



DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY

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**OMBUDSPERSON
OFFICE**

**A N N U A L
R E P O R T**

Prepared For :

Dr. Frank Harvery
Provost and Vice President
Academic

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Associate Vice President
Academic

Commitment to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

The Ombudsperson Office is committed to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. These pillars speak to the cornerstone of Dalhousie University's expressed intention to create a safe community and campus climate that promotes and challenges equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility on its campuses.

By exploring and acknowledging our privilege and biases, we can position our work by acknowledging and actively seeking to ensure students feel safe, supported, and recognized for who they are and their diverse needs.

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people.

We recognize that African Nova Scotians are a distinct people whose histories, legacies and contributions have enriched that part of Mi'kma'ki known as Nova Scotia for over 400 years.



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FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

In the short time I have occupied the role of Ombudsperson, it has become apparent to me that the role is diverse and a unique support for Dalhousie students.

The presence of an Ombudsperson on campus speaks to a commitment to recognizing that students need an avenue to discuss and navigate their complaints and concerns. Additionally, it speaks to the university community being open to understanding those complaints and concerns as a means to develop and evolve how students are supported.

I have come to recognize and appreciate that complaints and concerns are opportunities. By engaging complaints/concerns from this perspective, there is an opportunity to develop and shift

our lens and approach in how we engage with others.

While the Ombudsperson role has been reintroduced at Dalhousie University, there is still work that needs to be done for the office to develop as a hub of fairness, and to support students to understand their rights and responsibilities.

The Third Century Promise speaks of exceptional student service and while the Ombudsperson Office is independent and impartial, exceptional student service can be supported by the office as well as support the efforts of others to achieve this promise.

Carla Britten
CARLA BRITTEN
OMBUDSPERSON

ABOUT THE OFFICE



The Ombudsperson Office recognizes that within Dalhousie there are different levels of power and privilege between us that influence how we work with one another. The Ombudsperson is committed to educating the community and will endeavor to find ways to work together that recognize and challenge inequalities.

The Ombudsperson Office does not advocate for individual students/groups, or the university involved in a disagreement but provides confidential, independent, and impartial support to help resolve any university-related concerns. The office works with students, faculty, and staff to ensure just, fair, and equitable treatment of every student. The approach of the office is to turn from assigning blame to one party and supporting the reasonable resolution of complaints.

If a person believes the service and support they received was challenging to access, disrespectful, inaccessible, or unresponsive to their needs, their reaction can be passionate and reactive. In bringing forward a complaint, individuals are seeking a remedy, a means too right a wrong, accountability, and to prevent similar situations from occurring. When post-secondary institutions, like Dalhousie, value complaints and put supports in place to assist students who wish to make a complaint, such as an Ombudsperson, they are recognizing the importance of feedback. In learning from complaints, a campus climate of respect

and accountability can thrive.

What does an Ombudsperson do?

- Provide general resource information and make appropriate referrals
- Identify and explain relevant university processes/policies
- Work with a student(s) to explore and strategize options for problem-solving
- Empower students to deal directly and effectively with their concerns
- Facilitate discussions and make inquiries for clarification to seek resolution
- Give sound and practical advising
- Listen and provide an objective perspective

The Ombudsperson Office is dedicated to upholding the standards of practice of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons which include:

- Independence
- Impartiality
- Confidentiality
- Accessibility

These standards of practice involve creating a safe space for students to share so they can be encouraged to problem solve to resolve their complaints and concerns.

How to reach the Ombudsperson Office?

ombuds@dal.ca

902-494-2665

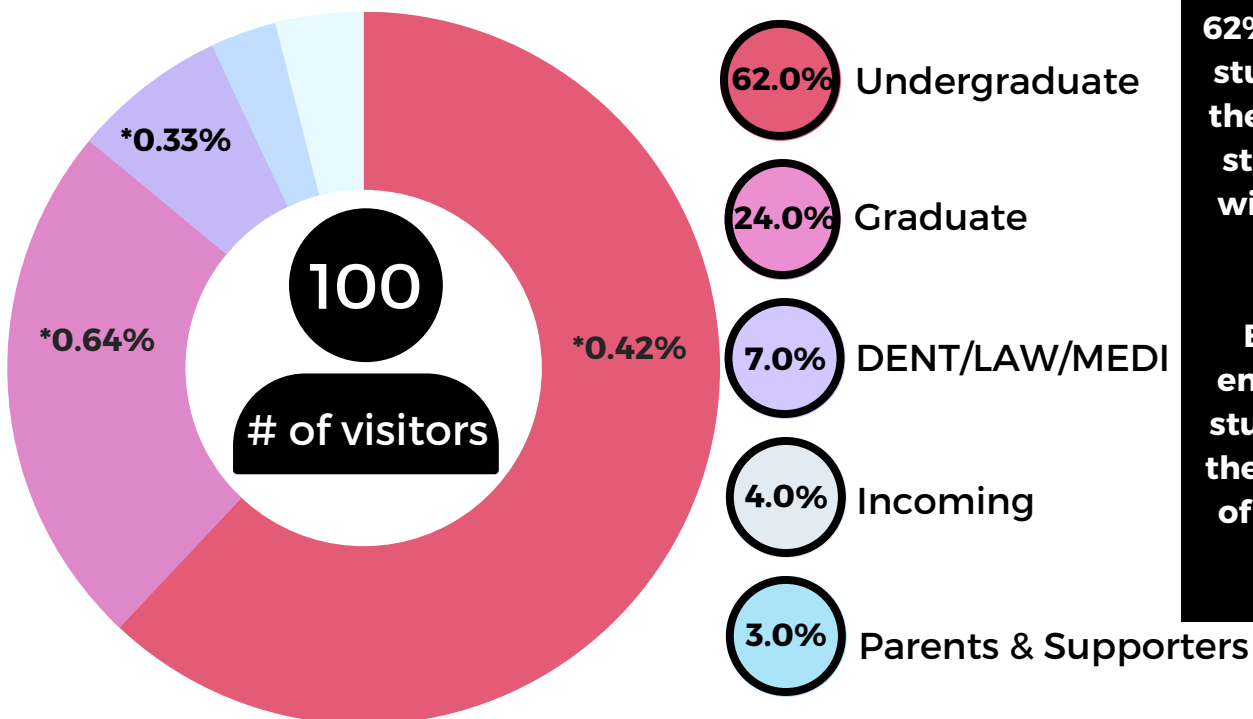
Student Union Building, Room 452

OFFICE EXPERIENCE: NUMBERS & STATISTICS

The following numbers and statistics outline the experience at the Ombudsperson Office in 2021-2022.

