

Listening and Learning:



OMBUDSPERSON'S ANNUAL REPORT (JULY 1, 2003 – JUNE 30, 2004)

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INTRODUCTION

I am required to report annually to the Ryerson community on the activities of my office and to provide recommendations, as appropriate. This is a much-welcomed obligation as I place great value on the opportunity to have a regularly scheduled exchange of thoughts and ideas about what 'fairness' and 'civility' should look like in the Ryerson community. In this report I also have the privilege of providing the community with a summary of the results of the evaluation of services provided by the Ombudsperson Office that was completed early in 2004.

As the evaluation of the services demonstrated that not all community members are well informed on the role of the Ombudsperson, in this year's report I will place greater emphasis on providing in-depth information about the role as well.

THE ROLE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON - NEITHER AN APOLOGIST FOR THE UNIVERSITY NOR AN ADVOCATE FOR INDIVIDUALS¹

My experience has been that individuals who have had contact with one or two Ombudspersons often come to the reasonable conclusion that all Ombudspersons will operate in a similar fashion given the unique nature of the role. However, since there are significant differences in practice, depending on the type of Ombudsperson and the circumstances in which she or he works, I will provide a comprehensive definition for the role of an academic Ombudsperson in a Canadian university setting.

While the role of Ombudsperson may be new to some universities or corporations or governments, it originated in the mid-1700's in Sweden when the first Ombudsman was appointed by the King of Sweden as his personal advisor. Subsequently, in the early 1800's, the Swedish government introduced the concept of an independent, parliamentary Ombudsman who received citizens' complaints and reported to

Parliament as a whole rather than to the King. This model is the precursor of the current classical or legislative Ombudsman, e.g. the Ombudsman for Ontario, British Columbia or Peru.

While it is often stated in ombuds² brochures and on websites that the Swedish term is gender neutral, many non-governmental organizations now use the term Ombudsperson or Ombuds in order to be respectful of contemporary thinking that a position title should not favour one gender over another. In my review of the ombuds literature, I have found the original title 'justitieombudsman' to be translated as 'a commissioner appointed by a legislature, who hears and investigates complaints by private citizens against government officials or agencies'. Russell (1996)³ also cites a translation of 'message carrier' or 'go-between' between the people and the government.

In the Canadian tradition, an academic Ombudsperson occupies a 'quasi-classical' ombuds role. This means that while I have the power to investigate and have unfettered access to all organizational records and information relevant to a complaint; the ability to make recommendations and publish annual or occasional reports; and the authority to initiate an investigation on my own motion, I do the vast majority of my work informally through various forms of 'appropriate dispute resolution'⁴, e.g. shuttle diplomacy, facilitation, active listening, problem identification, generation and evaluation of options, coaching, mediation and simply providing information. I also undertake preventative ombuds work by consulting with individuals and committees that are developing policies to ensure that the procedures contained within them are consistent with standard administrative fairness principles. In addition, I look for opportunities for including alternative dispute resolution options where appropriate. I also organize and present workshops and seminars on conflict and dispute resolution, what 'fairness' looks like when decisions are being made, the basic principles of natural justice, etc.

It is a continuing challenge to address the notion that many community members have that an Ombudsperson is in essence an advocate for individuals. It is also very difficult to manage the expectations of individuals who lodge complaints on the basis that the Ombudsperson will serve as their representative or act on their behalf. In reviewing the results of the recent evaluation of the service provided by the Office of the Ombudsperson, it is striking to see that students who provided negative ratings regarding their experience also had a lower understanding of the role of the Ombudsperson and a higher expectation that the Ombudsperson would act on their behalf.

In summary, an academic Ombudsperson is an advocate for fairness and equity rather than for individuals' specific complaints; a specialist in conflict resolution processes who generally approaches the resolution of conflict informally and from the perspective of both an ethic of care and an ethic of rights; and uses a variety of means to assist with the resolution of conflict. I am very fortunate to be able to occupy a role that allows me to assist individuals on all sides of various disputes to

¹ This phraseology was originally used by the Ombudsman for Ontario in 2002.

² I will use the word 'ombuds' as an adjective, rather than the more traditional term of ombudsmanship for ease of reading.

