

2016/
2017

**Annual Report
Office of the Ombudsperson, Dalhousie University
August 31, 2017**

ACTIVE LISTENING/MINDFUL REFLECTION

Note from the Ombudsperson:

I am pleased to present the first annual report of the office of the Ombudsperson for Students, Dalhousie University. Mandated by the office's Terms of Reference, this report provides feedback to the university regarding activities of the Ombudsperson ("Ombuds") and the types and trends of student concerns brought by visitors to the office.¹ It is the goal of the Ombuds that the addition of an Annual Report further assists the university in meeting its strategic goals and objectives.

For this inaugural report I have chosen the title *Active Listening/Mindful Reflection* as it best captures the spirit of my practice over these initial months. I have spent my time listening to students with an attempt to understand their concerns, speaking with faculty, staff and administration, and carefully considering where we can come together to build community.

The Office of the Ombudsperson opened on November 7, 2016 as a joint endeavor of the Dalhousie Student Union and Dalhousie University to provide an independent, confidential, impartial and informal service to students regarding any university-related concern. It is open to all current and former students of Dalhousie, and while the Ombuds works primarily with individual students, the office also aims to enhance the relationship between students and the institution.

An independent office, the Office of the Ombudsperson does not follow traditional reporting structures within the university. The Ombudsperson reports to the Provost level, through an Advisory Committee equally comprised of Dalhousie administration and faculty members and Dalhousie Student Union members. Current Advisory members include: DSU President Amina Abawajy, Vice-Provost and Dean of Student Affairs Arig al Shaibah, Indigenous Student Representative Aaron Prosper of the Dalhousie Indigenous Student Collective, General University Counsel Karen Crombie, and Associate Dean of Engineering Dr. Pemberton Cyrus. I owe these and many other Dalhousie University

“We have to find ways to listen to students and what they are saying.”

-Dr. Richard Florizone,
President,
Dalhousie
University

Year in Review

May 15, 2017

¹ https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/safety-respect/student-rights-and-responsibilities/where-to-get-help/ombudsperson.html

“At Dalhousie University we must accept responsibility for creating the conditions for everyone to flourish and to belong.”

-Belong Report,
Dalhousie University

community members a huge debt of gratitude for their generosity of time and spirit, and ongoing support over the past 10 months.

From 1971 through 2013, the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) operated an Ombudsperson’s office; this office, however, lacked resources, funding, and authority. In February 2014 the DSU Equity & Accessibility Office led the call for a full time Ombudsperson position at Dalhousie. In 2015 the *Report of the Task Force on Misogyny, Sexism and Homophobia in Dalhousie University Faculty of Dentistry* echoed this call in its recommendations.² From the Administration’s perspective, the implementation of the office was seen as a way for the university to advance strategic priority 1.3: “Strengthen student experience, leadership development and additional support for our locally diverse and international students.” (*Inspiration and Impact*, 2014).

Dalhousie’s *Belong Report* (2014) noted that isolated complaints add to difficulties in compiling a composite picture of the experiences of exclusion and discrimination within individual faculties and units, and within the university as a whole.³ The *Belong* report further explained that the university seeks to “gather aggregate data in order to understand the experiences of members of our community with the aim of creating a more inclusive Dalhousie that celebrates its diversity.”

The Office of the Ombudsperson’s strategic priorities align with the university’s: the office exists to address student concerns and in doing so assists the university in moving towards its more aspirational goals, including cultivating a

² <https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/cultureofrespect/DalhousieDentistry-TaskForceReport-June2015.pdf>

³ <https://www.dal.ca/about-dal/leadership-and-vision/dalforward/strategic-direction/infrastructure-and-support/belong.html>

culture of respect and inclusivity. Listening to and understanding the student experience, and reflecting on ways that individuals within - and the university as a whole - contribute to that experience, is necessary to ensuring an inclusive environment that supports student success.

We all come from different places and perspectives. Our relative degree of privilege will colour how we see and experience our environment. Making space for diverse voices to be heard, is, as Dr. Florizone pointed out, essential to moving towards our goals of being an inclusive community.

The independent, impartial and confidential nature of the office allows the Ombuds to hear serious concerns from individuals who might not otherwise come forward, and subsequently provide the university with feedback that it might not otherwise receive. As you read this report, I invite you to stay open and curious, especially to feedback and information that does not reflect your experience or perspective.

Diane Hawco,
Ombudsperson for
Students

PART I – THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON

Activities of the Office of the Ombudsperson

November 7, 2016 through August 31, 2017 was a time of intensive orientation, learning and relationship building within Dalhousie. In addition, I became an active member of both the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudsman (ACCUO) and the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO). The Office has moved location and is now located in room 452 of the Student Union Building.

To familiarize myself with Dalhousie, I have reached out to faculties, administration and student groups across all campuses, and have received student visitors from all faculties. I have also had contact with all areas of service delivery within the university, including: Student Affairs, Human Rights & Equity Services, the Center for Learning and Teaching, The International Centre, the Bissett Student Success Centre: Academic Advising and Career Services, Legal Services, Secretariat, the Student Accessibility Centre, and Student Health and Wellness. I have met with Residence Life staff, International Center Advisors, Black Student Advisor and Indigenous Student Advisors as well as many other advisors within the faculties, each of whom play integral roles in supporting students during their time at Dalhousie. I have met and consulted with members of the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU), South House and the Dalhousie Student Advocacy Service (DSAS).

During this time, there were also many logistical and administrative matters to be dealt with, including ensuring secure printing services and the development of a secure database accessible only to the Ombudsperson. Since arriving at Dalhousie, I have met with Deans and Associate Deans in council, maintained a presence at Senate and Board of Governors, participated in health and wellness presentations, student and faculty orientations, and furthered my own professional development in many ways, including attending the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons and the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman bi-annual conference in May 2017.

Ombudsperson

- *Independent*
- *Confidential*
- *Impartial*
- *Accessible*

As someone new to the Dalhousie environment, I have found myself time and again contacting people within the university to try and understand procedures and policies. Dalhousie is a large and, by necessity, bureaucratic institution, and while there are many services and policies that are standardized, many are not: faculties and departments often operate with their own rules and procedures. As Ombudsperson, I have the great privilege of access to the most senior levels of university administration and faculties, and without their assistance there would have been times when I may not have been able to provide advice to students. Navigating the university's many policies and procedures can be especially difficult for students, who do not have the benefit of such access, nor the skills or familiarity with the university structures to navigate complex and unclear processes.

Student Advocacy Service

The Ombudsperson acts as an informal advisor to the Student Advocacy Service, a peer led service funded by the Dalhousie Student Union and operated with the assistance of a great many student volunteers from the Schulich School of Law. Volunteers provide advice and advocacy to students as they navigate university processes, including, but not limited to: Academic Integrity processes, Academic Appeals and Student Code of Conduct processes. The value added by this group of dedicated law students cannot be understated. Student Advocates assist hundreds of students a year, and are a valuable asset not only to students, but to the university itself. Student Advocates act as a mechanism for ensuring fair and transparent processes, thereby assisting to further university values and goals. They have been a valuable source of information to the Office of the Ombudsperson, reporting on both individual cases and systemic trends.

