The Office of the Ombudsperson is jointly funded by Simon Fraser University, the Graduate Student Society and the Simon Fraser Student Society.
LOOKING FORWARD

SFU has the distinction of being one of the first universities in Canada to create an Office of the Ombudsperson. For over 40 years the Office has provided advice, information, interventions and referrals to the university community. Until 2008 the Office was solely funded by the Simon Fraser Student Society, a model that was quite different from other small offices across Canada. The university joined with the Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) and the Graduate Student Society (GSS) in 2008 to support the development of a jointly funded Office of the Ombudsperson.

The new model has been extremely positive and an important step in the evolution of the Office. Having the moral and shared financial backing of the SFSS, the GSS and the university further strengthens the Office and demonstrates the community’s commitment to providing an independent and unbiased resource for students. It also signals that the SFSS, the GSS and university administration are committed to the fair and just treatment of all students.

A special thank you should also go to Ali Godson, former SFSS University Relations Officer. Ms Godson was instrumental during the start-up phase and worked very hard to ensure the financial resources were in place to establish a new office that met the needs of students and the Ombudsperson.

In 2009/2010 the Office will continue to build bridges to the community in our effort to promote our services and resources to the university. The mission of the Office is greatly enhanced by the support and cooperation of many individuals who contribute to positive organizational changes at our campuses. Their willingness to hear feedback and to collaborate on many issues to bring about fair and equitable outcomes is deeply appreciated.
The Office of the Ombudsperson at Simon Fraser University fulfills two duties. The first duty is to provide informal dispute resolution services to students who have complaints or problems concerning the university, university personnel, or university policies. The second is to observe the life of the university with a view to noting substantive or procedural unfairness, and to report such unfairness to university administration and the university community.

The mandate of the Office is to provide confidential, informal, independent, and unbiased dispute resolution services in matters of administrative fairness to all members of the university community by providing information, advice, intervention and referrals. Our services are confidential; we will not disclose any identifying information without the express permission of the person who provided it. We are impartial and unbiased in our approach to a problem. We seek to advance the interests of all parties and the institution as a whole through informal, consensual dispute resolution. Finally, our Office operates independently of other university offices.

The Office may investigate in an impartial fashion complaints and grievances that arise against the university or its boards, committees, academic or administrative departments, or against anyone employed by the university exercising authority. The Office may also make recommendations, where appropriate, for changes in University policies and procedures and to promote discussion on institution-wide concerns.
**BEST PRACTICES**

Most university and college Ombudsperson offices in North America strive to adhere to a standard of practice that (1) promotes and ensures a high degree of independence and impartiality and (2) is accountable to the entire university community.

As per the Constitution of the Association of the Canadian College and University Ombudspersons: [s]omeone who fulfils an ombuds function in a college or university normally does all or most of the following: 1) receives and investigates complaints in an impartial and objective manner, and in confidence; 2) acts independently of the administrative structures of the institution and/or students’ associations; 3) maintains a standard of neutrality [and]; 4) reports on findings and recommendations and/or issues an annual report.

The Office is now a full member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) and the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) and operates in accordance with established practices. In accordance with the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), the Office adopted a Statement of Professional Standards which has been posted on the website.

Although its structure has changed significantly over the last forty years, the primary aim of the Office, of advocating for fair treatment of students at the university, has remained central. Fair treatment of students will continue to be the core concern of the Office.

Many students and members of the university community think that the role of the Ombudsperson is to be an advocate; the Ombudsperson is an advocate for fairness and equity rather than for an individual’s specific complaint. Where the Ombudsperson determines that a complaint is justified, the Ombudsperson makes recommendations to remedy the specific complaint. More importantly, through individual complaints or concerns, the Ombudsperson identifies for students, administration and faculty systemic issues and problems for which change is required. We cannot force the university to change its actions or decisions; rather the Ombudsperson only has the power to recommend actions for ensuring administrative fairness. In this sense, the Ombudsperson can be viewed as an agent for change.
One of the most important services that the Ombudsperson provides is to encourage self-advocacy for students. Direct intervention or mediation is an option, but often a last resort. From a student development perspective, learning to speak for oneself is an essential life skill. The advantage of this approach is that taking responsibility for a situation is an empowering step away from the problem and toward a solution. Self-advocacy not only allows for a solution to the problem, but it also allows the complainant to feel the accomplishment of solving his/her own problem. The Office spends a great deal of time coaching, guiding, and even role-playing in our efforts to help students advocate for themselves. Direct intervention may be expedient, but we believe that helping students learn to advocate for themselves is well worth the extra time and investment. Many students have expressed their appreciation for having been taught new ways to resolve conflict and problems.