³ Rick Russell is a former Ombudsman for McMaster University and is now a principal of the ADR firm - Agree Incorporated. The article referenced is titled: The Ombuds Model, *Alternative Dispute Resolution Practice Manual*, CCH Canadian Limited, 1996

⁴ This is a term coined by C. Menkel-Meadow in her article entitled Ethics and Professionalism in Non-Adversarial Lawyering, *Florida State University Law Review*, Vol. 27:153, 1999

resolve conflict fairly and in a timely fashion. In addition, it is a role that, contrary to some community members' perceptions, provides many opportunities for positive interaction. For example, it is not uncommon for parties on all sides to engage in discussion about what could have been done differently so that a conflict did not escalate. In addition, complainants frequently express appreciation for the opportunity this service

affords individuals to speak with someone who listens actively and responds in an impartial and constructive fashion to the issues they find troubling or confusing. Staff and faculty who contact the office for advice or discussion about 'fairness' and ideas for approaching the resolution of conflict in alternative ways, also indicate that they appreciate the opportunity to talk about troubling matters with an impartial person.

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

For this service year, the Office handled 480 concerns and complaints. This represents a decline in numbers in comparison to 2002/2003 of approximately 6%. To assist readers to gain a better understanding of the type of actions taken to deal with concerns and resolve complaints, the following details are provided:

Provided advice and referral	262	(54%)
Provided information	114	(24%)
Intervened to obtain clarification	49	(10%)
Intervened via shuttle diplomacy ⁵	40	(8%)
Investigated complaint	12	(3%)
Conducted a mediation	3	(<1%)
Total	480	(100%)

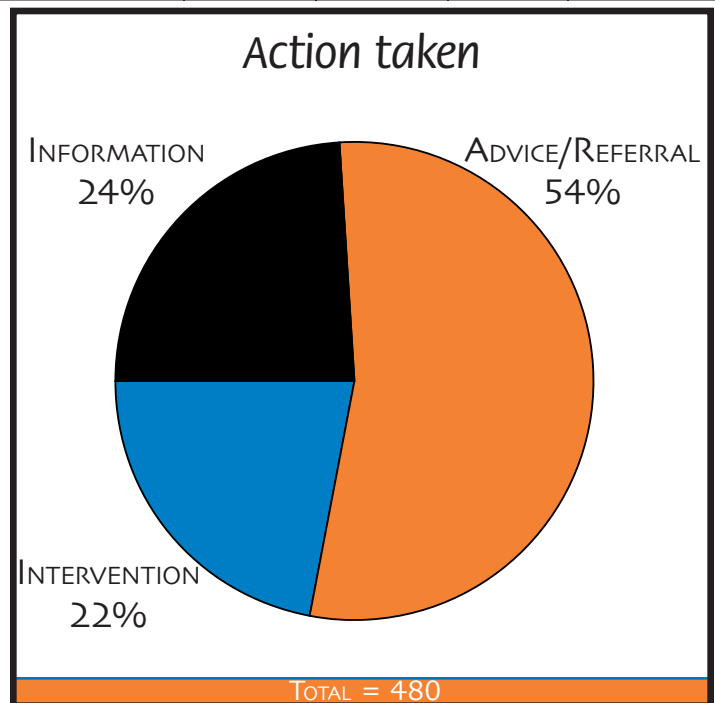
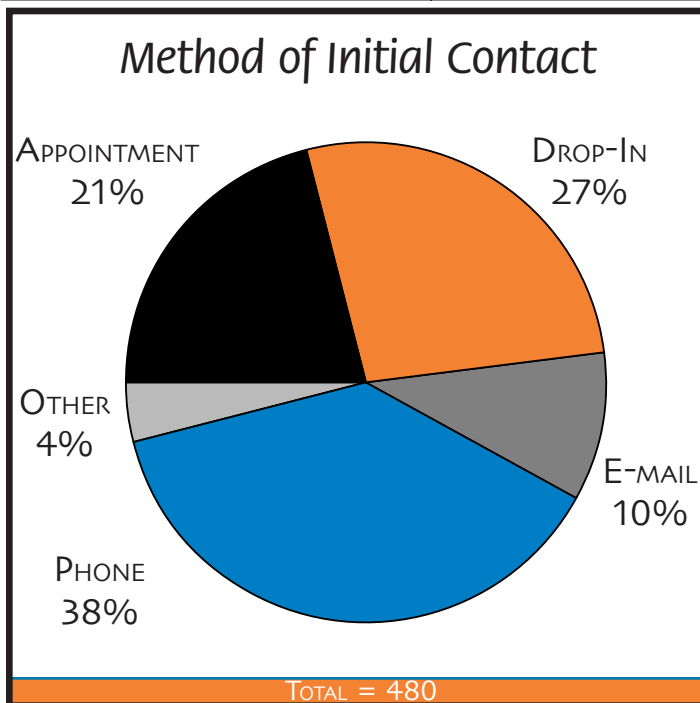
Comparative Figures by Type of Concern Received

