



UNIVERSITY OF  
ALBERTA

**OFFICE OF THE  
STUDENT OMBUDS**

IMPARTIAL ACCESSIBLE  
INDEPENDENT CONFIDENTIAL

Annual Report  
2016 ~ 2017

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[www.ombudservice.ualberta.ca](http://www.ombudservice.ualberta.ca)

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### OPENING COMMENTS FROM THE DIRECTOR

In 1971, the University of Alberta recognized the value and need of an ombuds service on campus to ensure that members of the University community are treated fairly in all university processes. Initially created as a University-wide resource for staff and students, the ombuds function changed after the creation of the Dean of Students in the mid-1970s. After that point, the function was limited to student clients. Separate advisory and ombuds services assisted students in the Dean of Students' Office and the Students' Union over the late 1970s to early 1990s. Faculty and administrative staff use the services of their respective staff organizations. The Dean of Students and Students' Union services merged into a hybrid ombuds service for students in the 1990s. In 2015, the student ombuds became ombuds interns and were trained and mentored by university ombuds in the renamed Office of the Student Ombuds. Ombuds University services are delivered today on North campus, Campus St. Jean and Augustana, by four ombudspersons and three ombuds interns.

### SCOPE OF THE OFFICE OF THE STUDENT OMBUDS (OSO)

As advocates for systemic fairness, ombuds focus on client empowerment (ethics of care and rights). Our services include support for informal and formal resolution processes in all University of Alberta academic appeals, professor/supervisor conflict; academic and non-academic discipline matters, professional misconduct, bullying, discrimination and harassment, intellectual property disputes, residence conflicts, and fee/fine petitions. Our orientations and workshops primarily address student rights, appeal processes, effective communication and conflict resolution techniques, digital citizenship, managing supervisory relationships, restorative practices, academic integrity, and research ethics, and may be tailored on request.

The OSO serves prospective, undergraduate, graduate, medical residents and post-doctoral fellows, and student groups. It is an important resource of information for University administrative staff and faculty. The OSO advocates for natural justice; through a lens of fairness, it promotes substantive, procedural, relational and equitable fairness in all university-related processes. The OSO offers

confidential advice to over 1000 students annually. We compile statistical data to check for gaps, omissions and miscommunication that may lead to injustices and systemic discrimination.

The OSO operates at arm’s length from the Dean of Students portfolio. The OSO is accountable to the University for confidential and impartial support to students. The OSO provides a valuable educational service to the University, and postsecondary institutions nationally and internationally. The OSO serves on University committees in an advisory capacity, and plans the annual University Student Advisors’ Conference. This conference is an opportunity for student service professionals to network, learn about new initiatives and practices in student support, and acquire skills for professional self-care.

The power of the ombuds is through “moral suasion”. Our ombuds follow the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) Standards of Practice. These standards – impartiality, accessibility, independence, confidentiality – guide the ombuds in delivering a high quality of service that is consistent and effective. Ombuds may make recommendations for positive change to the appropriate University decision-making bodies and committees to promote institutional fairness. The ombuds monitor responses to ensure these changes are duly considered, and implemented wherever possible. The ombuds can be viewed as social change agents as they investigate gaps, omissions and inequities in policy, and make recommendations to promote fairness and due process.

#### **OSO STAFF**

The University ombudspersons are dispute resolution professionals who use a number of techniques, such as coaching, restorative practices, shuttle diplomacy, interest-based negotiation, and facilitated mediation in their practice. Their background training and expertise allow them to be flexible, using the techniques best suited to their clients’ specific needs.

In this reporting period, the OSO had three full-time ombudspersons and three ombuds interns on North campus, offering Campus St. Jean services on request, and one ombudsperson on-site at Augustana campus. The OSO holds weekly staff meetings to encourage us to discuss how to handle difficult casework, debrief on casework and University policy changes, and promote team support and self-care.

**Natalie Sharpe, Director of the Office of the Student Ombuds** is responsible for managing staff and activities at the OSO on the three campuses; training, mentoring and supervising interns; guiding and supervising university ombuds staff; preparing reports and statistics, and formulating policy and protocol for the service. She also chairs the annual Student Advisors’ Conference on campus.



In 2016 – 2017, Natalie became the President of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons; she is responsible for keeping ACCUO members informed of the activities of the executive and initiatives of fellow members across Canada in order to provide support across the nation. She provides bimonthly bulletins to announce issues that tie higher education ombuds together regionally, nationally, and internationally. She also serves on the California Caucus of College and University Ombudspersons’ Board of Directors and the conference planning committee. Natalie has been involved in a long-term study on cyberbullying on university campuses, and is contributing an ombuds perspective in a global collaboration of scholarly studies on cyberbullying in higher education.



**Nancy Goebel, Augustana Ombudsperson**

Nancy is the Chief Librarian (faculty) at Augustana and has expertise in human rights, sexual harassment, diversity and equity issues. She provides immediate on-site ombuds support on Augustana campus. She works in close consultation with the ombudspersons on North campus. Nancy's ombuds role commenced at the beginning of 2016; she offers an important perspective on Augustana student life and activities.