Numbers and statistics are representative of November 2021 to August 2022 as the Ombudsperson began their position in November.

VISITOR OVERVIEW



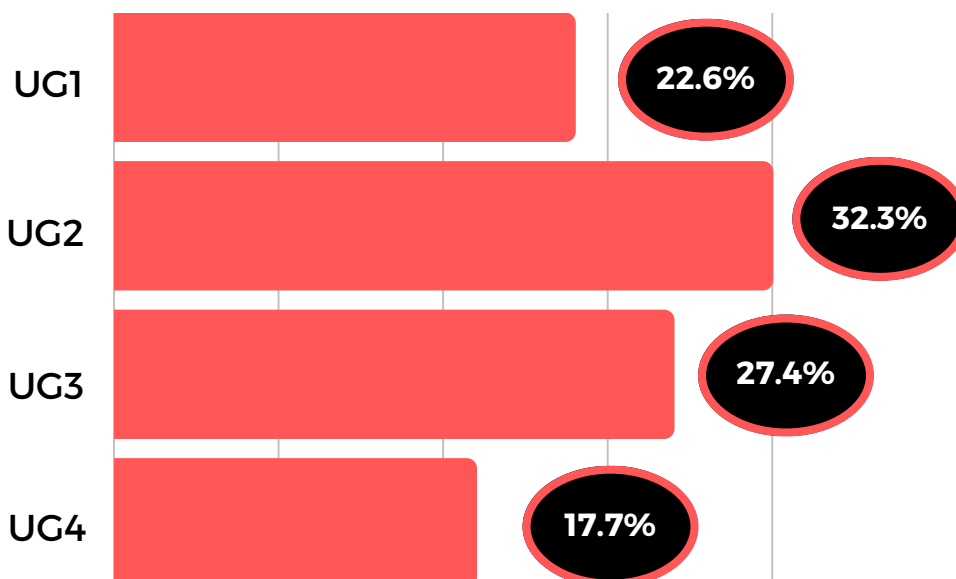
62% of undergraduate student visitors were the largest number of students to connect with Ombudsperson Office.

Based on student enrolment, graduate students represented the largest proportion of student visitors at 0.64%.

**Enrolment
Numbers**

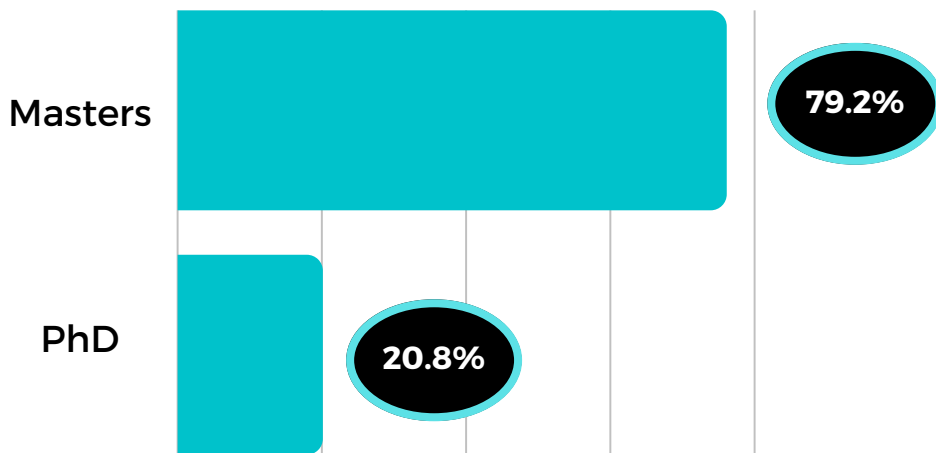
*Percentage of student visitors by number of students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and DENT/LAW/MEDI

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS



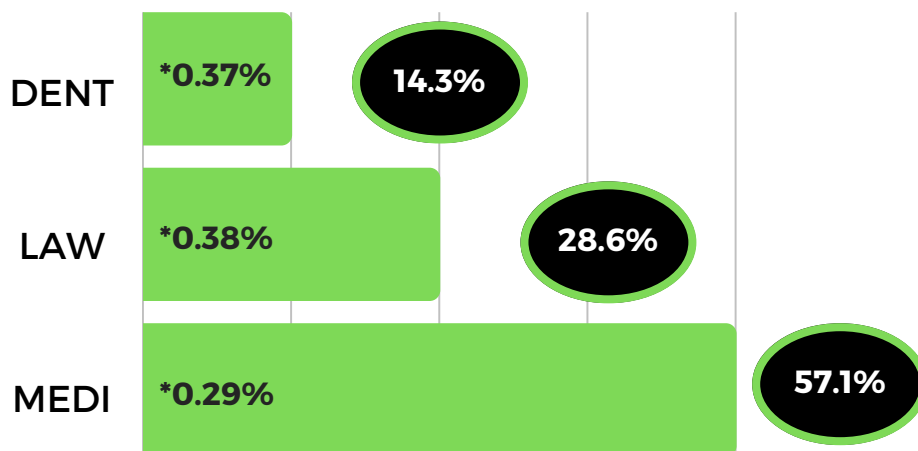
For undergraduate students, those studying in their 2nd and 3rd year accounted for 59.7% of undergraduate student visitors who connected with the Ombudsperson Office.

GRADUATE STUDENTS



Graduate students completing their Master's degree accounted for 79.2% of graduate students who connected with the Ombudsperson Office.

DENT/LAW/MEDI STUDENTS



Students in Medicine accounted for largest group of students visitors from DENT/LAW/MEDI to connect with the Ombudsperson Office.