The Work of Ombudspersons

As Ombudsperson, I practice in accordance with the principles and standards of practice outlined by the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO), and am primarily concerned with the rights of every person to be treated fairly. I act as a source of information and advice on rules and procedures and help to identify systemic problems and weaknesses in institutional policy and practice.

The Office of the Ombudsperson at Dalhousie provides support to students who want to resolve any university related concern by focusing on fairness, equity and respect. The Ombudsperson assists students to work towards problem resolution, and in doing so recognizes that conflict, in unearthing and bringing to light competing interests and

needs, is an essential component to the growth and development of both the student and the university.

The Office of the Ombudsperson at Dalhousie provides information about policies, procedures, rights and responsibilities; makes referrals to university officials and other problem-solving and supportive resources; provides advice and assistance in analyzing problems, reframing issues, developing options and evaluating appropriate courses of action; provides coaching or feedback to help students/staff or faculty address and resolve issues; may employ conflict resolution processes, including but not limited to fact-finding, third-party intervention, shuttle diplomacy and mediation; may provide suggestions, ideas and comments to all involved to assist in the resolution of a concern, or to prevent similar situations from arising in the future; submits an annual report to the university community; and, remains well informed about policies, procedures and changes within Dalhousie and participates in regular professional development activities.

Standards of Practice

The Office of the Ombudsperson at Dalhousie offers an Independent, Impartial, Confidential, Informal and Accessible service to all students. The office is structured to function independently from administration and from student, faculty and staff associations. The office employs informal methods of resolution, and does not replace or usurp university policies or processes.

As an *independent* entity, the Ombudsperson does not have authority to make or substitute decisions for the university or for student, faculty or staff associations. Except in an advisory or consultative capacity, I serve only as Ombudsperson.

All visitors and enquiries are handled in a strictly *confidential* manner. The office does not reveal any identifying information about visitors unless a decision has been made that the Ombudsperson will intervene. Office files containing information about student visitors are kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to the Ombudsperson and a secure desktop database has been developed by the Ombudsperson to allow for the retention of statistical information that forms the basis of this annual report.

The Ombudsperson acts as an *impartial* source of information and problem solving, and does not operate as an advocate for individual students, nor represent or defend the interests or position of the university in specific cases.

It is important that the office be *accessible* to the student body, that students are aware that the office exists, understand the functions of an Ombudsperson, and is housed in as highly visible a location as possible while still being able to maintain the confidentiality of student visitors.

Fairness and The Practice of Ombudspersons

The office of the Ombudsperson operates from a lens of administrative fairness and equitable treatment. Feeling treated fairly often has less to do with outcomes and more about how the person was treated by decision-makers throughout the process. Being treated fairly by those with decision-making authority, especially in difficult or stressful circumstances, has a significant impact on student experience, success and retention.

Basic principles of *procedural fairness* in administrative decision-making include:

- Providing information to students about a decision that might affect them
- Giving advance notice of the criteria on which the decision will be made
- Providing an opportunity to share their side of the story
- Offering a response or decision within a reasonable time

Fairness does not mean that everyone will be treated the exact same way. This point cannot be emphasized enough. Some decision makers equate notions of formal equality, “if I do it for one, I have to do it for all” with fairness. In reality, treating everyone the same often results in substantive inequalities. When you treat everyone the same, regardless of circumstances, you uphold existing structures of privilege and oppression.

Fairness is not an attitude. It's a professional skill that must be developed and exercised.

- *Brit Hume*

Being fair requires a nuanced decision-making process that takes into account all relevant circumstances, as opposed to strict reliance on the blanket application of a policy that was never designed to anticipate all situations and circumstances. What fairness demands of the decision-maker will vary depending on the circumstances. The more serious the potential consequences to the student, the more procedural protections will be required. This is especially important in the case of a final decision.

There are additional dimensions to a fairness model employed by Ombudspersons that relate to how people *feel* about how they have been treated during a decision-making process. Elements of **relational fairness** include being

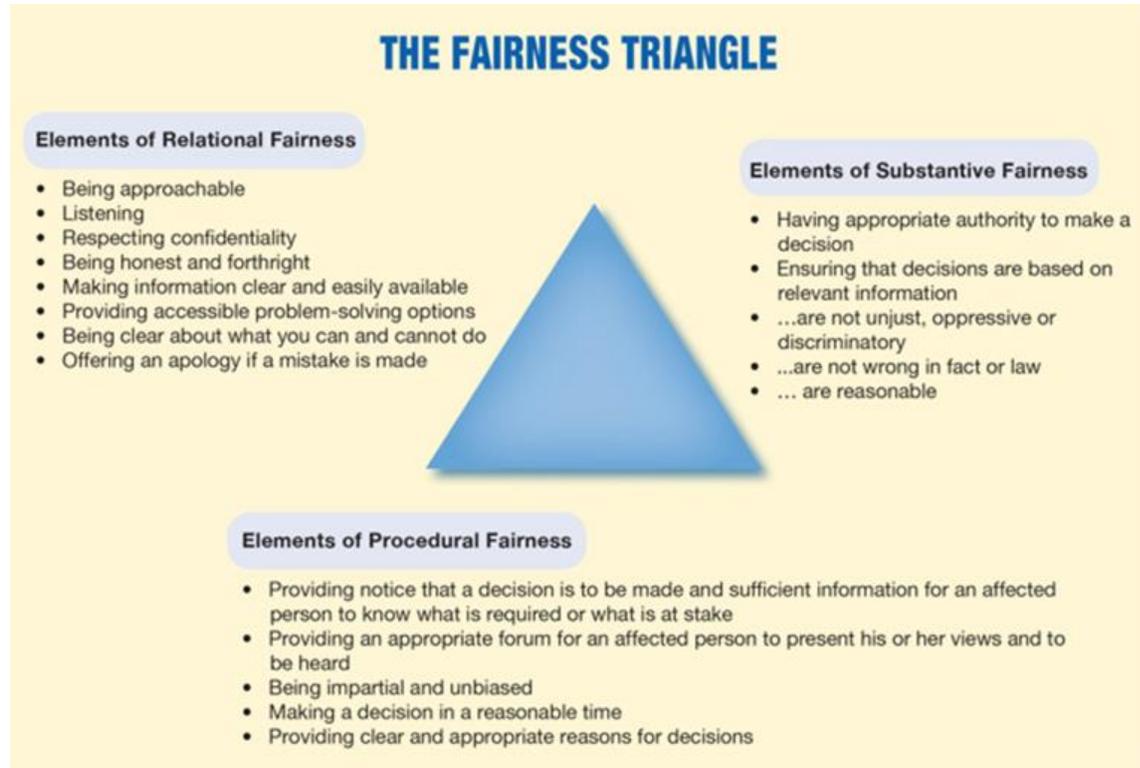
approachable, listening to understand, being clear about what you can and cannot do, and offering an apology when mistakes are made. People are more likely to accept adverse decisions if they have been treated in a way that allows them to retain their dignity, speak and be heard, and feel respected throughout the process.

