

2021/2022

Office of the Ombudsperson Annual Report

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

Western 
UNIVERSITY • CANADA



Office of the Ombudsperson

Who we are:

We are an independent, impartial and confidential office that students visit when they don't know how to approach an academic or nonacademic situation at Western. We offer a safe, nonthreatening environment where students can ask for advice. Students visit us regarding conflicts and difficult decisions they need to make; what to do if they have been accused of a scholastic offence or Code of Conduct infraction; and to determine whether they have grounds for appeal.

What we do:

We meet with students in person, via Zoom, phone or Teams. We listen to concerns and ask questions. We guide students through the policies and processes that might apply in their situation. As a confidential resource, we do not contact anyone on campus or off unless we are concerned for a student's safety or the safety of someone else. From time-to-time we do ask the student's permission to contact a decision maker or administrator to clarify a situation and ensure fair process has been followed. In short, we untie the knots in a situation.

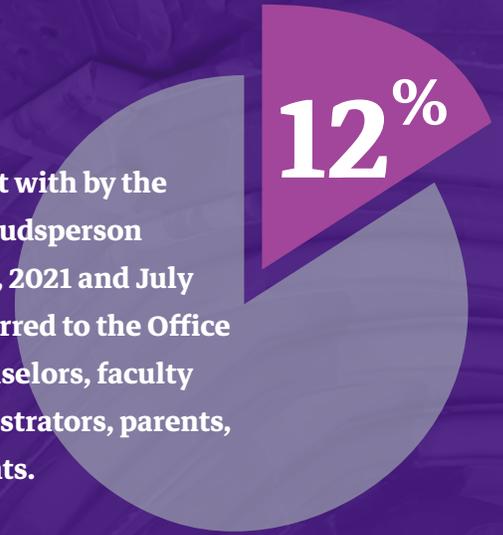
We practice shuttle diplomacy and on occasion make recommendations to senior administrators on specific policies and processes.

1,223 TOTAL VISITORS

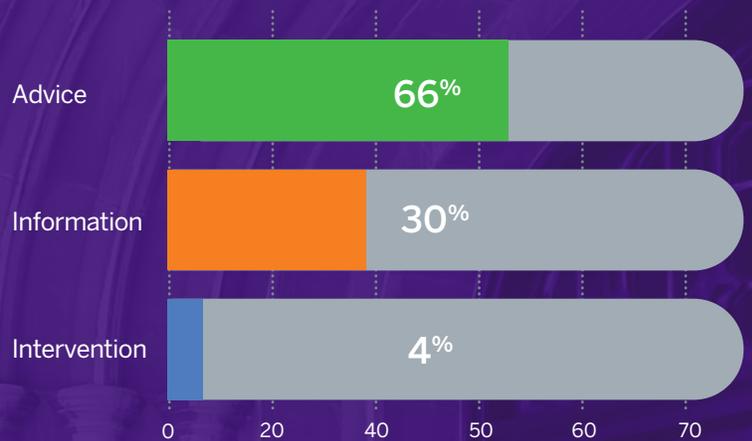
92% 8%

student visitors (1120) Non-student visitors (103)

12% of cases dealt with by the Office of the Ombudsperson between August 1, 2021 and July 31, 2022 were referred to the Office by academic counselors, faculty members, administrators, parents, and fellow students.



Reason student approached office:



1 out of every 38 students contacted us in 2021/22



Degree Level of Student Visitors

Undergrad **89%**
Master's **6%**
Doctoral **5%**



To the Western Community:

I am pleased to provide the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson for the period August 1, 2021 to July 31, 2022. This is pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the constituent university, affiliate university colleges, and student associations.

The facts

Between August 1, 2021 and July 31, 2022, the Associate Ombudsperson and I met with 1120 students regarding 1214 concerns. This equates to 2.6% of the student population of the constituent and affiliate campuses, an increase from 2.2% in 2020/21.

Ombuds staff intervened in four percent of cases, and only with the student's permission. The remaining students (96 percent) needed information such as to whom they should appeal or where to locate a policy, or advice on a situation such as how to manage a conflict or have a difficult conversation. The Associate Ombudsperson and I also advised students on appeal processes, whether the student had grounds for an appeal, and reviewed appeals before the student submitted them.

Ombuds staff also met with 103 non-students, including faculty, administrators, staff, parents, and alumni.

Activities

The Office of the Ombudsperson works with various cohorts to provide best practices on difficult conversations and conflict management. For example, through the 2021/22 year, we conducted workshops as part of the Own Your Future graduate student professional education program and worked with individual students on difficult conversations they needed to have.

