



OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

Report to the University Community

April 1, 2010 – March 31, 2011

Submitted by:
Robert Clegg, Ombudsperson



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Table of Contents

MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON	1
THE YEAR IN REVIEW	2
Communication and Objectives	3
Event Participattion	4
Daily Operations	5
Confidentiality	5
Distribution of Cases	5
Graduate Student Issues	7
Complaints about Instructor Behavior	8
MEMBERSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS	9
A NEW YEAR UNFOLDS	10

MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

I report the activities of the ombudsperson in order to provide accountability to the University of Calgary and its student body, and to provide insight into the various student issues being served by the office.

I am happy to report that the first year of the office was an overall success with over 500 students requesting assistance. I made significant progress in my outreach initiatives while moving pragmatically and methodically towards my goal of advocating for the fair and equitable treatment of all students at the University of Calgary. I continued to learn about the culture and inner workings of the university, its various faculties and departments. I continue to meet with stakeholders, deans and faculty representatives in order to better understand how such a large and diverse organization operates and what issues are front and center.

During the year, I met with over 500 undergraduate and graduate students to discuss their individual issues. While a majority of students access the office for advice with respect to ongoing issues, others had more delicate issues regarding their instructors or graduate supervisors. Others simply needed someone to direct them to the appropriate office on campus to address their concerns.

The office does not advocate on behalf of students but actively advocates for the fair treatment of all students enrolled at the University of Calgary, since the university has such a large and diverse student body.

I am thankful to all students, the University of Calgary, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) and the Students' Union (SU) for their full and continuing support of the Office of the Ombudsperson. The office maintains an excellent relationship with each stakeholder and strives to continue building on these relationships in the future.

The Office of the Ombudsperson is staffed solely by myself, and serves a total university population of over 30,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. The office also serves students enrolled in distant learning programs, Red Deer College and the downtown Calgary campus.



Respectfully,

Robert Clegg

Ombudsperson



THE YEAR IN REVIEW

This report covers undergraduate and graduate student activities for the period beginning April 1, 2010 and ending March 31, 2011. The period covers the mandate of Robert Clegg who served in the position of student rights advisor (SRA) and Graduate Student Association ombudsperson immediately prior to March 1, 2010 when he became the first ombudsperson for the University of Calgary.

The University of Calgary joined with the GSA and the SU in 2008 to support the development of a jointly funded ombudsperson office. On March 1, 2010 the Office of the Ombudsperson became a reality. Robert Clegg was hired as the first ombudsperson through a competitive and open process and continues to serve in this important role.

Having the university, the GSA, and the SU playing an equal part in the creation and continuing evolution of the office not only strengthens the office, but demonstrates the university community's commitment to its undergraduate and graduate students.

The ombudsperson is a non-faculty position and is available to both undergraduate and graduate students who seek advice with respect to a number of academic and

non-academic issues. The position does not in any way advocate on behalf of students but does advocate for the overall ideal of procedural fairness.

The Office of the Ombudsperson fulfills two main duties. The first duty is to provide assistance to all students facing academic or non-academic proceedings by providing assistance to students in the form of guidance and advice. Many people (students included) believe that the role of an ombudsperson is that of an advocate. This is not entirely accurate. The University of Calgary ombudsperson is an advocate for fairness and equity rather than for any individual with a particular dispute or grievance with the university.

The second duty involves making recommendations, where appropriate, for changes to university policies and procedures, while also promoting discussion and focus on institution-wide concerns.

With respect to issues concerning academic and non-academic matters, the student is interviewed in order to fully understand the matter at hand. Recommendations for a course of action are presented to the student and ultimately the student decides what action to take in close consultation with Robert.

Additionally, the office acts as an informal mediator with respect to conflicts between students and their instructors. A large majority of students leave the office with a good idea of how best to address issues involving conflicts with their instructors.

Upon communicating their respective issues to Robert, the student is advised as to the strengths and weaknesses of their individual matters. Robert reviews the nature of the issue with the student and promptly advises the student as to their rights, as governed by university regulations, and provides them with an appropriate course of action to follow, if any. Whether the students follow the recommended course of action is within the students' discretion.

The office receives numerous testimonials from students expressing their thanks for assistance in their matters.

Communication and Outreach Initiatives

Students learn about the office through a number of mediums. Efforts to increase awareness of the office include posters, billboards, emails, and word of mouth. A website containing current information about the office was launched in December 2010 and is currently hosted and maintained by the Office of the Provost. This exciting new website is expected to increase the visibility and outreach of the office. Additionally, the office holds information sessions on campus and meets with faculty and department heads to keep up-to-date on any changes to faculty rules and processes.

Robert has spoken and presented at various orientations, meetings and lunch and learns in an effort to provide the University of Calgary campus with information regarding the Office of the Ombudsperson.