Types of Concerns	03/04 480	02/03 513	01/02 364	00/01 303	99/00 363	98/99 327	97/98 302
Academic Advice⁶	61	60	34				
Academic Appeals - includes Academic Standing	152	136	76	88	96	77	70
Academic Misconduct	23	19	15	9			
Accessibility	6	6	5	0	7	9	13
Advanced Standing	<i>Category included with Admissions</i>			0	2	6	3
Advancement & Development	0	1	1	--	--	--	--
Admissions	31	27	18	24	27	16	17
Ancillary Services	2	8	3	--	--	--	--
Campus Planning & Facilities	2	1	2	--	--	--	--
Challenge Credits	<i>Category included with Curriculum Advising</i>			0	4	3	6
Conduct – Instructor	57	59	44	44	--	--	--
Conduct – Staff	16	16	27	18	--	--	--
Conduct – Student	4	8	3	7	30	31	25
Confidentiality	2	2	2	--	--	--	--
Course Requirements	<i>Category included with Academic Advice</i>			0	15	0	12
Curriculum Advising	9	15	10	13	--	--	--
Exchange Programs	0	1					
Fees	18	17	21	13	32	38	35
Financial Assistance	8	11	15	12	24	21	15
Information Requests - no complaint	17	29	22	5	--	--	--
Late Withdrawals	<i>Category included with Registration & Records</i>			0	3	4	0
Library	3	2	1	0	13	10	8

⁵ Shuttle diplomacy is very similar to mediation except that the parties involved are not communicating 'face-to-face'.

⁶ This category includes concerns regarding not being able to easily access academic advice from a knowledgeable person.

Types of Concerns	03/04 480	02/03 513	01/02 364	00/01 303	99/00 363	98/99 327	97/98 302
Non-Academic Complaints	Category Omitted				30	23	27
Outside Jurisdiction	7	14	6	7	--	--	--
Pre-requisites	Category included with Academic Advice			0	2	3	0
Practicum/Placement	5	7	5	5	--	--	--
Registration & Records	25	29	22	17	--	--	--
Reinstatement/Re-admission	16	26	15	20	26	34	30
Residence	3	1	0	4	18	24	18
Safety & Security	4	3	6	8	--	--	--
Sports & Recreation	0	2	0	0	7	0	0
Student Media	0	1	3	--	--	--	--
Student Services	2	3	2	--	--	--	--
Student Unions/ Associations	3	5	5	4	--	--	--
Team work	4	4	1	0	20	15	12
Transfer Credits	Category included with Admissions			5	7	13	11



Action Taken	03/04	02/03	01/02	00/01	99/00	98/99	97/98
Information	114	159	85	110	15	18	21
Advice	262	228	138	83	227	213	199
Intervention	104	126	141	110	121	96	82
Total	480	513	364	303	363	327	302

- Information – Providing information on policies and procedures
- Advice – Providing information and discussing possible options with students
- Intervention – Taking action, with the students' permission, to assist in some way to resolve the concern, e.g. clarifying information, facilitating, mediating, conducting investigations