**Brent Epperson, Graduate Ombudsperson** consults with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR), the Graduate Student Association (GSA), and Post-doctoral Fellows Association (PDFA) to report on trends in graduate and PDFA issues. Brent Epperson is responsible for working with advanced degree students, including PDFAs and medical residents. Much of his casework involves the resolution of conflicts with academic supervisors or other faculty (research, laboratory work). Brent served on the Restorative Practices Initiative (RPI) Working Group in collaboration with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, the Dean of Students, Student Conduct and Accountability, and Human Resources. The RPI Working Group aims to develop institutional capacity in restorative practices across campus.



*Brent Epperson*

*Marc Johnson*

Brent is a former social worker, and current researcher on health/ education policy reform, and higher education policy; Marc is an experienced mediator. The two offer unique areas of expertise and they play an invaluable role in mentoring the interns. They are completing graduate degrees soon: Marc, a Master's in Education, and Brent, a PhD in Political Science.

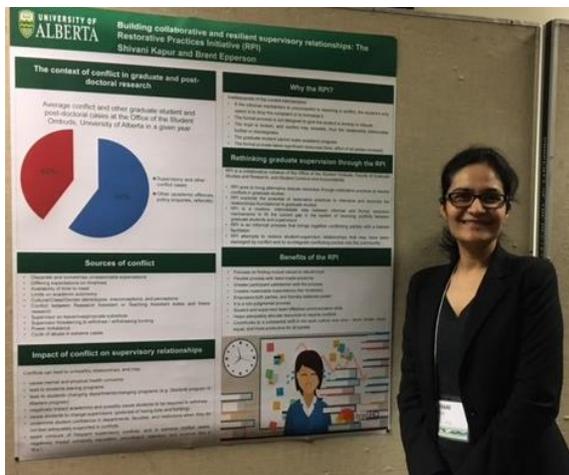
**Marc Johnson, Undergraduate Ombudsperson** is responsible for undergraduate student complaints, and provides training and education sessions to staff and students on conflict resolution strategies. Marc has worked closely with Natalie on developing an informal educational approach to resolve social media abuse in professional programs. They are promoting a digital citizenship approach in collaboration with a faculty and its students. This could serve as a model to mitigate social media harm. Marc and Natalie also met with the Students' Union to advocate informal conflict resolution approaches for student groups' internal conflicts. These informal modes of resolution and communication strategies are a healthy response to conflict and reduce the reliance on formal disciplinary channels that are cumbersome, take up resources and time, and result in less satisfactory outcomes for affected parties.

## OMBUDS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

This year, we hired a part-time graduate ombuds intern and two undergraduate ombuds interns. The graduate ombuds intern assisted our office and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research with background research to explore the development of informal resolution mechanisms and restore fractured supervisory relationships, thereby increasing student retention.

The intern program is structured for leadership and career development in ombudsing and related fields; these are paid positions. The interns learn to work both independently and as a team. They develop critical leadership and communication skills under the training and mentorship of the senior ombudspersons. Mentoring is a unique and comfortable way of learning, allowing the interns to grow and ask questions in a safe and supportive learning environment. Mentorship is instruction through examples; interns initially shadow by observing the experienced ombudsperson in interaction with their client. The interns then lead client meetings supported by their ombuds mentors, debrief on their casework, and eventually manage cases on their own. Debriefing allows the interns to reflect on casework to ensure consistency in their approach and adherence to ombuds professional standards of practice. Skill building in alternative dispute resolution is enhanced through conflict resolution roleplays.

The ombuds internship program has additional benefits in creating awareness of the importance of the ombuds role on university campuses. Our interns prepared a meeting with our Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education. They also collaborated with the Province of Alberta Ombudsman, hosting a Fairness Day on campus, to help build student and staff knowledge of ombuds services related to disputes regarding post-secondary government loans and disability assistance.



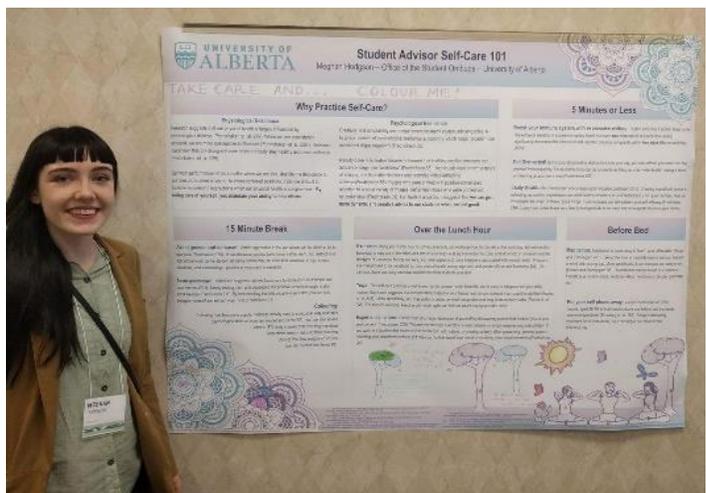
Shivani Kapur, Graduate Ombuds Intern, and Master's in Law. *This poster presentation outlines the goals and challenges of the Restorative Practices Initiative (RPI) in restoring professional relationships, managing reputational risks, and improving student retention. It will be a voluntary, non-punitive, informal facilitated process aimed at repairing and restoring supervisor relationship for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.*