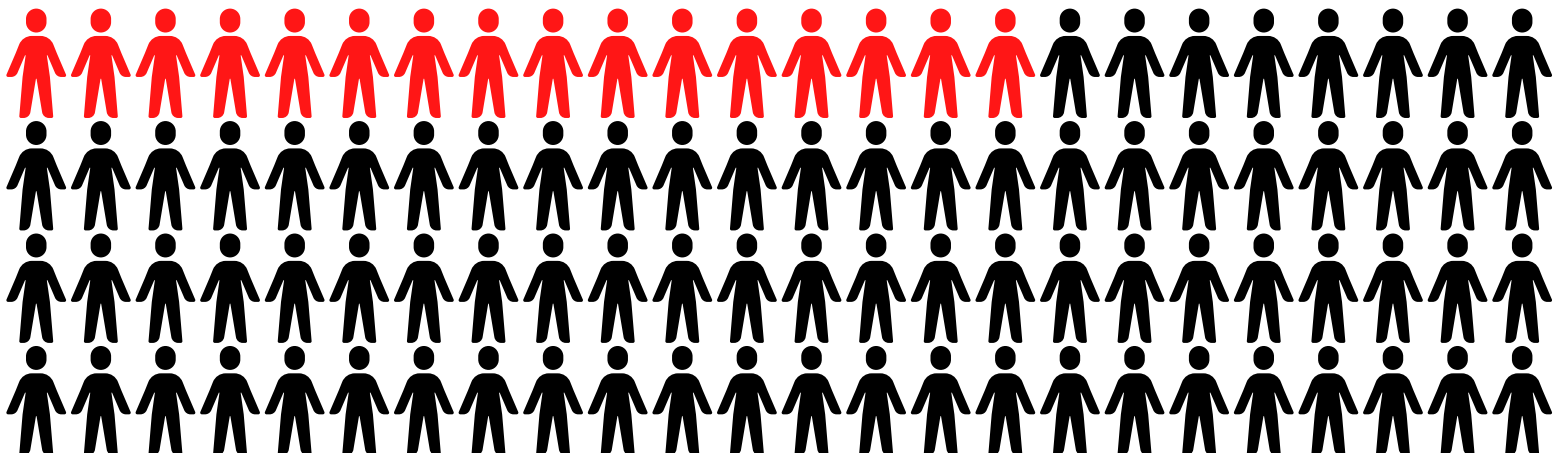
Based on student enrolment, students in Law represented the largest proportion of student visitors at 0.38%.

*Percentage of student visitors by number of students enrolled in DENT, LAW, and MEDI

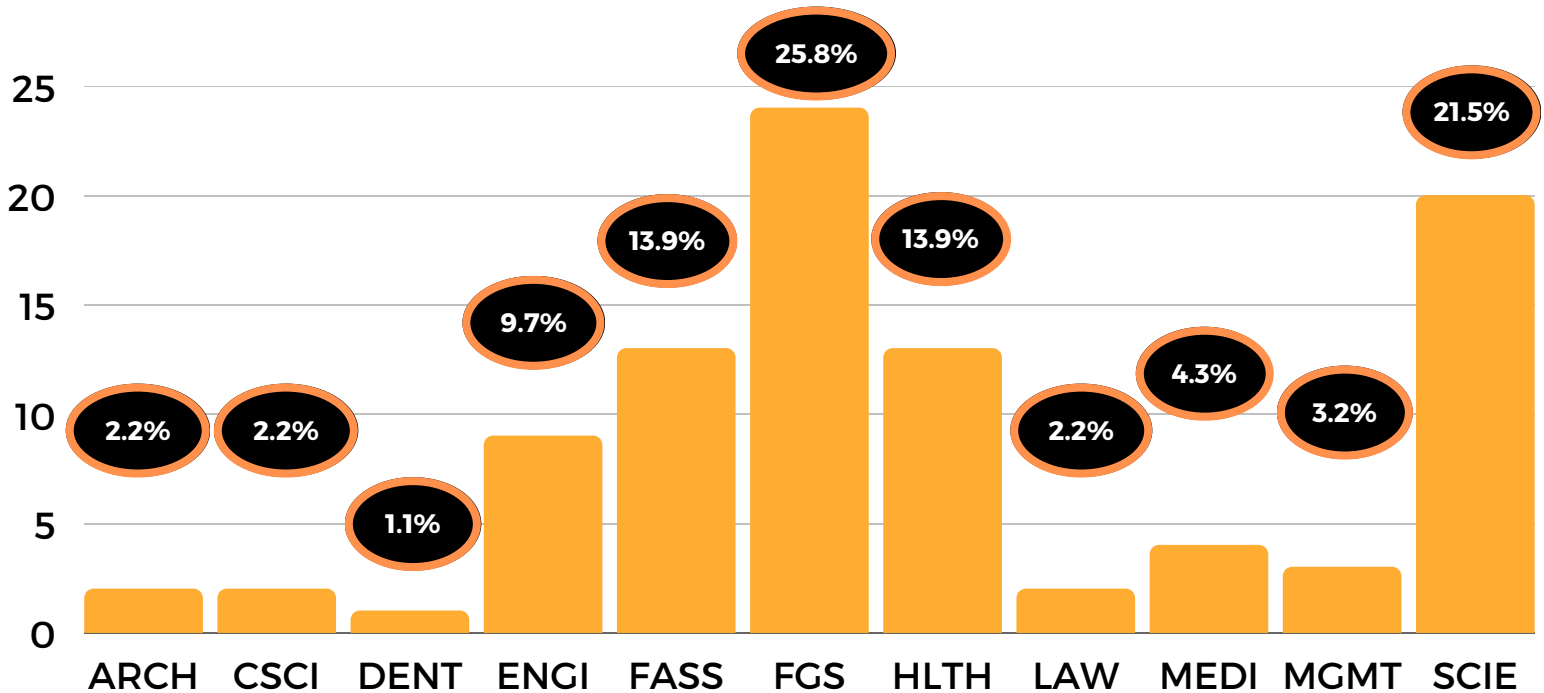
Enrolment Numbers

Of the 97 student visitors, only 16 students were international students accounting for 16.5% of all visitors to the Ombudsperson Office.

Based on student enrolment, this accounts for 0.33% of international students.

