Office of the Ombudsman

Annual Report
2016-2017

11 December 2017

Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC)
Algonquin College of Applied Arts and Technology
1385 Woodroffe Avenue
Ottawa, ON K2G 1V8

Dear Members of the ORC,

In accordance with section 3, subsection (3.11) of SA02: Ombudsman, Terms of Reference, the Office of the Ombudsman (the "**Office**") presents this annual report of the activities and observations of the Ombudsman for the period 1 May 2016 to 30 April 2017.

Generally, the Ombudsman's annual reports include statistical overview intended to provide insight into the nature and volume of services provided by the Office. It is important to note that the impact and complexity of the concerns/complaints addressed – as well as recommendation(s) – cannot be reflected through statistical analysis alone. For this reason, the reports usually include case summaries to augment understanding of services and interventions provided by the Office.

In this report, although potential systemic matters constituting areas of concern are identified, preliminary comments of proactive solutions are provided rather than recommendations as it is prudent to further monitor these matters in order to provide a thorough recommendation(s).

Parts I and II outline the mandate and statistical overview of the activities of the Office. 485 files were opened, representing a 4% increase in our caseload over the 2015-2016 Academic Year. Of these 485 files, 334 were student files and the remaining 151 files were non-student (i.e. faculty, staff, Algonquin Students' Association, and other). It should also be noted that as multiple concerns can be associated with a single file, the number of concerns exceed the number of files handled.

In Part III, case summaries are intended to provide insight into situations requiring the involvement of the Ombudsman. Part IV advances the discussion of the fairness triangle featured in previous reports; it is intended to assist with the mission, vision, values and strategic plan of the College.

Finally, but no less importantly, the report – Part V – concludes with an expression of appreciation to the ORC, the College leadership, the Algonquin Students' Association, and the entire College community for the support and collaboration in recognizing that the independent, impartial and confidential nature of the Office of the Ombudsman are the touchstones of its effectiveness.

Respectfully,

George Cole, Ombudsman.

I - About the Office of the Ombudsman

Per the Terms of Reference, [SA02: Ombudsman](#), the Office of the Ombudsman is to provide an independent, impartial and confidential process through which students of the College may pursue the resolution of any College-related concern.

Specifically, the Ombudsman has the mandate:

1. To investigate, at the absolute discretion of the Ombudsman, any student(s) complaint about aspects of student life, including:
    a. academic matters;
    b. services provided by the College or the Students' Association;
    c. the operations of the College or the Students' Association;
    d. the treatment received from other students;
    e. the treatment received from staff and faculty.

2. To provide information to students on College policies and procedures, the rights and responsibilities of students in College situations, and provide advice on where and to whom complaints and inquiries are to be directed.

The Office of the Ombudsman adheres to the standards of practice that guide the work of all Ombudsman/persons across Canada and other parts of the world. These standards of practice include the following (see our [website](#) for further information):

I.   Independence,
II.   Impartiality,
III. Confidentiality,
IV.   Accessibility, and
V.   Informality.

The principles of fairness, natural justice, and credibility are essential to these standards of practice.

In fulfilling our responsibilities, the Office of the Ombudsman uses methods of intervention, including:

- Coaching/Advice,
- Dialogue Facilitation/Mediation,
- Fact Finding/Investigation,
- Problem Resolution,
- Providing information on policies and procedures,
- Referral, and
- Shuttle Diplomacy.

II - Case Distribution

In this reporting period, the Office of the Ombudsman opened 485 files. Of this, 334 were student files and the remaining 151 files were non-student (i.e. faculty, staff, Algonquin Students' Association, and other; see Tables 2 and 3 for further details). The total number of files opened in the 2016-2017 Academic Year represents a 4% increase in our caseload over the 2015-2016 Academic Year. All the data in this report includes our caseload from the Pembroke and Perth campuses.

Figure 1, shows a trend of yearly increases in our caseload from 2011-2012 to 2016-2017.