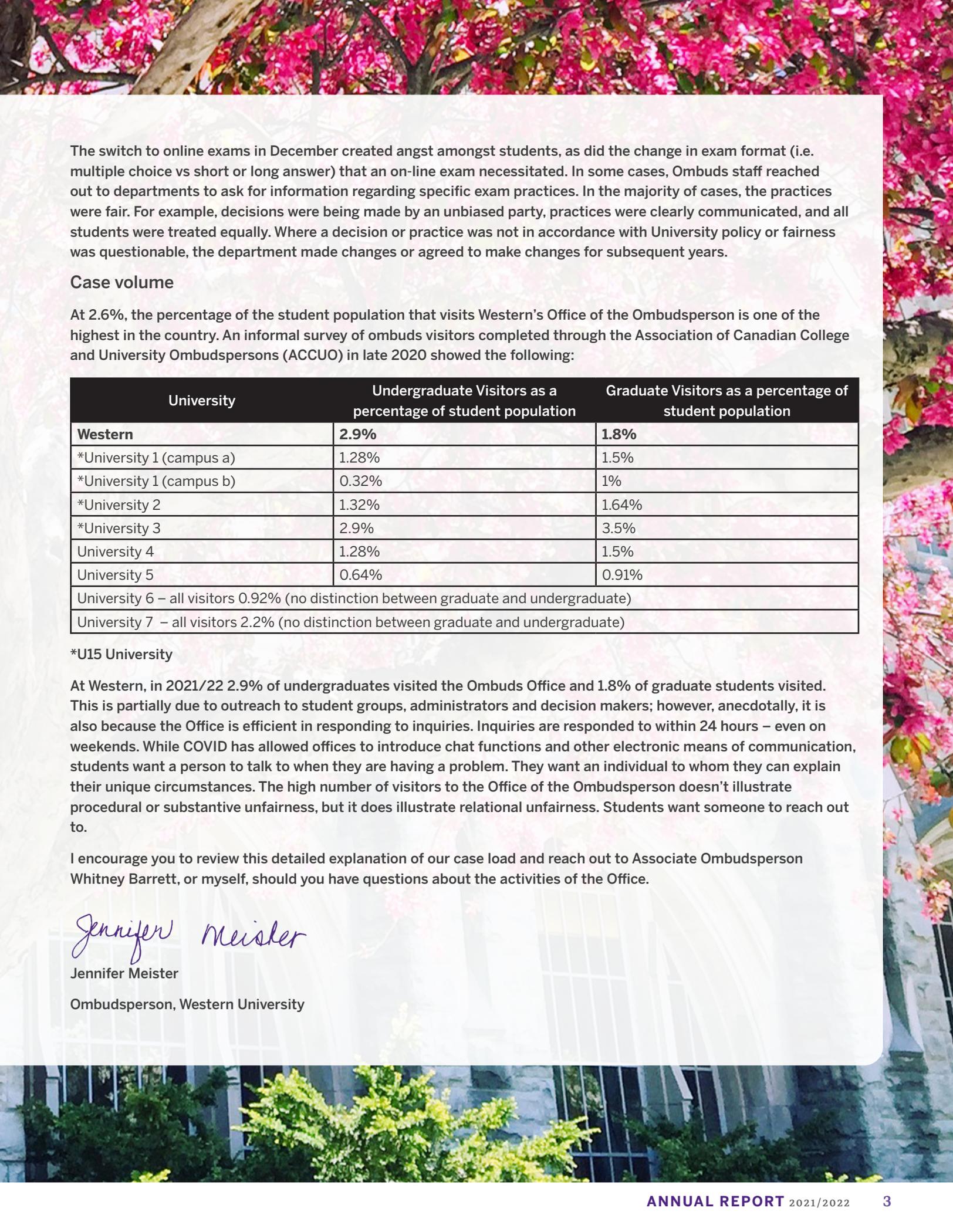
From time-to-time we also work with senior administrators on policy revisions to ensure fairness of the institution's policies and procedures. In 2021/22 we continued work on rewording the Dean's Honours List and Scholarship policies and how those policies impacted students with disabilities, as well as continuing to suggest revisions to the Self Reported Absence policy to ensure fairness for everyone -students, faculty, and academic counselors.

Impact of COVID

As with the rest of campus, COVID brought unique issues to the Office. In total 107 students came to the Ombuds Office with concerns related directly to COVID.

Students were referred to the Office of the Ombudsperson if they had questions regarding the fairness of vaccine mandates passed by the University. Thirty-eight students approached the Office because they were not granted exemptions or had received notification from Student Support and Case Management (SSCM) they would be withdrawn if they did not upload their vaccine certificates. Some of these students were on internship and would not be on campus, but not all faculties had relayed that information to SSCM. The Ombuds Office referred these students back to SSCM and their off-campus status was recorded.

A few students ignored the vaccine status emails until March, when they were withdrawn by the University. These students and their families were very upset; however, they had been treated fairly by the University. They had been provided notice that a decision would be made and a forum for requesting an exemption.



The switch to online exams in December created angst amongst students, as did the change in exam format (i.e. multiple choice vs short or long answer) that an on-line exam necessitated. In some cases, Ombuds staff reached out to departments to ask for information regarding specific exam practices. In the majority of cases, the practices were fair. For example, decisions were being made by an unbiased party, practices were clearly communicated, and all students were treated equally. Where a decision or practice was not in accordance with University policy or fairness was questionable, the department made changes or agreed to make changes for subsequent years.