Constituency	03/04	02/03	01/02	00/01	99/00	98/99	97/98
Full-time degree	334	358	241	226	264	241	210
Part-time degree	<i>Category included with Continuing Education</i>				17	18	14
Applicant	29	21	21	17	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
Graduate students	4	3	3	4	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Continuing Education	79	84	58	38	52	44	49
Special Students	<i>Category included with Miscellaneous</i>				4	5	2
Alumni	7	7	11	3	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
Miscellaneous	27	40	30	15	26	19	27
Total	480	513	364	303	363	327	302

Special Students: (97 - 00) Students on letter of permission

Miscellaneous: (97 - 00) Alumni and Admissions

Miscellaneous: (00 - 04) University personnel, parents of students, members of the general public, special students, unidentified

RECOMMENDATION

It is readily apparent from the statistics shown that concerns about academic appeals for grades and standing remain the most common type of student concern. This is not unusual in an academic environment. However, what has attracted my attention this year is that the percentage of the caseload that this category occupied increased by 12% while the overall caseload declined by 6%. In addition, this year this category represents 32% of the overall caseload. In the past the norm has been for this type of complaint to represent approximately 25% of the caseload. In addition, we saw an increase in complaints about similar types of procedural matters within the area of academic appeals that have been addressed in recommendations made in previous years. The types of concerns raised include:

- Responses to appeals not being released by the Department and Dean's levels within 10 working days.

For instance, I have seen responses which have been delayed as long as a month. In addition, prior to the late responses being provided, there has been no communication from the respondent indicating that a delay was anticipated. In my experience when timelines are not met without an explanation, the recipient's view of the fairness of the appeal process, regardless of the outcome or level of scrutiny applied, is tainted. However, it is worthy of note, that I have also observed that there are some areas of the University where, in my experience, deadlines are routinely met or if not, the decision-maker or his or her designate contacts the appellant prior to the deadline, to indicate a delay is anticipated for a particular reason and an extension is requested.

- Responding incorrectly to requests for review of assignments based on an appellant's assertion that the quality of the work is not reflected in the mark assigned.

This review can be requested and conducted during the term or for final assignments or exams, at the end of the term and is no longer identified as a specific ground for a grade appeal. Over the past twelve months, I became aware of a number of situations where erroneous information about how 'grade

reassessment' reviews are to be conducted had been provided both in verbal and written forms. Information which has been cited as being taken directly from the Undergraduate Academic Consideration and Appeals (UAC&A) Policy has been, on a number of occasions, misquoted. It is heartening to note that in the vast majority of instances where examples of incorrect advice being given either verbally or in written form, have been brought to my attention, when I have raised the errors with the individuals handling these types of requests, significant effort has been made to correct the misunderstandings as quickly as possible.

- In a number of instances I have observed what appears to me to be an increasing trend toward an adversarial approach to appeals in some settings. For example, I am aware of situations where efforts have been made by the student to meet with the instructor and then with the Chair, informally, as the UAC&A policy prescribes, prior to launching an appeal. In a number of instances, individuals have been told that no conversation will be had on the matter of concern. At that point, the only option available is to invoke the formal appeal process. In a similar vein, the UAC&A policy is explicit in that students may review their final exams in a controlled environment. In a number of instances students have been advised that the instructor will not allow them to see the final exam. The student must then approach the Chair or Director in order to make arrangements to review the exam in order to determine whether a request for a grade re-assessment is justified.

Conversely, I am also aware of a number of key decision-makers who have taken the opposite 'tack'. Those individuals who appear to me to be attempting to reduce the degree of adversity and decrease the potential for a 'win/lose' outcome, have introduced procedures whereby the decision-maker and the appellant meet in person to discuss the appeal, prior to a decision being made. Or, alternatively, a designate of the decision-maker, speaks with the appellant, gathers information and provides a detailed letter or report recommending a particular outcome based on the review

undertaken. The decision-maker then provides his or her opinion on the matter. I would like to compliment decision-makers who have initiated these procedures as they demonstrate both transparency as to what is being taken into account when the decision is made and as well as a desire to gain as much relevant information as is possible about the circumstances prior to a decision being made.