Event participation

- On-air appearances - the 'Billable Hour' radio show on CJSW, the university's independent radio station, Fall 2010/Winter 2011
- Orientation - graduate students, Fall 2010
- Orientation - English for academic purposes, Fall 2010/Winter 2011
- Presentation – Counselling and Wellness Center staff, Winter 2011
- Presentation - University of Calgary Graduate Conference, May 2010
- Conference co-host - 2011 mid-year meeting, Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons. (ACCUO)

Daily Operations

The office operates on a walk-in basis. However, students can schedule an appointment to discuss their respective matters. Students located outside of Calgary commonly seek advice by telephone or email. Advising students about their various options remains the most common request. Often times, students want an open ear to listen to their issues. Many times, students have questions about the complex system of university and faculty regulations. Other times, students have issues that can be handled best by referring them to the appropriate on-campus resource.

The amount of time devoted on each case varies widely, and is dependent on the type of issue. In many cases, issues were able to be resolved quickly and efficiently. In other cases, issues required multiple appointments and follow up with the appropriate department or faculty. Graduate student issues take a much greater amount of time than undergraduate issues, and often include multiple consultations by phone or in person.

Examples of other services provided by the Office of the Ombudsperson include:

- Disability issues
- Collections efforts
- Graduate student leaves of absence
- Privacy issues
- Transfer of credit from other institutions
- Loss of scholarships
- Parking permit violations
- Housing
- Student Visa issues
- Student loans



Confidentiality

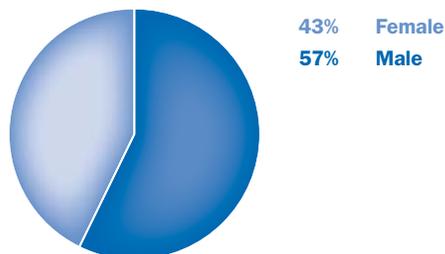
Robert is committed to strict confidentiality and the office is a safe place for students to voice their concerns. This focus on confidentiality is what makes students comfortable enough to openly discuss their issues, and is the cornerstone of the Office of the Ombudsperson.

Distribution of Cases

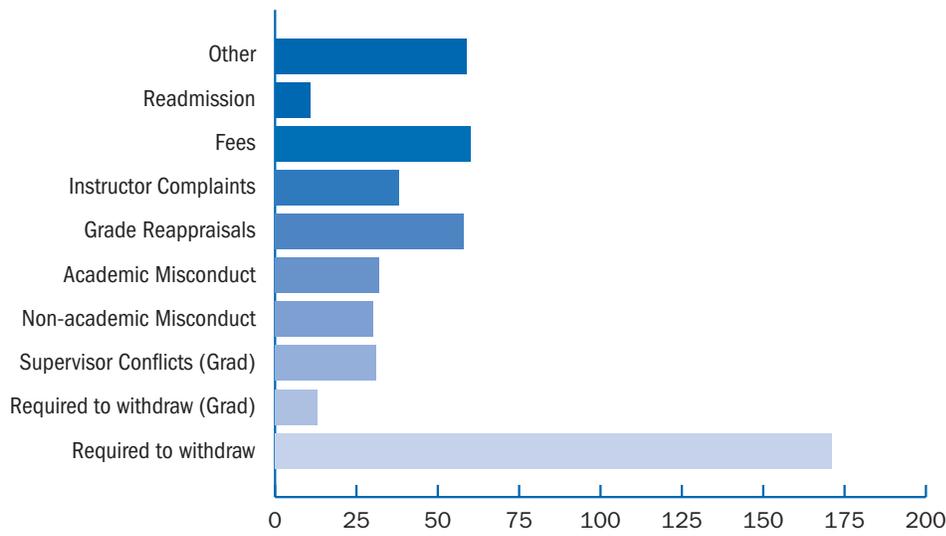
The following tables represent the distribution of students requesting service by the Office of the Ombudsperson based on gender, type of grievance and faculty.

Distribution by Gender

Male students represented 57 percent of total cases, or 288 out of a total of 503. Female students made up the remaining 43 percent, or 215 cases.

