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LISTENING & LEARNING

20th Anniversary

Annual Report for July 1, 2016
to June 30, 2017 for the Ombudsperson
at Ryerson University

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Note: The citation style used throughout this report follows the McGill Law Journal tradition.

Introduction

This annual report is a measure of accountability for the Office of the Ombudsperson and provides recommendations for system-wide improvements that flow from the discussion of complaints, concerns and the Ombudsperson's research and observations. In this report we also provide updates on the progress made on previous recommendations and present statistics on the type of concerns and complaints received, the constituencies bringing forward concerns, and how complaints are handled on a general basis.



Essential Characteristics of the Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information provided to the Office of the Ombudsperson is kept confidential, unless the Office has explicit permission for names and/or identifying details to be released and the Office considers it to be appropriate to do so.

IMPARTIALITY:

The Office of the Ombudsperson considers all of the information it receives and collects with the highest degree of objectivity. We strive to ensure that everyone involved believes their perspectives have been understood and considered and that they have been treated **fairly**.

INDEPENDENCE:

The Office of the Ombudsperson and staff operate independently of the University, including all administrative and academic structures and student government.

Modus Operandi of the Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University

INDIVIDUAL CASE WORK

- discussion about concerns or complaints;
- review of relevant options and assist in the assessment of these options so that the student can decide in an informed manner the viable routes available for moving forward;
- assist with 'reality testing' of expectations for a resolution or a response;
- coach people on how to approach the resolution of a dispute in a kind, calm and respectful manner;
- if a student has tried to resolve a problem and not been successful and it appears there is a gap in information or a possible misunderstanding we may call to seek clarification;
- if an opportunity for a mutually satisfactory and fair outcome emerges we may engage in shuttle diplomacy or mediation;
- if it becomes evident there is no other means to resolve the situation and the student has identified concerns that relate to fair treatment, process or outcome, we may initiate a fairness review to investigate what has transpired and determine if the University has acted fairly.

SYSTEMIC AND SYSTEM-WIDE ANALYSIS

- review concerns and complaints to identify common trends;
- analyze individual complaints to see if they are indicative of a potential systemic or system-wide concern.

PREVENTATIVE ORIENTATION

Online presence

- provide detailed information on our website on how to access policies, procedures and relevant forms along with explanations for the routes available for addressing all manner of concerns and complaints.

Consultation and Training

- consult on development of policy and procedure as an independent and objective resource; and
- consult on University training initiatives, particularly those related to fair decision-making and effective conflict resolution and lead training developed by the Office of the Ombudsperson.

“I must thank you for all your help in assisting me during all the hard times I was going through at the start. Without your kind words, I would have had ended up being left alone to search for the energy and confidence to overcome all the hurdles I was faced with.”



Progress made on Ombudsperson's Recommendations

Each year in this annual report we provide updates on the progress the University has made in implementing the recommendations accepted previously.

Follow-up on Recommendations for 2015/2016:

Graduate Student/Academic Supervisor Relationship Issues

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Therefore, I am recommending that YSGS and its academic department partners explore the introduction of a pilot project whereby all doctoral students have the opportunity to provide input on any obstacles that are impeding their progression on an anonymous or self-identified basis via a carefully constructed questionnaire. As some students may be apprehensive about providing input while they are still in the process of completing their degrees, I'm also recommending that graduating students, as well as those who voluntarily withdraw, be offered the opportunity to participate in an exit interview that would allow them to provide YSGS and its academic partners with specific feedback on their experience, the strengths and weaknesses of the conflict resolution protocol and to solicit their suggestions on useful interventions for addressing the emergence of interpersonal relationship difficulties before they become intractable.

University's Response:

The University recognizes the importance of a positive and productive relationship between graduate students and their supervisors. For that reason, the University—including the Yeates School of Graduate Studies—has in the past implemented procedures similar to those you describe, on an ad hoc basis, with the goal of establishing and maintaining such relationships. Plans are under consideration for expanding the scope of such procedures in the future.

Progress Made:

I have been advised that as there are now two Associate Deans in the Yeates School of Graduate Studies (YSGS) and each Faculty now has an Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, there are sufficient resources available to provide additional attention to supporting effective academic supervisor and student relationships. The following initiatives are in process:

- Exit interviews will be offered to departing and graduating Ph.D. and Masters' students so that they can provide their input on what types of support and programming was beneficial to them, the strengths and weaknesses of the protocol for resolving negative conflicts and to provide suggestions on how to better support future students.

- The guide for developing productive relationships between academic supervisor and student entitled 'Graduate Supervision' and the 'Student/Supervisor Discussion Checklist' are in the process of being reviewed and updated.
- The Associate Deans for Graduate Studies for each Faculty are organizing regular opportunities for faculty members to discuss ways and means for supporting graduate students' academic progress.
- At the request of YSGS, the Learning and Teaching Office is collecting resources and preparing an easily accessible means for academic supervisors to acquire additional professional development on how to provide the type of guidance that best supports graduate student success.
- YSGS Associate Deans have begun discussions with faculty members about the need for supervisor training and professional development initiatives that could be piloted at the Faculty level.
- Both the Graduate Course Management Policy (#151) and the Graduate Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy (#152) are being reviewed by the Academic Policy Review Group.

These undertakings are important contributors to supporting increasingly successful and fulfilling graduate student and academic supervisor relationships.

Additional Expectations for Passing a Course

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Therefore, my recommendation is that the University determines and then publicizes the route that should be used for approving variations where schools and departments believe it is in their students' best academic interest to be required to pass a particular component of a course regardless of the overall passing grade achieved.

University's Response:

As you note, there may be sound pedagogical reasons for requirements to pass the exam(s) and/or other specific components in some courses. In addition, there are often safety concerns in cases where students need to pass the laboratory component of a course, so that they can progress to other lab-based courses and work safely in lab-based settings both in and outside of the University.

The issue has been brought to the attention of the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) as well as the Academic Governance and Policy Committee (AGPC) in recent months. Both committees are working on developing a process that might include inviting and reviewing the rationale for such requirements from instructors, programs, departments, and faculties. The initial work includes looking at existing policy elements related to this issue, such as the Periodic Program Review (PPR) process described in Policy 126 and the guidelines for curriculum modifications described in Policy 127. This work is timely: both Policy 126 and 127 are part of Ryerson's Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP)—currently under review in response to a recent routine audit conducted by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. While program quality assurance at Ryerson is an ongoing process, we trust that the work of the two committees will enable us to address your recommendation directly. Another part of the process involves the ad hoc Academic Policy Review Committee (APRC), due to its review of Policy 145 (Undergraduate Course Management) among others. Finally, we are considering a further course of action: to address this issue as part of Ryerson's course management guidelines and requirements, which in turn would provide the Academic Standards Committee with a basis on which to evaluate program reviews and curriculum modification proposals under Policies 126 and 127.

Progress Made:

I have observed that the University has used a number of methods to advise faculty members that any grading variations they wish to apply to their courses must be evaluated by the Academic Standards Committee and ultimately approved by Senate before they are implemented and described in course outlines. Specifically, the Interim Provost, at the time, Chris Evans, wrote to all Chairs, Directors and Deans in May 2017, and the current Provost, Michael Benarroch, wrote to all RFA members in September 2017, to describe how to put forward a request for approval and the time line for the approval process. It was also confirmed that after November 2018, if a grading variation has not been approved for a course by the Academic Standards Committee and Senate, past practice will not be allowed to continue and only the Senate will be able to approve a grading variation. Prior to approval being received, professors are able to continue applying a grading variation along with the following expectations being met:

- The grading variation must be clearly stated in the course outline and announced in class.
- Students who do not pass the required course component, but who have an overall passing grade in the course, have the right to submit a formal grade appeal.
- Appeal decision-makers must, on a case-by-case basis, take into account all factors for each student, including the extent to which the grading variation/extra requirement affected their grade.

This explanation was also provided to all Senators verbally as updates at Senate meetings in the first half of 2017.

The commitment the University has shown in implementing a University-wide methodology to ensure approved grading variations are consistent with best pedagogical practices is impressive.

Failing a Required Course Three Times

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Therefore, I am recommending that the University undertake to collect the data that shows the number of students who have been assigned the academic standing of PPW as a result of failing a required course for a third time, as well as the course that has been failed, so that this information can be used to investigate the underlying cause for the repeated failures. If the data reveal that the reasons for the repeated failures are idiosyncratic to the individual student then attention may be paid to developing a means for identifying students who have failed a required course a second time so they can be alerted to the serious situation they will be in if the course is failed a third time along with being reminded of the supports that are available to them. In the event there are trends observed that may assist with system-wide improvement these data can be provided to the relevant school or department for further investigation to determine if there are system-wide changes that may be useful. In addition, all advising staff should be made aware of the fact that students who are assigned the academic standing of PPW are eligible to pursue either a grade and/or an academic standing appeal or a request for a retro-active drop.

University's Response:

The University recognizes that it is stressful for students to be withdrawn from their program for any reason, especially if it is due to failing a course three times when they are otherwise close to graduation. The main purpose of the rule is to help students identify problems early on, and to seek help or readjust their goals well before it gets to this point. Students find themselves in this position for many reasons. Some are committed to a program that might not be appropriate for them; others reject advice to take time off to deal with their personal challenges, or delay taking a mandatory course because it looks too difficult, or take a failed course the second or third time in addition to a full load, or in a compressed (spring/summer) format. That said, it benefits everyone if we can find further, underlying causes—whether student- or system-based. Therefore, as you suggest, the University will explore ways to learn more about how and why students are affected by this rule, and to ensure that affected students are aware of their options in good time.