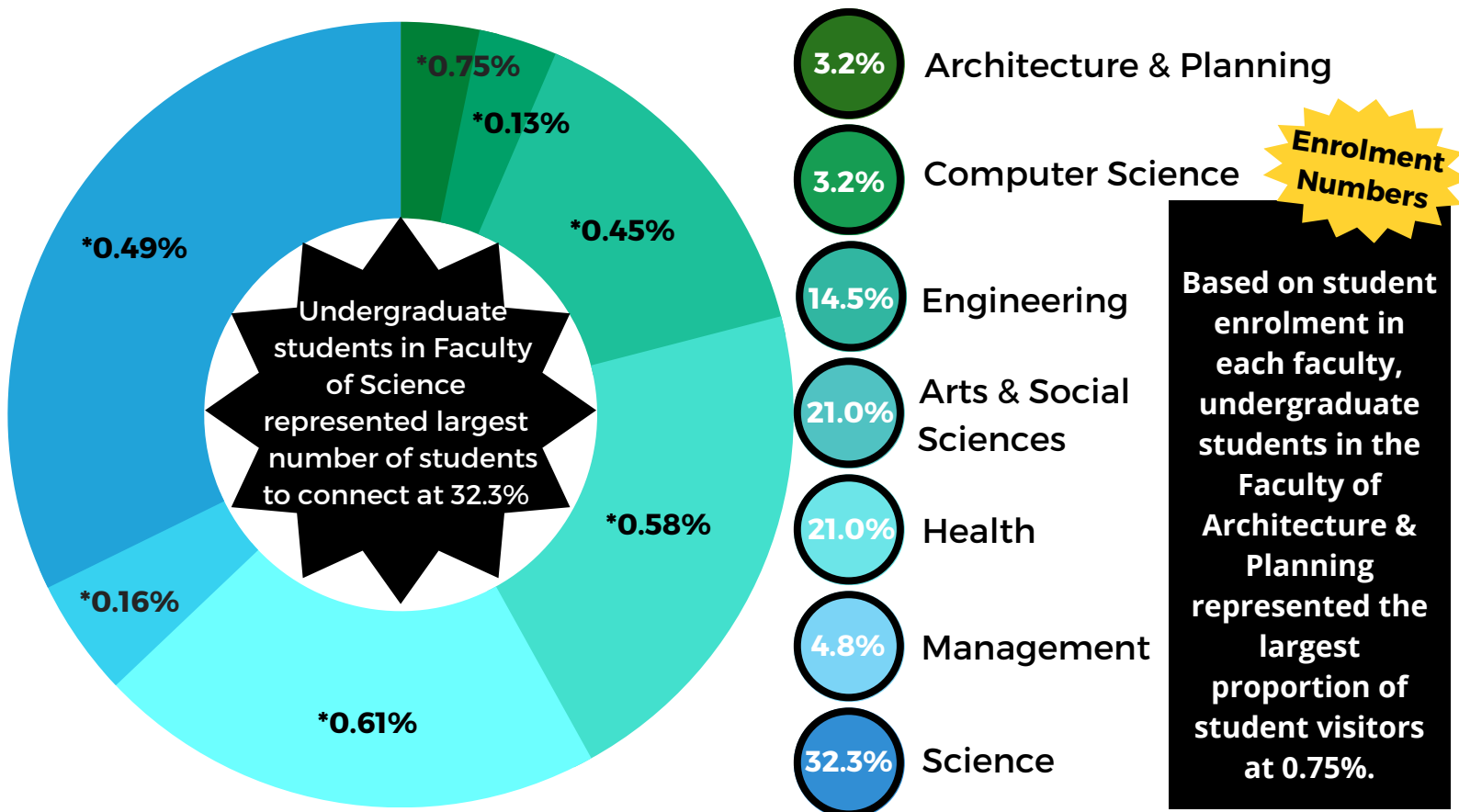


STUDENT VISITOR BREAKDOWN BY FACULTY



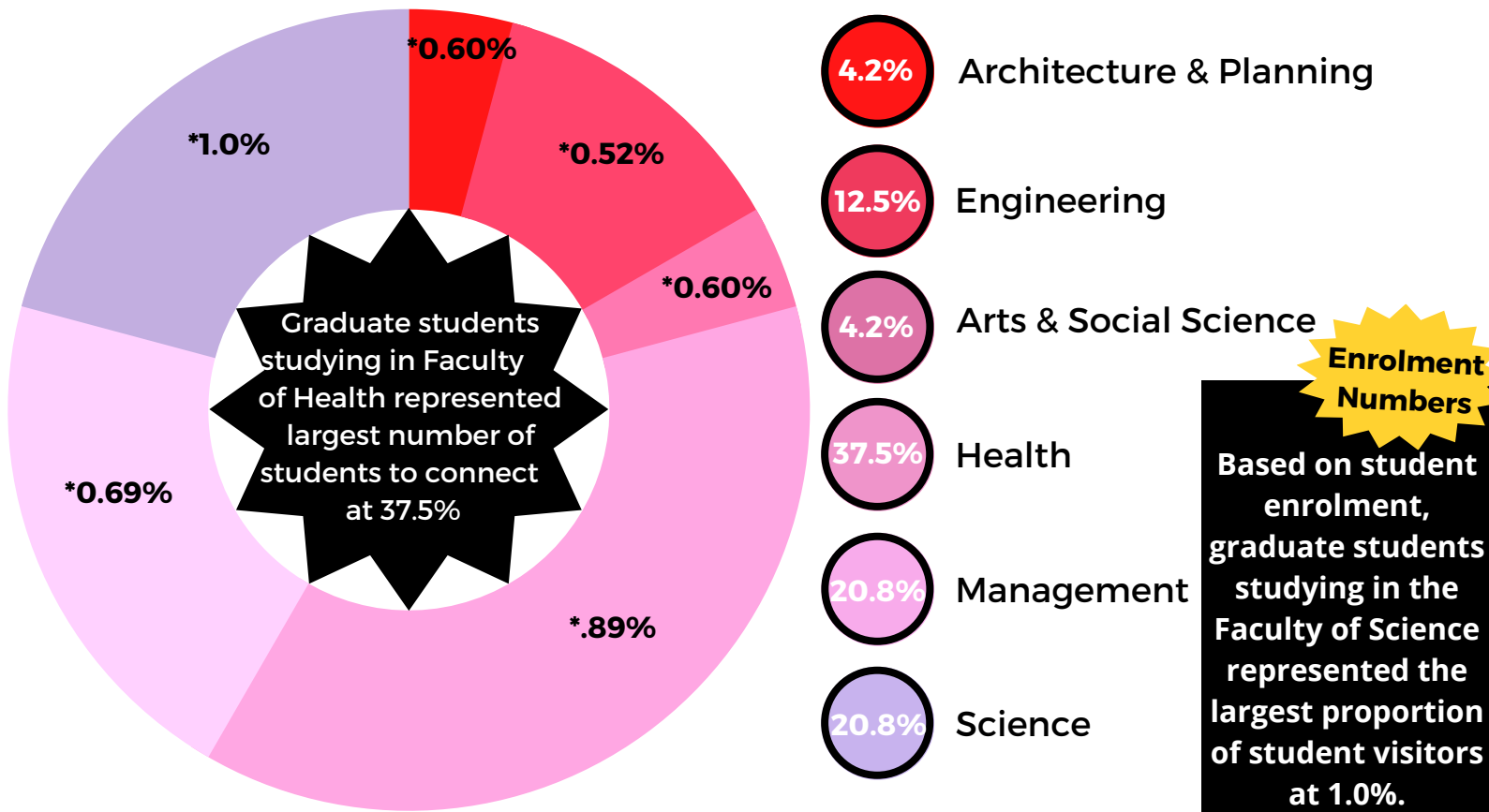
Student visitors in the Faculty of Graduate Studies represented the largest faculty to connect to the Ombudsperson Office at 25.8%.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS BY FACULTY