Yearly Comparison of Caseload

Figure 1: Yearly comparison of caseload from 2011-2012 to 2016-2017.
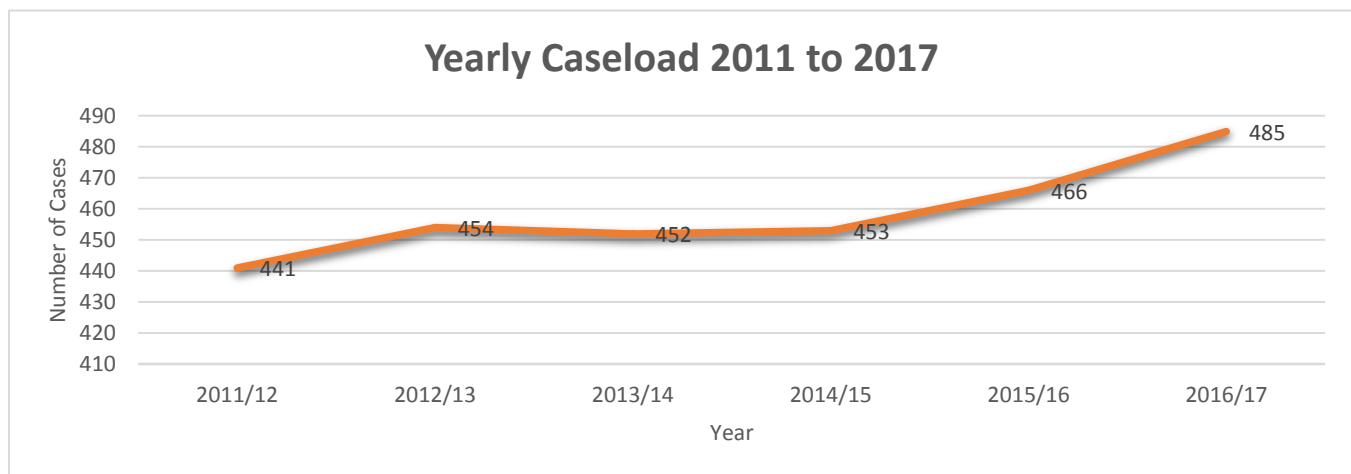
It is assumed that this trend reflects the general increase in the student population at Algonquin College. The Office caseload is influenced by the number of concerns/complaints as well as their complexity. It is important to note that the number of services offered exceed the number of files handled, as multiple services can be associated with a single file. Often, each file entails several complaints that require different services. A single file may entail the following concerns/complaints:

- an alleged plagiarism in a group project/assignment;
- an ongoing conflict with other group members;
- course management, delivery, and associated policies or expectations;
- a disability or medical related accommodation that is allegedly having some challenges;
- an OSAP related matter that is affecting their ability to purchase required textbooks; and
- a U-Pass related concern arising from inadequate OC Transpo service in their suburb.

Depending on the nature of a request(s) for assistance, the Office provides an array of services within the broader spectrum of 'Dispute Resolution.' Although these services range from informal to formal processes, most of our processes are informal.

Files Opened per Month[1]

Table 1: Files opened per month, in descending order, in the reporting year 2016-2017.

Month	2016-2017	%
December	63	13
November	62	13
January	52	11
March	52	11
October	44	9
April	44	9
September	43	9
May	42	9
February	37	7
August	23	5
June	17	3
July	6	1
Totals	485	100

Although the number of files opened per month is slightly different in each academic year, on average, November is usually our busiest month, followed by April, January, September and March. It is unusual that the highest number of files were in December. See Appendix A for annual comparison.

In this reporting year, the concerns/complaints associated with the files opened in November, December, January, March and April were academic appeals, plagiarism, medical/disability related accommodations (including retroactive accommodations), progression and graduation requirements, course management and policies, field placements/internships, and relational conflicts.

Matters pertaining to academic appeals, progression and graduation requirements usually account for most of our caseload in January and April. Our caseload in September usually pertains to student transition to the new academic year, and academic appeals from the preceding Spring Term.

On average, the Office handles fewer complaints/concerns in July and August. This is primarily because most students take time off for the summer break. Nonetheless, the Office sometimes handles the most complex cases during the summer break. These are usually cases that have lingered over a long period of time and are referred to the Office when they become intractable.

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[1] Appendix A provides this information in chronological, rather than descending order.

Profile of our Clients

Our clientele reflects a broad range of members of the Algonquin College community. Our mandate pertains to anything that affects a student, and in exceptional circumstances, alumni of the College.

Table 2: Client Type by Status, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017.

Client Status	Number of Cases							
	2013-2014	%	2014-2015	%	2015-2016	%	2016-2017	%
Full-Time (In-Class)	330	73	260	57	299	64	277	57
Non-Student	80	18	115	26	93	20	148	31
Part-Time (In-Class)	14	3	17	4	19	4	21	4
Alumni	4	1	15	3	15	3	12	2
Full-Time Online	15	3	13	3	11	2.5	8	2
Part-Time Online	7	2	6	1	8	2	8	2
Applicant	2	0	4	1	10	2	8	2
Other	-	-	23	5	11	2.5	3	1
Totals	**452**	**100**	**453**	**100**	**466**	**100**	**485**	**100**

As in previous academic years, full-time (in-class) students account for the majority of our caseload by student status, followed by part-time (in-class) students, then full-time online and part-time online.

Our non-student clients are primarily faculty and staff members who consult with us on a broad range of student related matters. Table 3 provides further data on our non-student clientele.