Progress Made:

I have been advised that the Registrar's Office has explored ways to identify students who are enrolled in their third and fourth course attempts, and that exploration has revealed that what on the surface seemed to be a straightforward piece of research has actually proven to be quite complex. For example, as students do not necessarily pursue subsequent attempts in consecutive terms there are often multiple terms between attempts. In addition, some students have second or third failures in multiple courses, which are not required courses, and these variables add complexity for reporting purposes.

The data compiled by the Registrar's Office for Fall 2016 and Winter 2017 reveal that:

- 423 students completed third course attempts and of these, 337 passed (80%) and 86 failed (20%)
- 10 students completed fourth course attempts and of these, 9 passed (90%) and one failed (10%).

The Registrar has observed that while this information indicates a very high level of success at the fourth attempt it should be noted that this is the only additional attempt that requires authorization from the Dean, the Chair/Director as well as the Registrar. In order to be eligible for a fourth attempt, students need to provide a compelling rationale for why they should be given yet another opportunity which may stimulate more intensive self-reflection by the student and also provides a mechanism for more in-depth consultation with the student on strategies for successful completion of the course.

The Registrar's Office has also identified the following ways for providing an early-alert process for students at high risk for PPW status as a result of failing required courses:

Immediately following the failure for a second attempt and prior to enrolment in a third attempt, early alert reports will now be provided to each program department identifying these high risk students. This early alert process will let schools and program departments know that a student is at this critical stage before the student enrolls in the course again, and potentially experiences a third failure of a required course which would result in a PPW status, regardless of their overall CGPA.

In addition, the Academic Advising Coordinator associated with the Registrar's office has committed to conducting a pan-university environmental scan of program/department and Faculty retention strategies to inform recommendations and explore opportunities to support Chairs/Directors and Academic advisors in the development and implementation of early alert mechanisms to improve a student's likelihood to succeed.

These initiatives are noteworthy and worthy of commendation as the availability of in-depth information of this nature can be an important contributor to increased student success and a valuable addition to the provision of effective academic advising.

Level of Difficulty of Make-up Exams

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Therefore, my recommendation is that the Academic Policy Review Committee analyze and then address this concern when it is proposing new policy related to academic evaluation via make-up exams, so that this unfair means of addressing the potential for some students to misuse the academic consideration process does not continue.

University's Response:

As you note, Ryerson's policies already state that make-up exams are to be of the same level of difficulty as the original, although they do not necessarily have to be in the same format (e.g., an exam that is originally multiple-choice can have a make-up that requires written answers). Explicit statements and practices to the contrary by instructors can and have been addressed by the University when they are brought to our attention. It is expected that revisions of the policies currently under review by the APRC will continue to include this requirement. The committee will be advised to pay close attention to its wording, with the goal of achieving a balance between avoiding abuse and providing appropriate consideration for students who need it.

Progress made:

The Secretary of Senate advised all faculty members in a September 1, 2017 email, that, as is expressly stated in the Course Management Policy, make-up exams cannot be made more difficult than the original exam. I have been advised that this topic has also been discussed at the Academic Policy Review Committee and it is acknowledged that some faculty members maintain the view that creating make-up exams that are more difficult than the originally-scheduled exams is acceptable, as it serves as a deterrent for students who are not ill to miss the original exam. As a result, it is recognized that greater attention must be dedicated to assisting these faculty members who maintain this view to recognize that this approach is counter-productive and unfair, as those students who are unavoidably and legitimately absent for the original exam are negatively affected due to no fault of their own.

Access to Academic Advice

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Therefore, my recommendation is that the University review the areas identified as needing attention and the resulting recommendations set out in the report of the Student Success Committee as well as consulting with current relevant parties to define the most effective strategies for arranging for the provision of academic information and advice via a 'user friendly' system that is student centred; timely, accessible, equitable and consistent, clear and transparent.

University's Response:

The University agrees that appropriate academic advising is a key factor in student success. The 2010 Student Success Committee report provides substantial information on how advising is provided at Ryerson (or at least how it was provided at the time the report was written), as well as recommendations for improvement, some of which are based on procedures already in place at Ryerson and at other universities. There was a follow-up report in 2011, part of which explored and refined the 2010 report's recommendation for the establishment of a "central coordinating function related to academic advising." The result was the creation of a new position – Coordinator, University Academic Advising – which was funded in 2013 and first staffed in January 2014 as part of the Registrar's Office. A major goal of that position is to provide information and training to those who advise students across the University. As the position evolves, more strategies are being developed to achieve that goal.

In addition, academic advising issues have arisen from the consultations conducted by the recently reinstated Curriculum Implementation Committee (CIC). The committee is especially interested in exploring ways to help students learn about and choose elective courses that allow them to delve deeper into their program area, complement that area, or provide breadth that is not directly related to that area. Online tools are now available for Ryerson students, and we continue to look for ways to refine those tools.

Progress Made:

The Registrar has advised that the implementation of the Visual Schedule Builder (VSB) in 2016-2017 provided students with a user-friendly alternative to RAMSS for course enrolment. The feedback received is that the availability of this new tool has had a positive impact on the student experience. Now in its second pilot year over 9,000 students have already accessed the VSB during the in-progress enrolment period for Fall 2017.

In January 2018, the Registrar's Office will be introducing a new interface between VSB and the Academic Advisement Report (AA) that will create a highly personalized enrolment experience. When accessed through the AA report, the VSB enrolment tool will only present course enrolment options that count towards meeting a student's outstanding degree requirements based on their specific program of study. This tool will also assist staff and faculty who provide academic advising support to students. With the expected roll-out of a new open elective structure across all programs, another opportunity to explore additional enhancement to existing tools arises and attention is being paid to the acquisition of new tools to assist students in exploring their options.

Beyond tools and technological supports, the Registrar's Office has also made significant progress in creating centralized academic advising support through the establishment of the Ryerson Advising Network. This group is facilitated by the Coordinator, University Academic Advising and includes staff and faculty who advise students as part of their responsibilities. Monthly meetings are held to address academic advising matters and share effective practices and at the end of the school year an academic advising conference is held on campus. All staff and faculty may opt into a monthly newsletter with relevant information related to advising as well.

In Fall 2017 Ryerson is also launching the university's first academic advising certificate entitled "Interpersonal Approaches to Advising". This comprehensive program includes multiple sessions on the current best practices for advising students towards success. The certificate will focus on interpersonal approaches on setting the stage for quality academic advising, creating goals, and working with students' strengths to fulfil their potential.

These developments are very progressive and demonstrate how both technological advancements and personalized attention can be used to support greater opportunities for student success. At the same time, these developments demonstrate recognition of the value of more opportunities for professional development for those staff and faculty who strive to provide the best academic advice.

What is Fair in this Particular Circumstance?

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Therefore, my recommendation is that every opportunity for orientation for staff and faculty should be taken to reinforce that fairness is a key RU value and that all decision-making should be informed by the expectations described in the fairness triangle for relational, procedural and substantive fairness.

University's Response:

As you note, the University's current Academic Plan states, under the heading of values (integrity), that it is committed to transparency, fairness and accountability in all of its decision-making, administration and governance. Ryerson will continue to explore ways to communicate this commitment to faculty and staff. Two opportunities stand out: 1) semi-annual "New Faculty Orientation" sessions held by the Learning and Teaching Office; 2) annual training for members of the Senate Appeals Committee (SAC). In both cases, we can work to incorporate a stronger message of fairness and what it means on the ground. Human Resources will also work to reinforce this value in orientation for new staff members and in the delivery of training programs for leaders at Ryerson.

Progress Made:

I have been advised that the following actions have been taken by the Human Resources Department and by the Learning and Teaching Office:

The importance of understanding and applying the 'fairness triangle' as the foundation for making fair decisions has been added to the following programs:

- New Employee Orientation program. Resources will also be added to D2L so that participants have ongoing access to this framework.
- Manager Orientation program. The use of the fairness triangle in navigating training scenarios has been added to the curriculum.
- The 'People First Service Certificate' which is being offered for the first time in Fall 2017 will include the application of the fairness triangle as a teaching tool.
- Leadership Certificate program. The application of the fairness triangle to decision-making will be included in the curriculum for Winter 2018.
- An e-learning module entitled 'A Crash Course on Fairness' is being developed so that all employees have ongoing access to this framework to inform fair decision-making.
- The Learning and Teaching Office has made provision for a workshop on fairness to be delivered to interested faculty in the Fall 2017 semester.

The addition of the 'fairness triangle', which is a practical framework for guiding fair decision-making, to the University's orientation and professional development schedule for both staff and faculty demonstrates a noteworthy and overarching commitment to fairness overall, regardless of the context.