While the number of concerns regarding 'academic misconduct' have not increased at a similar rate as academic appeals, I remain concerned about the types of complaints I have received in this area. For example, in some instances when a hearing has been conducted at the Faculty level, basic elements of procedural fairness have been absent. Once again when problems of this nature have been brought to the attention of the individuals involved, the process has been corrected. As a formal hearing at the Faculty level is a new process for many members of the community, it is not unexpected that there would be some initial missteps. Since the quality of the hearing has a great impact on whether or not the parties involved believe they were treated fairly, and since a hearing consumes such a large amount of time and effort, it is important that hearing procedures be followed 'to the letter' in every instance.

In addition, at the first point of contact when it is expected that a discussion will be had between the instructor and the student concerning a suspicion of 'academic misconduct', I have been advised of situations where upon entering the meeting scheduled for this purpose, students have been asked to sign an already completed 'Summary of Discussion' Form. Clearly this kind of approach violates the spirit of the Student Code of Academic Conduct. As I understand it, the first level discussion was designed to be a dialogue between the instructor who suspects misconduct and the student(s) involved, in order that both parties be able to exchange their perceptions of what occurred before a decision is made on whether or not a charge will be laid. In other instances students have advised that they have not been able to provide their view of the situation in that the meeting was conducted as a monologue. As I was not present at these meetings, I cannot confirm whether or not what I've been told is true. I have observed, though, that these types of complaints have been raised by a variety of individuals who have no prior connection with one another about meetings held in a number of different Faculties. While I can understand how trying and unpleasant it is for dedicated and committed instructors and scholars to be placed in a position where they have to raise a suspicion of plagiarism or cheating with students, the

opportunity for a full discussion should always be provided prior to a decision being made on how to proceed.

Recommendation 1:

In an effort to reduce the incidence of procedural errors and increase the level of pro-activity regarding the handling of academic appeals and charges of academic misconduct, I am recommending that in conjunction with the upcoming 2005/2006 review of the Undergraduate Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy and the Student Code of Conduct that consideration be given to exploring various alternatives for providing ongoing support and advice to individual decision-makers and hearing panels with respect to the handling of appeals and suspicions of academic misconduct and non-academic misconduct.

I recognize that the Secretary of Academic Council has conducted a series of in-depth workshops on the proper implementation of the academic appeals and (mis)conduct policies, and responds to a high volume of individual queries on an ongoing basis, and that various departments and Faculties have also organized training and provide consultation to instructors and decision-makers. In addition, the Academic Council website holds a wealth of information relating to the proper implementation of the aforementioned policies. However, given the growth of the University, it may now be appropriate to consider adding support in the form of a dedicated resource person who would be solely responsible for providing individual consultation to decision-makers and Chairs of Faculty hearings as well as providing specialized advice on unusual situations to all community members. In addition, this resource person could conduct workshops for instructors, specific administrative staff, Chairs/Directors and Deans, on an ongoing basis. For example, the University of Toronto has established a position of a Student Judicial Affairs Officer whose sole responsibility is to coordinate the work of the University's tribunals for academic appeals and for academic misconduct hearings and to provide training and support to adjudicators, hearing panels, etc. In a similar vein, McMaster University has established the Office of Academic Integrity which has a singular mandate of striving to assist instructors and students with issues of academic misconduct. The Officer provides training for instructors and students on how to create a climate that encourages academic integrity as well as how to avoid academic dishonesty. In addition, the Office of Academic Integrity provides instruction and advice on how to conduct hearings and how to participate in them.

PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

The Ombudsperson has participated in the following events: All U201 Sessions (workshops for students in academic jeopardy): January and May 2004

All CESAR Student Orientation sessions: September 2003 and January 2004

Student Services First year student orientation (August 2003)

Student Services Leadership Development Program (Fall and Winter workshops on Resolving Conflict Effectively)

CESAR Saturday Services Workshops (Fall and Winter workshops on Resolving Conflict Effectively)

CONTRIBUTING TO FAIRNESS

The Ombudsperson has consulted to a number of different individuals and committees who are developing new policies or refining existing policies. Some examples include A Guide to Civility which was approved by the Board of Governors, April 2004 and The Academic Council Appeals Committee Rules for Dismissing Appeals.

In addition the Ombudsperson provided support for the organization of the Ryerson University 2004 Equity Conference and the Fall 2003 Training Session for Academic Decision Makers.