The Fairness Triangle

Ombudsman Saskatchewan (2012) articulated the dimensions of fairness as a triangle, and this was further refined for post-secondary use by the Ombuds office of the University of Victoria. Sides of the triangle represent:

- *Procedural Fairness* – how a decision is made
- *Substantive Fairness* – the decision itself
- *Relational Fairness* – how a person is treated/perceptions of fairness

Substantive and Procedural Fairness are measurable. Relational Fairness is not measured, it is perceived, based on interpretations of behavior. When conflict or potential conflict arises, it is relational fairness that is more vulnerable to emotional influence and personal bias. Even with the best of intentions, we can engage in behavior that is perceived to be unfair. Respect, concern, kindness and compassion all contribute to feelings of fairness and creating the trust that is necessary for acceptance of sound decisions.



©Ombuds office at the University of Victoria (“Because Fairness Matters”) adapted from the Ombuds Saskatchewan fairness triangle (“Promoting Fairness”)

Intentionally considering all three elements of the triangle -- substantive, procedural and relational fairness -- increases the likelihood that decisions will not only be fair, but that they will be seen to be fair. Relational aspects of fairness are especially important to students because a) relational issues are one of the most significant contributors to students feeling that they have been treated unfairly; and, b) when relationships with instructors and supervisors break down, it is the student who bears the brunt of the negative outcomes, whether in lost time, failures, loss of supervision, loss of references, or withdrawal. Within Dalhousie, ensuring a high degree of relational fairness is an important step towards attaining the universities strategic goals, and especially the goal of increasing retention and degree completion

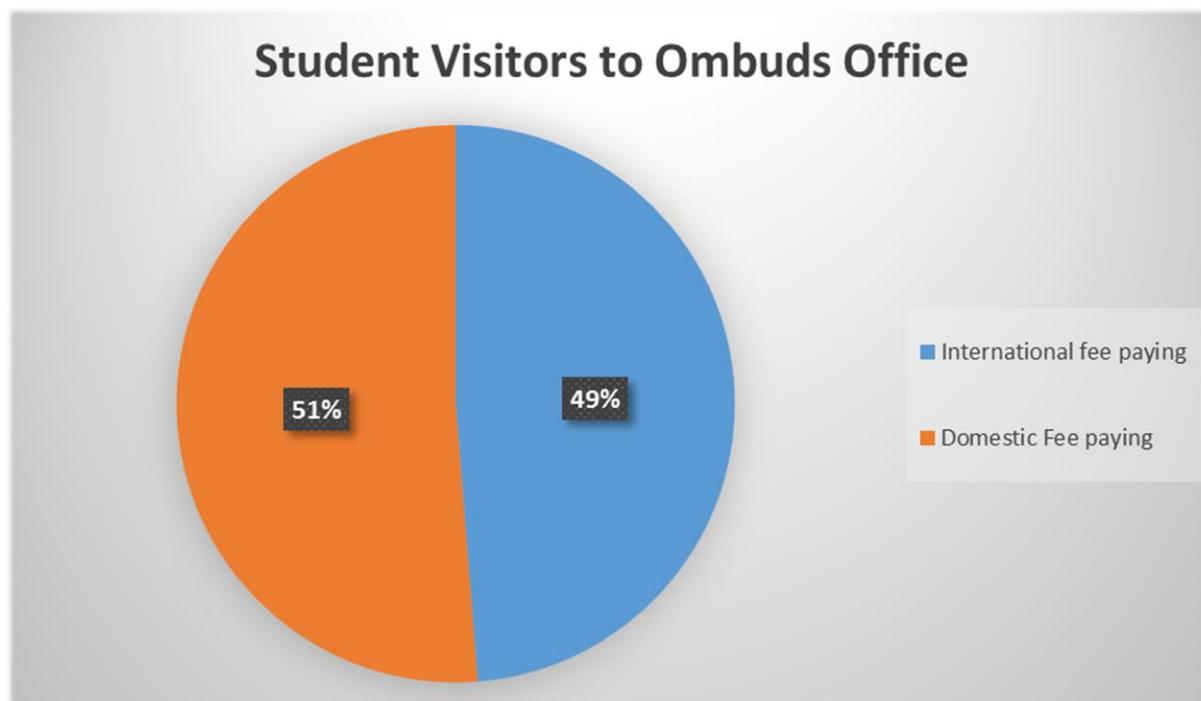
I am writing just to thank you for all the time and effort you have put towards my case. I almost gave up and didn't even want to keep trying. - Student

PART II STATISTICAL REPORTING

The office opened on the Ombudsperson's first day on campus, November 7, 2016. During the period November 7, 2016 through August 31, 2017, the office saw 119 individual visitors, and answered inquiries of an additional 29 more via phone and email only. There were 235 scheduled and drop-in meetings with student visitors over that period of time. In addition to in-person meetings, there were follow up contacts over the phone and via email, in some cases over a period of several months.

The service is still in its infancy; however, I was struck by the accuracy with which students paired their concerns with the mandate of the office: overwhelmingly, students presented with concerns about not being treated fairly, and with wanting to understand their rights and obligations.

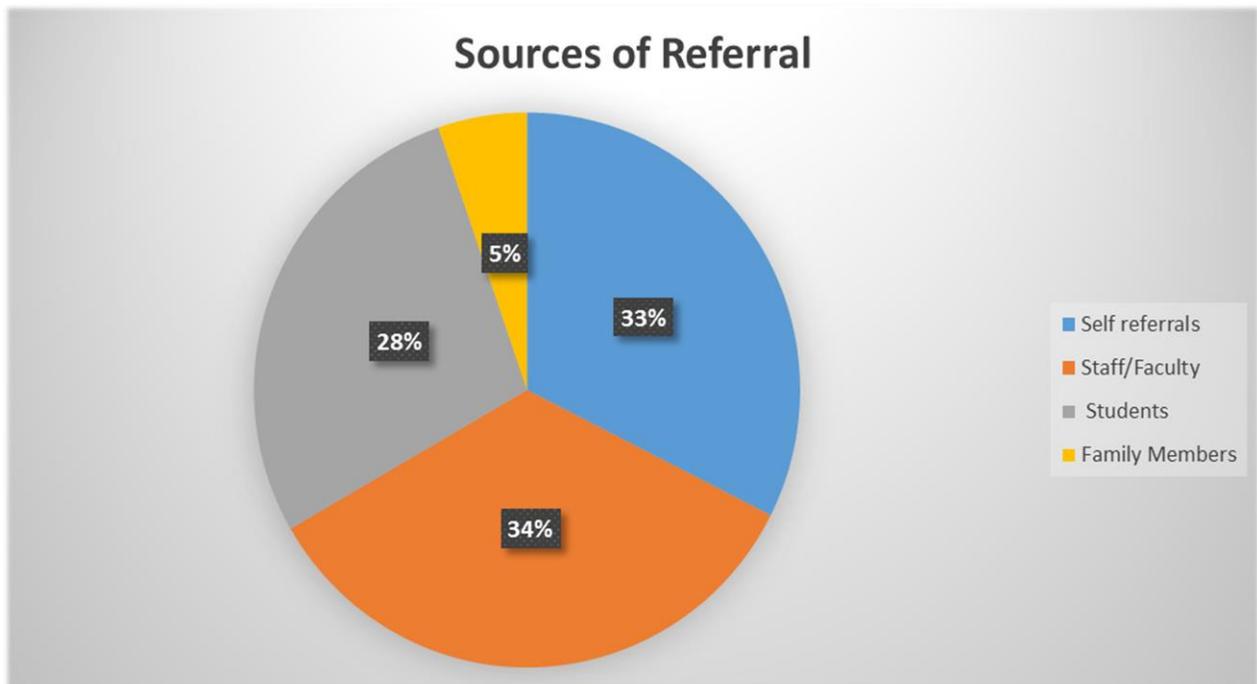
From November 7, 2017 through August 31, 2017, the Office of the Ombudsperson saw 119 separate student visitors. One of the most interesting findings is the backgrounds of the students who are coming to the office. While International Students represent roughly 1/5th of the overall student population, they represented half of the students who sought the services of the Office of the Ombudsperson.