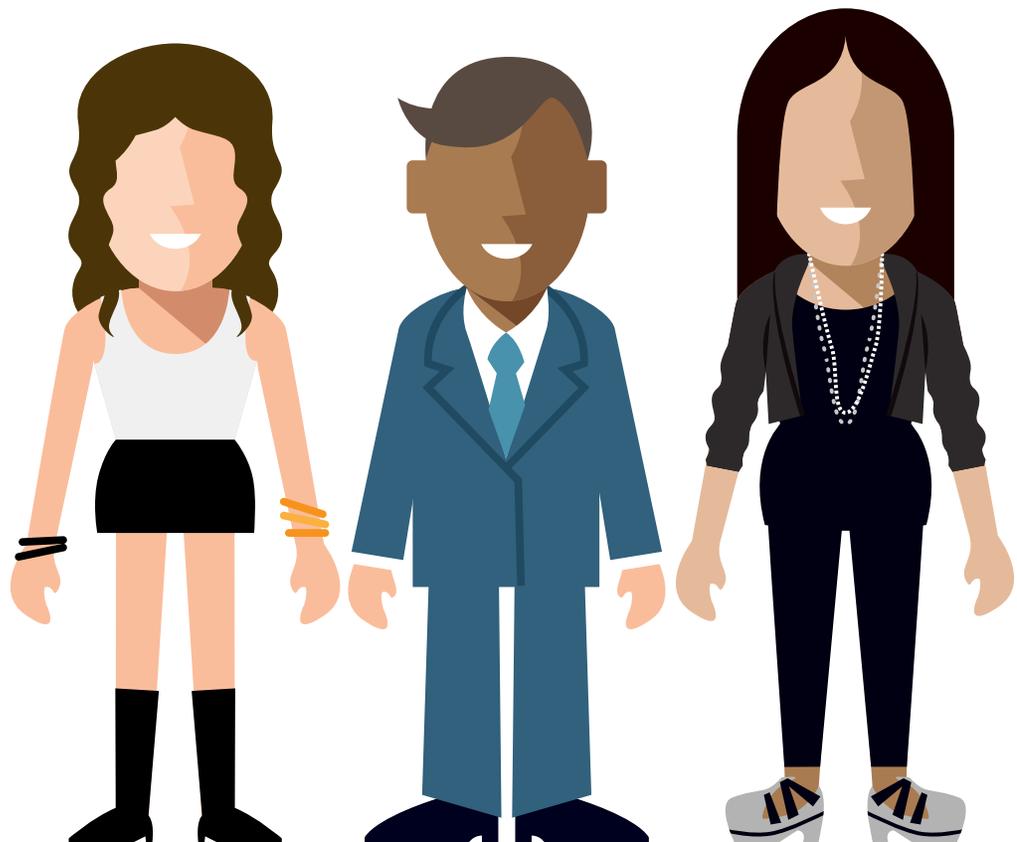
Compliments

The two pilot projects introduced as a result of the synergy created by the Academic Policy Review Group in concert with the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering and the Ted Rogers School of Management deserve recognition:

- The Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering's leadership in offering students the opportunity to use a 'self-declaration', in specific circumstances, rather than being required to visit a health care provider to obtain a 'Health Certificate' to document their unavoidable absence due to illness or extenuating circumstances deserves both appreciation and respect. In particular, reducing the need for students to access medical resources that could be better utilized for assessment and treatment more broadly and eliminating the potential to expose other people to their virulent illnesses unnecessarily, offers both an individual and societal benefit.

- The Ted Rogers School of Management's leadership in testing the efficacy of the on-line submission of requests for academic consideration is another example of exploring whether a more user friendly and streamlined system is an effective means for students to communicate with their home department and faculty members across the University when they are unable to attend to their academic obligations due to circumstances beyond their control.

The initiative lead by the Secretary of Senate to provide for the on-line submission of grade and academic standing appeals is also deserving of commendation as it offers a number of benefits to students, staff and decision-makers. Specifically, reducing the amount of time staff and students spend organizing and copying materials for review by decision-makers, and no longer requiring students to submit duplicate copies in person, will reduce unnecessary administrative time, travel time and expense. In addition, eliminating the amount of time and tenacity needed for seeking approval to submit a grade or academic standing appeal by email or fax when students are out of the city, province or country due to family or work commitments, is also reflective of a more collegial and inclusive approach to problem solving.



Commentary and Recommendations for 2016/2017

Nota bene: In order to provide recommendations that are likely to benefit the whole community we analyze the complaints received for indicators or trends that have systemic or system-wide implications. In addition, we deliberately do not provide descriptions of the individual cases dealt with by the Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University (RU). The reason for taking this approach is that all Ombudsman/person work must be undertaken in private so that the complainants' confidentiality is protected. In order to ensure that none of the people we work with conclude that their confidentiality has been compromised, the outcomes of our reviews and any specific recommendations that are made on individual cases are not included in this report. Rather, we report on cases in the aggregate and make only systemic and system-wide recommendations. As a result, the case references are necessarily generic in nature so as not to reveal the identities of those who have raised the concerns and complaints that are the basis for the following recommendations.

Late Course Drop and Retro-active Withdrawal

The University has developed a comprehensive set of instructions explaining the process for how students can apply for a **late drop** after the final date to drop a course without academic penalty has passed but before the end of the semester and how a **retro-active withdrawal** can be requested after the semester has ended. In addition, an application form entitled the 'Request for Late Drop/Retro-active Withdrawal Form' solicits all of the information that is needed for these requests to be considered. A detailed explanation of what types of requests will not be considered along with instructions on the logistics of the submission process is also provided. It is also made clear that while a recommendation may be made that a course or courses should be removed from the student's record, the Registrar's Office makes the final determination as to whether a late drop or retro-active withdrawal is approved.

This application process is similar to those used at many other higher education institutions and recognizes that dedicated and responsible students may not be able to complete their courses as planned due to circumstances that are beyond their control. However, a number of concerns have been raised by staff, and complaints made by students, that demonstrate there is room for improvement with respect to how this valuable form of academic consideration can be improved.

The issues that would benefit from further attention are:

- 1) If a student wishes to request a retro-active withdrawal of a course(s) before the deadline for the submission of grade or academic standing appeals has elapsed, the student is required to submit the request for the retro-active withdrawal through the grade or academic standing appeal process. Outside of this three week period three times a year, these requests are submitted to the student's home department or school. As a result, students sometimes receive conflicting advice, in that they are told that they are not allowed to ask for a retro-active drop through the grade and

academic standing appeal process but instead are required to complete the 'Request for Late Drop/Retro-active Withdrawal Form'. This direction can conflict with the advice they have received from other advisors, and is incorrect prior to the expiration of the appeal deadline for the semester. Not surprisingly, students are often confused and worried about what they should be doing when they are getting conflicting directions from different University personnel. Therefore, when the student does not feel comfortable questioning the advice of the departmental representative, or if there is insufficient time to consult with others, the student then abandons the appeal form and letters of explanation they had already prepared, and scrambles to complete the Late Drop/Retroactive Withdrawal application form. Although, the student can use the same documentation to support the application, preparing a written explanation using a different set of questions than what is required for a grade appeal can still create considerable anxiety and unnecessary tension under such time pressure. It's also important to note, that students who are requesting retro-active withdrawals typically are doing so because they were or are very ill, or have experienced a daunting crisis like an eviction, serious illness or death in their family that has created a domino effect. To complicate matters further, some students are no longer in Toronto as they have had to leave the country in order to attend to family matters and it is difficult for them to re-organize their paperwork from a distance.

- 2) As noted above, when students are requesting a late drop they make this request to their home department regardless of which department or school teaches the course. However, as their grade appeals may be submitted to two or more different teaching departments and their academic standing appeal is submitted to their home department, the possibility exists that the request for a recommendation for a retro-active withdrawal is approved by the decision-maker in one department, and declined by another decision-maker even though the rationale provided by the student for seeking an exception to normal practice is the same. Once again, this can create a situation for the student which is confusing and highly stressful. If the student continues the appeal process and appeals to the Faculty level and is submitting grade appeals and an academic standing appeal to different Faculties, it is also possible that one Faculty level decision-maker may approve a recommendation for a retro-active withdrawal and another will decline to do so. If the student does not abandon the process at this point, and continues the appeal of the declined requests to the Senate level, one Panel of decision-makers will review all of the declined appeals at the same time. However, to get to this point requires considerable effort and stamina, which a student may not have if they are very ill or their functioning is compromised for other reasons. Therefore, if they are unable to continue onto the Senate level of appeal they lose the opportunity for a final overarching review.

3) Currently, the eligible grounds for considering late drop and retro-active withdrawal applications are limited to medical and/or compassionate rationales. However, there are other legitimate reasons why a student may not have been able to drop a course prior to the published drop deadlines. I have found that some other educational institutions include another ground, such as 'other legitimate reasons' or 'procedural error' which a student can expand upon in their application. Some of the other legitimate reasons include technical issues whereby a student understood they had dropped the course but only realize at the end of the semester that the drop they had thought was completed successfully was not finalized. This could apply to students who have never dropped a course before or are very ill and have sought the assistance of family members to help them to drop the course, and they are not sufficiently conversant with RAMSS to recognize the drop was not completed successfully. In other instances, students may not receive sufficient feedback on their academic performance in the class in order to determine whether they have a reasonable prospect of passing the course until after the final date to drop the class without academic penalty has passed. Some students may reach out to a departmental administrator and find out that they can request a late drop. However, if they review the current late drop and retroactive withdrawal application form alone and do not seek advice, it would not be unreasonable for the students to conclude that they have no legitimate ground for requesting a late drop. This gap in information could result in them eventually failing a course that they had virtually no potential to pass given their poor academic performance on assignments which were not marked prior to the final date to drop courses without academic penalty.