RESPONSE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT, ADMINISTRATION AND STUDENT AFFAIRS AND THE PROVOST AND VICE PRESIDENT ACADEMIC

to the Ombudsperson's Annual Report July 1, 2003 - June 30, 2004

Once again, we would like to thank the Ombudsperson, Nora Farrell, for her report and for the work that she and her office do to help insure that the principles of fairness are applied at Ryerson.

This year the Ombudsperson's Report again focuses on academic appeals of grades and standings. The report notes that while there has been an overall decrease of 6% in the office's caseload, there has been a 12% increase in the academic appeals category. It should be noted that in Fall 2003 there were over 26,000 FTE undergraduate and CE students at Ryerson, which is 2,000 more than the previous year. The total number of academic appeals cases reviewed by the Ombudsperson's office was 152, up from 136 the previous year. This represents less than 0.6% of the undergraduate student population. An increase of 16 individuals out of 26,000 (0.06%), especially considering the growth in student population, is not statistically significant. In fact, the number of academic appeals to Academic Council has decreased over the last year. That being said, the concerns raised by the report should be addressed.

The current Undergraduate Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy was instituted in Fall 2003. The year covered by this report is, therefore, the first year of this new policy. There is always a learning curve associated with the implementation of new policies, especially when changes are significant. A training session for all academic decision makers was held early on in the year, and smaller sessions have been held since that time. As per the policy, the annual training session for all new academic decision makers was held on October 25, 2004, and all academic decision makers were invited to attend, even if they had attended a session previously. Policy requirements, including the need to respond in a timely way, to clearly outline the reasons for a decision, and to be as fair and comprehensive in the decision making process as possible, are routinely communicated. But it is recognized

that people often do not assimilate information until they need to know it. The report notes that the communication by some departments and Faculties with students has improved and many have done an exceptional job. We believe that this trend will continue as the policy matures and becomes more ingrained in the Ryerson culture.

The concern about students being given erroneous information, we believe, will also be addressed over time as the "consideration" aspect of the policy becomes ingrained. The process of reassessing grades, meeting with students to discuss situations when they arise, and allowing students to view their final exams needs to be communicated very clearly to the faculty and we shall ensure that this is done. The Secretary of Academic Council has already begun meeting with all faculty at Department/School meetings to discuss these issues and others related to policy implementation.

As has been pointed out, the processes associated with Academic Code of Conduct appeal hearings at the Faculty Appeals Committee level have been of some concern. While there have been relatively few of these hearings, panel members and Chairs were new to the process and some initial procedural mistakes were made. The Secretary of Academic Council was consulted in several instances, procedural errors were corrected, and mechanisms put in place to avoid them in the future. Again, as these committees become more experienced, these problems should no longer arise. This also applies to the incidents where students were asked to sign an already completed "Record of Discussion" form at an interview on a suspicion of misconduct and to cases where students are not given the opportunity to speak at these interviews. Although faculty are increasingly aware of the nature and requirements of the form and the procedure which is to be followed, Deans will also be asked to ensure that all faculty are informed of the process by which students are charged with

academic misconduct.

It has been recommended that there be a "dedicated resource person who would be solely responsible for providing individual consultation to decision-makers and Chairs of Faculty hearings as well as providing specialized advice on unusual situations to all community members", and that this person could also conduct workshops on an ongoing basis. It is our belief that the current process is headed in a positive direction, and that the efforts of the Secretary of Academic Council in this area have been exceptional. She has provided just the sort of support mentioned, and has worked to ensure that the policies are consistently interpreted across the university. As she was an integral part of the development of the new policies, she is able to understand their intention. Through her involvement with their interpretation, she is able to track the areas which need revision or clarification. It has been widely commented that she has provided excellent support for decision makers, and that the institution of the policies has had a very positive effect on the appeals process. She has also worked on many initiatives in the area of academic integrity. It is expected that as students seek consideration in a more timely way, and as increased awareness of academic integrity issues become the norm, the number of appeals will decrease even further. It is our determination that she should, for now, continue to provide advice and training on academic appeals and academic misconduct.