Case volume

At 2.6%, the percentage of the student population that visits Western’s Office of the Ombudsperson is one of the highest in the country. An informal survey of ombuds visitors completed through the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) in late 2020 showed the following:

University	Undergraduate Visitors as a percentage of student population	Graduate Visitors as a percentage of student population
Western	2.9%	1.8%
*University 1 (campus a)	1.28%	1.5%
*University 1 (campus b)	0.32%	1%
*University 2	1.32%	1.64%
*University 3	2.9%	3.5%
University 4	1.28%	1.5%
University 5	0.64%	0.91%
University 6 – all visitors 0.92% (no distinction between graduate and undergraduate)		
University 7 – all visitors 2.2% (no distinction between graduate and undergraduate)		

*U15 University

At Western, in 2021/22 2.9% of undergraduates visited the Ombuds Office and 1.8% of graduate students visited. This is partially due to outreach to student groups, administrators and decision makers; however, anecdotally, it is also because the Office is efficient in responding to inquiries. Inquiries are responded to within 24 hours – even on weekends. While COVID has allowed offices to introduce chat functions and other electronic means of communication, students want a person to talk to when they are having a problem. They want an individual to whom they can explain their unique circumstances. The high number of visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson doesn’t illustrate procedural or substantive unfairness, but it does illustrate relational unfairness. Students want someone to reach out to.

I encourage you to review this detailed explanation of our case load and reach out to Associate Ombudsperson Whitney Barrett, or myself, should you have questions about the activities of the Office.

Jennifer Meister

Jennifer Meister

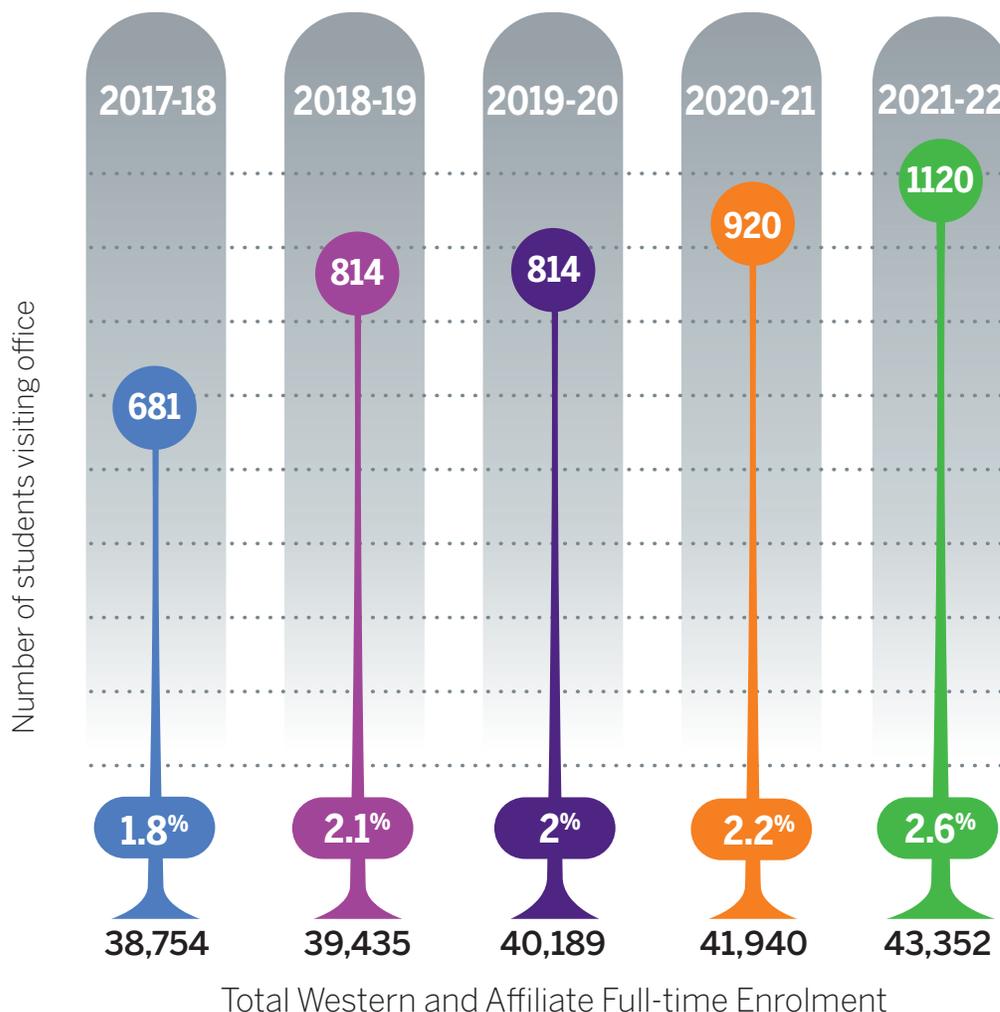
Ombudsperson, Western University

Visitor Overview

The following pages paint a picture of who came to the Ombuds Office in 2021/22 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 1214.)



