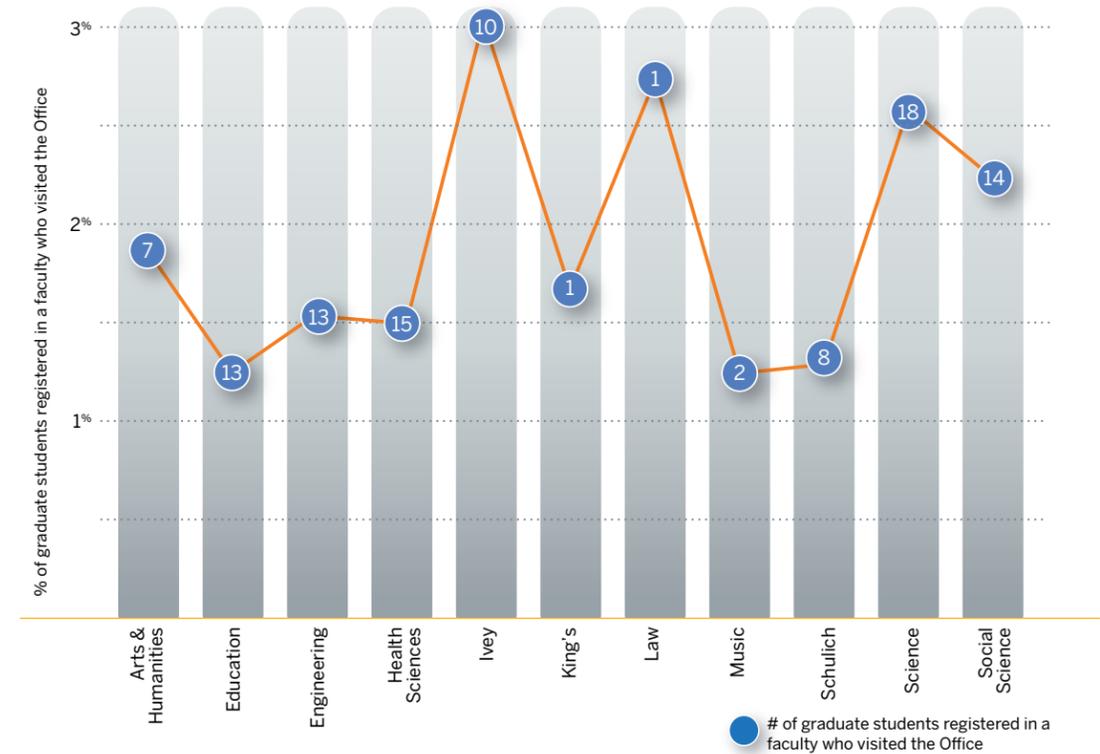
*COVID-policies* refers to general concerns related to policies the University brought in as the result of COVID-19. Examples include students unhappy with reweighting of assignments and removal of final exams upon which students were depending to increase their grades.

*Proctortack* refers to technical issues encountered when using Proctortrack for April exams or questions regarding privacy. Western's Information and Privacy Office and Office of the Registrar created a Frequently Asked Questions document that addressed many of the concerns we were hearing.



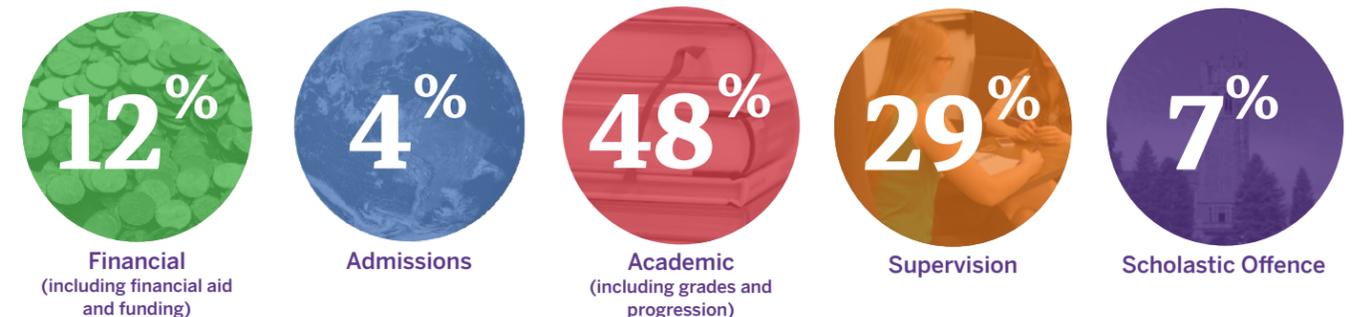
## Graduate Student Visitors

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 graph below shows the number and percentage of master's and doctoral students visiting the Office from various disciplinary faculties. Note: Not all students identified their discipline, so they are not included below but they are considered in the overall count of student visitors earlier in this report.