*Percentage of student visitors by number of undergraduate students enrolled in each faculty

GRADUATE STUDENTS BY FACULTY



*Percentage of student visitors by number of graduate students studying in each faculty



Students in DENT/LAW/MEDI had a separate category to distinguish the unique nature of their programs.



As noted earlier, students in Medicine accounted for the largest number of students to connect with the Ombudsperson Office while students in Law represented the largest proportion of students to connect based on enrolment.

NATURE OF INQUIRY

Concerns/complaints from visitors to the Ombudsperson Office were categorized depending on the nature of their inquiry and were designated into broad categories to provide an overview to encapsulate the nature of the concern/complaint. Categories included: academic, equity, admissions, facilities, finances, interpersonal, covid protocols, and non-academic.

For concerns/complaints that were academic and involved interpersonal conflict, sub-categories were created to outline the specific nature of the concern/complaint.

COMPLAINT/CONCERN CLASSIFICATION



ACADEMIC

48.0%



EQUITY

8.0%



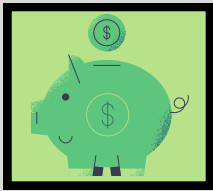
ADMISSIONS

3.0%



FACILITIES

4.0%



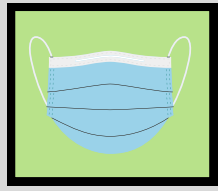
FINANCES

4.0%



INTERPERSONAL

25.0%

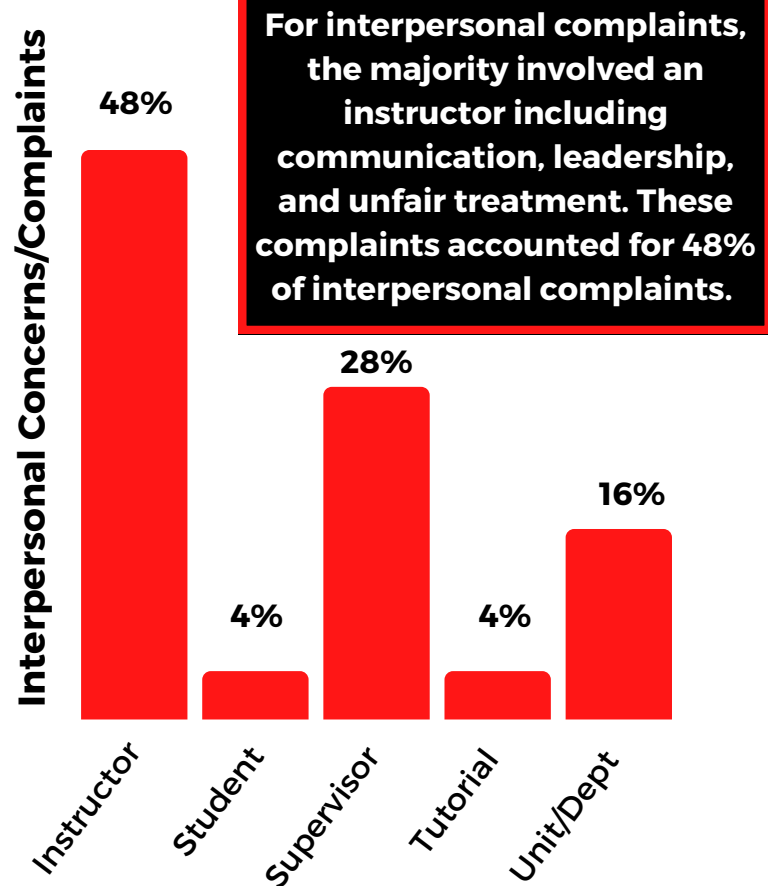
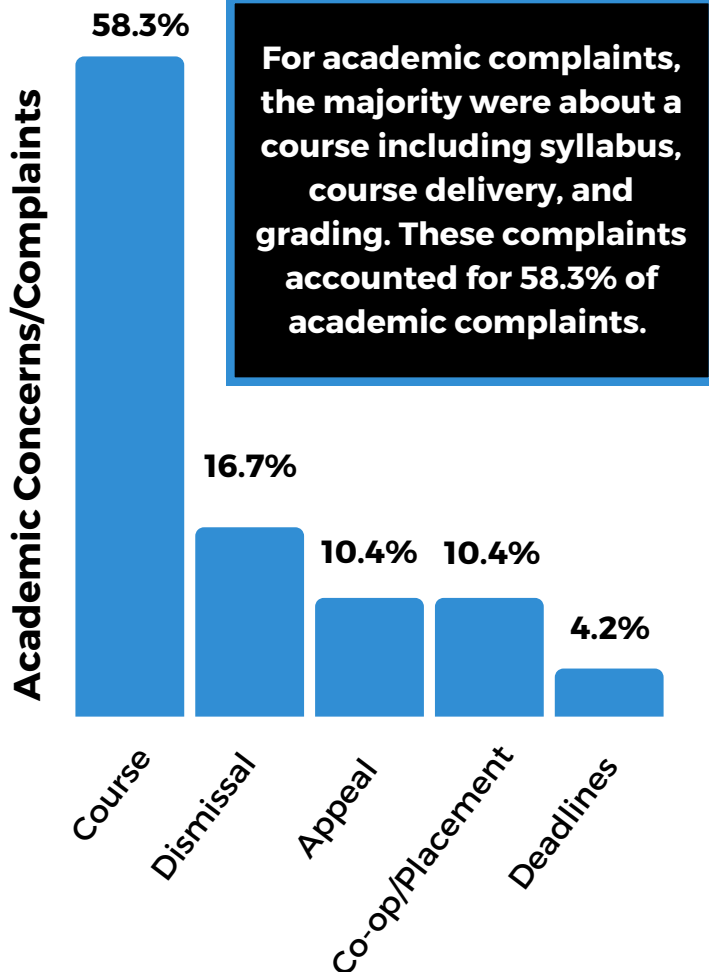
COVID
PROTOCOLS