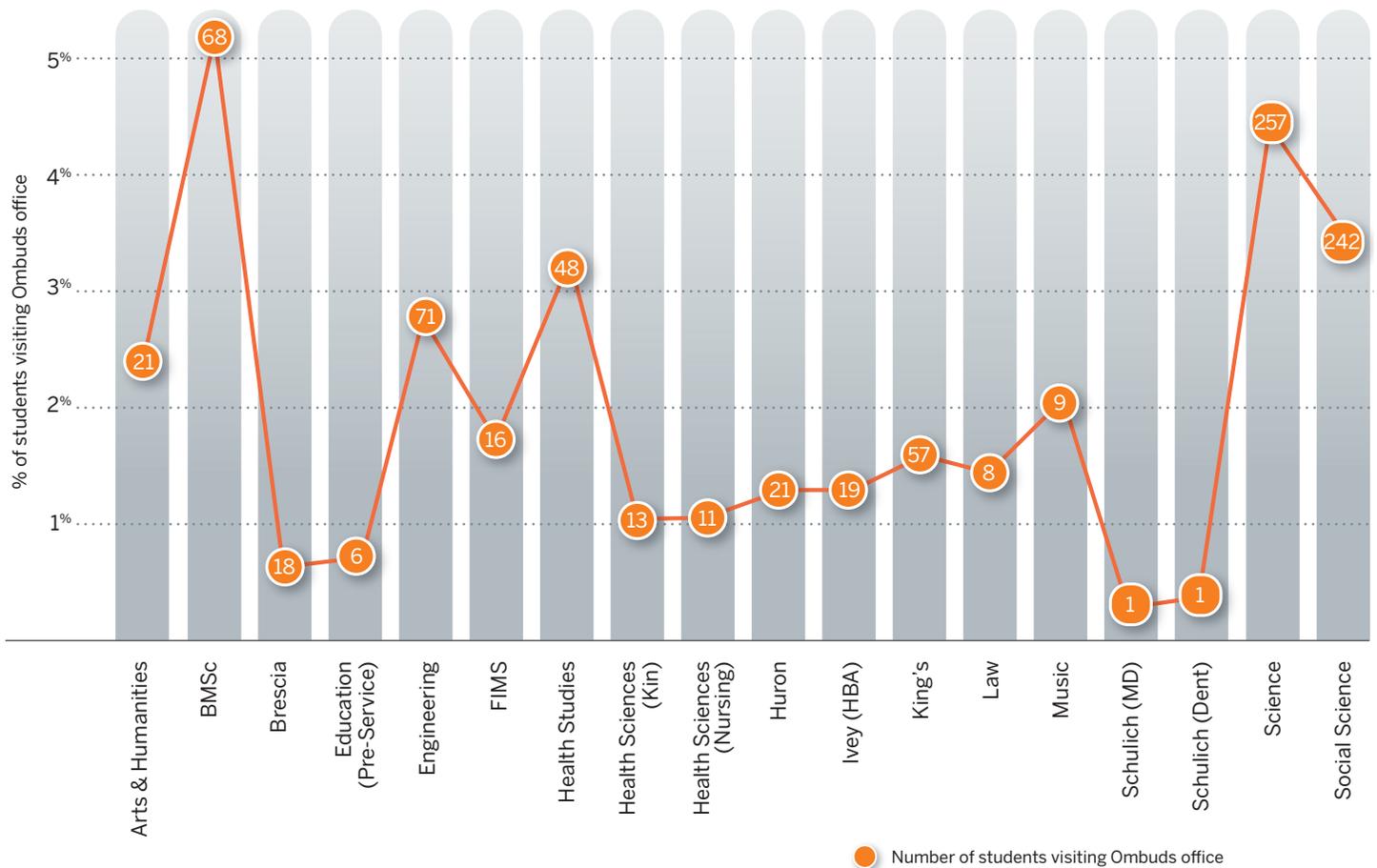
*Enrolment numbers are taken from Western's Institutional Planning and Budgeting Five-Year Enrolment Comparison located at https://www.ipb.uwo.ca/documents/2022_five_year_enrolment_comparison.pdf

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 see where there may be systemic issues. In 2021/22, 1120 students visited the Office with 1214 concerns.