I believe that the methodology that was developed for late drop and retro-active withdrawal applications was put in place with the best of intentions. Nonetheless, both the potential for and the reality of inconsistent decision-making causes considerable stress for those students who are struggling with various illnesses, and/or economic hardship or have no family support or whose family members cannot assist them with problems of this nature due to their lack of experience with higher education administrative processes.

The decision to decline a late drop or retro-active withdrawal is potentially life changing for students, in that a semester of failed courses due to a severe illness which has rendered the student temporarily incompetent may result in lost scholarship funding and/or future access to some professional schools and graduate programs; or the requirement to withdraw temporarily or permanently from their program. Whereas an approval, when circumstances warrant doing so, can mean that the student has the ability to continue in their program under much better circumstances and complete their degree or certificate with better prospects for admission to advanced education. Hence, this form of academic consideration is a key part of a robust commitment to fair decision-making by treating students equitably.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Therefore, I am recommending that the late drop and retro-active withdrawal process be reviewed and that consideration be given to eliminating the requirement for students to use the academic grade and standing appeal process for requesting retro-active withdrawals so that all requests of this nature are submitted to the student's home department regardless of the time of year.

That the grounds for requesting a late drop or retro-active drop be expanded to include a category such as 'other legitimate reasons' or 'procedural error' so as to capture the circumstances that do not fall within 'medical' or 'compassionate' grounds but are such that they may warrant a late drop or retro-active withdrawal.

In addition, I have seen a number of requests for retro-active withdrawals that were declined by the home department but were eventually determined to warrant a retro-active withdrawal when they were considered at the Faculty or Senate level or by the Registrar's Office. Therefore, when a decision-maker declines to make a recommendation that a late drop or retro-active withdrawal be granted, I am recommending that a mechanism for review by the Registrar be made available to determine if the circumstances are such that the University-wide standard has actually been met.

A separate but related issue is the timing of the Fee Appeal application process whereby students who have been successful in having courses retro-actively dropped may appeal for reimbursement of fees. Currently, the student must launch a separate application for reimbursement of fees. For a student who is very ill or is very vulnerable due to their personal circumstances and is also living with great economic hardship this additional step can be overwhelming. I have been the recipient of many calls from the parents of students who are in the very early stages of recovery or are still so ill that they have limited capacity. Hence, they find it incomprehensible that the University now expects a severely compromised student to subsequently engage in a separate process to request reimbursement of fees when the information the student has already submitted to justify a retro-active withdrawal is identical to what would likely be submitted to support a fee appeal.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Therefore, I am recommending that consideration be given to providing the opportunity for students to submit both requests for a late drop or retro-active withdrawal and a fee appeal simultaneously, when circumstances warrant doing so. By streamlining the application process in this way, it would not be necessary for the students who are hospitalized for an extended period or who are at the beginning of or in the midst of a long recovery, to prepare two separate applications, and seek assistance on two separate occasions, when submitting their requests for a late drop or retro-active withdrawal and a fee appeal.

Access to Academic Information

We continue to see an increase in the numbers of students who contact us with concerns that they have not been able to get the academic information and feedback they need to progress and to succeed. Examples of the kinds of complaints that are raised include:

- Some students demonstrate that they did not get feedback on their assignments and tests in a timely manner and they completed subsequent assignments, tests and exams without knowing where they went wrong in earlier academic work.
- In a similar vein, some students complain that when they ask for more details about what is required when completing assignments the information they receive in response is often minimal. When students are advised to politely follow up with their professor some say that they feel uncomfortable following up repeatedly as they don't want to be seen to be a bother or an annoyance and they move forward without the information they were seeking.
- We also see many instances where students do persist and follow up repeatedly and they are able to demonstrate, subsequently, that they did not receive a response to any of their queries or that the feedback they received is scant and insufficient to determine where to focus their efforts.

The results from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NESSE) which RU relies on to inform its planning processes, also shows a similar finding in these areas in that only 43% of first year students and 47% of fourth year students indicated that they received prompt and detailed feedback on tests and completed assignments. The RU report also notes that the RU results are similar to the experience reported at other Ontario universities, and lower than ratings given for American peer institutions.¹

The data from the RU Graduating Students Survey for 2015 provide higher results with respect to the availability of useful and timely feedback in that only 28% of the respondents disagreed that most professors provided useful feedback and only 26% disagreed that feedback is provided promptly.² While these data demonstrate a lower level of complaint in these important areas the results are still cause for concern.

Willingness to Assist

- Students frequently complain that when they ask for assistance to deal with an enrollment issue or how to address an academic or administrative problem, or how to access learning supports or student financial assistance, they are met with indifference, or delayed or rote responses that do not take into account their particular circumstances.
- Some students complain that they are not able to get all of the information they need in order to solve various academic problems like arranging for an extension during the term or for an incomplete grade (INC) at the end of the term due to a debilitating illness or a circumstance that comes up related to housing or child or elder care that prevents them from completing their course work as planned.

- One of the most frequent complaints we receive about delayed responses is from students attempting to address problems with the Student Financial Assistance Office. It is not uncommon for students to demonstrate they have sent multiple emails over a substantial period of time before a response is received.

The results from the NESSE survey on these topics show that “Forty percent of students appear to be satisfied with information about how to access learning and support services, as are 34 percent with regard to information about financial aid.”³ These statistics suggest that 60% of students are not able to access the learning and support services they need and 66% of the survey respondents are not able to access the information they need about financial aid.

Similarly, only 24% of respondents assess their experience as being “good or very good” when receiving information about common academic problems.⁴ This statistic suggests that 76% of the respondents are stating that the quality of information provided is not considered to be very good.

It is important to recognize that the most recent NESSE survey results available were collected in 2014 and the most recent Graduating Students Survey results were collected in 2015. Therefore, the many improvements that have been made by RU since then with respect to easier access to academic advising and to administrative information may have resulted in higher levels of agreement or satisfaction if the surveys were conducted in 2016/2017. However, the type and quantity of complaints we continue to receive in these areas in 2016/2017 suggests there is still room for improvement.

One of the crucial areas that I observe overall that would dramatically improve students’ perception of the quality of their administrative and academic interactions with the University is the degree to which University personnel demonstrate care and concern for students’ well-being and success.

The Graduating Students survey results mirror the information provided to our Office, as it is noted that: “Satisfaction with concern shown by the University for students as individuals is relatively low at 55%, although this is similar to other universities.”⁵ These data suggest that only 45% of the students surveyed indicate that their experience is such that they feel that the University does care about them.

As we have many opportunities to review correspondence between students and University personnel, and we speak with University personnel about issues raised with us or respond to calls from staff about how to address a difficult problem fairly, we are also acutely aware that many staff and faculty are both kind and caring in their interactions with students. It is also crucial to acknowledge that students have told us about very positive interactions they have had with RU faculty and staff where they felt they were given helpful advice or received follow up calls and/or emails if their academics or attendance was suffering. Students have also described the efforts staff and faculty have made to support them and to help them to find relevant resources.

¹ University Planning Office, “Highlights of Results” National Report of Student Engagement (NESSE) (2014) online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/upo/reports/undergrad/nsse/NSSE2014HL.pdf>> at 4.

² University Planning Office, “GRADUATING STUDENT SURVEY 2015 from students graduating from undergraduate programs” online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/upo/reports/undergrad/gradsurvey/CUSC15.pdf>> at 2.

³ *Supra* note 1 at 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Supra* note 2.

However, we are also aware that some students feel invisible when they ask for assistance, as they describe how they are summarily dismissed and their questions are considered to be trivial even when it is readily apparent that they are in a difficult situation. As these students know they need help, they are cognizant of the need to continue their attempts to solve various problems but given the initial response they don't know how to go about continuing to ask for assistance. Often, they are afraid that if they disclose more details about their situation and the response is dismissive, curt, rude or unkind, they will feel worse than they did before. This dynamic may lead them to ignore the problem, struggle alone or confide in friends, if they feel comfortable sharing sensitive personal information. Or, they may seek out professional help. Unfortunately, if they do not receive a prompt response or a response that they perceive to be constructive, they may decide it's not worth the effort and they abandon the search for assistance. Therefore, making every effort to ensure that students get the assistance they need at the first place they seek it, especially if they are in a difficult and time-sensitive situation can prevent them from struggling to find it elsewhere or withdrawing.

We have also observed many occasions when an error is made and although the error is eventually corrected, neither an apology nor an acknowledgement of the error is provided to the student. This kind of response is surprising as acknowledging an error; correcting the error and then sincerely apologizing is a common response in many other relationships. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, a sincere apology and acknowledgement of the harm that has resulted from the error is typically a very good way to build a positive relationship as it builds trust and confidence. In addition, as by definition, all human beings regardless of how well intentioned and qualified, will make at a minimum, the occasional error, we must all be mindful of our responsibility to truly take 'full responsibility' and do whatever is possible to make it right. It is also worthy of noting that when it is discovered that a current problem has been caused by a past error and so many other actions have been taken subsequently that the past error cannot be undone, it is only reasonable to apologize for the original error and commit to improving the system so the same problem will not occur again. Even though students affected by an error of this nature will not benefit personally from this type of acknowledgement, we are aware from our interactions with students in this situation that they are appreciative of the fact that the process or procedure will be more efficient or accessible for future students.