5.0%

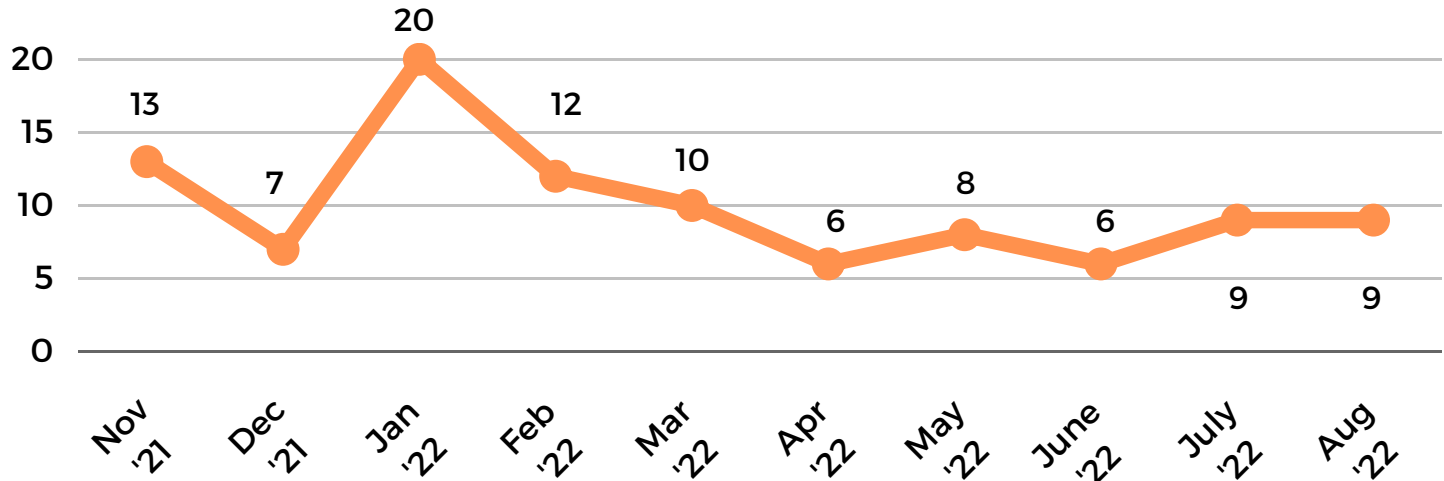
NON
ACADEMIC

3.0%

48.0% of
complaints/concerns
shared by student
visitors were
academic.



APPOINTMENT NUMBERS BY MONTH



January 2022 was the busiest month for the Ombudsperson Office with 20 student visitors; accounting for 20% of appointments throughout the year.

Types of Support Provided



Advice &
Information
21.0%



Intervention
15.0%



Referral
10.0%



Advice,
Information &
Referral
41.0%



Coaching
10.0%



Facilitated
Conversation
3.0%

The support provided by the Ombudsperson Office varied depending on the nature of the concern/complaint and the approach to problem-solving the student visitor wanted to engage in.

The main type of support provided to visitors included advice, information, and referral at 41.0% of all appointments.

79.0%
appointments
were on Teams

8.0%
appointments
were by email

5.0%
appointments
were in person

8.0%
appointments
were by phone

With the changes to remote classes and service delivery in January, it is not surprising the majority of visitors met through Teams.

PRESENTATIONS/WORKSHOPS



APRIL 27 5:00PM - 6:00PM

Office of the Ombudsperson - Support for Students and Fairness

Ombudsperson Office delivered information sessions for students, staff, instructors, and administrators. These sessions were offered monthly and provided an opportunity connect and promote the Ombudsperson Office.

These sessions represent an intentional approach to "get the word out" and establish the work of the Ombudsperson Office on campus.

Thank you for the session and for sharing presentation and resources.
-Session Participant

Fairness and Bias

Time

1:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m. ADT

If you are interested in attending, please email ombuds@dal.ca. The link to the event presentation will be emailed to you on the day of the event.

Cost

Free

Contact

Carla Britten, Ombudsperson
ombuds@dal.ca
902-494-2665



The Office of the Ombudsperson is pleased to invite you to learn more about the connection between fairness and bias.

Ombudsperson Office offered a presentation on Fairness and Bias to staff, instructors, and administrators. The feedback from the presentation has been helpful in guiding future offerings. The delivery of the presentation will be reviewed for applicability and uptake from the University community. A presentation on Fairness and Bias will also be offered to students.

TREND HIGHLIGHTS

Exploring and examining trends helps inform the work of the Ombudsperson Office by facilitating recommendations to the University and Dalhousie Student Union. Framing a complaint/concern as an opportunity for growth and change engages students to voice their frustrations and participate in university policies and procedures. By making student visitors heard and valued, they are learning to advocate and how to utilize resources and tools to problem-solve. Student visitors are acquiring life skills they can bring forward to future experiences beyond Dalhousie.

The University is supporting positive change for students and embracing the opportunity to adapt in response to student feedback. The confidential, impartial, and independent support of the Ombudsperson Office supports students to resolve their complaints/concerns and navigate policies and procedures.

As an Ombudsperson does not act as an advocate for a student(s) or the University, they provide a listening ear and forum for individuals to share and be heard. Demonstrating compassion and empathy, it can allow an individual(s) to have their voice and experience heard. Not all complaints/concerns brought to the Ombudsperson involved a problem-solving approach but provided a venue for a student(s) to share their experiences and be heard.

Thank you so much for holding space for me and for validating all of my concerns. I really appreciate all of the time you have spent working on this issue.
-Student

Regardless of whether a student(s) wanted to engage in problem-solving or not, by adhering to the standards of practice, the Ombudsperson is positioned to learn from experiences and how those experiences inform policies, procedures, and practices at the university.