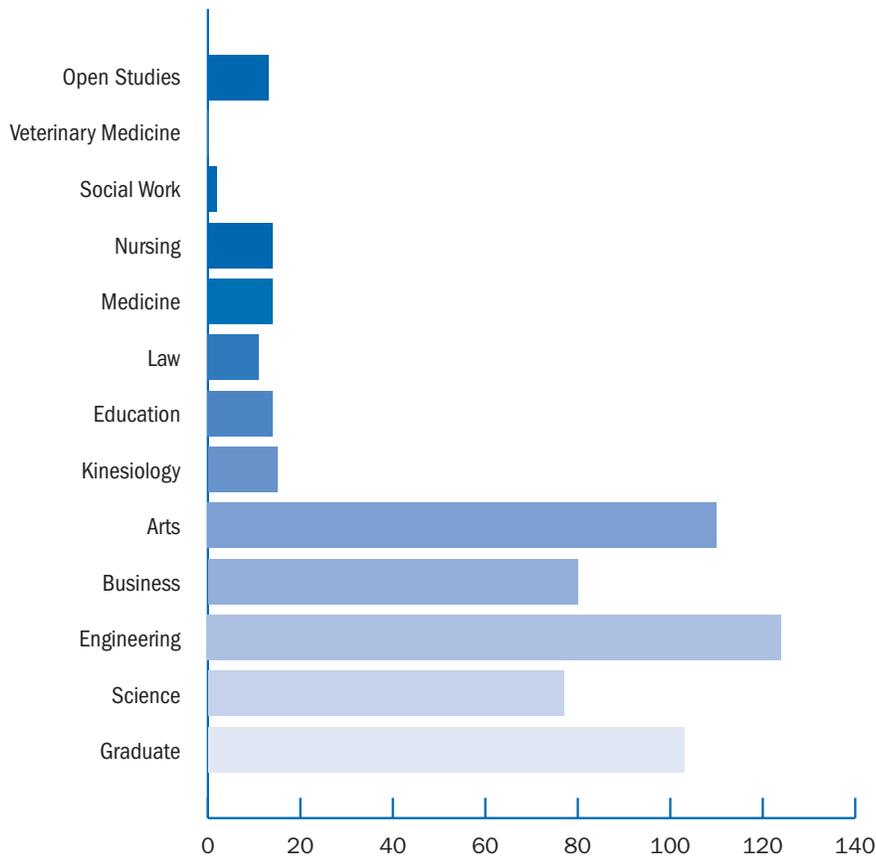


*Distribution by Type of Grievance**



* Over the course of the year, many students sought the assistance of the office with issues that do not squarely fit within one of the issues listed above. Often times, students would come to the office to vent or to talk about challenging issues confronting them.

Distribution by Faculty





Graduate Student Issues

Graduate student cases comprised 20 percent of the overall case load managed by the office. A large percentage of graduate students sought consultation with respect to issues they experienced with their supervisors. When things do go wrong with this relationship, graduate students often require consultation on how best to deal with their concerns.

The most common issues included how to change supervisors, supervisor behavior, and consultations regarding how to deal with tense or awkward situations with their respective supervisors. Issues involving supervisor conflicts are the most involved cases the office handles. Often, graduate students with these types of concerns meet with the office an average of three times. Others follow up by email or by telephone. Robert serves an important role as advisor and helps guide the graduate student through this tumultuous time in their lives.

On average, graduate student issues take approximately two to three hours to conclude. Time is spent on multiple consultations with each student in an attempt to fully understand the issue in order to reach a satisfactory resolution. The office provides guidance and assistance in the drafting of appeals, and fully informs the student with respect to their procedural and substantive rights. The office continues to have a good working relationship with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and values their assistance in resolving difficult and complex issues. The office rarely intervenes directly on behalf of the students but rather encourages the notion of self-help and advocacy.



Complaints about Instructor Behaviour

Perhaps the most difficult issues faced by the office concern student complaints about instructor behavior. These issues tend to be emotionally charged and divisive and are generally unrelated to overall student performance. Typically, the most prevalent complaints stem from perceptions that instructors are disrespectful, unfair in their decision making and generally unavailable.

The office regularly discusses these issues and recommends techniques and best practices in how to address them most effectively. Communication is key; often communication between the parties has broken down or has never materialized. Students describe situations in which the instructor is disinterested, rude, disrespectful and otherwise uninterested in the students' well being.

Students often complain about how their professors fail to respond to their email or voice mail messages.

Both undergraduate and graduate students often feel disadvantaged and vulnerable and fail to communicate and voice their concerns to their professors out of fear of retribution. The issue is often resolved by opening up the channels of communication between the parties.

When it appears the relationship between student and instructor is problematic, the recommendation is for the student to discuss the issue with the department chair. Often,

the student feels that any discussion with the chair would be pointless and refuses to have an outside third party intervene directly as this may compromise their standing in the program.

MEMBERSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Robert is a member of the ACCUO. The association provides access to a network of other ombudspersons located throughout Canada. The association is also an excellent platform designed for Canadian ombudspersons to field questions and comments regarding dispute resolution and best practices. The association provides ongoing training, networking and research materials for its members.

In February 2011, the Office of the Ombudsperson co-hosted the first mid-year conference of the ACCUO with Mount Royal University. Ombudspersons from the University of Alberta, Camosun College, and the University of British Columbia attended the conference hosted at the Hotel Alma.