Shivani Kapur describes the value of this internship. *A student needs to apply theory to practice in a highly diverse human community. A day in the ombuds office is never predictable. There is no quick 'how to learn to become a real ombudsperson'; the learning curve is steep. The internship program consists of modules to train the intern on how to examine casework holistically; the interns then help their clients to explore options to resolve their personal and academic crises and dilemmas. The interns learn life-building skills such as how to resolve conflicts, how to navigate complex policies and procedures, how to write appeals and present position papers, and ultimately how to treat others with respect and intentional fairness. In this way, the connection between the real world and the academic world is open and fluid.*



Mariah Venkatraman, Undergraduate Ombuds Intern, and Psychology major *This “Active Communication” poster focuses on adapting Educational models for student advisors’ use, with a goal to promote fairness and inclusivity in advising. The internship helps me feel as though I can make a difference through hearing a person’s story; confidence as a working professional, develop my own style of ombuds work; opportunity for continued learning and development; and encouragement to explore different interests and their relation to the ombuds world.*

Meghan Hodgson, Undergraduate Ombuds Intern, and Psychology major *Self-care 101: the goal of my poster is to offer self-care strategies that can be easily integrated into a student advisors’ life. It is my hope that by encouraging the audience to discover their unique needs and preferences, that I will contribute to a resilient campus. The Ombuds internship is an amazing opportunity to work as an Ombuds Intern to add to my undergraduate experience.*



In October 2016, the OSO and Alberta Ombudsman held a Fairness Day on the University campus. Students and staff were able to learn about Alberta Ombudsman services available to students related to complaints about government financial loans and disability aid. The OSO interns developed an educational tool “The Fairness Game” to teach the facets of fairness through an ombuds lens. They gave visitors common case scenarios to identify what aspects of fairness were present and what were lacking. Students and staff enjoyed learning and reflecting on how ombuds examine fairness, and comparing this to their own practices.

**LANDSCAPE OF OSO ACTIVITY: CASEWORK DEMOGRAPHICS**

<b>Reporting Years Comparison (Apr 1 – Mar 31)</b>	<b>2016 - 2017</b>	<b>2015 - 2016</b>
<b>Clients</b>	1149	1229
Undergraduate	882	986
Graduate	*243	243
Unknown Status	24	
International	**429	449
Domestic	686	780
Residence Status Unknown	34	
Contacts and Visits	2508	3083
Avg # of Visits per Client	2.2	2.5
<b>Issues</b>	***1286	1418
Academic	589	689
Conflict	149	158
Academic Offence	326	432
Non-Academic Offence	36	51
Discrimination/Harassment Allegations	38	59
Miscellaneous	148	138
<b>Activities</b>		
Investigative Meetings	511	597
Committee Meetings	****502	218
Formal Hearing	31	26
Informal Resolution	15	21

\*Graduate student population includes medical residents and post-doctoral fellows

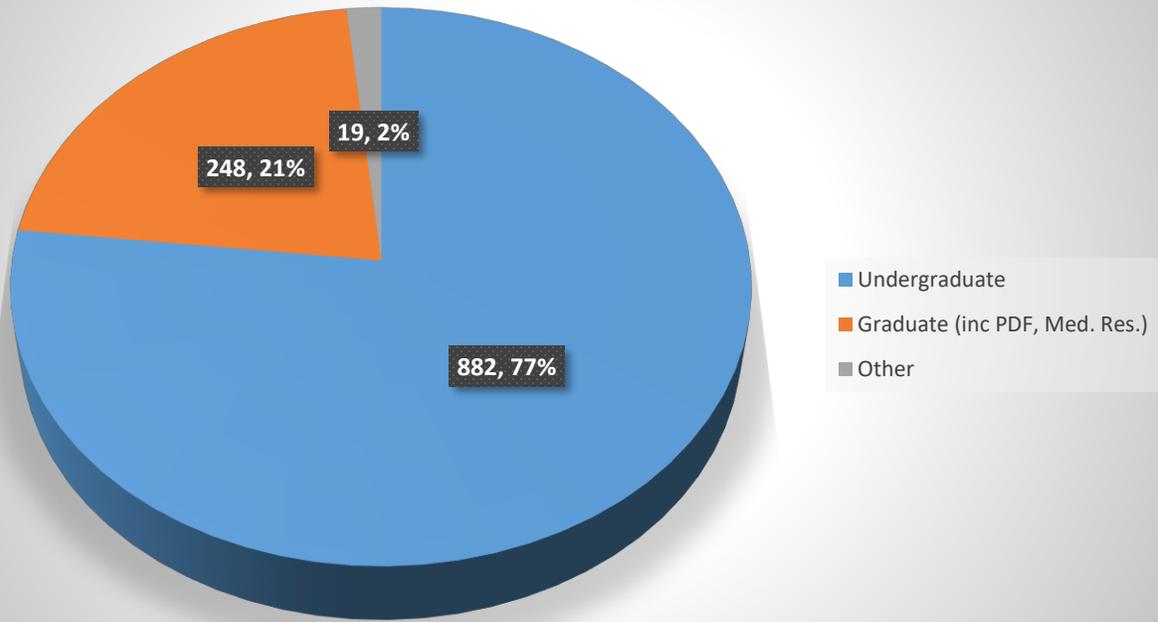
\*\* International students are a smaller portion of the total student population, yet are 2 times more likely to visit the OSO student than a domestic student (domestic includes permanent resident)