Inclusion and Accessibility for International Students

A noticeable trend, based on the data, were the small number of international students that connected with the Ombudsperson Office. Of the 97 student appointments during the 2021-2022 academic year, only 16.5% of students were international students. This trend highlights the need for intentional outreach and education of the Ombudsperson Office to ensure inclusion for all students.

Student Visitor Example: A student who identified as an international student reached out to the Ombudsperson Office after being referred by another office and shared they were not aware of the office nor what the office did to support and guide students. In helping the student

understand their situation and the approach to problem-solving they wanted to utilize, they found the office a safe space for them to share and get resources and advice.

While this case scenario highlights one visitor to the office, their experience draws attention to the need for intentional outreach to ensure all students are aware of the Ombudsperson Office and how it can be a resource to students.

Interpersonal Conflict with Instructors

From the data collected at the Ombudsperson Office on complaints/concerns, interpersonal conflict with instructors came up for 48% of students. Interpersonal conflict, as discussed by students, included instructor communication, leadership, and unfair treatment.

Student Visitor Example: One student shared an experience where they expressed an active engagement to work with their instructor to learn and grow but found the interactions were not equitable and threaded with intimidation

We found it extremely helpful and comforting to chat with someone genuinely kind and empathetic amidst all this nonsense. Also, thank you for sending along those resources.
-Student Group

and bias causing the student to disengage and share concerns of unfairness in terms of grading.

These experience for students highlight further follow-up and tracking. It will be essential to understand if there are linkages for these students in terms of courses and faculties.

Balanced Support and Information Sharing

In listening to student complaints/concerns, what was observed was an imbalance in giving information/resources to students and gatekeeping processes/policies speaking to a systemic issue. Fairness does not mean a person receives the outcome they want but it does require processes should be transparent and consistent. Fair processes should allow someone to have a forum to be heard (procedural fairness) and ensure decisions are made without bias and align with policies and procedures (substantive fairness) as well as consider individual/party circumstances where individuals are treated with respect (relational fairness).

Student Visitor Example: A student reached out to the Ombudsperson Office sharing they did not know where to go or what to do. The student reported they had reached out and were given advice on their rights and options for appeal but felt defeated before deciding to engage in the appeal process. The student reported they were told the appeal would likely not be successful. The student was

overwhelmed and deflated before they even engaged in the appeal process believing that even if they appealed, it would likely not be successful.

This example highlights the importance of the balance required between providing advice, information, and support to students and not gatekeeping processes which can influence their understanding of their rights and fair processes.

When students seek guidance being honest and forthright is crucial. By focusing on potential outcomes of a process there is a positioning of gatekeeping and power imbalances that can deter and diminish advice and support. This requires a balance to listening and sharing but not to the point of minimizing or portraying processes (such as appeals) as no-win situations which curtail a student's rights and implies a process is predetermined, unfair, and immovable.

It is not a question of giving false hope but affirming that our processes are fair and allow arguments to be considered as part of the decision. In discouraging and gatekeeping options for a student, even if unintentional, we are doing a disservice to students and to our processes.

I really appreciate your direction and guidance throughout this process.

-Student

Currently, there is not one specific solution or recommendation but rather something to be cognizant of and explore in terms of a systemic issue. This experience requires further attention and focus to understand how it could impact and influence fairness.

Course Experience with Syllabi

In reviewing student visitor complaints/concerns, 58.3% of academic complaints involved the course including syllabus, course delivery, and grading. Students discussed confusion and a lack of transparency and understanding of course rules and expectations. Several students sought to understand their rights through the syllabus policy when course changes were made in terms of delivery and grading. Students demonstrated active participation in understanding their rights under the syllabus policy and how the policy applied to their situation.

Dalhousie syllabi represent a contract between the University and a student (Dalhousie University, 2021). When a student enrolls in a course they are agreeing to the terms of this contract, the contract must be clear, and students should know what is expected of them (Mansbach, 2016).

The syllabus structures the learning outcomes, assessments, expectations, and responsibilities (Tophat, n.d.). It is crucial students do not make assumptions about course components and deadlines but rather turn to the syllabus to guide their

understanding of rules and procedures as outlined by the instructor. However, when this information is not clear and/or absent from a syllabus, the recourse and/or options for informal and formal processes for students to follow-up are not currently in the syllabus policy.

Student Visitor Example: Several student visitors to Ombudsperson Office expressed they had expectations and understanding of the availability of make-ups for tests/midterms but when it came time to re-schedule it was not possible. In reviewing the syllabus for course requirements with the students, there was no clear indication make-up tests were not an option.

In another case, a student expressed confusion about the changes and pivots during their course with the syllabus being removed, edited, and reposted. The student expressed concerns of fairness but also uncertainty in trying to ensure they were following course objectives and expectations when those keep changing.

Final Thoughts

These trends align with student complaints/concerns and are opportunities for change and for shifting approaches to supporting students in both the social and academic environments.

The Third Century Promise, Dalhousie's strategic plan, includes four interconnected pillars. The first pillar addresses exceptional student

experience, and the success of our students as the highest obligation and reason for Dalhousie's existence and purpose. This pillar has several action items including delivering excellent student support programs and services representative of evolving student needs and identities to increase student retention and inclusive of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility of systems, policies, and practices.

The Ombudsperson Office seeks to align with this pillar by providing student support and service in recognition of the unique complaints and concerns students bring forward. Leidenfrost (2013) discussed there is a growing pressure on higher education institutions to respond more effectively to the diversity of students and their expectations. In having an Ombudsperson Office it sends a message Dalhousie cares about students and values informal dispute resolution.

In examining trends brought forward, the Ombudsperson Office is positioned to focus on exceptional student service in recognizing the diversity of students at Dalhousie and helping them to participate in problem-solving toward resolution.

I wanted to thank you again for the helpful resources you have provided me. I will not hesitate to contact you again in the future if I run into any more issues or just have any questions in general.

-Student

RECOMMENDATIONS

Review of Prior Recommendations

There were no formal recommendations from 2020-2021 that require review.

Consideration to Recommendations

Recommendations are developed from the trends in data brought forward by student visitor complaints/concerns. Recommendations from the Ombudsperson Office represent an opportunity to acknowledge student experiences and provide insight to how complaints/concerns can be addressed through collaboration with University partners.