Within the approach of self-advocacy, the Ombudsperson will encourage the development of mutual respect and understanding of the differing perspectives. As well, the Ombudsperson creates, in consultation with the person dealing with a problem, a particular approach to each situation. It is often the role of the Ombudsperson to “open doors” to staff on campus who can assist students with their concerns. This can involve making phone calls to other parties, and arranging for and participating in meetings. We avoid appearing to be direct representatives of the student and try to be seen as a conduit for information.
COMMUNICATION, OUTREACH, AND SERVICE ACTIVITIES

To provide the campus with information regarding the Office of Ombudsperson, we have spoken with faculty and staff meetings including:

Chairs and Deans Meeting
November 28, 2008

Campus Advisors Group
January 2009

GSS Forum
January 2009

Departmental Graduate Student Representatives Group
March 2009

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Managers Group
March 2009

Student Services Academic Advising Group
June 2009

SFSS Board Meeting
July 2009

New Student Orientation (Burnaby, Surrey and Vancouver)
August 2009

New Faculty Orientation
October 2009

TA/TM Orientation
October 2009

Chair of Committee to create a Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook
November 2009

The Office placed 12 advertisements “Feel like you’re hitting a brick wall?” in the Peak newspaper. The ads provided information about the services provided by the Office. The Office also had 250 posters designed and printed. These were distributed to staff and faculty throughout campus. The practice of advertising in the Peak Newspaper will continue in 2010. New posters will also be developed.
DAY TO DAY OPERATIONS

Advising people about their options remains the most common activity of the Office. Given the sheer number and complexity of many university policies and procedures, providing advice is almost always the first thing we do after a person describes his or her problem. Overall, though, our most common activities remain much the same: listening to the students’ problems, explaining the options available to them, and assisting students so that they can become self-advocates. In some cases we may refer them to more appropriate avenues for resolution or support. People approach the Office in a number of ways. Contact by email and phone are most common. Students are encouraged to book an appointment to ensure that we will be available for them. However, individuals do regularly drop into the Office, without notice, and there are rare occasions when this is difficult to accommodate because of previously booked appointments. We are normally able to meet with students within a 24 to 48 hour period after they contact the Office. For students who were in Distance Education courses or were unable to attend an appointment on campus, telephone appointments were made with the long distance costs charged to the Office when necessary.

While email does not allow for face-to-face contact, it does reduce response time considerably. The more free-flowing form of email allows for quick response without the constraints of having to find a mutually agreeable time to meet. There are limits to email. We often encouraged students to call if they were unable to meet to give students the opportunity to speak freely.

The amount of time and effort to address each case varied greatly. In some cases, after initial contact where advice and information is provided, the issue is resolved fairly quickly. In more complex situations, we try to follow up to determine if the students’ concerns were resolved to their satisfaction. In some cases, a request for assistance on a single concern turns into a need for help on a wide range of issues. Some cases were resolved in hours, others in days, and in some cases over a period of months. It should be noted that these particular cases involved complex issues related to graduate supervision, and involved long-term coaching to help students strategize and ease difficulties they were experiencing with their graduate supervisor.
For simple cases that are not resolved quickly, the next steps can vary greatly from one situation to another. Some cases involve a great deal of coaching to help the student; this is especially common with graduate student issues. There is often much more at stake for a graduate student: research, funding, references, reputation within the department, etc.

Given the potential risks, graduate students are often very concerned about resolving their case in confidence. Graduate student issues are often relational in nature and the path to resolution much more complicated. Moreover, the consequences of not addressing an issue can be devastating emotionally and may have a dramatic impact on the student’s academic career. Much of our work with these students is based on coaching the student to resolve the conflict without the direct involvement of the Ombudsperson. On occasion we hold discussions with people in conflict and help them work through these conflicts. These discussions loosely resemble mediation, though we prefer to keep the discussions much more informal. These typically involve what we call “facilitated discussions” that help people come to agreement. These discussions are informal, and may continue on and off for weeks or months.

**MOST COMMON FORMS OF ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO INDIVIDUALS**

1. **Advice or Individual Consultations:** This category is used to indicate that we consulted with individuals to identify their interests, consider their goals, options, and potential strategies. Our assistance in this category often includes conflict coaching regarding how they might raise difficult issues, approach others, attempt to gain cooperation, etc.

2. **Referral:** Referred to another on-campus or off-campus resource for primary or additional assistance. When this category is checked, an Individual Consultation is assumed to have occurred, as well.