\*\*\*Clients may present with more than one issue

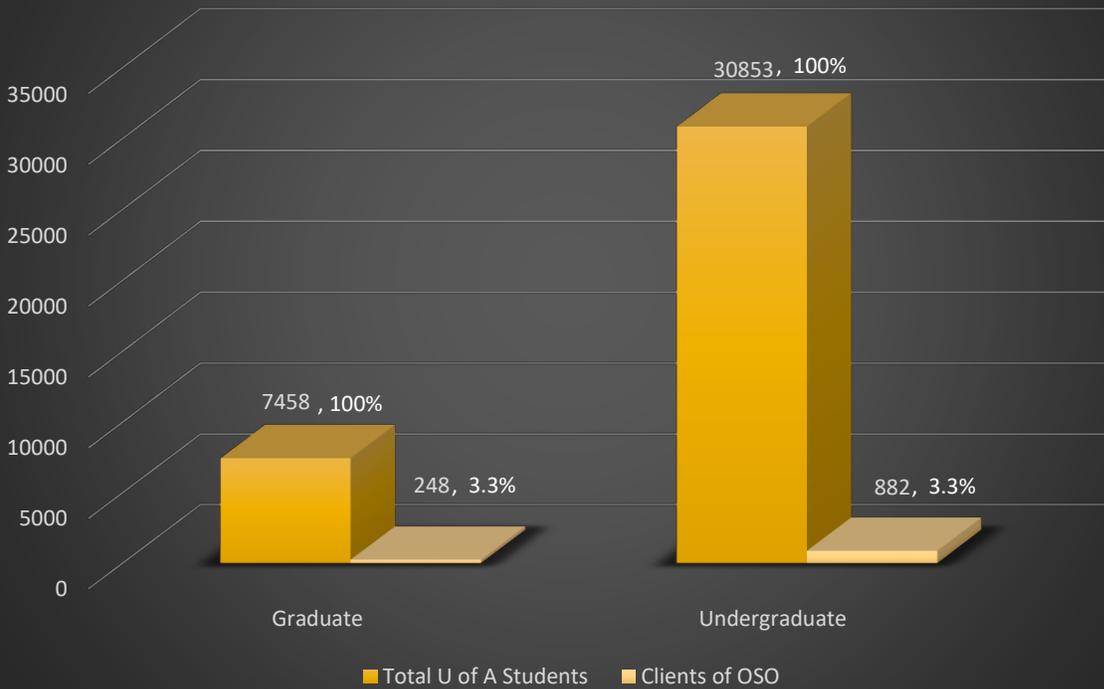
\*\*\*\* Restorative Practices Working Group, Sexual Violence Policy Working Groups, and Graduate Ombuds meetings with FGSR, GSA and PDFAs were held frequently this year

(**Glossary:** Academic includes required to withdraw (academic standing), grade appeals, exam deferrals and re-examinations. Conflict may involve interpersonal, supervisory, student-professor. Academic Offence includes plagiarism, cheating, misrepresentation of fact. Non-Academic Offences include disruption, vandalism, and inappropriate behavior. Discrimination/Harassment allegations related to sex, gender, racial, disability, family status discrimination, duty-to-accommodate violations. Miscellaneous includes fines, housing on campus issues, etc.)