Figure 2: Client Type by Status, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.
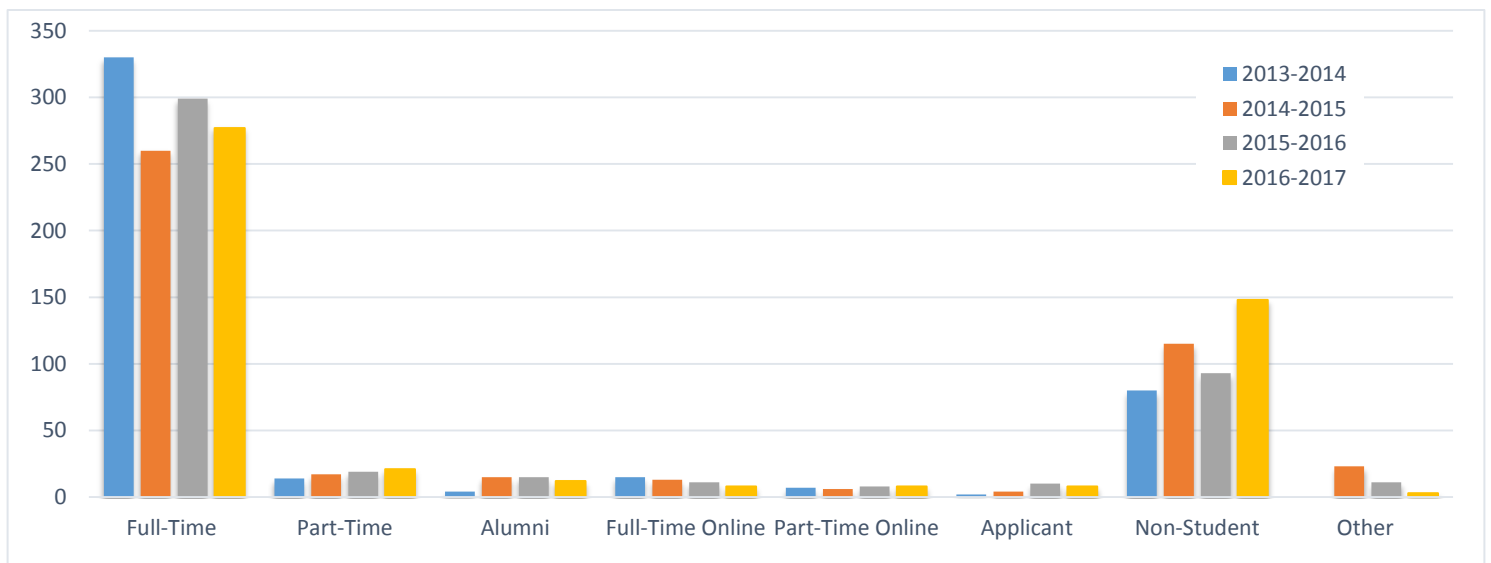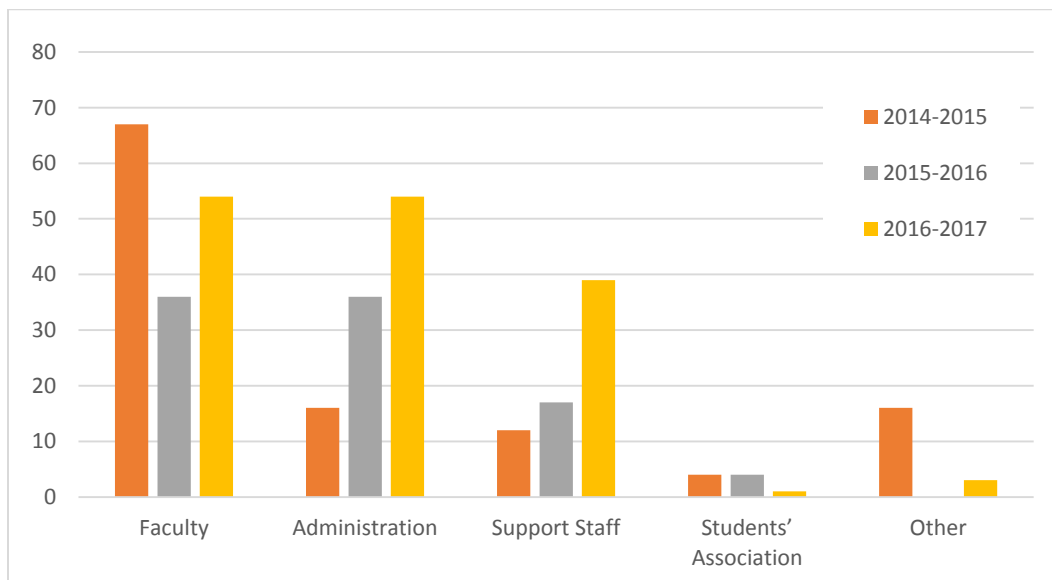
Table 3: Client Type by Non-Student Status, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017.