In "Our Time to Lead", the RU Academic Plan, one of the four interconnected priorities cited is:

1. Priority One

Enable Greater Student Engagement and Success through Exceptional Experiences⁶

The applicable strategy that follows from this priority is:

#6. Offer services, supports, spaces and improved engagement opportunities that enable student success at all levels, encourage high retention, and facilitate the timely completion of students' academic goals.⁷

While this is a laudable strategic initiative, a key element that needs further expression in implementing this strategy, is the expectation that in offering 'services, supports, spaces and opportunities' the desire to be helpful and demonstrate care for student success and well-being is also readily evident.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Therefore, I am recommending that it be explicitly stated at all faculty and staff orientations, and ongoing professional development, that within the Ryerson value structure all personnel are expected to operate from the premise that they have the duty to care about all students' well-being and act accordingly by making every effort to be:

Approachable

Proactive

Helpful

Polite

Unbiased and empathetic

Resourceful and

Responsive to reasonable requests for assistance in a timely and appropriate manner.

Please note that this list of expectations is intentionally generic, rather than prescriptive, so that the emphasis is placed on creating an environment where students and staff and faculty work together toward a common goal in a mutually respectful manner.

⁶ Provost and Vice-President, Academic, "Our Time to Lead" Academic Plan (2014 – 2019) online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/provost/academic-plan/>> at 12.

⁷ *Ibid.* at p. 18

Mental Health

The 'Student Snapshot' taken from the 2016 National College Health Assessment Executive Summary for Ryerson University indicates that "49% [of students] felt so depressed that it was difficult to function; 67% felt overwhelming anxiety; 15% seriously considered suicide and 3% attempted suicide".⁸ Our experience is similar in that it is not uncommon for students who approach our Office about a specific concern or complaint to also disclose that they are unwell and have serious concerns about their declining mental health and worry about being able to cope on an ongoing basis. Similarly, many students who have approached us after having been assigned the standing of Permanent Program Withdrawal (PPW) have ultimately disclosed that they have been struggling for years and have not been able to address their mental health concerns successfully even though they were aware that they were at risk of being removed from the University. Often their mental health declines further as they realize that unless they are successful in securing academic consideration or retro-active accommodation through an accepted grade or academic standing appeal, they will be unable to complete their degrees after having spent years of time and thousands and thousands of dollars. We often query why they have not sought help earlier? Some are unaware that there is help available; for some seeking support is a cultural, religious or family taboo; some are simply too embarrassed to ask for help as the stigma is so great that they feel it is a sign of weakness; some are in such financial straits they have no time to do anything other than work and attend classes and getting involved with a self-help program is not logistically possible; and sadly, in some instances, some students don't trust that the person they approach will understand the depth of their problems and be able to help them.

We also see many students who are very open about the fact they have been struggling with maintaining a high level of mental health for some time. This reality is not specific to Ryerson University as it is well documented that the demographic that is typically enrolled in institutions of higher education across Canada are a high risk group for mental illness. These statistics demonstrate that reality in stark terms:

- In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians experiences a mental health or addiction problem.
- 70% of mental health problems have their onset during childhood or adolescence.
- In 2012, suicide accounted for 17% of deaths among youth aged 10 to 14, 28% among youth aged 15 to 19, and 25% among young adults aged 20-24.
- After accidents, it [suicide] is the second leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 34.⁹

The additional funding that has been provided to university and colleges in Ontario by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) in recent years to assist institutions of higher education to provide support to students who are mentally unwell further demonstrates the pervasiveness and the severity of the problem. As we see so many students who are struggling with maintaining their mental health, the initiatives taken by the University to support students (as well as staff and faculty) are very much welcomed. Examples like 'Thriving in Action' or THRIVE that was created to assist those who are not coping well but are not yet in crisis¹⁰ and SMASH (Students for Mental Awareness and Health) that was designed to provide peer support and advocate for policy changes¹¹ are important contributors. The preventative programming such as 'Be Well'¹² in the Nutrition and Food program and the various focus points of the SHARP (Student Health Assistance Resilience Program)¹³ organized through the Health Promotion unit of Student Affairs are examples of beneficial preventative programming. In addition, the Ryerson Mental Health Committee (RMHC) has been working for many years to orient policy-makers, faculty and staff to the importance of acknowledging the ubiquity of mental health challenges and the importance of providing assistance to students who are struggling to maintain their mental health through the delivery of Mental Health 101 training workshops as well as through the creation of a compendium of flexible teaching practices for review by both faculty and policy makers as they fulfill their responsibilities.

The pervasiveness of mental illness was also addressed in a recent op-ed article entitled "Students are not fragile flowers – we must care about their mental health" written by Santa Ono, the President of the University of British Columbia and Michael Wilson, the Chancellor of the University of Toronto, in which they described their own histories where struggles with mental health resulted in potentially tragic and truly tragic outcomes. Their personal stories, along with their in-depth exposure to higher education environments due to the roles they fulfill, reinforced the importance of eliminating the stigma of weakness associated with seeking assistance for treatment for mental health conditions and why preventive strategies that have been implemented in so many universities along with mechanisms for providing for peer support are so necessary.¹⁴

⁸ Ryerson Mental Health Committee Report 2017, "Executive Summary" online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/mentalhealth/RMHC-Exec2017-Web.pdf>> at 2.

⁹ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, "Mental Illness and Addictions: Facts and Statistics" online: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health <http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about_camh/newsroom/for_reporters/Pages/addictionmentalhealthstatistics.aspx>.

¹⁰ Will Sloan, "A New Way to Help Students Thrive", Ryerson Today (5 September 2017) online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/news-events/news/2017/09/a-new-way-to-help-students-thrive/>>.

¹¹ "Mental Wellbeing" online: Ryerson University <http://www.ryerson.ca/mentalhealth/wellbeing_at_ryerson/>. The calendar of activities organized by SMASH is available at: <<https://ryersonsmash.com/>>.

¹² *Supra* Note 8.

¹³ SHARP- RU Health Promotion online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/healthandwellness/healthpromotion/sharp/ru/>>.

¹⁴ Michael Wilson and Santa Ono, "Students are not fragile flowers - we must care about their mental health" The Globe and Mail (5 October 2017) online: The Globe and Mail <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/students-are-not-fragile-flowers-we-must-care-about-their-mental-health/article36498798/>>.

In an earlier but related op-ed article entitled “Exams should test mental ability and not mental health” Benjamin Berger and Lorne Sossin, a professor and Dean of Osgoode Hall Law School respectively, carefully rebutted a colleague’s thesis that students who are seeking academic accommodation for mental health conditions when writing exams are in essence gaining an unfair advantage.¹⁵ Berger and Sossin refuted the notion that academic assessment is comparable to an athletic competition where speed and completion time are the hallmarks of success, when in fact the goal of academic evaluation should be to determine students’ knowledge of particular subject matter along with their capacities to think critically and solve problems. In addressing the question of how to best accommodate mental health and physical disabilities, Berger and Sossin make this compelling observation:

“Ultimately, however, we do not see the goal of the movement to better accommodate students with mental health conditions as an end in itself. Addressing the reasons why law school contributes to, or exacerbates, mental health conditions is the bigger conundrum.”¹⁶

It is important to acknowledge that the increasing volume of students seeking academic accommodation due to mental health conditions is not limited to law school environments, as is evidenced by the 24% increase from 2014/2015 to 2015/2016 of students identified as having a mental health disability who registered with the Academic Accommodation Support Office at RU, and another 24% increase from 2015/2016 to 2016/2017.¹⁷ By comparison, the overall volume of students registered with ‘Academic Accommodation Support’ increased by 16% and 11%, respectively, for the same time periods. These RU specific data reinforce the benefit of placing greater emphasis on investigating why so many students are so unwell as well as assessing the efficacy of the current infrastructure that are both reactive and preventative with respect to the emergence and progression of mental illness.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Therefore, I am recommending that using the RMHC and other appropriate mechanisms, key questions should be investigated: What is it about university life that undermines mental health and what is it about university life that supports and encourages mental health? What additional strategies can Ryerson put in place or what traditional practices can be amended or revamped to address this debilitating and pervasive reality of increasing numbers of students struggling to maintain a high level of mental health?

“I also want to thank you for all the ways in which you have helped our students and for the respectful, considerate way you have always dealt with staff and faculty in our department.”



¹⁵ Benjamin Berger and Lorne Sossin, “Exams should test mental ability not mental health” The National Post” (22 August 2017) online: National Post <<http://nationalpost.com/opinion/benjamin-berger-and-lorne-sossin-exams-should-test-mental-ability-not-mental-health>>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ 2016/2017 Report, Prepared by Academic Accommodation Support (Ryerson University) for the Accessibility Fund for Students with Disabilities (AFSD).