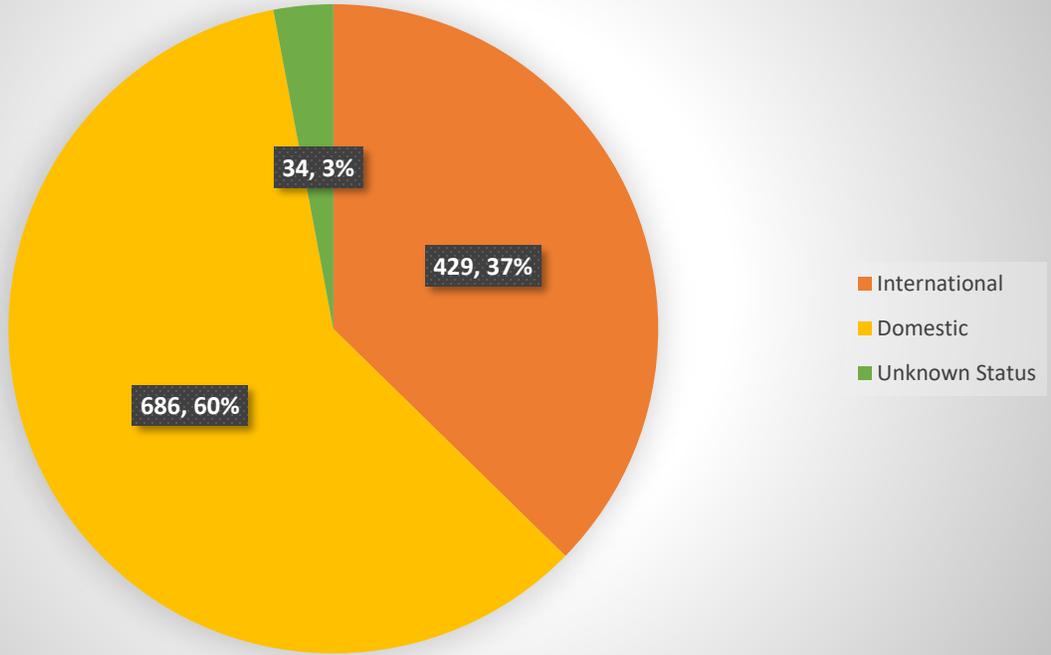
## OSO Client Breakdown - Program Level



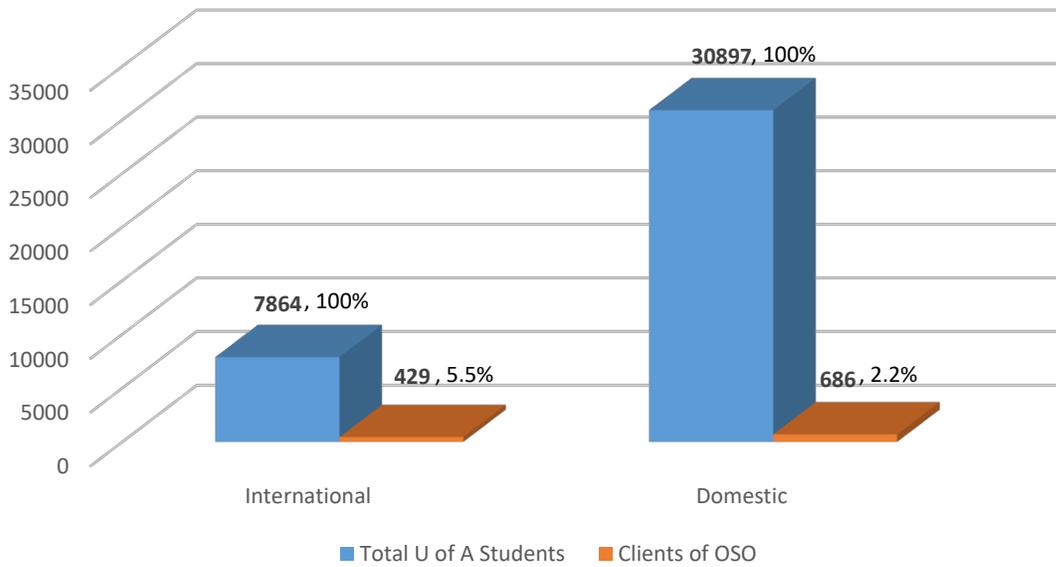
## Graduate vs Undergraduate Students at the OSO