Once again we would like to thank Nora Farrell and Diane Dyson for their work and for the advice they give to members of the Ryerson community.

Sincerely,

Errol Aspevig
Provost and Vice President Academic

Linda Grayson
Vice President,
Administration and Student Affairs

UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS REPORTS

2002/2003 recommendations

The text which appears below, in bold type face, has been excerpted from the 2002/2003 Ombudsperson Annual Report. The italicized text details the progress made on these recommendations to date and has been provided by the Office of the Provost and Vice-President, Academic.

Procedural errors when implementing the Academic

Appeals Policy

Recommendation 1:

A workshop be developed for departmental staff that addresses key policy matters related to appeals and registration requirements and provides departmental guidelines for managing work so that policies are abided by when high volume situations present themselves.

Two workshops were held: October, 2005 and June, 2004.

Timeliness of Responses

Recommendation 2:

That decision-makers and their support staff ensure that responses are provided, as the policy requires, by ten working days of they being received, or if circumstances are such that the deadline can not be met, that the student be contacted and if the student agrees, arrangements be made for an extension of the deadline.

Decision makers have been advised that they must explain why the delay has occurred and request an extension of the deadline. As extensive delays in responding to appeal documents continues to occur it may be worthwhile to consider additional or alternative approaches in the coming year.

Recommendation 3:

That when the Academic Appeals Policy is revised at its next regular interval, that consideration be given on how to ensure deadlines are met by both appellants and respondents.

This matter will be considered in 2005/2006 during the upcoming, regular review.

No Reasons Provided for the Decision

Recommendation 4:

Decision makers be oriented to the importance of demonstrating that fair process has been followed by providing reasons for their decisions and that a workshop be made available on how to present and write concise and informative decisions.

All new decision makers will be attending a training session in October of 2004 which will include information on how to draft useful decisions. A handout will be distributed as well.

Proper Handling of Charges of Academic Misconduct

Recommendation 5:

In addition to the centralized training that is being offered on 'appeals training' by the University in September 2003, a separate session on how to handle discussion of suspicions and subsequent charges of

academic misconduct should be offered. As well, each department or school should make provision in its on-going education program to orient all members of the department or school on the process that must be followed when Academic Misconduct is suspected. This would include not only the technical aspects of the process but the best manner in which to structure a dialogue that results in all parties believing that they have been accorded fair process.

A handout on this topic is being developed for review by decision-makers prior to conducting the discussion regarding their suspicions of academic misconduct.

Team Work or Group Work

Recommendation 6:

That the University:

- develop guidelines for instructors' use in orienting students on how to work in teams or groups successfully
- develop guidelines for instructors and students on how to deal effectively with negative group dynamics within team or group work settings;
- offer a workshop for instructors on how to intervene appropriately when called upon due to negative group dynamics
- departments and schools operate on the premise that complaints regarding inappropriate behaviour on the part of any group member will be addressed in a timely fashion by the instructor

The Course Management policy has been revised to make group work less problematic, e.g. marks for individual assessment are given greater weight than group work and the need for the instructor to provide mechanisms for students to deal with dysfunctional groups is emphasized. The Learning and Teaching Office has included workshops on how to facilitate effective group work in its 2004/2005 training agenda.

2000/2001 recommendation

Institutional Response to Conflict

Recommendation 2:

Given the technology that exists within the University, a user-friendly data base, which can be accessed via Ryerson users only, e.g. an Intranet site, should be developed that allows users to type in 'key words' and bring up all existing policy on the particular subject that concerns them regardless of whether it has been approved by the Board of Governors, Academic Council or administrative units.

I am aware that in May of 2004, the Vice-President, Administration and Student Affairs circulated an updated manual of administrative policies, procedures and guidelines. The same material was also placed on-line at www.ryerson.ca/vpasa. In addition, the Secretary of Academic Council has also provided improved on-line access to all policies passed by Academic Council. This material is supplemented by easy, on-line access to the Academic Appeals and Consideration Policy and the Student Code of Conduct and the appeal forms related to the use of these policies. Similarly, the Registration and Records web-site also contains all forms that are required for the launching of appeals. Both of the aforementioned websites also provide access to various other forms required for the initiation or completion of a wide variety of academic and administrative matters.

ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES OFFERED BY RYERSON UNIVERSITY'S OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON (OO) SPRING 2004

The Ombudsperson Committee established the following objectives prior to the implementation of the assessment of OO services to determine if:

1. the services provided by the Office are considered to be useful by users
2. the manner in which the service is provided to the users is considered to be respectful, confidential, impartial and timely
3. the manner in which the service is provided to those who respond to complaints, (e.g. faculty and staff) is considered to be respectful, confidential, impartial and timely

The assessment process was also used to solicit feedback and suggestions from all respondents related to the ongoing development of OO.

Feedback from the University community was solicited in two different ways. Firstly, users (e.g. students, applicants, alumni) were contacted by telephone and interviewed using a standard schedule of questions and secondly, faculty and staff received a 'paper and pencil' survey via internal mail. These responses were provided directly to an external data analyst.

Student Interview Feedback

The telephone numbers of 303 users of the Ombuds service were provided to a tele-researcher, who undertook to maintain all personal information received in confidence, in October of 2003. The 303 contacts were taken from the Ombuds files for the past twelve-month period for which there were valid phone numbers. The tele-researcher was able to arrange interviews with 164 students. The major reason for the tele-researcher not being able to connect with all 303 students was due to unusable telephone numbers. The respondents fell into the following categories: 64% undergraduate, 30% continuing education and part-time degree, 3% graduate students plus 2% applicants for admission and < 1% alumni.

From the data summarized by the external analyst, it is clear that the second objective of the assessment of services project can most definitely be answered in the affirmative in that 100% of the respondents indicated the service was delivered in a respectful manner; 92% indicated that the service was delivered in an impartial manner and 96% indicated that the service was delivered in a timely manner.

The most frequently occurring themes for future consideration and ongoing development were:

- The need for increased visibility and awareness of the existence, role and function of the Office of the Ombudsperson (OO) (35 comments out of 164 responses)
- The suggestion that there should be more of an advocacy type of approach taken by the OO on students' behalf, i.e., that the OO be more involved in policy change and more proactive in terms of interventions and overturning decisions (26 comments out of 164 responses).

Note: As an Ombuds should not advocate for individuals, the suggestions contained in these responses will not be accommodated into any future planning for the Ombuds service. Future orientation and education initiatives will emphasize the impartiality of the Ombuds and the importance placed on promoting adherence to the principles of natural justice in all decision-making processes.

- The suggestion that there be increased follow-up by the OO on the outcome of students' issues (7 comments out of 164 responses). Users of the service will be encouraged to re-connect with the Office as time goes on if they encounter future difficulties.

Faculty and Staff Survey Feedback

Paper surveys with business reply envelopes attached, were distributed by internal mail to 1178 individuals. 280 responses were sent directly to the external data analyst resulting in a response rate of 24%.

From the data summarized by the external analyst, it is clear that the third objective of the assessment of services project can most definitely be answered in the affirmative in that 91% of the respondents indicated the service was delivered in a respectful manner; 82% indicated that the service was delivered in an impartial manner and 88% indicated that the service was delivered in a timely manner.

The most frequently occurring themes for future consideration and ongoing development were:

- Ombudsperson services being extended to faculty and staff members (23 individuals' statements out of 74 written responses)
- The need for increased awareness of the existence, role and function of the Office of the Ombudsperson (22 individuals' statements out of 74 written responses)

The data analyst also observed that 47 staff and faculty respondents indicated that they found it useful to discuss concerns with the Ombudsperson in order to generate options for responding to difficult situations. The Ombudsperson will continue to offer that service to staff and faculty, when appropriate.

IN APPRECIATION

The Ombudsperson Committee which is composed of representatives from a wide variety of stakeholders has been an invaluable resource over the past year. Committee members deserve special recognition for the additional responsibility involved in overseeing the implementation of a comprehensive evaluation of services. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to Diane Dyson, the Assistant Ombudsperson for her efforts. Finally, I would like to express my admiration for those individuals who brought their concerns and complaints forward in a respectful manner, and for the staff and faculty who responded to them in a fair and creative fashion.

Respectfully submitted: Nora Farrell