## Graduate concerns – academic and financial

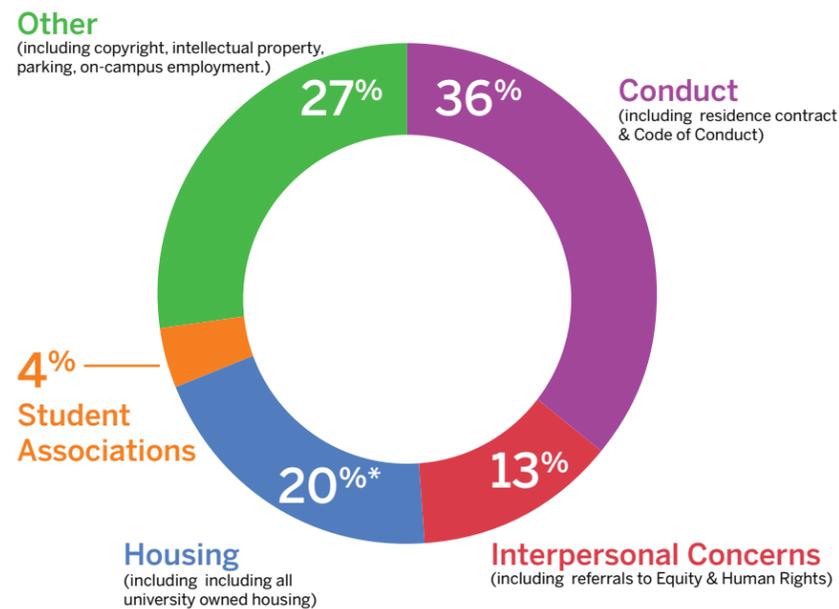
84 concerns raised by graduate students dealt with academic or financial issues.



# 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 concerns related to parking on campus. The Office of the Ombudsperson is not an official office of complaint for the University but does act as an effective listener when a student wants to be heard.

As a % of total non-academic and non-financial occurrences (105)



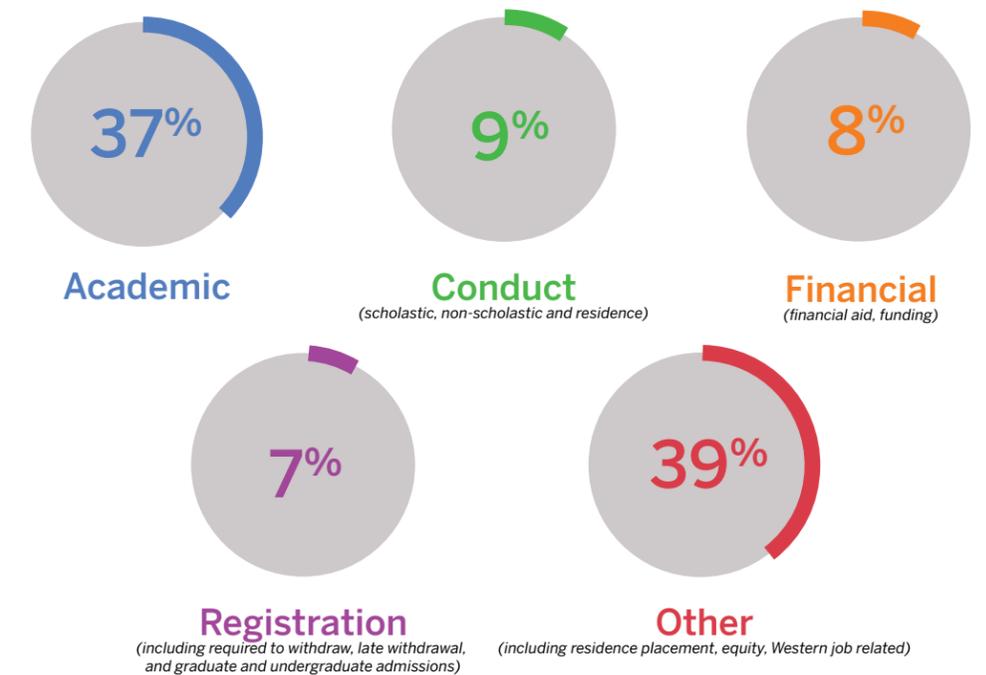
\*Housing contacts were significantly higher than 2018/19 because Residence was oversubscribed and students whose deposit was not received by the deadline lost their spot.



# Non-Student Data

In 2019/20 we heard from 76 administrators, staff, family members of students, and members of the public. These individuals had concerns such as accommodation for their family member who was attending the University, use of Campus Recreation, and a family member's academic progression. Ombuds staff also responded to academic administrators regarding grade appeals and scholastic offence accusations.

As a % of total non-student occurrences (76)



# Case Examples 2019-2020

As mentioned earlier, 69 percent of students visiting the Ombuds Office came for Advice, 29 percent needed Information and in only two percent of cases did we Intervene. Following are three scenarios we encountered this past year.