Response of Provost & Vice President, Academic and Vice-President, Administration and Finance

February 9, 2018

Dr. Nora Farrell
Ombudsperson
Ryerson University

Ryerson's Response to the University's Ombudsperson's 2016-2017 Annual Report

Dear Dr. Farrell,

Thank you for your 2016–2017 Ombudsperson's report. Please find below our comments and responses to your recommendations.

Progress on the 2015-2016 Report

The points raised in your 2015-2016 report covered a wide range of issues that can affect students' experiences at Ryerson. We appreciate you highlighting these issues and providing possible ways forward for each. Through such means, you are helping ensure that the University continues to address vital challenges as we move to strengthen the supports we provide for student success.

We are also pleased that in this year's report you recognize the progress being made in some key areas.

Your compliments regarding the pilot projects on self-declarations as a substitute in certain circumstances for health certificates in the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering were appreciated, as was your validation of the online submission of requests for academic consideration in the Ted Rogers School of Management. The feedback from students, faculty and staff concerning both pilots has been very positive so far, and both have been expanded for the Winter 2018 term. Results will continue to be monitored. Finally, we appreciate your recognition of the work to date on the planned online appeal submission system, and note that a pilot project for that is also under development.

Each of these initiatives is intended to streamline processes that we recognize can be stressful for students, often because they are engaging with those processes at times when they are already challenged by health or other personal issues, and because it may be the first and perhaps only time they need to learn about the relevant procedures. We note that there are additional advantages to the initiatives as well, such as enhanced privacy protection for students' personal information, and fewer opportunities for delays.

This progress is a testament to the ongoing collaborative efforts between your office and other constituencies at the University. We look forward to continuing this collaboration.

Response to the 2016-17 Report

There are four recommendations in this year's report, to which we have responded below:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

I am recommending that the late drop and retro-active withdrawal process be reviewed and that consideration be given to eliminating the requirement for students to use the academic grade and standing appeal process for requesting retro-active withdrawals so that all requests of this nature are submitted to the student's home department regardless of the time of year.

That the grounds for requesting a late drop or retro-active drop be expanded to include a category such as 'other legitimate reasons' or 'procedural error' so as to capture the circumstances that do not fall within 'medical' or 'compassionate' grounds but are such that they may warrant a late drop or retro-active withdrawal.

In addition, I have seen a number of requests for retro-active withdrawals that were declined by the home department but were eventually determined to warrant a retro-active withdrawal when they were considered at the Faculty or Senate level or by the Registrar's Office. Therefore, when a decision-maker declines to make a recommendation that a late drop or retro-active withdrawal be granted, I am recommending that a mechanism for review by the Registrar be made available to determine if the circumstances are such that the University-wide standard has actually been met.

The University recognizes that for some students, a late drop or a retroactive withdrawal from one or more courses is sometimes the most appropriate response to their situation. At the same time, in striving for consistency and fairness across students, programs and Faculties, Ryerson is committed to maintaining high standards of academic rigour and adherence to its policies and procedures, which means that a late drop or retroactive withdrawal is not always a viable solution. Achieving a balance between those perspectives is an ongoing challenge.

In essence, your recommendation has three parts: 1) to undertake a review of the late drop and retroactive withdrawal process with the aim of clarifying how this process relates to the submission of academic grade and standing appeals; 2) to expand the grounds for requesting a late drop or retroactive withdrawal; and 3) to establish a mechanism for the review by the Registrar of whether University-wide standards are being met when departmental representatives decline to make a recommendation that a late drop or retroactive withdrawal be granted.

The University appreciates that current regulations open the possibility of confusion when it comes to decision-making around late drops and retroactive withdrawals, and agrees with your recommendation that a review is necessary. As you are aware, Ryerson Senate's ad hoc Academic Policy Review Committee (APRC) is currently reviewing the criteria and policies governing academic consideration requests and academic appeals for graduate and undergraduate students. This review is expected to impact the process on late drops and retroactive withdrawals, because this process is sometimes the remedy recommended by academic appeal decision makers.

With regard to the first part of your recommendation, it is important that the APRC investigate possible sources of confusion in the relationship between the late drop and retroactive withdrawal process and the academic grade and standing appeal process. With regard to the second part of your recommendation, part of the current review being conducted by the APRC will be to study the possibility of expanding the definition of 'medical' or 'compassionate' grounds. Finally, with regard to the third part of your recommendation, the APRC will also assess during its review the advisability of establishing a mechanism for the review by the Registrar of whether University-wide standards are being met when departmental representatives decline to make a recommendation that a late drop or retroactive withdrawal be granted.

Related to these issues, as you point out, it is perhaps at least as important to look at ways to monitor students' academic performance, and provide appropriate advice, prior to the point where a late drop or retroactive withdrawal is seen by a student as the best or only way to address their situation. As discussed in Recommendation 3 from your 2015-2016 report, and in your subsequent follow-up in the current report, the issue of students taking a required course for a third time is especially relevant here. In most programs, students who have three failed attempts to a required course receive a Permanent Program Withdrawal (PPW) standing, and they often feel that a late drop or retroactive withdrawal is their only solution (in some programs, two failed required courses leads to PPW). However, it may or may not be appropriate in a given case. To help avoid these situations, the Registrar's Office now identifies and provides program departments with reports of students who have experienced first, second and third attempt failures.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

I am recommending that consideration be given to providing the opportunity for students to submit both requests for a late drop or retro-active withdrawal and a fee appeal simultaneously, when circumstances warrant doing so. By streamlining the application process in this way, it would not be necessary for the students who are hospitalized for an extended period or who are at the beginning of or in the midst of a long recovery, to prepare two separate applications, and seek assistance on two separate occasions, when submitting their requests for a late drop or retro-active withdrawal and a fee appeal.

The University appreciates the complexities that students face when submitting requests for a late drop or retroactive withdrawal as well as a fee appeal. The Registrar's Office has agreed to consider your recommendation, but notes that since tuition fees are rarely refundable, combining the two requests might set an unrealistic expectation that, if granted, a retroactive withdrawal or late drop would readily coincide with a fee refund. Where clearly warranted on the basis of exceptional circumstances, the Registrar's Office already automatically assigns fee reversals through the retroactive withdrawal and late drop request process, but we acknowledge that this could be made transparent through additional wording on the existing request form. In general, fees issues can involve multiple offices and units that have potentially different criteria for decision making, but the overall process for evaluating fee refunds in the context of late drops and retroactive withdrawals is certainly something that can be reviewed.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

I am recommending that it be explicitly stated at all faculty and staff orientations, and ongoing professional development, that within the Ryerson value structure all personnel are expected to operate from the premise that they have the duty to care about all students' well-being and act accordingly by making every effort to be: Approachable, proactive, helpful, polite, unbiased and empathetic, resourceful and responsive to reasonable requests for assistance in a timely and appropriate manner.

Please note that this list of expectations is intentionally generic, rather than prescriptive, so that the emphasis is placed on creating an environment where students and staff and faculty work together toward a common goal in a mutually respectful manner.

The University recognizes the importance of a respectful environment for all members of the Ryerson community, and will consider a holistic university-wide approach to addressing this important issue. There are several opportunities to convey that message to faculty and staff, some of which are already in place and others that can be pursued for future implementation.

For example, there is Ryerson's ongoing *People First* commitment. Many of the concepts you have suggested are included in that commitment, and are conveyed through various routes, but there are opportunities for continuing improvement. For example, a People First Certificate is currently in development, and could include scenarios specifically dealing with student issues for staff to consider as they learn about those concepts. The University also conducts new employee orientation sessions that include a component regarding fairness in decision making and on Ryerson's values. Again, looking forward, a focus on scenarios dealing specifically with student issues will be explored for inclusion in these sessions.



Another opportunity for enhanced communication of these concepts, especially regarding interactions with students, is provided by the orientation sessions for new managers conducted by Human Resources. Several more in-depth opportunities are available. For example, HR works closely over an extended time period with particular administrative or academic unit on skills development for both teams and individuals. In addition, Student Affairs runs ThriveRU, a campus-wide resilience-training program for students, staff and faculty that incorporates these concepts through a five-factor model based on gratitude, optimism, self-compassion, grit and mindfulness. Student Affairs also offers Writing for Wellness, a monthly journaling program for staff and faculty that integrates ThriveRU principles. Beyond these initiatives, there are also potential online/e-learning opportunities for the University to explore as ways to enhance its communication of these concepts to faculty and staff. Finally, there is an opportunity in welcome letters to new faculty and staff from the senior administration to further express the University's commitment to these concepts and values.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

I am recommending that using the RMHC and other appropriate mechanisms, key questions should be investigated: What is it about university life that undermines mental health and what is it about university life that supports and encourages mental health? What additional strategies can Ryerson put in place or what traditional practices can be amended or revamped to address this debilitating and pervasive reality of increasing numbers of students struggling to maintain a high level of mental health?

The University recognizes the importance of mental health supports for students, and the increasing concern at all universities regarding this issue. Your recommendation provides an appropriate juncture for the Ryerson Mental Health & Wellbeing Committee as it refreshes its terms of reference and recommits to its fundamental priorities in coming years. In doing so, the Committee will continue to examine the questions posed in your report, and advise the University on strategies and initiatives that effectively enhance and sustain the mental health and wellbeing of students, staff and faculty.