SOURCES OF REFERRAL

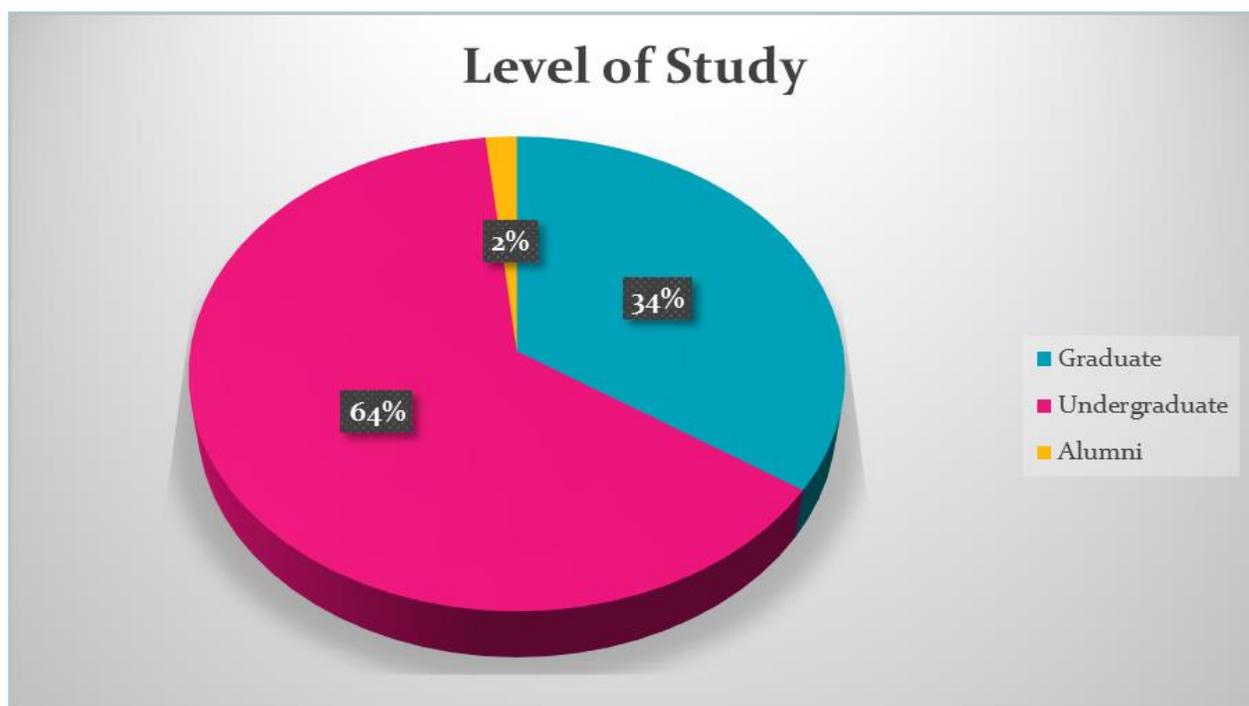
Statistically, students were equally:

- self-referred
- referred by other students and family members
- and referred by staff/faculty



STUDENT VISITORS – LEVEL OF STUDY

- 64% of student visitors were undergraduate students
- 34% graduate
- 2% Dalhousie Alumni*

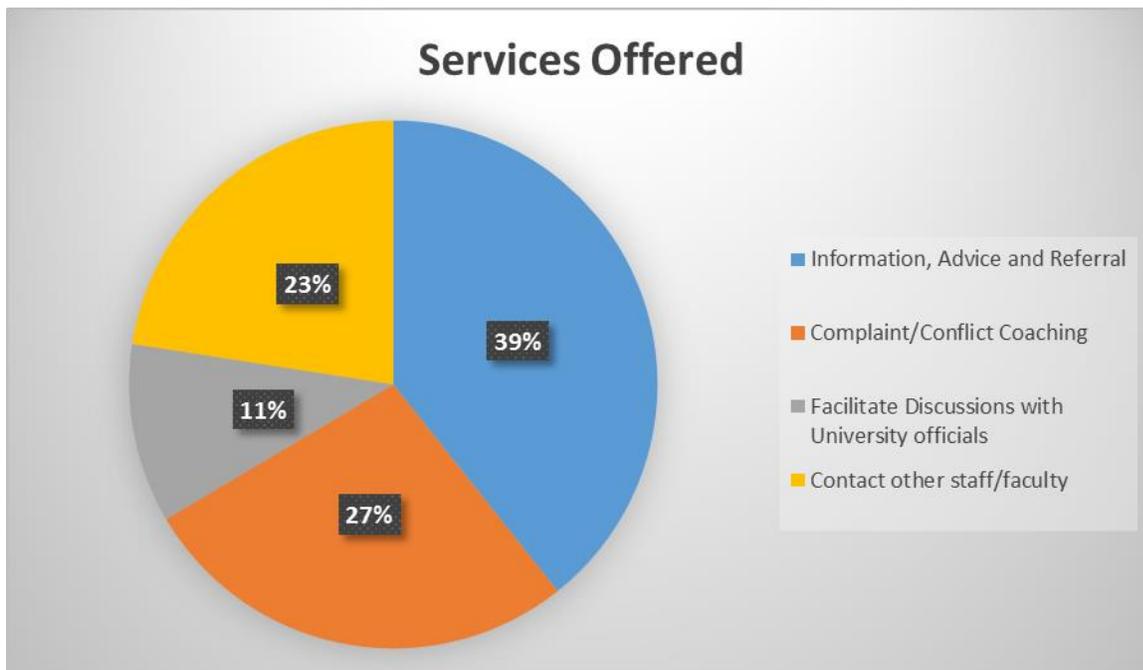


* The Office of the Ombudsperson will see Alumni visitors with concerns relating to their time at Dalhousie.