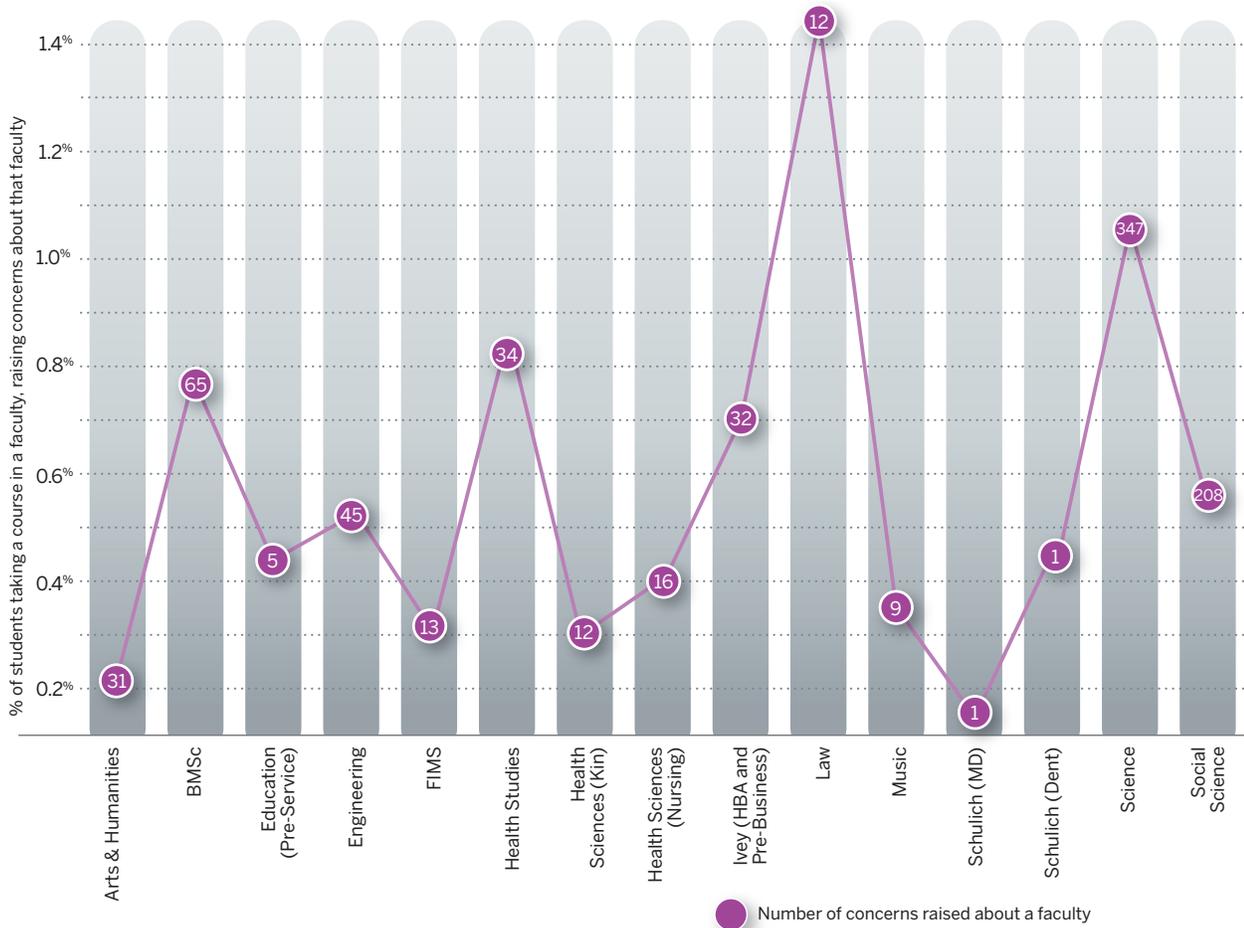
Undergraduate student visits by home faculty

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 (29 concerns), Huron (20 concerns), and King's (50 concerns) are not included in this graph because the teaching activity at the colleges is not publicly available.

Undergraduate concern breakdown

862 concerns raised by undergraduate students dealt with academics and financials. Following is a breakdown of concerns raised over the past year.

Category of concern

General academic related (inc. grade issues, program requirements, and course management)

67% (581)

Administrative procedures (required to withdraw, admission, late withdrawal, registration, add/drop deadlines, readmission)

24% (204)

Scholastic Offences

5% (45)

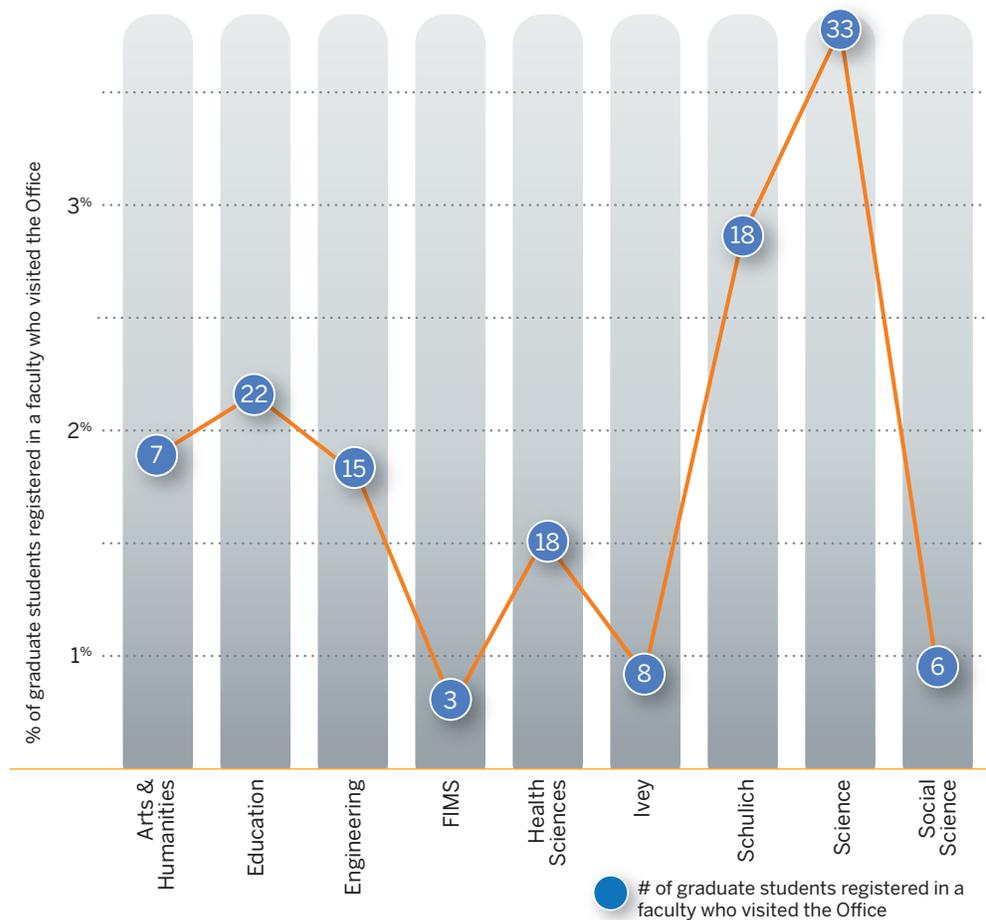
Financial (fees, scholarships, financial aid)