Client Status	Number of Cases					
	2014-2015	%	2015-2016	%	2016-2017	%
Faculty	67	58	36	39	54	36
Administration	16	14	36	39	54	36
Support Staff	12	10	17	18	39	26
Students' Association	4	4	4	4	1	1
Other	16	14	-	-	3	2
Totals	**115**	**100**	**93**	**100**	**151**	**100**

Figure 3: Client Type by Non-Student Status, 2014-2015, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.

The Office continues to observe an increasing number of faculty and staff who consult with us on policy and/or student related matters; we welcome this proactive approach. In this reporting year, we noticed a slight increase in the number of support staff who consulted with us on a range of student related matters. It is assumed that this increase is a reflection of the growing awareness of our proactive approach to addressing student related concerns.

Experience has shown that it is more efficient and less stressful for students, faculty and staff when all options are reasonably explored, before decisions are made. This eventually advances fairness, increases positive adherence and acceptance of the final solution, and so improves our learning and working community.

Clients by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s)

Table 4: Profile of our Clients by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s) in 2016-2017. See Appendix B for comparison of previous years 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17.

School / Academic Department	2016-2017	%
School of Health and Community Studies	93	19
Other: (Admin/Support Staff, Students' Association, Ancillary etc.)	84	17
School of Business	62	13
School of Advanced Technology	57	12
School of Media and Design	38	8
Police and Public Safety Institute	35	7
Algonquin Centre for Construction Excellence	32	7
School of Hospitality and Tourism	22	5
Centre for Continuing and Online Learning	21	4
General Arts and Science	20	4
Language Institute	7	1
Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley – Pembroke	7	1
Algonquin College Heritage Institute – Perth	7	1
Career and Academic Access Centre	0	0
Totals	485	100

As Table 4 shows our clients by affiliated school/academic department(s), it is cautioned that this data is not mistakenly interpreted as the academic department(s) with more files is problematic. It is important to note that academic departments with more students and/or programs, as well as departments with unique program requirements such as placements/work practicum/internships which invariably involve stakeholders outside the College, are likely to have more interaction with the Office of the Ombudsman than other departments.

Types of Concerns

In this reporting year, as in previous academic years, the concerns/complaints brought to the attention of the Office were mostly academic related, namely: academic appeals and review of final grades, placements/work practicum/internships, and progression and graduation requirements. The non-academic matters are primarily about services provided by the College and the Algonquin Students' Association, and violations of the Student Conduct policy.

Table 5: Types of Concerns

Types of Concern	Number of Occurrences							
	2013-2014	%	2014-2015	%	2015-2016	%	2016-2017	%
Academic	496	62	693	60	805	70	845	73
Other (Interpersonal Conflict, External - Landlord/Tenant, Co-op, Notary, etc.)	145	18	188	16	168	14	139	12
Services	92	12	220	19	124	11	112	10
Human Rights / Student Rights	36	4	12	1	8	1	33	3
Non-Academic Student Conduct	20	3	31	3	36	3	20	1.7
Algonquin Students' Association	5	1	18	2	6	1	3	0.3
Total	794	100	1162	100	1147	100	1152	100

It is important not to confuse the **number of files opened** with the **number of concerns (complaints).** As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the number of concerns (complaints) exceeds the number of actual files handled, as multiple concerns can be associated with a single file. Often, each file entails several concerns that require different services. A single file may entail the following concerns/complaints:

- an alleged plagiarism in a group project/assignment,
- an ongoing conflict with other group members,
- course management, delivery, and associated policies or expectations,
- a disability or medical related accommodation that is allegedly having some challenges,
- an OSAP related matter that is affecting their ability to purchase required textbooks, and
- a U-Pass related concern arising from inadequate OC Transpo service in their suburb.

Also, similar matters/interests are combined under single headings.

Table 6 provides further details of the data on 'Academic' and 'Services' as shown in Table 5.

Table 6: Types of Concerns (Academic and Services)

Academic	2013-14	%	2014-15	%	2015-16	%	2016-17	%
Academic Appeal / Review of Grades	40	8	66	10	102	13	132	16
Progression / Graduation	80	16	124	18	151	19	132	16
Other (Access to information/Confidentiality, Grading/Evaluation, Advising, etc.)	88	18	159	23	68	9	87	10
Accommodation of Disability / Special Allowance	28	6	49	7	58	7	83	10
Course Management - Teaching/Delivery	71	14	65	9	73	9	78	9
Course Management- Professor Bias/Treatment	23	5	35	5	57	7	56	7
Course Management- Course Policies	25	5	19	3	31	4	49	6
Course Management- Pedagogical Support	5	1	2	0	48	6	49	6
Course Management - Course Outline	9	2	16	2	15	2	41	5
Course Management- Classroom Management	40	8	19	3	48	6	35	4
Academic Integrity - Discipline/Plagiarism	16	3	24	4	59	7	34	4
Practicum / Clinical Placement / Field Placement	43	9	86	12	68	9	31	4
Exemptions/Advanced Standing/PLAR/Transfer Credit/Other	18	4	14	2	17	1	20	2
Academic – Examinations	10	2	15	2	10	1	18	2
Total	**496**	**100**	**693**	**100**	**805**	**100**	**845**	**100**