Services Offered

The type and extent of services offered by the Ombuds varies depending on the circumstances that are brought forward by student visitors. During the first 10 months of operation, the Ombuds offered:

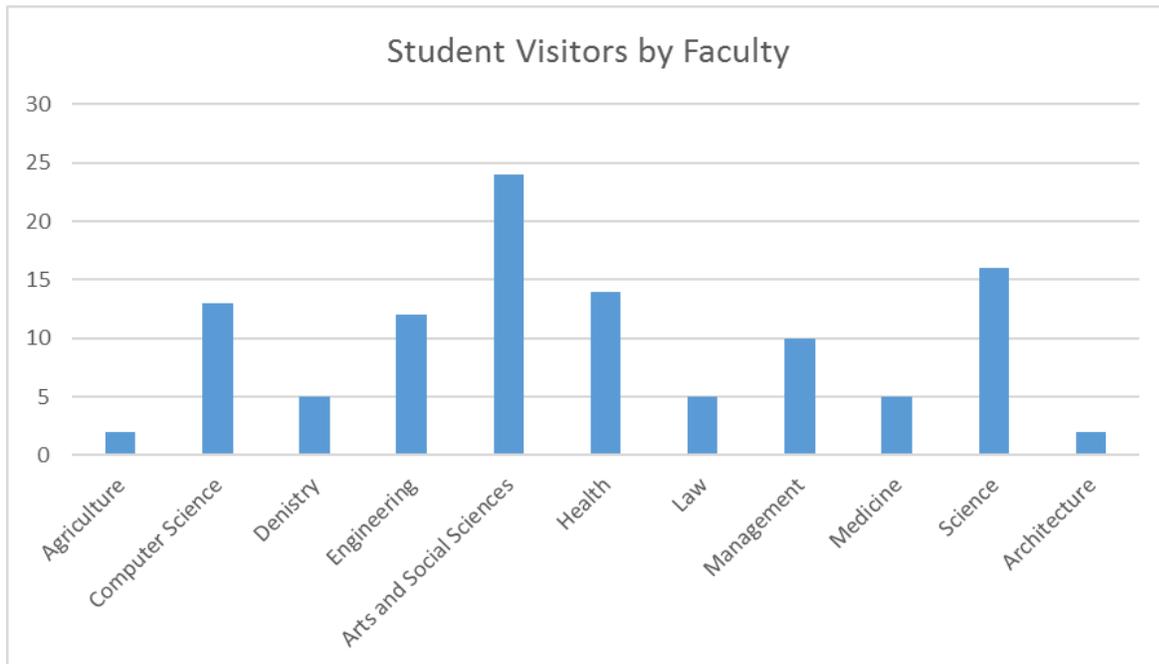
- information, advice and referral only in 39% of cases
- conflict and complaint coaching in an additional 27%
- contacted other staff or faculty to clarify a situation in 23% of cases
- intervened, in the form of shuttle diplomacy and facilitating conversations in 11% of cases.



Note: Currently, there is no mandate for investigation.

Student Visitors by Faculty

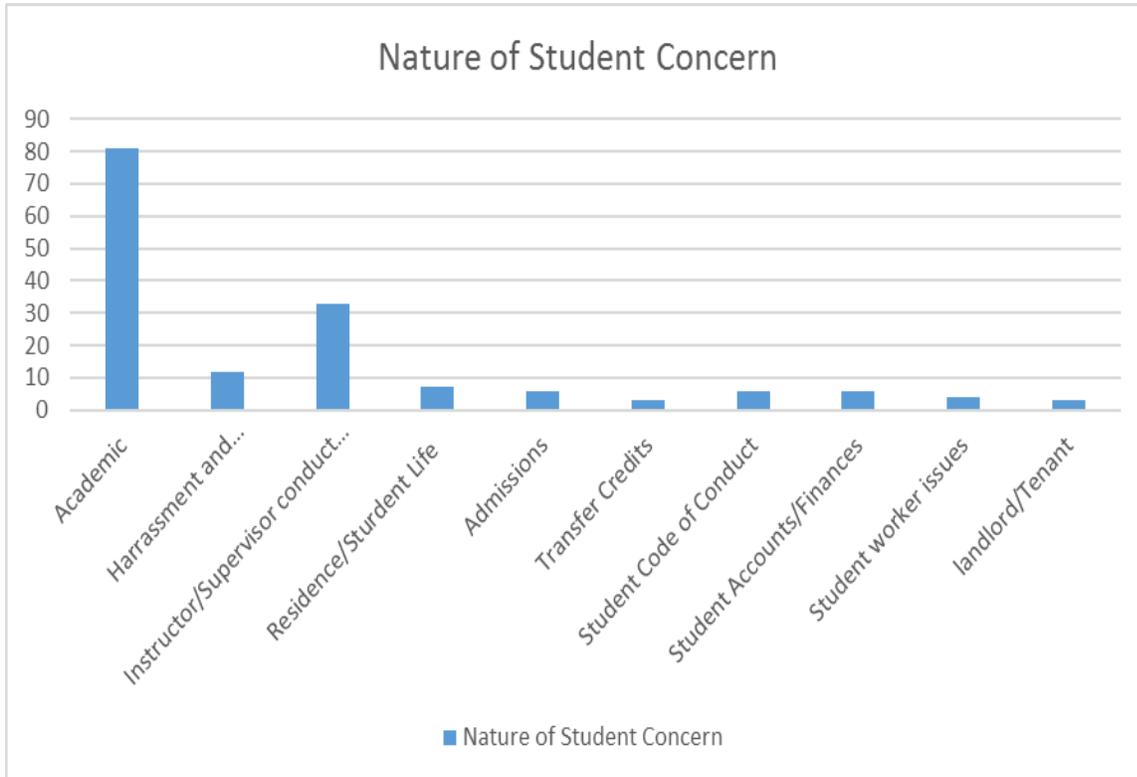
Student visitors represented all faculties on each of the university campuses. It should be noted that students often present with issues that do not involve their home faculties, especially at the undergraduate level.



Student Visitors by Faculty – the numbers

Agriculture	2
Architecture	2
Arts and Social Sciences	24
Computer Science	13
Dentistry	5
Engineering	12
Health	14
Law	5
Management	9
Medicine	5
Science	16
Other	2

Nature of Student Concerns



The majority of concerns brought forward by students were academic in nature, followed by concerns about Instructor/supervisor conduct and harassment and discrimination complaints. A further breakdown of the nature of academic concerns is outlined in the table below:

Breakdown - Nature of Academic Concerns

Academic Appeals	19
Academic Waiver	17
Academic Integrity	10
Academic Dismissal	14
Transfer Credits	3
Admissions	6
Academic Accommodations	14

In matters of truth and justice, there is no difference between large and small problems, for issues concerning the treatment of people are all the same.

-Albert Einstein

PART III TRENDS, ISSUES AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Feedback in the form of student concerns help us better understand the experiences of students, and can serve to provide us with opportunities for positive change. Providing students with channels of complaints is an invitation to participate in the workings of the university. Responses to complaints provide feedback to students regarding how effective they are in generating action, and whether their views count. Tracking student concerns and trending issues can assist the university to set priorities target its problem-solving resources. Ultimately an Ombudsperson serves as an effective alternative communication channel within the university.