4% (32)

of Occurrences (790 total)

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

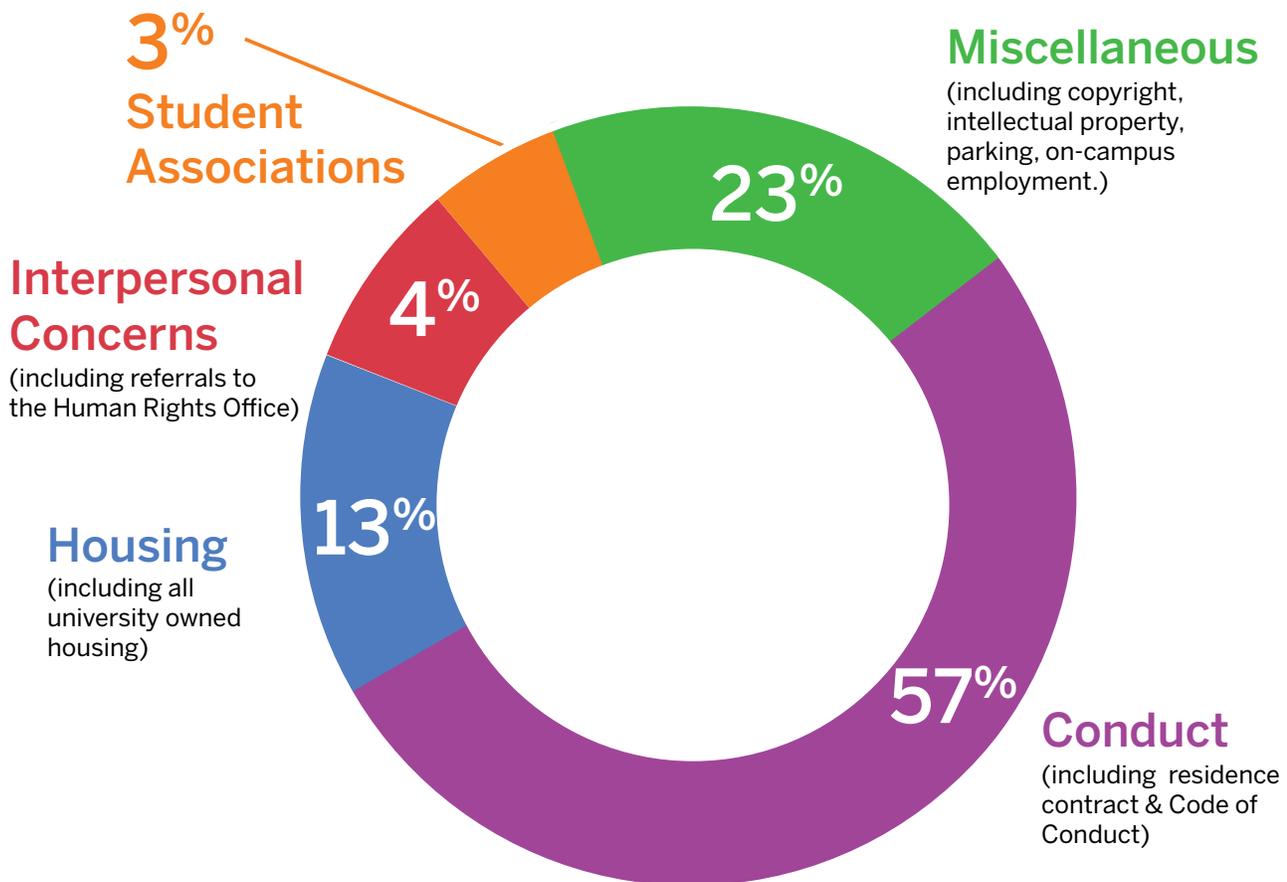
107 concerns raised by graduate students dealt with academic or financial issues.



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 other campus offices. 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 (142)



Non-Student Data

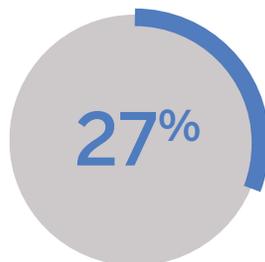
In 2021/22 we heard from 103 administrators, faculty members, staff, family members of students, alumni, and members of the public regarding a range of concerns.