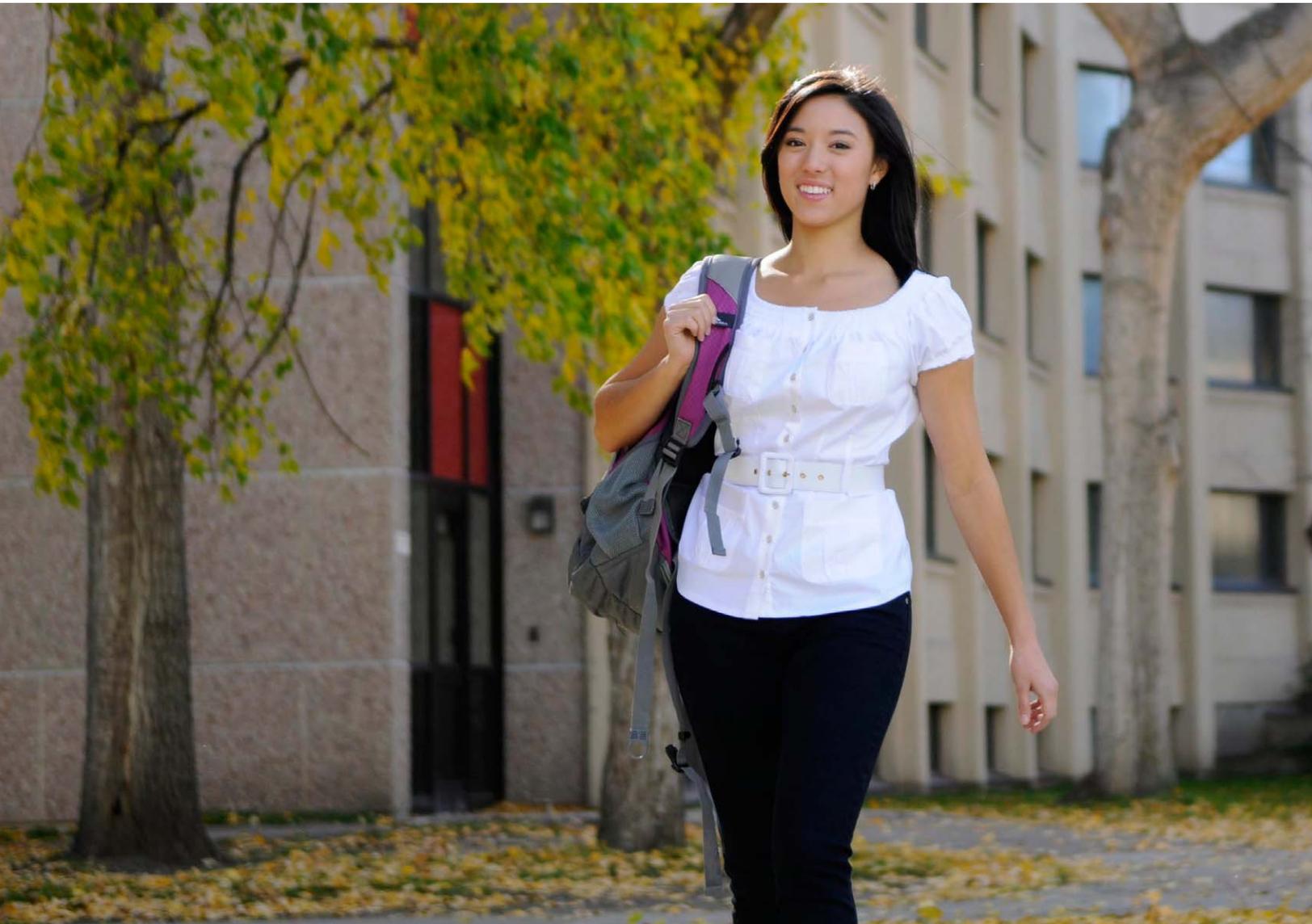
Robert has begun networking with ombudspersons from Canada and the United States and currently is on the list serve for the Northwest Ombuds Group. This group is a regional group of ombudsperson offices located in Canada and the United States designed to discuss and explore best practices and other issues relevant to the practice.



A NEW YEAR UNFOLDS

The office expanded the total number of undergraduate and graduate students assisted by 29 percent on a year-to-year basis. This was accomplished by word of mouth, advertising, publications, student orientations, lunch and learns and other student sponsored events. This year, the office intends to publish new information brochures, student surveys, a Students' Bill of Rights and articles in the Gauntlet, the university's student publication.

Looking forward, the office will strive to build on its success from the previous year and to continue building awareness among the student body. The continued support of the university, the GSA and the SU is greatly appreciated for without their support, the Office of the Ombudsperson would not exist.





OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

ADMINISTRATION BUILDING RM. A166
2500 UNIVERSITY DRIVE NW
CALGARY, AB T2N 1N4
ombuds@ucalgary.ca