Clarity and Transparency:

It was clear from visitors to the office that students seek to understand and be understood. In a large decentralized university, with rules and procedures varying within departments schools and faculties, that can be easier said than done. Students and the Ombudsperson have noted difficulty with the issue of clarity of policy and procedure and transparency in decision-making.

Our policies and procedures should not be so complex as to render them inaccessible to students. Clarity ensures that everyone involved in the process has the same understanding of what is happening, what is to be decided and the criteria to be considered.

Transparency is chiefly about openness and the visibility of our processes. Decisions made by authorities based on unclear criteria and with no visibility of the decision-making process will often be seen as suspect.

Providing clarity in our policies and transparency in our processes creates the context necessary to inform sounds decision-making:

- for students to decide if they want to engage
- for decision-makers so they can make equitable decisions

Equitable Decision-Making:

Students have presented concerns related to fairness when there is a strict application of a policy that assumes that all student circumstances are the same, or that fails to account for differences or differing circumstances. The justification for this is typically "we have to treat everyone equally" or "if I do it for one I have to do it for all". Not considering the differential impact on the student can result in decisions that impede rather than promote student success.

Unfair decisions are often a problem of the decision-making process and typically do not arise from the intent of the decision-maker. We cannot avoid our responsibilities to make decisions, but we can find ways to make the process clear, obvious and fair. Ultimately, fair decisions can fortify the relationships between the student and the university, fostering feelings of trust and community.

A good decision-making process will involve several things:

- 1) Sound decision-making framework that accounts for the diversity of student experiences;
- 2) Clear and accessible policies and procedures;
- 3) Consciously and mindfully infusing our interactions with kindness and compassion;
- 4) Choosing the right thing to do – making sure that our decisions do not compromise our community values and are student centric and not made out of self interest;
- 5) A willingness to revisit and reassess if facts point to a flawed decision. Allowing ourselves to be seen as flawed humans capable of holding ourselves personally accountable is one of the greatest qualities that we can model for our students.

Nora Farrell, Ombuds at Ryerson University, has developed an Administrative Fairness Checklist for Decision-Makers. Using the checklist will greatly enhance decision-makers' abilities to ensure fair and balanced decisions.⁴

Fairness does not mean that everyone will be treated the exact same way, but it does require deliberate and mindful decision-making processes. Treating everyone the same often upholds structures of privilege and oppression. Policies that were developed from

⁴ <http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/ombuds/documents/Administrative%20Fairness%20checklist.pdf>

one perspective may not result in common sense decisions when applied to students who have very different circumstances.

Policies are an essential starting point for making our decisions, but a policy cannot anticipate every situation. With 20,000 students, there are bound to be situations where a policy has not anticipated the circumstances. This is where fairness will be tested. Policies should be applied in ways that align with our core values, and the objective that the policy intended to address.

Slippery slope arguments, speculation about future outcomes if an unconventional decision is made should not be used to justify upholding the status quo. Progress towards our goals will always demand that we change – fair and equitable decisions may highlight gaps or concerns with a policy that no longer works to meet the needs of our growing and diverse student population.

Policy Navigation, Problem-Solving and Informal Resolutions:

Several students expressed that they engaged in formal appeals processes, not by choice, but because they were frustrated in their attempts at “informal resolutions”, where informal resolutions were prescribed by policy. Many policies suggest that students first attempt an informal resolution, but in the absence of clear guidelines several students indicated that they were unable to navigate a resolution process. Student visitors who did engage in informal resolution processes were concerned that they were not being given an opportunity to be heard and understood in communications with faculty and staff. In meetings that were reportedly designed to be conciliatory and problem-solving, students reported feeling ignored, shut down and forced into accepting agendas that did not allow them an opportunity for full expression of their thoughts and concerns. Students expressed feeling worse after these meetings, having entered into the process with an honest belief that the university officials with whom they were meeting were open to hearing their thoughts and perspectives. They felt that those privileged enough to have access to information, resources and decision-making authority, who hold the power to influence student success, were not hearing them. In short, these students did not feel that they were treated fairly, and felt that they had no choice but to elevate their concerns through formal processes.

Feeling heard is essential to feeling like you belong, like you matter, and like you have been treated fairly. Clear communication, listening with the intention to understand, and providing a compassionate ear, fosters connection. Safe and collaborative work and learning environments breed excellence.

On many occasions, I simply provided a compassionate ear and listened as students expressed their concerns, worries and frustrations. While I was not always able to offer any additional assistance, in many cases, that was enough to meet the needs of the

student. I am always amazed by the outpouring of gratitude from students for the simple act of compassionate communication. I have heard Joanne Mills, Director of Counselling services at Dalhousie state that “often, a student only needs kindness and compassion”. I have found that to be very much the case with the student visitors to my office. Resolving student concerns at the lowest and most informal level is essential to maintaining student trust in the university and its employees, and to creating an environment where everyone believes that they belong.

“Often, a student only needs kindness and compassion.”

Joanne Mills, Director of Counselling Services, Dalhousie

Recommendation #1: Informal Resolution Guidelines

Dalhousie should ensure that guidelines for informal resolution processes are developed and distributed. These guidelines should be based on restorative strategies and emerging practices related to effective informal resolutions of academic issues.

Privacy - Students with Accommodations

Several visitors were students with approved accommodations through the Advising and Access Centre (as it then was), who reported difficulty at the faculty level in relation to these accommodations.⁵ More than one student indicated that they were asked to disclose the diagnosis that led to the accommodations, including psychological information. Students also reported being asked to justify their accommodations, and in one case a student reported that they were informed that they would be “marked harder” if they used their accommodations. The students were well versed in the accommodations policies and knew that these questions were impacting their rights as members of protected groups under human rights legislation. Students not only had concerns about their fair treatment, but these interactions led them to feel intimidated and believe that they were seen as less competent than their peers without disabilities or diagnosed mental health issues.

⁵ https://www.dal.ca/dept/university_secretariat/policies/academic/student-accommodation-policy-wef-sep--1--2014.html

While incorporation of the Student Accommodation Policy in the course syllabus meets university requirements, incorporation alone does not ensure a basic understanding of the equitable practices that are necessary to ensure that our courses and materials are accessible to all students. The entire university community should be aware of their requirements in not only complying with the policy, but also in ensuring that their interactions with students are not discriminatory. Having access to policies is not enough to ensure that decisions and actions are not biased by stereotype and stigma. The office of Human Rights and Equity Services, the Student Accessibility Centre and Human Resources can serve as valuable sources of knowledge and, in my experience, are always available to consult with university staff and faculty about ensuring that we are all doing our part to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

Other Privacy Matters

In addition to privacy matters concerning accommodations, several students reported that they believed that their privacy was infringed. Examples ranged from personal information shared in an email being forwarded to others without the student's permission, disclosure of confidential personal student information to other students, to informing faculty not involved that a student was being accused of an academic offence. In these cases, student sentiment was the same – students felt that their rights to privacy were violated and reported a decreased sense of trust in the university as a result.