As a % of total non-student occurrences (103)

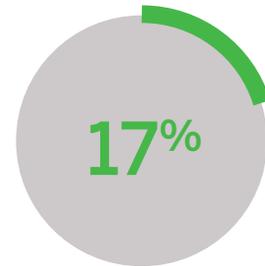


Miscellaneous

(including residence placement, equity, Western job related)

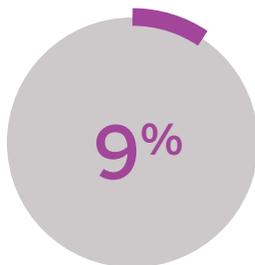


Academic



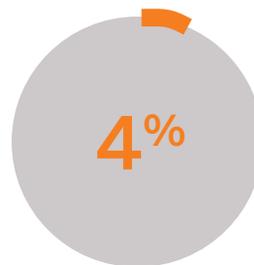
Conduct

(scholastic, non-scholastic and residence)



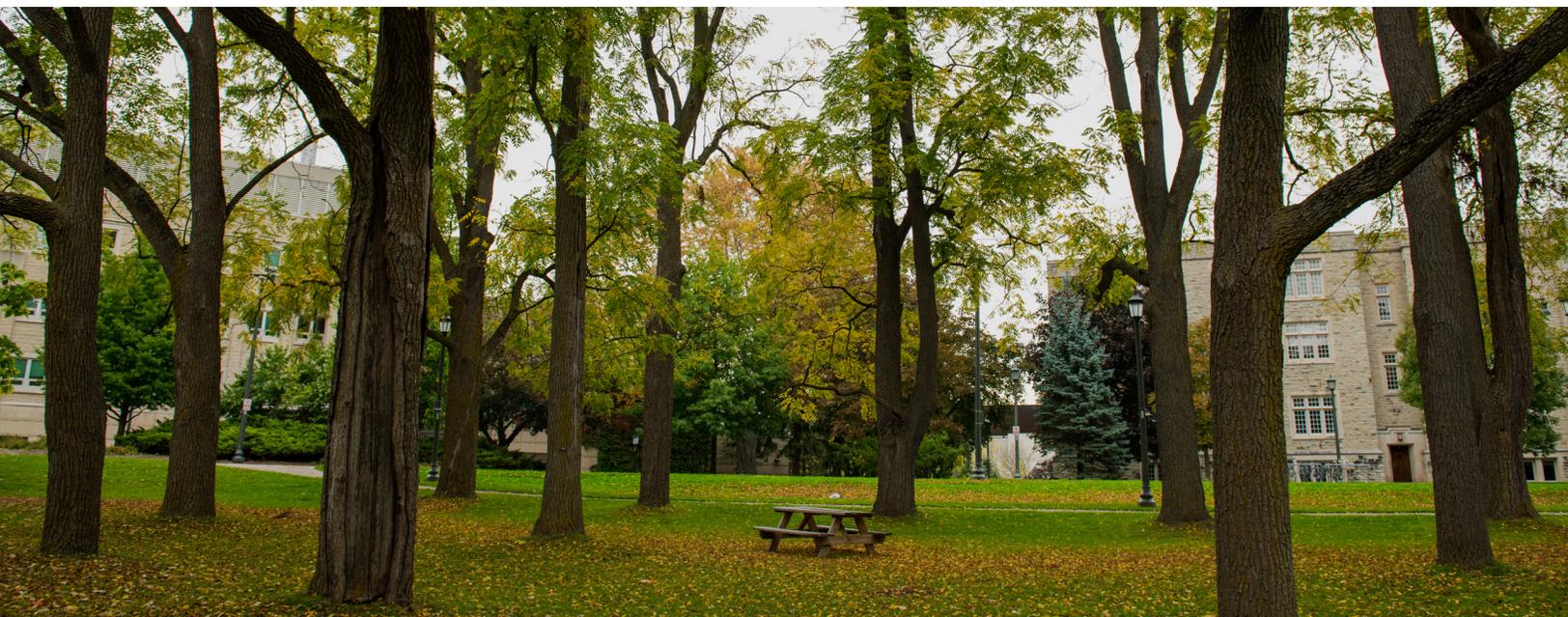
Administrative procedures

(including required to withdraw, late withdrawal, and graduate and undergraduate admissions)



Financial

(financial aid, funding)



Case Examples

2021-2022

Ombuds staff evaluate each concern that is brought to us according to fairness: procedural, substantive, and relational. The following cases provide examples of where Ombuds staff were able to work with administrators and decision makers to ensure fairness for students and the institution.

Academic records and privacy

A student reached out to the Ombuds Office expressing concerns in relation to information maintained in their student record from the time of admission. The student stated the data appearing on their record could potentially flag the students as belonging to a protected group.

The Ombuds Office discussed the student's concern with Western's Legal Counsel, specifically relating to Western's duty to protect privacy but also maintain the accuracy of student records. While the University was operating within the bounds of existing policy and privacy laws, the student maintained they were uncomfortable with the information being accessible. The Ombuds Office worked with the Office of the Registrar to have the identifying information not removed from the student's record but altered in a way that maintains the record and anonymizes the sensitive data.

Duplicate policy application

A graduate student was directed to the Ombuds Office following a program decision which resulted in the student being withdrawn.

Through discussions with the student and decision makers, and review of the documentation, it became clear the student's situation fell under two separate policies: the Scholastic Offence policy and the Academic Appeals Policy. The decision to withdraw the student was made due to the outcome of a scholastic offence which resulted in the student not meeting progression requirements. This gave the student the option to appeal either the scholastic offence through the Scholastic Offence policy process, the program decision requiring the student to withdraw through the Academic Appeal Policy, or the student could appeal both.