## Appeals past the deadline

- » A fourth-year student felt their first- and second-year grades were impacting their ability to access further education. The student was tested for a learning disability between second and third year and found to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The student was treated for the condition and their grades improved dramatically. Personnel from Accessible Education referred the student to the Ombuds office to discuss options for appealing their first- and second-year grades. Ombuds staff discussed with the student what they wanted, i.e. late course withdrawals or some kind of grade reweighting. This student envisioned a combination of outcomes. We then explained there were appeal deadlines and no formal policy mechanism for appealing past deadlines; however, we did say that the Associate Deans were very empathetic and open to reviewing appeals on grounds such as this student had. Ombuds staff then reviewed the student's appeal to the Associate Dean. The appeal was denied at the Associate Dean level and the student appealed further to the Senate Review Board Academic (SRBA). Again, Ombuds staff guided the student through the SRBA process and reviewed their appeal.
- » Similarly, a student who attended Western in 2016/17 was referred to the Office of the Ombudsperson by one of the academic counseling offices. The student suffered from a mental health condition and wanted to appeal to have their grades changed to passes, rather than having a numerical grade. Ombuds staff guided the student through an appeal to the Associate Dean. The Associate Dean denied the appeal and the student did not appeal further.

## Upset student

- » A Master's student dropped into the Ombuds Office one morning at 8:15. They were in tears and looked as though they had not slept. The student had received a scathing email from their supervisor, which the student showed Ombuds staff. After assuring the student that the language used was not appropriate, Ombuds staff suggested the student meet with their graduate chair. The student was not comfortable doing that, but they were comfortable meeting with the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in their faculty. The student was eventually given a co-supervisor so that they could finish their program with minimal contact with the supervisor.

## Course access disagreements

- » An undergraduate chair sent a fourth-year student to the Ombuds Office. The student had asked and received special permission to take a course even though they had failed the prerequisite. The undergraduate and department chairs had both given the student permission to take the course, but the professor was saying the student could not enroll. Ombuds staff recommended the student speak to the professor to see what their reservation was and to explain other courses with similar content that the student had taken. This approach was not successful so Ombuds staff suggested the student seek advice from the department chair. The department chair ended up intervening and the professor allowed the student to enter the class.

## The case of the delayed visa

- » An international applicant to a graduate program was on a work visa and experienced delays in getting the visa converted to a study visa. The individual had applied for the permit in plenty of time, and in fact had done everything possible. The program admitted the student but said that if they did not have their permit by a specific date they would have to reapply for another term. Western International, the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the Ombuds Office worked extensively with the program to either extend the date they would accept the visa or to defer admission to the next term – rather than making the student reapply. The student eventually received their visa before the extended deadline and was able to start the program.



Jennifer Meister  
Ombudsperson



Whitney Barrett  
Associate Ombudsperson

## Who We Are

Jennifer Meister, Ombudsperson, and Whitney Barrett, Associate Ombudsperson, are the faces of the Ombuds Office.

## Spreading the Word

### Outreach

- » SOGS Amazing Race, stop on the race
- » SOGS Welcome to your Grade Club, booth
- » SGPS Fall graduate student orientation, booth
- » Conflict Management workshops, SGPS Own Your Future
- » Student Experience/Graduate Student Life graduate student orientation, presentation
- » USC Peer Support Training, presentation
- » SOGS International Student Orientation, booth
- » USC Orientation Week Services Fair, booth
- » Postdoc Conflict Management Workshop

### Committee Participation

- » Graduate Student Life Advisory Group
- » Task Force on Undergraduate Scholastic Offences

### Conference Attendance

- » Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons mid-year meeting

# Advisory Committee

The Office of the Ombudsperson Advisory Committee is a sounding board and advisor to the Ombuds Office on issues such as outreach, budget and the annual report. The composition of the Advisory Committee is set out in the Memorandum of Agreement.

### Thank you to the 2019/20 Advisory Committee:

- Mr Pranjan Ghandi, University Students' Council
- Ms Jina Kum, Society of Graduate Students
- Dr Angela Mandich, Senate Representative
- Dr Ken Meadows, President's Representative
- Dr John Mitchell, Brescia, Affiliate Faculty representative
- Mr Emmanuel Ukposidolo, Master of Business Administration
- Ms Hailley White, King's, Affiliate Students' Council representative



Western

## Office of the Ombudsperson

Room 3135 Western Student Services Building  
Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada  
N6A 3K7  
t. 519-661-3573  
ombuds@uwo.ca  
westernu.ca/ombuds  
@westernuOmbuds

©2020 Office of the Ombudsperson, Western University

The Office of the Ombudsperson is jointly funded by the University of Western Ontario, the Affiliated University Colleges, the University Students' Council and Student Councils of the Affiliated University Colleges, the Society of Graduate Students, and the MBA Association.