Recommendation #2: Privacy Matters

Dalhousie should undertake to enhance protections of students' privacy generally, and specifically relating to the implementation of student accommodations through:

a) annual distribution, to all staff and faculty, of policies relating to Student Privacy, and contact information for campus resources,

and,

b) annual distribution, to all staff and faculty, of policies relating to Student Accommodations, and contact information for campus resources.

Timeliness

Students who visited the Ombudsperson office in 2016/2017 offered examples to the Ombudsperson of instances where their emails and repeat emails to university faculty and other university staff went unanswered for weeks at a time in a given semester. In some cases, there was no response to requests for information and meetings. These were matters of importance to the affected students, and delayed responses left them feeling disrespected and disregarded by the university. In addition, students indicated that they felt that these delayed responses prejudiced their ability to deal with academic concerns in a timely manner and impacted their ability to succeed academically.

In one case, a student who failed a graduate course was subjected to an appeal process that took 22 months. The length of the process prejudiced the student's ability to either complete their degree or move on to other endeavors. If the university is to have processes in place for students to appeal grades, fairness and current university policy, demands that this be accomplished in a reasonable time. There are strict deadlines for students to file appeals relating to instructor and faculty decisions. It is reasonable, and fairness demands, that faculty responds in a timely fashion, so as to not unduly prejudice students who are utilizing university processes.

Recommendation #3: Appeal Timelines

To ensure that Senate Appeals are completed in a timely manner, Dalhousie, via the Senate Appeals Committee, in consultation with the Manager of Discipline and Appeals and Legal Services, should:

- a) Review academic appeals policy(ies), and**
- b) Develop clear and transparent timelines so that students can enter into appeals processes with some amount of certainty about reasonable time frames for resolution.**

Graduate/ Honours Student/Supervisor Relations

Student and faculty supervisory relationships are crucial – when they break down, so often does a student’s relationship with the entire university. Several students expressed concern with the quality of their interactions with supervisors, especially in lab settings. Students relayed incidents of conflict, disharmony, breakdowns in relationships and being locked out of labs. The impact that this had was significant and in certain cases, career ending. Students indicated that they were unaware of where they could turn for assistance, or alternatively that they requested assistance and did not believe that their concerns were taken seriously. Students indicated that they had reported incidents that they believed to be harassment and discrimination to people within their home departments/faculties, but were not referred to the office of Human Rights & Equity Services. It is important to note that students often take their cues from staff and faculty about what services are available to deal with their concerns.

The feedback provided to the Ombudsperson by student visitors underscores the crucial role that good supervisor/student relationships play in student success, and especially graduate student success. Many professors have developed excellent resources in this area, and there are regulations which provide a basic framework for these relationships. However, there is not standardized form or policy to assist in framing the relationship, or clarifying expectations of both students and supervisors. A lack of clarity in this area can lead to assumptions around expectations for behavior on both sides. Expectations and assumptions without clear communication can lead to breakdown in relationships. Emerging practices in student/supervisor relations indicate that the best relationships, the ones that meet both the needs of the supervisor and the student, are those where roles, expectations and supervisory styles are discussed at the earliest possible instance. Because of the power imbalance inherent in the relationship, students may need to be invited to discuss their expectations or ask questions.

Recommendation #4: Student/Supervisor Relations:

Dalhousie, via Faculty of Graduate Studies, in conjunction with the Center for Learning and Teaching, the Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students and other relevant offices, should ensure that there are adequate frameworks and resources in place, and there is university-wide awareness of responsibilities and accountabilities relating to student-supervisor relations. It is recommended that this is done by:

- a) Developing resources in the form of a standard checklist, that can serve to guide early conversations of both supervisors and supervisees, and assist them in developing clear supervisory agreements that set out expectations and agreements.**
- b) Ensuring accessible channels of complaint for all students working with supervisors and in laboratory environments. These should have clear and transparent procedures, so that students are aware of the process prior to making a complaint.**
- c) Increasing awareness of the services that exist through the university to assist student complainants in circumstances where concerns of harassment and discrimination are expressed, including a positive duty to refer.**

*In my experience the vast majority of students want to be challenged.
But they want to be treated like human beings, too, and they want to
know that they're being treated fairly.*

- Daniel Heath Justice

Student Appeal Processes

It quickly became apparent that student appeal processes were not standardized across the university. Each faculty retains its own jurisdiction over basic appeal processes. Some policies are clearer than others, and provide more procedural protections to students, with clearly laid out criteria, hearings and appeal panels. Others have no criteria, no right of a hearing, and a single decision-maker. Students are rightly upset when they are aware that their appeal would be handled differently (and objectively, more fairly) if they were in a different faculty. There is no justification for us having inequitable appeals processes. Student visitors exhibited considerable distress in attempting to locate decision-makers, understand the criteria against which they were judged, and prepare documents related to appeals. I am aware that the university is in the process of attempting to standardize appeal processes and recommends that it be given priority to ensure that all students are able to equally access their rights of appeal.

Recommendation #5: Student Appeal Processes

Dalhousie should ensure that priority is given to the standardization of academic appeals processes, by striking a committee tasked with aligning processes across departments/faculties⁷.

“Be transparent. Let's build a community that allows hard questions and honest conversations so we can stir up transformation in one another.”

— Germany Kent

Student Appeal Processes – Relational Fairness

While several university policies specifically prohibit retaliation for students participating in university processes or filing complaints, student fears of retaliation are very real. I have heard concerns from student visitors to the office about fear of returning to their home department, school or faculty after a successful appeal. Students expressed being impacted by the adversarial tone and demeanor of those participating in meetings and hearings, and expressed great concern that they repair what they perceived to be broken relationships with their faculty, department or school. Students should be able to proceed with their studies free from concerns of retaliation for taking part in university processes. These processes are put in place for the protection of everyone. The goal should always be, whoever safe, to restore a positive relationship. Students felt that although an appeal panel had agreed that they were unfairly judged academically, the adversarial process of an appeal left them feeling like the faculty viewed them as a “problem student”. This was not the favoured outcome for students, who felt that they had been prejudiced by an unfair grade and now had to return to “prove” themselves in what they believed to be a chilly climate. There was at least one incidence brought to the attention of the Ombuds office where a student felt so prejudiced by the process and unfairly treated in their attempts to reintegrate into their faculty that the student chose not to return. Participating in these processes can be an uncomfortable experience for everyone. However, it is important to see these processes from an objective and student-centered perspective. Student Appeals are a right of a student, to be handled in a professional and dignified manner by all participants.

Recommendation #6: Student Appeal Follow-up

Dalhousie should ensure that there is adequate follow-up for students following appeals processes. In all cases where a formal academic appeal process results in favorable outcome to the student, the student should be offered an opportunity to discuss the impact of the process and their concerns for reintegration into their home department, school or faculty.

International Students – Academic Integrity/Retention Issues

International students are a special, distinct and growing population of our student body at Dalhousie. It is not insignificant that a population who represents less than 1/5 of our student body represents ½ of the visitors to the office.