As the Committee refreshes its terms of reference, ensuring the full implementation of its various initiatives will be key. These include the *University's Statement of Commitment to Mental Wellbeing*, whose principles are meant to infuse Ryerson's overall support for mental health; the development of online resources to support individual and collective mental health available at the Mental Wellbeing website; the Mental Wellbeing Principles for Ryerson Policies being considered as part of the work of the APRC; the report *Our Time to Lead and Mental Well-being at Ryerson*, which provides specific strategies for Ryerson units seeking to meet their academic plan aims in the context of promoting mental health; Mental Health 101, the training program designed to support individuals in the community with how to respond to a student or colleague in distress; online resources at the ThriveRU website for students interested in addressing academic and personal challenges during their educational experience; the Thriving in Action resilience-building program for students, especially from vulnerable populations, which operates under the ThriveRU umbrella; and the creation of a new position, University Mental Health Coordinator, to coordinate mental health initiatives across campus for faculty, staff and students. There has also been a shift towards a more flexible model for student counselling that has resulted in reduced wait times.

Again, we would like to thank you for your thoughtful submission, and for your commitment to Ryerson University. We look forward to continuing to work with you on these and other important issues.

Sincerely,



Michael Benarroch
*Provost and Vice-President,
Academic*



Deborah Brown
*Vice-President,
Administration and Operations*

History of the Creation of Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University

The Catalyst: It had been observed by student union elected leaders and staff and by various University personnel that students were not being treated fairly and that many students had no idea what rights they had as students for ‘fair process and fair treatment’ if allegations were made that they had done something wrong. In addition, there was an interest in finding additional ways and means of improving students’ experience at RU.

The Chronology

Fall of 1993: As a result of his positive experience with the Office of the Ombudsperson at Algonquin College previously, the President of the Continuing Education Students Association at Ryerson (CESAR) approached the President of Ryerson Students Administrative Council (RYESAC), now the Ryerson Student Union (RSU), to work together to lobby for the creation of an Ombudsperson role at RU. A joint proposal was prepared and discussed with Terry Grier, the President of Ryerson University.

Spring of 1994: President Grier established a committee to review ‘Student Services’. This committee organized consultations and received deputations and the RU President asked that the creation of an Ombudsperson Office be investigated. One of the results of the Committee’s work was that the University held a referendum to ask students if they would be willing to pay an additional ancillary fee to fund current and new student services. It was also decided that the referendum would include a question about students’ willingness to have part of the proposed ancillary fee used to fund the establishment of an Ombudsperson office.

Fall of 1995: This referendum was implemented and the student response was positive. The University established a Working Group to create Terms of Reference for the Office of the Ombudsperson.¹⁸

June 1996: The ‘Committee to Establish Ombudsperson Position’ presented its final report on the mandate, reporting structure and selection criteria for an Ombudsperson. The committee members included: Irene Devine (Chair), Acting Dean, Faculty of Business, Al Wargo, Secretary to Academic Council, Keith Alnwick, Registrar, Frank Cappadocia, Executive Assistance, RYESAC, Paul Cheevers and then Victoria Bowman, President of CESAR, Brent Bowes, Past-President, CESAR, Archie Bonifacio and then Claude Sam Foh, President, CESAR. Observers included: Antonella Ceddia, Complaints Investigator, Equity, Harassment & Safety Services, Marion Creery, Director, Student Services, Eva Samery, Faculty, Urban and Regional

Planning, Robert Carley, Program Director, Applied Arts, Continuing Education and then Kileen Tucker-Scott, Acting Program Director, Community Services, Continuing Education.¹⁹

February 1997: The Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University was officially opened on February 1, 1997, 32 years after Simon Fraser University elected its first Ombudsman in 1965, which was also the first Ombudsman role established in Canada.

Interestingly, the idea to create such an Office at RU was raised many times prior to that date. However, due to the collaboration and commitment of particular RU community leaders and stakeholders, the Office finally came to fruition as a result of a four year period of concerted effort and collaboration.

Liz Hoffman, formerly the Ombudsperson at the University of Toronto and Carleton University, was hired as the first Ombudsperson for Ryerson University. Ms. Hoffman resigned in August 2000 and took on the position of Senior Investigator for the Department of National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman – Canada. In addition, Ms. Hoffman served as the Ombudsperson for the Ontario College of Art and Design. Ms. Hoffman earned a bachelor’s degree in Public Administration at Carleton University and pursued post-graduate studies at the Syracuse University School of Public Administration.

Nora Farrell was hired as the Ombudsperson in November 2000 after having served as the Ombudsman for the Canadian Franchise Association and International Franchise Association, and prior to that as the Manager of Complaint Resolution/Investigations for the Ombudsman for Ontario. As an active member of the Ombuds community Nora is the Past-President of the Board for the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman. Nora has earned a Ph.D. as well as a LL.M. from Osgoode Hall Law School at York University and a M.Ed. (Master of Education) from the University of British Columbia. Nora authored “The Evolution of the Idiosyncrasy of the Role of Ombudsman/person in Canada” in *The Nature of Inquisitorial Processes in Administrative Regimes*, Laverne Jacobs & Sasha Bagley, eds. (Surrey, England: 2013) at 325.

In 2001/2002 arrangements were made with CESAR and the Dean of the Continuing Education Faculty to eliminate the waiver that prevented Distance Education and off-campus students from making use of the Office of the Ombudsperson.

¹⁸Elizabeth Hoffman, “Report of the Ombudsperson for the time Period of February 1, 1997 to June 30, 1998” online: Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/ombuds/documents/reports/1997%20-%201998%20Annual%20Report.pdf>> and “Search to Begin for First Ombudsperson” in Forum, September 27, 1996.

¹⁹Irene Devine “Final Report of Committee to Establish Ombudsperson at Ryerson Polytechnic University” (June 17, 1996).

Statistics from 20 years of Operation

10,058

CASES HANDLED

1 IN 5

CASES LED TO AN INTERVENTION BY THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

OVER 200

INVESTIGATIONS WERE CONDUCTED

97

RECOMMENDATIONS WERE MADE IN PUBLICLY AVAILABLE ANNUAL REPORTS. HUNDREDS OF RECOMMENDATIONS WERE MADE ON INDIVIDUAL CASES ON A CONFIDENTIAL BASIS.



The Year in Numbers

Types of Concerns 2016/2017

	16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13	11/12	10/11	09/10	08/09	07/08
TOTAL	541	521	520	483	593	617	571	579	586	558
ACADEMIC ADVICE ²⁰	197	181	151	133	192	177	138	104	103	92
ACADEMIC APPEALS ²¹	62	85	83	95	102	103	107	169	158	142
ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT	40	36	55	41	49	61	70	65	83	64
ACCESSIBILITY	21	23	21	18	27	25	33	10	12	11
ADVANCEMENT & DEVELOPMENT	3	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
ADMISSIONS (UNDERGRADUATE)	20	11	15	20	20	11	17	10	15	25
ADMISSIONS (GRADUATE)	2	4	1	3	4	5	4	5	6	5
ANCILLARY SERVICES	0	2	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	1
CAMPUS PLANNING & FACILITIES	2	3	0	2	0	3	0	1	0	0
CONDUCT – INSTRUCTOR/FACULTY/SUPERVISOR	59	54	61	51	62	53	57	78	43	42
CONDUCT – STAFF	21	12	8	8	8	8	13	14	12	11
CONDUCT – STUDENT	9	6	3	4	4	8	9	4	7	9
CONFIDENTIALITY	0	0	1	3	0	0	4	5	1	0
CURRICULUM ADVISING ²²	8	9	7	4	11	3	7	7	11	18
ENROLLMENT SERVICES	19	19	23	17	29	45	24	37	41	35
FEES	19	21	8	27	14	21	7	7	20	24
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE	23	21	24	16	18	20	16	9	15	13
INFORMATION REQUESTS – NO COMPLAINT	2	0	0	3	1	5	2	7	4	9
LIBRARY	0	0	0	1	0	4	2	2	1	1
OUTSIDE JURISDICTION	15	16	14	9	13	13	13	8	13	9
PRACTICUM/PLACEMENT (ADMINISTRATION & AVAILABILITY)	7	4	22	5	9	11	4	2	7	9
REINSTATEMENT/READMISSION	3	1	5	6	11	14	27	17	15	26
RESIDENCE	0	3	1	0	2	1	3	7	4	3
SAFETY & SECURITY	4	2	2	3	2	5	2	1	2	3
SPORTS & RECREATION	1	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	1
STUDENT SERVICES ²³	1	2	6	6	6	8	4	1	2	2
STUDENT UNIONS/ASSOCIATIONS	3	3	8	7	5	8	3	5	8	2

²⁰This category includes concerns regarding not being able to easily access academic advice from a knowledgeable person.

²¹ Includes Grades and Academic Standing.

²² Includes Transfer Credits and Challenge credits.

²³Including application of Student Code of Non-Academic Misconduct.

Please note that over the past ten years some categories of concern have been removed as the very low numbers of complaints received did not justify their continued inclusion.