Services	2013-14	%	2014-15	%	2015-16	%	2016-17	%
Registrar's Office	41	45	83	38	74	60	62	55
Financial Aid	17	19	36	16	13	11	27	24
Safety & Security	7	8	38	17	5	4	8	7
Residence	5	5	17	8	3	2	5	4
Other (Student Services, Health Services, Mamidosewin Centre, etc.)	15	16	37	17	20	16	5	4
Parking/Lockers	4	4	4	2	5	4	4	4
Ancillary Other - Campus Stores, etc.	3	3	5	2	4	3	1	1
Total	**92**	**100**	**220**	**100**	**124**	**100**	**112**	**100**

Over the past years, matters relating to academic appeals, review of final grades, academic integrity (plagiarism and academic dishonesty), accommodation of disability (special allowance), course management (i.e. teaching and delivery, course management, classroom management, course policies), field placements (i.e. practicum, clinical placements, and internships), and progression/ graduation accounted for the majority of our caseload.

In this reporting year, there was an increase in medical (disability) accommodation related matters. It is assumed that there is a growing awareness of the Ontario Human Rights Commission's guidelines on academic accommodations – particularly, retroactive accommodations. The College is advised to continue to handle these matters very carefully and when applicable, designate additional resources to assist accordingly, as these matters usually require extensive coordination and commitment.

Summary of Services Provided

Table 7: Summary of Services provided in 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017.

Services Offered	Number of Services							
	2013-14	%	2014-15	%	2015-16	%	2016-17	%
Coaching/Advice	191	18	194	24	297	28	359	26
Referral	213	20	154	19	177	16	314	23
Information	320	31	266	33	277	26	279	20
Intervention - Problem Resolution	59	6	55	7	110	10	164	12
Intervention - Shuttle Diplomacy	70	7	39	5	60	6	155	11
Intervention - Dialogue Facilitation / Mediation	30	3	16	2	58	5	47	3
Fact Finding / Investigation	86	8	49	6	61	6	29	2
Other	74	7	22	3	33	3	26	2
Total	1043	100	795	100	1073	100	1373	100

The Office of the Ombudsman takes the approach of proactively assisting with the resolution of student-related concerns. Nonetheless, the Office works to ensure that existing recourse mechanisms for resolution are reasonably exhausted. Note that the number of services offered exceeds the number of files handled, as multiple services can be associated with a single file.