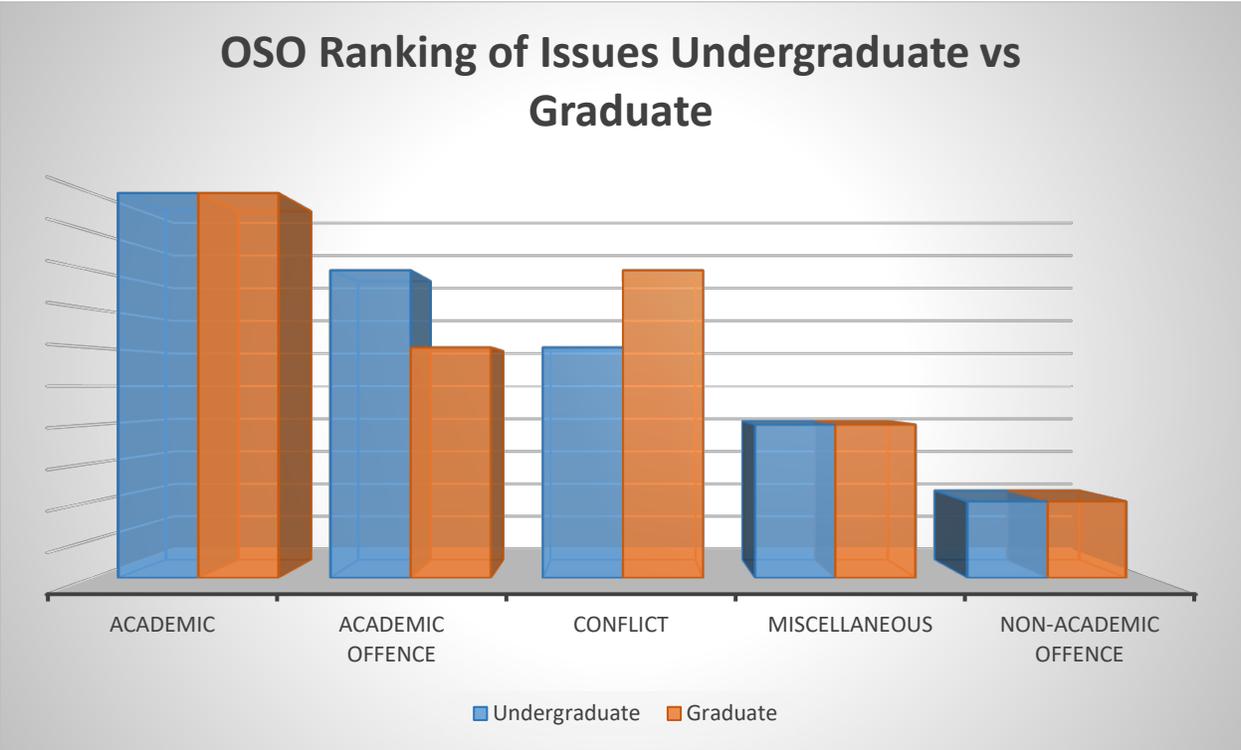
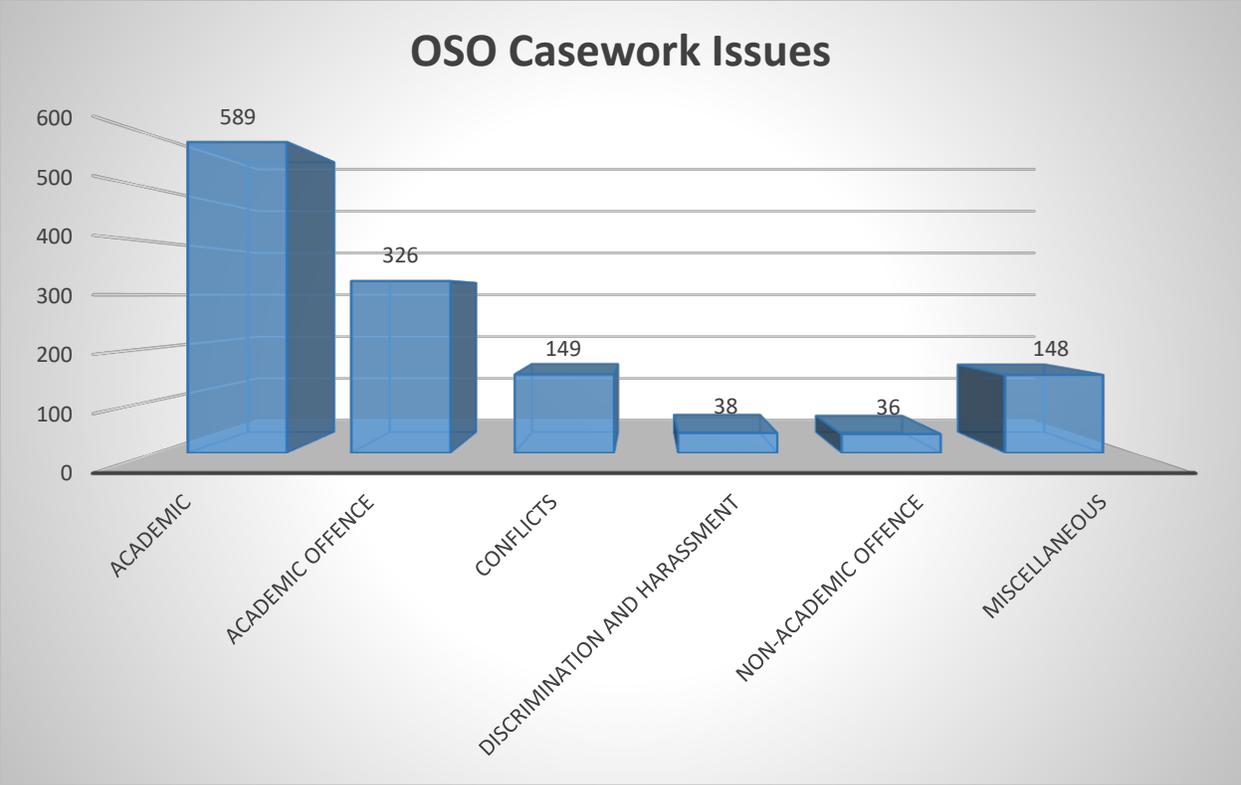


## OSO Client Breakdown - Residence Status



## International vs Domestic Clients at the OSO

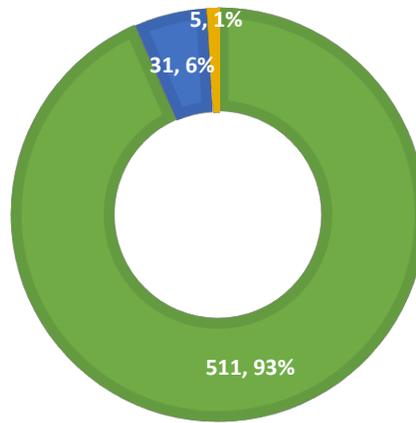




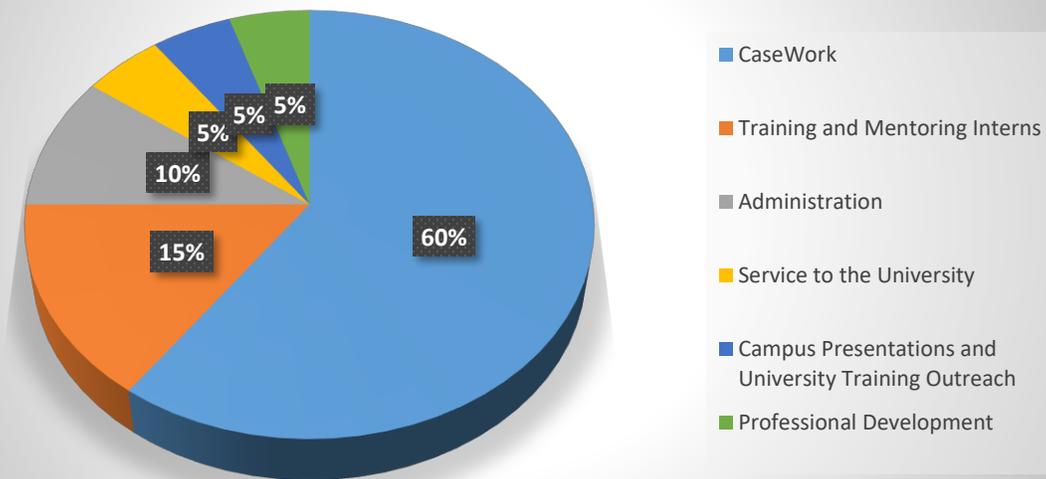
**\* 60% Grad cases are conflict related**