The recommendations focus on syllabi both policy and education. The syllabus policy was last updated in June 2021 so an update will not be conducted for a few years. The recommendations are cognizant of this reality but present an opportunity for future amendments and communication with instructors.

These recommendations are also contextualized and recognize the experience of our student cohorts. For over two years, due to the pandemic, students have experienced pivots and changes in the way they learn and in the environment in which they learn.

In reviewing student visitor complaints/concerns, 58.3% of academic

complaints involved the course including syllabus, course delivery, and grading.

Examples included students who did not understand how the student declaration of absence applied and implications of not being able to write a test (no make-up and re-weighting).

Section F5 of the syllabus policy aligns with Academic Calendar 16.1, outlining alterations that affect assessment components, the weight of individual assessment components, or examination requirements with a value of 10% or more must have the approval of at least two-thirds of enrolled students to be valid. The current syllabus policy does not address the recourse and/or option for students to follow-up informally or formally when this approval is not achieved.

Section B in syllabus policy outlines the policy applies to all credit-bearing undergraduate courses and some credit-bearing graduate courses (special topics, modules, and directed studies) which are dynamic and may require several changes from offering to offering. However, there are dynamic undergraduate courses offered at the University such as clinical and field placements, and independent studies. While the syllabus policy accounts for all undergraduate courses, dynamic courses such as these that may require pivots to delivery should also be addressed in course syllabi and the policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Syllabus Policy (including Appendix A)

A. Engage Senate Learning and Teaching Committee (SLTC) to consider adaptations and amendments to the syllabus policy and appendix A in the following areas:

1. Review and discuss the informal and formal options/steps for recourse and follow-up if a student disagrees that the application of the syllabus policy in their course(s) and what is outlined in Appendix A. Currently, the syllabus policy and Appendix A do not address the recourse and/or option for students to follow up informally or formally if in disagreement with their experience in the course and what is shared in terms of responsibilities in the course syllabi. Is this recourse policy specific or faculty specific? Regardless if follow-up rests within the policy or with the faculty, how this information is made accessible to students in syllabi so they understand their rights and responsibilities when in conflict is pivotal.
2. Clarity in syllabus policy in terms of section F5. Section F5 aligns with Academic Calendar 16.1, outlining that alterations that affect the assessment components, the weight of individual assessment components, or examination requirements with a value of 10% or more must have the approval of at least two-thirds of enrolled students to be valid. While the policy addresses alterations that affect assessment components, clarity is required to outline what aspects of the course require two-thirds approval. For example, in situations where there needs to be a date change to a test/midterm. This will impact an assessment to a course where the instructor offers options to students. In consideration of this clarity, the syllabus policy should outline what areas instructors may have flexibility in making syllabi changes and amendments. By providing clarity and outlining these details, it can support both students and instructors.
3. For dynamic credit-bearing undergraduate courses (clinical and field placements, independent studies) there should be clear communication in the syllabi which represents the unique course context. Syllabi should reflect the dynamic experiences of the academic and practical learning course components. As such, communication in the syllabi should create transparency for students as well as support instructors when there are required changes to a course. In so doing, there is more clarity and clear expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendation #2: Syllabi Education

B. With a focus on student engagement and responsibility, providing opportunities for students to learn how to read and understand their course syllabi to achieve full understanding and take responsibility for their learning.

By acknowledging and addressing syllabi education, there exists an opportunity to recognize the challenges encountered by student cohorts who have been pivoting between in-person and online learning over the past two years due to the pandemic whether studying at Dalhousie, transferring, or coming from high school.

Syllabi education also represents an accessible approach to facilitating learning and sharing rights and responsibilities.

The diversity of our students and their needs requires we do not fall into passive approaches to information sharing and making assumptions about what students understand and have access to for support (i.e. first generation students). Providing educational opportunities impresses upon students the value and importance of course syllabi as well as their rights and responsibilities.

1. Inclusion of syllabi education in New to Dal Orientation programming/materials in partnership with the Bissett Student Success Centre.

2. Development of a video by the Studying for Success Team describing and reviewing how to read a syllabus and what to do with it once a student receives it. The video can serve as a resource for students and a resource for instructors to share with their students to encourage student engagement, ask questions, and reinforce the responsibility of students.

These recommendations represent a holistic opportunity to engage in policy amendments and considerations as well as education. It is not enough to recommend policy or education alone but to support and build upon one another recognizing how we can improve student experiences and promote instructor approaches and course implementation.

This annual report will be made available on the Ombudsperson website for the Dalhousie community. Presentations on the annual report will be held to share report information and recommendations to promote transparency and support.

STRATEGIC & OPERATIONAL PLANNING 2022-2023

**1****Outreach and Collaboration with International Students****2****Workshops and Presentations****3****Establish the Ombudsperson Office as a hub of support for students, faculty, and staff****4****Online Presence and Resources****5****Membership to Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO)****One**

Collaborate with the International Centres on hosting information sessions. Outreach to associations and societies that support International students.

Two

Develop and deliver workshops in collaboration with campus supports to address student trends and experiences at the Ombudsperson Office.

Three

As we return to in-person classes and support, work to establish the office as a hub of support and recognized resource for students.

Four

Utilize feedback from students and campus partners to develop resources. Build upon the Ombudsperson Office online presence with a robust website, resources, and evaluations.

Five

Become a member of ACCUO to facilitate collegial connections and best practices.

Thank You

The Ombudsperson Office at Dalhousie University would like to extend a warm thank you to the Ombuds Advisory Committee members for their insight, support, and expertise: Verity Turpin, Rick Ezekiel, Bob Mann, Patricia Laws, Isabelle French, Lisa DeLong, Aparna Mohan, and Sydney Keyamo.

I would like to extend a thank you to Dalhousie students for reaching out, sharing their experiences, and engaging with the University.

While the list would fill this page, I am grateful to the many Student Affairs Offices, Academic Faculties and Departments, University Administrators, Legal Counsel, Human Rights and Equity, and Dalhousie Student Advocacy Services for sharing their space, their time, and ongoing dialogue and inclusion of the office.

A thank you to Dr. Harvey for supporting my professional development, growth and independence in finding my way within the role.

Finally, I would like to thank Jennifer Murray and Jacqui Langille for their patience and support in helping me get the office organized and making introductions.



DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY



OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE

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902-494-2665

**STUDENT UNION BUILDING,
ROOM 452**

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