Figure 4: Summary of Services provided in 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.
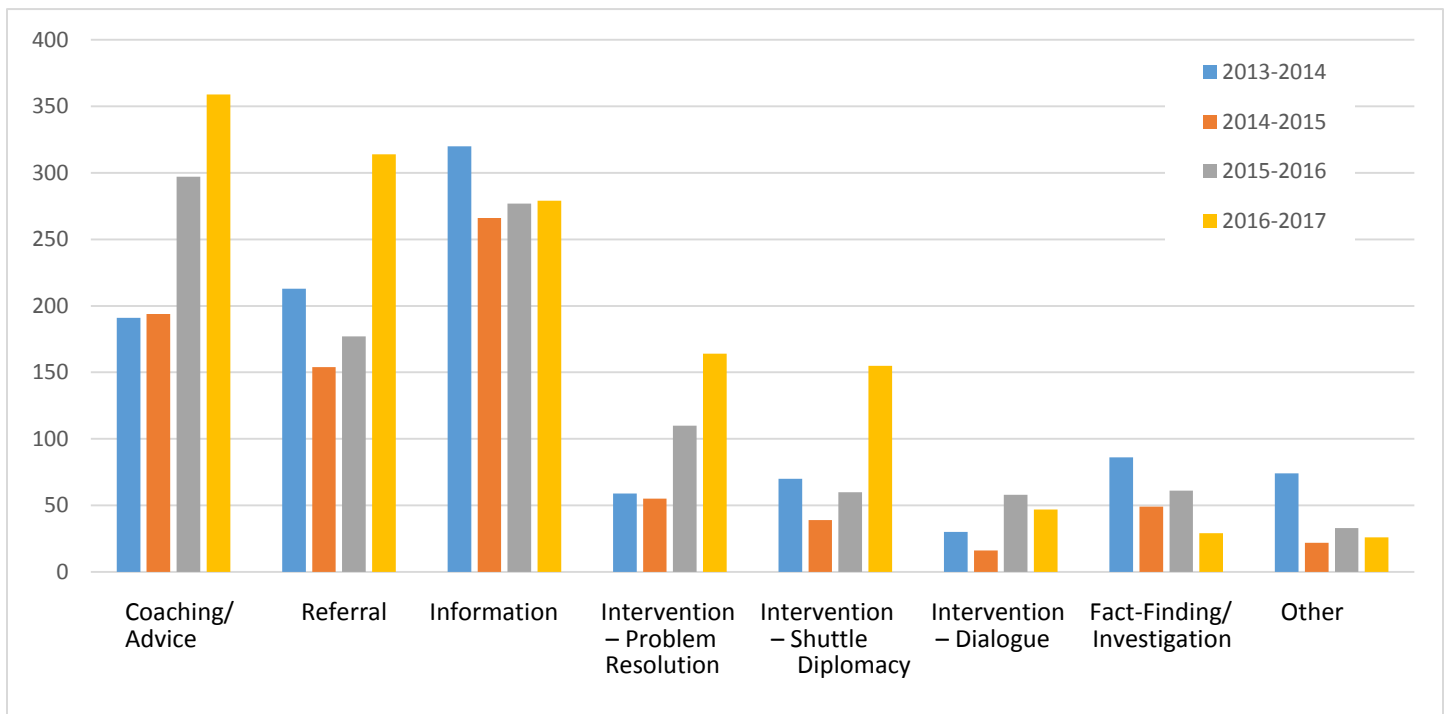
Often, each file entails several concerns/complaints that require different services. Depending on the nature of the request(s) for our assistance, we provide an array of services within the broader spectrum of 'Dispute Resolution.' Although our services range from informal to formal processes, most of our processes are informal.

As summarized in **Table 7**, our services are categorized under eight sub-headings.

> **1. Coaching/Advice -** Listening, understanding a client's perspective on an issue, and assisting the client to explore his/her options for resolution. In most cases, this requires an identification of the bigger picture, in order to help the client make a reasonable decision to address the issue/matter.

> **2. Fact Finding/Investigation –** Responding to issues ranging from an informal inquiry into a situation, to a full-fledged formal investigation. Most services in this category are informal inquiries, and review of appropriate documents/files in order to obtain a better understanding of a situation and make the appropriate recommendation.

> **3. Information -** Providing information on policies, procedures/directives, and channels of appeal.

> **4. Intervention: Dialogue Facilitation/Mediation -** Facilitating a dialogue between the conflicting parties and/or for all the stakeholders in a dispute.

> **5. Intervention: Problem Resolution -** Engaging directly with the appropriate authorities and/or parties in a dispute/conflict in order to find a resolution.

> **6. Intervention: Shuttle Diplomacy -** Serving as the intermediary to maintain the lines of communication, when the identified parties in a dispute are unwilling to engage in direct dialogue or when it is not appropriate to engage them in direct communication.

> **7. Referral -** Listening and directing the client to the appropriate authority or office.

> **8. Other -** Addressing any issues that do not fall within the above categories.

One or a combination of the services described above was provided in all the cases we handled in this reporting period. The Ombudsman made monthly visits to the Pembroke and Perth campuses. Additionally, our office provided the necessary services to our distance education students who contacted us.

III - Case Summaries

Race against Time: Final Exams or Delivering a Baby?

Anne Green-Wables, a full-time student in the XYZ Program, was funded by an external agency that required her successful completion of each academic term to maintain her funding; without this funding, Anne had no other means to continue her education. Anne lived in a neighbouring town that required approximately 90 minutes commute to school, each way.

Anne was in the final trimester of her pregnancy. Her projected due date was one week after the end of the College's officially scheduled final exam dates. However, she did not believe the baby would wait that long. Based on her hunch, she requested to write her final exams earlier than originally scheduled.

Anne asserted that at some point during the previous academic term, she notified her program coordinator and student advisor about the pregnancy. At the time, she was informed that it was preferable she completes her placement and final exams early as the College would most likely not want a student to go into labour while writing their exams.

About a month before the scheduled exams dates, Anne submitted her request for earlier exams. The request was denied but she was informed that if the baby arrives before the scheduled exams dates, arrangements would be made for her to write the exams at a later date. Anne was dissatisfied with the response; she felt strongly about writing the exams before the baby's arrival and not have to worry about taking time away from the baby and family to prepare for exams, after delivery. Also, she was concerned that waiting until the scheduled exams dates, could put her at risk of going into labour during a commute to or from school.