In this case the student appealed under both policies; however, the case did highlight where policy intersection can cause confusion for the student as well as decision makers.

Preferred name policy

A student approached the Ombuds Office because while they had been permitted to use a preferred first name, the University does not allow a student to use a preferred last name. Surnames can only be changed with legal documentation. The inability to change a last name is an issue for numerous equity-deserving groups.

The Ombuds Office surveyed other Canadian universities and colleges to determine their practices and met with the Registrar's Office. The Office of the Registrar did permit the student to use a preferred last name and is in the process of reviewing the name change policy.

Backdated withdrawal

A student visited us in March 2022. They had fallen ill in first term and had been unable to complete all their courses. The student had been given incompletes in some first term half courses and had dropped some of their full year courses before the deadline. They had worked hard through second term to write exams and submit material for the incomplete courses. However, in one course, they continued to struggle. It was an essay-heavy course and the nature of the student's illness made it difficult for them to complete the work.

The student spoke to the professor who was very empathetic and said they would support the student's request to drop the course without academic penalty (commonly known as WDN). The professor sent the student to the Ombuds Office for assistance with a request to the Faculty. We guided the student through the appeal process. The student submitted an appeal to the Associate Dean in their home faculty, along with an email of support from the professor. The appeal was granted and the student was able to drop the course past the drop date.

This is a good example of relational fairness. First the professor, and then the Associate Dean, showed empathy for the student and although the course drop was outside of policy, it did make sense from a relational fairness point of view.

Exam rescheduling

Through the 2021/22 academic year, students were required to self-isolate if they had been diagnosed with, or had come in contact with, COVID. A parent contacted us in March 2022 to explain their frustration with the way the University was accommodating students considering these rules. The student in question lived in a house off campus with other students – all in the same program. One of the residents had come down with COVID, meaning the other residents needed to self-isolate. Because of this, the students missed two midterm exams. According to the course OWL sites, the make-up midterms were scheduled for the same day, one between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m., and one between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. Knowing the schedule for the make-up exams and the stress it would cause writing six hours of exams, the parent felt the students were being encouraged to lie. They were being encouraged to appear for the regular exam and risk passing COVID onto those around them.

Ombuds staff empathized with the students and encouraged the parent to have the students contact the Associate Dean of the faculty offering the courses. After some discussion, one of the exams was moved to another day.

The Ombudsperson's role as an Academic Case Manager

On occasion, Ombuds staff act as Academic Case Managers helping students navigate complex situations. In one such case, a student visited the office late in first term. They had been in a car accident and had received academic consideration for the two days following the accident, but they had been impacted mentally and weren't coping well with end of term workload. Academic counseling had told the student they couldn't provide any more extensions without medical documentation. Ombuds staff helped the student develop a plan to talk to each professor. The plan included revised assignment deadlines and requests for reweighting. Ombuds staff also suggested the student meet with an academic counselor again to share their plan and meet with a physician and psychologist to get documentation explaining their situation.

After some back-and-forth with professors and academic counseling, the student dropped one course and received extensions on assignments. This was a complex, multi-faculty issue the student needed help managing. Ombuds staff was responsive to the student and able to meet with them numerous times to help them navigate the various offices and often complex bureaucracy.

Recommendation

Ombuds staff practice shuttle diplomacy, working with senior administration throughout the year to ensure systemic issues are resolved. For that reason, recommendations are seldom made in the Office of the Ombudsperson annual report. This year, I do have one recommendation.

Addition to course outline policy

The policy on Course Outlines (Syllabi) for Undergraduate Students (https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/exam/courseoutlines.pdf) is very comprehensive, ensuring syllabi contain information critical for student success. I recommend the policy be updated to include a statement that the make-up date for the final exam be included when known. For example, many second term final exams are made up during the first two weeks of May. This creates problems for students beginning jobs or travelling home. Stating on the course outline the make-up exam will be during the week of May 2 (for example) would ensure the student is aware when making plans.

Getting the Word Out

Outreach

- » Conflict Management workshops, SGPS Own Your Future
- » Numerous orientation events
- » Appeals policy training for USC Student Appeals Support Centre

Committee Participation

- » Graduate Student Life Advisory Group
- » Worked with SGPS Vice Provost and Associate Vice Provosts on updates to academic integrity policy

Virtual Conference/Meeting/Training Attendance

- » Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspople
- » California Caucus of University and College Ombuds
- » Forum of Canadian Ombudsman

Who We Are

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



Jennifer Meister
Ombudsperson



Whitney Barrett
Associate Ombudsperson

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 2021/22 Advisory Committee:

Ms Fahimeh Abdoulahi, Brescia, Affiliate Students' Council representative

Ms Ziyana Kotadia, University Students' Council

Dr Stephen McLatchie, Huron, Affiliate Faculty representative

Dr Ken Meadows, President's Representative

Mr Kevin Moore, Society of Graduate Students

Dr Andrew Walsh, Senate Representative

Ms Jenny Zhang, Master of Business Administration Association 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

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.

Western University is situated on the traditional lands of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinabek, Haudenosaunee, and Leni Lenapewak people. This territory also covers lands connected to the London Township Treaty and Sombra Treaty 1796, and the Dish with One Spoon Wampum.