## OSO OUT-OF-OFFICE MEETINGS RELATED TO CASEWORK

■ Investigative Meetings   ■ Formal Hearings   ■ Alternative Dispute Resolution



## OSO Workload Breakdown



### Distribution of OSO Workload

Casework, 60%, includes client and on-campus meetings, case preparation, and attendance at hearings; 15% training, mentoring, supervising, and evaluating interns; Administrative work, 10%, includes weekly staff meetings, statistics, website, handbook and intern manual revisions, annual reports, handouts; Service to University, 10%, includes all committee consultation, and faculty appeal revision review requests; Campus presentations/University community outreach, 5%, include all orientations and requested sessions; Professional Development, 5%, includes ACCUO activities; conferences attended; sessions/papers presented

## HIGHLIGHTS OF OSO ACTIVITIES 2016 – 2017 (Apr 1 – Mar 31)

- ✓ OSO worked in an advisory capacity on University committees to provide an ombuds lens of equity and fairness. The main committees include Restorative Practice Working Group, Academic Standards Committee, Campus Law Review Committee, Sexual Violence Working Groups, Duty to Accommodate Working Group, and faculty-specific academic appeals policies (requested to review revisions for clarity and procedural fairness).
- ✓ We worked closely with the International Centre to improve education to international students on academic integrity, and promoted three presentations on international student supports at the Student Advisors' Conference in March 2017.
- ✓ We collaborated on the Restorative Practices Initiative for Graduate Students and Post-doctoral fellows with a daylong symposium in December 2016. The goal of the symposium was to educate stakeholders on the benefits of early, informal-facilitated intervention to manage conflict between students and supervisors.
- ✓ We collaborated with a professional faculty to help engage their students in developing a socially responsible, digital citizenship model for use of social media.
- ✓ We promoted education and the importance of relational fairness in student-faculty relations by distributing the Relational Fairness Guide of former Ombuds Intern Veronica Kube.
- ✓ We celebrated Fairness Day with the Alberta Ombudsman in October 2016 on the main floor of the Students' Union Building to engage students, faculty and administration using an educational tool on fairness. The Alberta Ombudsman explained the services they have to offer to students outside the OSO jurisdiction, related to complaints against Alberta government agencies disbursing student loans, and disability resources aid.
- ✓ The OSO also served on the planning committee and the Director chaired the Student Advisors' Conference. We offered a session on Relational and Equitable Fairness, and three poster presentations.
- ✓ The ombuds internship-training program expanded to include a part-time graduate ombuds intern. We revised the training manual and enhanced the skill training to further develop competency in mediation and other forms of dispute resolution. The ombuds internship program was endorsed by ombuds in higher education nationally and internationally.
- ✓ The OSO staff attended numerous on-campus training, including Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) techniques to support clients who suffer from trauma, and sessions on support for Survivors of Sexual Assault.
- ✓ The OSO introduced electronic paperless record keeping. This enabled us to improve our ability to produce timely statistical reports through an automated recordkeeping programs. For example, we provided the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research a special report showing statistical evidence for the need to reduce supervisory conflicts.
- ✓ Three senior ombuds staff received Certification in "Essentials for Ombuds Training", the only Canada professional certificate in ombudsmanship, through the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman /Osgoode Hall Professional School, Toronto, and Forum of Canadian Ombudsman/Université of Sherbrooke, Montreal.
- ✓ The Regional Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education was formed and met four times. We have found great value in connecting with our ACCUO higher education colleagues in Alberta: University of Calgary, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Athabasca University, and Grant MacEwan University. Two meetings were hosted by the OSO.
- ✓ The OSO staff engaged in Webinar sessions with the NorthWest Ombuds Group and Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons on ombuds case conundrums.

## **OSO RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD**

**RECOMMENDATION ONE** The OSO supports the collaborative initiatives of the Restorative Practices Initiative (RPI) Working Group in its efforts to fill a gap in informal resolution processes at the University of Alberta. The OSO recommends that the University continue to support the work of FGSR and the OSO (in consultation with the Office of the VP Research, the GSA, and the PDFA) to develop restorative practices as they specifically relate to resolving conflicts in the graduate student and post-doctoral communities. Restorative practices need to be integrated into these communities in order to maintain healthy working relationships. We support drawing on expertise from practitioners of Restorative Practices for future conferences in order to build a strong base of theoretical and applied knowledge of these practices.