While the Office of the Ombudsman was in discussions with the academic department about the necessary arrangements for Anne to write her exams early, Anne received medical advice that the baby would certainly arrive earlier than the start of the scheduled exam dates. With this update, Anne was advised to concentrate on having the baby and write her final exams later. Anne successfully delivered the baby, passed all her exams, and maintained her funding to continue her studies.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Over the past few years, the Office of the Ombudsman has been involved in several matters regarding accommodation(s) for expecting mothers; single parents whose childcare arrangements sometimes make it impossible for them to arrive on time for an 8:00AM class; single parents and/or parents with younger child(ren) who realistically cannot make the necessary drop-offs for their childcare arrangements in the morning and then use the U-Pass for school – yet, they cannot opt-out of the U-Pass because they live within the OCTranspo/STO service area; students whose mandatory lab-related courses or placement(s) are scheduled on weekends that conflict with a religious obligation(s); and a growing number of students whose classes on a particular weekday conflict with a religious obligation(s).

As the College reaches out to a broad spectrum of learners, it will be best served to carefully examine the delivery platforms and program related policies in order to retain and support the success of the broad spectrum of learners who are an integral part of the Algonquin College community.

Navigating the flexible learning pathways

Sam Morgan, a full-time student and sole supporting parent of a toddler, was registered in the XWX Program. Sam was recovering from an injury that resulted in a permanent mobility impairment; *they*[2] was very committed to furthering *their* education in order to change careers. Sam was in subsidized housing and *their* toddler attended fully subsidized daycare. Without any child support, and having been compelled to abandon a previous career path due to the injury, *their* prospect of self-advancement and putting the family on a stable financial future was riding on the successful completion of their studies.

Upon receiving the Winter 2017 schedule in the middle of December 2016, Sam noticed that over fifty percent of *their* classes had been scheduled during evening hours. This completely conflicted with *their* toddler's daycare schedule and without any alternative childcare, *they* could not attend school. Sam immediately contacted *their* designated Program Administrator to explore the options to adjust *their* class schedule. Sam was informed that it was impossible to make any changes to the schedule at the time; they had to wait until end of the academic term (Fall 2016) to see if there were any open spots to adjust *their* schedule. At the end of the academic term, Sam contacted the designated Program Administrator but there were still no open spots for Sam to adjust *their* schedule. Allegedly, during that conversation, Sam was advised to consider switching to online studies. Sam alleges that *they* inquired if that switch would affect *their* OSAP funding and was advised it would not because *they* would still be enrolled in full-time studies. Based on this information, and without the opportunity to adjust *their* class schedule, Sam decided to switch to online learning. Accordingly, Sam was referred to another administrator to assist with the transfer process. After several emails and phone calls, the transfer was completed on the first day of classes in Winter 2017.

Unfortunately, there were some glitches and confusion with Sam's transition from the College's Blackboard Platform for in-class students to the Online Learning Portal (ePortal) for online students. Sam was unaware that *their* online courses would not be loaded on the College's Blackboard; that all the etext course related resources *they* had purchased and downloaded via Texidium were inapplicable; and that the textbooks, reading materials and software for the courses were different. Also, Sam later learned that *their* transition to online learning had resulted in an OSAP overpayment which had a cascading risk of affecting *their* future funding; the prospect of continuing *their* studies; maintaining *their* living arrangements; and providing for *their* young family. After a number of desperate emails and phone calls, Sam was directed to several people within the College for assistance, including the Office of the Ombudsman.

Eventually, the necessary stakeholders collaborated to find a resolution. There was a genuine commitment and collaboration to assist Sam. By the time the glitches were resolved, Sam was behind in *their* studies by approximately four weeks. Sam was given extensions in some of the courses and withdrew from two courses; these two courses were successfully completed in the following academic term.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Considering the College's strategic focus on retention, personalized and flexible learning pathways, it is suggested that the College reviews its processes and procedures to promote a smoother transition across programs and learning pathways. Also, to the extent possible, consideration be given for consistency in curriculum, learning resources, and other applicable resources or information.

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[2] Gender neutral pronouns **'they'** and **'their'** are used in this report.

Retroactive Accommodation

Mackenzie True-North, a student in the ZYX program, was registered in six courses during an academic term. Due to medical reasons, Mackenzie missed a significant number of classes. Mackenzie was away from school (i.e. classes) more than the classes attended. The ZYX program, unlike most programs at the College, was structured such that each class involved a mixture of evaluations (including, in-class exercises, projects, assignments and exams) that was part of the overall grade. Also, the evaluations were co-dependent, and required successive faculty feedback in order to effectively complete the subsequent exercises / projects / assignments / exams.

Due to the significant number of missed classes and evaluations, the Program Coordinator met with Mackenzie to discuss *their* attendance and determine the next steps. They mutually agreed that Mackenzie would submit half the work that the rest of the class had already completed. While Mackenzie was in the process of completing the outstanding school work, there was another medical emergency that required a few more days away from school. Mackenzie had the necessary medical notes to substantiate these absences from school.