In its Strategic Plan, *Inspiration and Impact*, the university lists as strategic goals 1.1 through 1.3 inclusive:

- Increase retention and degree completion
- Focus on strategic student recruitment based on discipline, level and diversity
- Strengthen student experience, leadership development and additional support for our locally diverse and international students.

The office was visited by students and representatives of the Dalhousie Student Advocacy Center (DSAS) to discuss concerns that international students are disproportionately represented in Academic Integrity Offences (AIO). DSAS shared recent statistics that showed that the majority of its AIO cases involved International Students, and in some months, significant majorities. Standards of plagiarism and academic integrity vary significantly around the world, and students come to Dalhousie with writing styles and ideas of academic soundness that often look very different from a North American perspective. One student with an advanced degree indicated that they had not heard the word plagiarism until they came to Canada. While referring to the *Scholarly Misconduct Policy* into a course syllabus meets the requirements that the university sets out, it is not sufficient to meet the learning needs of our diverse student population. Academic Integrity Officers in each faculty are often sources of information and consultation for faculty members on these issues. Academic Integrity meetings are designed to be learning experiences for students and understanding any cultural barriers to integrating new standards of academic integrity will assist these processes in meeting the needs of students who are vulnerable to breaching standards of academic integrity. This year international student orientation included an academic integrity module, which is an excellent addition to resources for our students.

We can learn to see each other and see ourselves in each other and recognize that as human beings we are more alike than we are unlike.

-Maya Angelou

Recommendation #7: Intercultural Awareness: Academic Integrity Officers

Dalhousie should ensure that the Academic Integrity Officers are proficient in intercultural matters. Training for Academic Integrity Officers should include a cultural component, so that cultural influences on academic writing are understood. This information should also be widely distributed throughout the university.

A disproportionate number of International student visitors sought out the Ombuds office as a resource on issues related to academic dismissal matters. Concerns were also brought forward by student advocates, including concerns about the disproportionate impact academic dismissal has on many international students, specifically on their ability to remain in Canada while awaiting the opportunity to reapply to the university. Students who are academically dismissed and are on a student visa are not permitted to work in Canada, cannot access educational funds (i.e. student loans/bursaries from their home country) and often face revocation of their student visas. Internationals Students expressed great distress at the prospect of being academically dismissed. Students indicated receiving emails that they were dismissed, quoting regulation and indicating when they would be eligible to reapply. Students presented at the Ombuds office often shocked and in distress, not sure where to go or whether they had any options.

Recommendation #8: Academic Dismissal Resources

Dalhousie should develop a standardized method of ensuring that students who are being notified that they are academically dismissed also receive information relating to the dismissal, including:

- a) **any right of appeal and the processes to exercise that right;**
- b) **support services on campus, including services in department/school or faculty to assist the student in understanding the circumstances that led to dismissal.**

Accessibility of the Office

The Ombudsperson is aware that there were concerns regarding knowledge of and accessibility to the office when it was student staffed. Concerns included the lack of visibility of office due to it being in a low traffic area on the 4th floor of the Student Union Building. (DSU Call for Ombudsperson). The current office is housed in the same area. Early feedback is that for students who contact the Ombudsperson via email this does not appear to be an issue, however this will continue to be monitored.

Moving Forward

The Office of the Ombudsperson will always be concerned with ensuring the voice of those who less powerful are heard and that their experiences and perspectives are taken into account. Let us all champion our expressed values by challenging how our own personal experiences and identities influence the way we view and consider facts. Finally, let's all do our part to validate and give space the many students, faculty and staff whose lived reality is one of being subjected to institutional biases and oppression. If we are to be successful together, it is their voices that need to be heard the loudest.

Feedback

If the Ombudsperson is to be seen as a legitimate point of reference for the power of complaints to facilitate change and improve processes and practices, the Office of the Ombudsperson must be a prominent example. The Ombudsperson welcomes and encourages all feedback. The Ombudsperson recognizes that the office can only grow and develop into the best possible resource through feedback loops, complaints and suggestions. All are welcome and encouraged.

Appendix- Ombudsperson Recommendations 2016-7

	Title/Theme	Details	Accountability	Timeline
#1	Guidelines for Informal Resolution	Dalhousie should ensure that guidelines for informal resolution processes are developed and distributed. These guidelines should be based on restorative strategies and emerging practices related to effective informal resolutions of academic issues.		
#2	Privacy Matters	Dalhousie should undertake to enhance protections of students' privacy generally, and specifically relating to the implementation of student accommodations through: a) annual distribution, to all staff and faculty, of policies relating to Student Privacy, and contact information for campus resources, and, b) annual distribution, to all staff and faculty, of policies relating to Student Accommodations, and contact information for campus resources.		
#3	Senate Appeal Timelines	To ensure that Senate Appeals are completed in a timely manner, Dalhousie, via the Senate Appeals Committee, in consultation with the Manager of Discipline and Appeals and Legal Services, should: a) Review academic appeals policy(ies), and b) Develop clear and transparent timelines so that students can enter into appeals processes with some amount of certainty about reasonable time frames for resolution.		
#4	Student/ Supervisor Relations	Dalhousie, via Faculty of Graduate Studies, in conjunction with the Center for Learning and Teaching, the Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students and other relevant offices, should ensure that there are adequate frameworks and resources in place, and there is university-wide awareness of responsibilities and accountabilities relating to student-supervisor relations. It is recommended that this is done by: a) Developing resources in the form of a standard checklist, that can serve to guide early conversations of both supervisors and supervisees, and assist them in developing clear supervisory agreements that set out expectations and agreements. b) Ensuring accessible channels of complaint for all students working with supervisors and in laboratory environments. These should have clear and transparent procedures, so that students are aware of the process prior to making a complaint. c) Increasing awareness of the services that exist through the university to assist student complainants in circumstances where concerns of harassment and discrimination are expressed, including a positive duty to refer.		

#5	Student Appeal Processes	Dalhousie should ensure that priority is given to the standardization of academic appeals processes.		
#6	Student Appeal Follow-up	Dalhousie should ensure that there is adequate follow-up for students following appeals processes. In all cases where a formal academic appeal process results in favorable outcome to the student, the student should be offered an opportunity to discuss the impact of the process and their concerns for reintegration into their home department, school or faculty.		
#7	Intercultural Awareness: Academic Integrity Officers	Dalhousie should ensure that the Academic Integrity Officers are proficient in intercultural matters. Training for Academic Integrity Officers should include a cultural component, so that cultural influences on academic writing are understood. This information should also be widely distributed throughout the university.		
#8	Academic Dismissal Resources	Dalhousie should develop a standardized method of ensuring that students who are being notified that they are academically dismissed also receive information relating to the dismissal, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) any right of appeal and the processes to exercise that right; b) support services on campus, including services in department/school or faculty to assist the student in understanding the circumstances that led to dismissal. 		
Not e	Visibility and Awareness of Office of Ombudsperson			

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,

who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out

for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.

meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.

because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

— Jellaludin Rumi