3. **Intervention:** Although the Office encourages students to self-advocate there are times when there is no other viable option to intervention. This category can be selected to indicate that we did a structured mediation or intervention on the student’s behalf.
THE YEAR IN REVIEW

From November 30, 2008 until December 22, 2009 a total of 227 people have sought the advice and support of the Ombudsperson.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Referral</th>
<th>Advice</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Appeal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal under Extenuating Circumstances</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence and Housing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Registration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Relationship</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP (W)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAB</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Conflict</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Credit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Delivery</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating and Plagiarism</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Academic Misconduct</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Board on Student Discipline</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 194 students were undergraduate
- 33 were graduate students
- 130 females, 97 males
- *Many graduate student issues require multiple meetings to resolve the issue. Average of 4 visits per student.
- Other = Many issue that present themselves to the Office do not fit neatly into one category. Some issues do not relate to administrative fairness but are examples of students struggling to navigate the complex and often confusing bureaucracy. In many cases, students just need support or a safe and confidential space to work through their challenges. Some students are dealing with mental health issues and often need referral to counselling services.
Examples of other concerns:
• Tuition refunds
• Academic integrity issues
• Forged documentation
• Defamation
• Graduate student leave requirements
• Transfer of credits
• Disability issues
• Student Visa issues
• Charge of theft from the bookstore
• Non-payment of tuition/student loans
• Loss of scholarship
• Cheating on exam
• Denial of Graduate diploma
• Missed final
• Parking permit changes/parking tickets
• Course qualification
• Readmission
• Various other issues.

CASE STUDIES
“Case” is used to reference a particular situation that an individual may bring to the Office. The period encompassed by this report is November 30, 2008 to December 22, 2009.

Two “F” grades for the price of one
A recent example of our “best practices” approach involved a student who had taken and failed a 4 credit undergraduate course. Taking the advice of his departmental advisor, he registered to re-take the course the next semester. When he received his final mark he was surprised to see that the course was now being offered as a 3 credit course. The department had no explanation as to why the course had changed and the syllabus indicated that the course content was exactly the same. What was of particular concern to the student is that he received a grade of C (3 credits) for the new course and $\frac{1}{4}$ of an “F” was applied to the new grade. The student acted in good faith, retook the course and was inadvertently penalized. The Registrar’s Office was contacted and the fairness issue was clear to the Registrar’s Office. The issue was resolved. The Registrar’s Office agreed to revisit the policy so that this does not happen to other students.
Lack of Supervision

The relationship between a graduate student and a supervisor is a unique and sometimes difficult relationship to navigate. When things go wrong the impact on a student’s reputation, academic success, research and funding are potentially devastating. A PhD student in her third year had been struggling with her supervisor for over two years when she sought the services of the Ombudsperson. She had in good faith attempted to resolve the interpersonal tensions directly and had worked to salvage a relationship that had soured. The situation was having a negative impact on the student’s mental health and the Office worked with counselling services to ensure that the student received additional support.

In such cases, it is important that students consider what a resolution would look like for them. Do they want to find a way to salvage the relationship? What are the implications to their research if they move on and find a new supervisor? How would the department react to such a request? After several meetings with the student to review her options the student decided that there was no other option available but to look for a new supervisor. The student discussed this matter with the Graduate Advisor in the department. After some time, it was agreed to support her request. Several months later the student contacted me to inform me that the department had still not completed the appropriate paper work and that the issue remained unresolved. With considerable coaching and guidance, the student was advised to take the matter to the Department of Graduate Studies. This case is now being addressed by the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and remains unresolved.

Issues related to supervisory conflict are some of the most challenging and complex cases that the Office encounters. This case demonstrates how a complaint can unfold over many months, and that the role of the Ombudsperson is to guide the student through the many challenges and detours that come into play.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Ombudsperson attends quarterly meetings with Ombudspersons from The University of British Columbia, The University of Victoria, Camosun College and Douglas College. These meetings allow university ombudspersons from other post-secondary campuses across the province to come together and discuss various topics and issues unique to the profession. It is the intention of the group to expand membership to eventually include all post-secondary Ombudspersons from across the province.

The Ombudsperson at SFU is also a member of the International Ombuds Association (IOA) and the Association of Canadian University and College Ombudspersons (ACCUO). Both groups provide access to a network of other individuals who practice conflict management from across the nation who meet in a designated place to collaborate and strategize in ways to handle situations that may arise in the daily operations of the Office. The Ombudsperson attended the annual joint conference held in Montreal in April 2009. The Ombudsperson also attended a two-day Administrative Justice Workshop hosted by the BC Council of Administrative Tribunals.