Status of Individuals Bringing Forward Concerns & Complaints

	16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13	11/12	10/11	09/10	08/09	07/08
CONSTITUENCY										
ALUMNAE	19	15	7	6	11	10	8	11	22	6
APPLICANT	13	13	10	23	18	13	17	13	25	27
CONTINUING EDUCATION/PART-TIME DEGREE	55	45	62	79	81	87	76	106	95	82
FULL-TIME DEGREE	308	348	322	283	401	416	406	368	385	375
GRADUATE STUDENTS	75	32	58	58	40	49	27	41	25	32
MISCELLANEOUS (PARENTS, STAFF, ETC.)	71	68	61	34	42	42	37	40	34	36
TOTAL	541	521	520	483	593	617	571	579	586	558

Summary of Service Provided

Information:

Providing information on policies and procedures.

Advice:

Providing information and discussing possible options with students.

Intervention:

Taking action to assist in some way to resolve the concern, (e.g. clarifying information, facilitating, mediating, conducting investigations).

	16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13	11/12	10/11	09/10	08/09	07/08
ACTION TAKEN										
ADVICE & REFERRAL	469	424	397	382	484	511	482	493	471	452
INFORMATION	0	2	5	10	1	3	1	2	10	8
INTERVENTION – CLARIFYING	27	38	37	33	48	37	39	42	43	36
INTERVENTION – MEDIATION	0	1	0	1	1	3	1	0	1	1
INTERVENTION – SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY	34	37	63	44	43	49	31	25	31	42
INVESTIGATION	11	19	18	13	16	14	17	17	30	19
TOTAL	541	521	520	483	593	617	571	579	586	558

Website Activity

The website of the Office of the Ombudsperson provides information and links to frequently consulted policies, procedures, deadlines and contact points at Ryerson. It is designed to be as accessible as possible so that users can quickly acquire the knowledge they need to help prevent academic or administrative problems from arising. As well, the information is organized so that students can resolve existing concerns without ever having to contact our office directly.

As we launched a new website in August 2014, 2016/2017 is the first year that we have comparable data for the same time period for two consecutive years. We are pleased to report that there was a 31% overall increase of users from 2015-2016 to 2016-2017.

The most frequently visited pages during the 2016/2017 reporting period were the pages providing information on how to drop courses and programs and what to do in the event of missing an exam or classes.

We analyze the data on an ongoing basis including numbers for new and repeat users and found that 57% of all users visited our website more than once to seek additional information.

Year	Total Users	Average number of visitors/month	Months with most traffic (top 3 in descending order)	% increase monthly from previous year
2014/2015 ²⁴	8,611	718	March, April, January	n/a
2015/2016 ²⁵	15,420	1,285	March, November, April	n/a
2016/2017 ²⁶	20,247	1,687	March, November, October	31%

We also provide a link to an anonymous online questionnaire where individuals who have interacted with the Office can provide feedback on their experience. I would like to express our sincere appreciation to those individuals who have taken the time to provide their assessment and commentary. We make every attempt to use this input to improve our service to the Ryerson community.



²⁴ The statistics presented were collected from August 31, 2014 to August 31, 2015.

²⁵ The statistics presented were collected from July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016.

²⁶ The statistics presented were collected from July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017.

In Appreciation

It is my belief that a complaint is a gift in that we all need feedback, both as individuals and institutions, regardless of what we do or how well we perceive that we do it, in order to improve. As a result, we recognize how privileged we are to be a trusted recipient of the cares and concerns of those individuals who encounter difficulties as it often takes great courage to bring sensitive information forward to a stranger. We also recognize how fortunate we are to also have access to all of the perspectives on the situations brought to our attention. Similarly, it is both a great privilege and a great responsibility to assist individuals to resolve their concerns fairly and we take our obligations to maintain confidentiality, and to think and act impartially and independently, very seriously.

We are grateful to all of the RU community members who engage with us in a constructive and open manner so as to ensure that everyone involved has the opportunity to express their views and to work toward the ultimate goal of fair treatment for all concerned.

I would also like to recognize the members of the Ombudsperson Committee for their respect for the impartiality, confidentiality and independence of the Office and their willingness to provide input, advice and commentary in a timely and considered manner.

I would also like to acknowledge the dedication and high level of care and concern demonstrated by the staff of the Office of the Ombudsperson at RU:

Gemma Kerr, *Assistant Ombudsperson*

Ayesha Adam, *Assistant Ombudsperson*

We are also very grateful to the RU community members whose efforts more than twenty years ago resulted in the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsperson at RU on the basis of very well defined 'Terms of Reference'. Their dedication and foresight provided for an independent, impartial and confidential route for the fair resolution of many thousands of concerns and complaints and have allowed those of us who have had the good fortune to work in this Office to contribute to procedural, substantive and interpersonal fairness at RU.

Respectfully submitted,

Nora Farrell

Ombudsperson at Ryerson University

Appendices

APPENDIX 1:

About the Office

The Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University was established in 1997 via leadership from a community-wide taskforce.

STAFFED BY:

Nora Farrell

Ph.D., LL.M. (Osgoode), M.Ed. (UBC) [Ombudsperson]

Ayesha Adam

B. Proc., LL.M. (UKZN, South Africa) [Assistant Ombudsperson]

Gemma Kerr

B.Sc. (DCU, Ireland), M.Ed. (TCD, Ireland) [Assistant Ombudsperson]

“I want to thank you once again for your confidence and help. It inspires courage and faith, especially to vulnerable students.”



APPENDIX 2:

The Terms of Reference of the Ombudsperson

The role and functions of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University as defined by the Terms of Reference are:

- a) To advise and/or refer members of the University student community as needed about all situations and University procedures concerning which grievances may arise; specifically, to advise students of their rights and responsibilities and of the proper procedures to follow in order to pursue whatever business or complaint they may have. Where such information exists in University offices or publications, the Ombudsperson shall direct enquirers to these sources and emphasize their responsibility for initiating the appropriate actions and for returning to the Ombudsperson if not satisfied with the results;
- b) To investigate, in an impartial fashion, student complaints that may arise against the University or against anyone in the University exercising authority. Complaints may be made by any member holding status as a student of the University community, by former members of the student body or by student applicants to the University (dependent on the discretion of the Office of the Ombudsperson), whether accepted or not at the time of the complaint. Investigations may also begin on the independent initiative of the Ombudsperson in respect of anyone of the above entitled to make a complaint....
- c) To bring findings and recommendations to the attention of those in authority by the most expeditious means possible.

It shall be the special concern of the Ombudsperson that:

- a) Decisions affecting members of the University student community are made with reasonable promptness;
- b) Procedures and policies used to reach decisions affecting students are adequate and consistently applied and that criteria and rules on which the decisions in question are based are appropriate;
- c) Any gaps and inadequacies in existing University policies and procedures that might jeopardize the principles of fairness and natural justice of members within the University student community be brought to the attention of those in authority. It is not the function of the Ombudsperson to devise the new rules and procedures, but to make recommendations and follow these up to the extent necessary for their formulation and/or improvements; and
- d) The complaints received by the Ombudsperson are analyzed on an annual and multi-year basis to determine trends and identify potential for systemic or system-wide problems.²⁷

²⁷ Terms of Reference for the Office of the Ombudsperson (October 2009), online: The Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/ombuds>>.

APPENDIX 3:

Information Illustrating the Size of the Ryerson University Community²⁸

STUDENT ENROLMENT, FFTE²⁹ 2010-2017

Year	Undergraduate Students	Graduate Students
2016/2017	31,575	2,120
2015/2016	30,531	2,048
2014/2015	28,963	1,961
2013/2014	27,369	1,940
2012/2013	25,466	1,931
2011/2012	24,161	1,905
2010/2011	23,237	1,805

CONTINUING EDUCATION STUDENT ENROLMENT 2010-2017

Year	Continuing Education Students, FFTE	Continuing Education Course Registrations ³⁰
2016/2017	2,792	66,461
2015/2016	2,710	66,000
2014/2015	2,673	67,735
2013/2014	3,077	69,549
2012/2013	3,046	68,294
2011/2012	2,213	69,108
2010/2011	2,412	68,532

TEACHING AND STAFF COMPLEMENT 2010-2017

Year	Tenure/ Tenure Track Faculty ³¹	CUPE 1 Part-time and Sessional Instructors ³²	CUPE 2 Continuing Education Instructors ³³	Staff (FFTE) ³⁴
2016/2017	877	300	477	2,278
2015/2016	866	261	524	2,063
2014/2015	856	261	483	1,950
2013/2014	847	250	490	1,905
2012/2013	832	229	431	1,800
2011/2012	808	220	486	1,803
2010/2011	778	228	464	1,718

²⁸ University Planning Office, "Student Enrolment Overview" (2016/2017), online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/upo>>.

²⁹ FFTE stands for Fiscal Full-Time Equivalent. A student's FFTE is the proportion of a full load course load that he or she is taking. E.g. If a program normally includes 20 hours of instruction, a student enrolled in 15 hours of courses would generate 0.75 FFTE (15/20). Online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/upo/FAQ>>.

³⁰ University Planning Office, online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/upo/statistics/ced-2016>>.

³¹ University Planning Office, online: Ryerson University <<http://www.ryerson.ca/upo/statistics/faculty-2010-2020>>.

³² Senior Research Analyst, Ryerson University Planning Office.

³³ Teaching Support Services, Continuing Education -The Chang School. These numbers represent the average number of Instructors engaged to teach courses in the Chang School over the Fall, Winter and Spring semesters for 2010/2011 to 2016/2017.

³⁴ *Supra* note 31.