**RECOMMENDATION TWO** Following the 2016 Review of the University of Alberta's Response to Sexual Assault and the approaching implementation of the new Sexual Violence Policy, the OSO recommends special attention to communities that may require special accommodations and interim measures. Specifically, in light of the professional fears that sometimes dissuade graduate students and post-doctoral fellows from making formal complaints in such cases, the OSO recommends that resources for the implementation of this policy ensure that modifications and interim measures are developed to protect these communities from the unique forms of retaliation and professional consequences that sometimes affect them. The OSO will play a consultative role in collaboration with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and the Office of the Vice-President Research in order to develop minimum modifications and interim measures to offer all graduate students and post-doctoral fellows in cases of sexual violence and harassment.

**RECOMMENDATION THREE** As the number of cyberbullying incidents increase on postsecondary campuses, the OSO has recognized a lack of knowledge on the part of faculties with regard to ways to present positive communication strategies for students in online group work, online classes, and on social media when discussing academic work and practicums. The OSO has worked with faculties and student groups on ways to promote healthy use of digital media in their professional, academic and social activities. In response to requests from faculty, the Director of the OSO and Undergraduate Ombudsperson have developed resources to help faculties respond to conflicts that involve the misuse of social media. The OSO recommends that faculty and student groups explore informal modes of resolution to respond to conflicts and restore relationships. The digital citizenship approach to healthy use of social media can serve as a model to mitigate conflicts and teach students ways to defuse conflict in social media discourse. The Undergraduate Ombudsperson and the Director will meet with Student Group Coordinators in the Students' Union to develop an informal conflict resolution method for their internal executive disputes and disputes between members. These informal modes of resolution are a healthy response to conflict and reduce the use of formal disciplinary channels that are often cumbersome and lengthy.

**RECOMMENDATION FOUR** We have found that both undergraduate and graduate students have difficulty finding their way through policies and procedures. It would be helpful to develop a clear and concise resource that outlines all students' rights to appeal. Student Rights' Handbooks for the undergraduate and graduate populations would help students understand their rights in disciplinary and administrative processes. It would further help to ensure administrative fairness and could increase perceptions of fairness.

## SERVICE, REPORTS AND PUBLICATIONS

### Ombuds Certification and Service to Growth of Ombuds in Higher Education

Brent Epperson, Marc Johnson and Natalie Sharpe “Essentials for Ombudsman” certification, Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO) and Université de Sherbrooke, Montreal; FCO and Osgoode Hall, Toronto  
Brent Epperson, Editorial Board of the Journal of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds (peer reviewed)

Natalie Sharpe, President of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons

Natalie Sharpe, California Caucus of College and University Ombudsperson (CCCUO) Board Member

Natalie Sharpe, CCCUO Conference Planning Committee

OSO Development of Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education – University of Alberta, University of Calgary, NAIT, Athabasca University, Grant MacEwan University

Natalie Sharpe, Survey response to Rob Behrens (Office of Independent Adjudicators, England) on a European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education study on “Being an Ombudsman in Higher Education: A Comparative Study” (to be published Jun 2017)

ACCUO and NorthWest Ombuds Group (NWOG) Practice Issues Conversation teleconference meetings

ACCUO Western Regional Meeting and Practice Issues Roundtable with B.C. Ombudsman

### Conferences, Presentations and Publications

Kube, Veronica (May 2016) *Fairness in Communication: A Relational Fairness Guide*, OSO, University of Alberta <https://www.ombudservice.ualberta.ca/en/OmbudsResources/FairnessCommunication.aspx>

Sharpe, N. (Nov 2016) *Challenges and Rewards of a New Internship Program*. Cal Caucus Ombuds Online Journal. <http://journal.calcaucus.com/article-4-ombuds-internships-a-model-of-strong-collaboration.html>

Sharpe, N. in collaboration with Kapur, S Epperson, B and Johnson, M (Nov 2016) *Putting Fair Policy Entrepreneurship into Practice: The Restorative Practices Initiative at the University of Alberta*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cal Caucus (CCCUO) Conference, Pacific Grove, California

Sharpe, N. MacDonald, C. (Camosun College) & Riley, M. (University of California, Berkeley), (Nov 2016) *Sexual Assault, Violence and Harassment on U.S. and Canadian Campuses: Strategies to Deal with Sexual Violence on American and Canadian Campuses*. Presented at Cal Caucus CCCUO. Asilomar, California

Sharpe, N. (Draft Apr 2017, to be published Dec 2017) *A University Ombudsperson’s Perspective on Using a Relational Fairness Lens to Build a Safe and Caring Cyberworld*, in *Cyberbullying at University: A Cross-Jurisdictional, Multi-Disciplinary Perspective*. Editors: Wanda Cassidy, Chantal Faucher, and Margaret Jackson, Publishers: Routledge Psychology Press, Taylor and Francis Group

Sharpe, N. (May 2017) Proposals accepted for Forum of Canadian Ombudspersons (FCO) prepared three proposals for FCO/ACCUO Biannual Conference, Ottawa

Office of the Student Ombuds attendance at 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Restorative Justice Conference with Alberta Restorative Justice. *Restorative Justice: A Cultural Shift*. (Nov 2016)

RPI Symposium: The Restorative Practices Initiative at the University of Alberta: Advancing Fairness and Accountability in the Graduate Student and Post-Doctoral Fellow Communities, at the University of Alberta (Dec 2016)