Upon returning to school, Mackenzie contacted a Counsellor at the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL), and the Office of the Ombudsman to discuss *their* accommodations in relation to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) directives on "Retroactive Accommodations". By this time, Mackenzie had missed more evaluations, in addition to the uncompleted work from the previously missed classes. The CAL Counsellor and the Ombudsman worked together with Mackenzie and the Academic Department to find a resolution. This required an extensive amount of coordination and commitment to strike a reasonable balance in: supporting Mackenzie to get caught up with the school work; supporting faculty to assist Mackenzie, while teaching and assisting other students in their respective courses; ensuring an evaluative process that was fair, without undermining the academic integrity of the program, and also not disadvantaging Mackenzie.

Eventually, it was agreed – by all stakeholders, including Mackenzie – that extensions would be given for the completion of some courses; some evaluations would be modified, without compromising the academic integrity of the course(s); and that Mackenzie would withdraw from some courses where far too many classes and assignments / exercises had been missed, making the prospect of success unrealistic.

Mackenzie successfully completed the courses *they* retained, with the help of some extensions on deadlines; was withdrawn – without any academic penalty – from a course that could not be salvaged; registered for the outstanding course in the following academic term; and took advantage of the College's flexible learning pathways by switching to online studies that afforded the opportunity to seek occasional medical attention and still pursue *their* studies.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Each matter on "Retroactive Accommodation" is fact specific and addressed based on the particular circumstances of the situation. It is acknowledged that retroactive accommodations require, among other things, extensive coordination, creativity, sensitivity, and confidentiality. The OHRC recognizes that in some circumstances, students are unaware of the effect of a mental health condition; are in the process of being diagnosed and do not yet have the necessary documentation to support a legitimate medical situation; or are simply uncomfortable identifying a disability or seeking the necessary accommodations due to concerns of being stigmatized. The OHRC supports retroactive accommodations in these circumstances.

Group Work/Assignments/Projects

Over the past few academic terms, the Office of the Ombudsman has been involved in several matters regarding student group work/assignments/projects. The main observable challenges arising from the conflicts associated with group work/assignments/projects include the following:

1. Issues regarding grading/evaluation; particularly, peer evaluation;

2. Issues pertaining to group members' individual contribution to the work/assignment/project;

3. Striking a fair and reasonable balance in supporting a group member(s) who require(s) accommodations or retroactive accommodations for absences and missed work, as well as, supporting the remaining group member(s) to complete the designated group work/assignment/project; addressing absences, with no prior notice, without breaching the confidentiality of the team-member who was away for medical/personal reasons;

4. Conflicts arising from individual differences and disagreements that spill over to social media postings and/or private chatroom conversations on social media; process(es) for removing team member(s) from a dysfunctional group; and/or allegations of faculty bias;

5. Issues about alleged plagiarism and/or academic dishonesty that affect the entire group; and

6. Issues pertaining to incidents that occur off-campus or involving community partners associated with these group projects.

Some of the students who contacted our Office regarding the observable challenges listed above also expressed frustrations about the perception of being treated unfairly in matters pertaining to group formation. Some claimed that they were compelled to join a group they otherwise would not have joined; yet, were expected to absorb the associated consequences of conflicts within the group. Interestingly, in situations where students were given the option to choose their own groups, we heard from some students who alleged that they either did not feel accepted by the other group members or felt isolated because the other group members were already "friends".

Comment(s)/Feedback: Understandably, learning to work effectively in groups/teams (or a team/group) is an essential employability skill and reasonably linked to the College's strategic focus on personalized and experiential learning. Considering that our broad spectrum of learners sometimes present some unique needs, including medical and other matters requiring accommodations, it is suggested that the College reviews its policies and processes to continue to support student's success in group work/assignments/projects.

IV - Advancing Fairness

In the 2014-2015 Annual Report, I stated how often the topic of *fairness* comes up in my conversation with students, faculty, staff, parents and other stakeholders. I used a widely accepted definition of *fair,* namely: "characterized by honesty, impartiality and candor; just; equitable; disinterested; free of bias or prejudice."[3] I also wrote about the three aspects of the **The Fairness Triangle**[4], namely; procedural, substantive, and relationship/equity.

Procedural Fairness focuses on the procedures entailed in the decision-making process. Questions asked include how the decision was made? What procedures, policies and regulations guided the decision making process?

Substantive Fairness pertain to the "fairness of the decision itself and recognizing that decision-making is a fluid process that includes initial contact with the person(s) involved in a situation and carefully reviewing the relevant information that informs the decision."[5]

Relational Fairness, also referred as "equitable fairness" at some institutions, is about how decision makers treat the parties involved in a situation.[6]
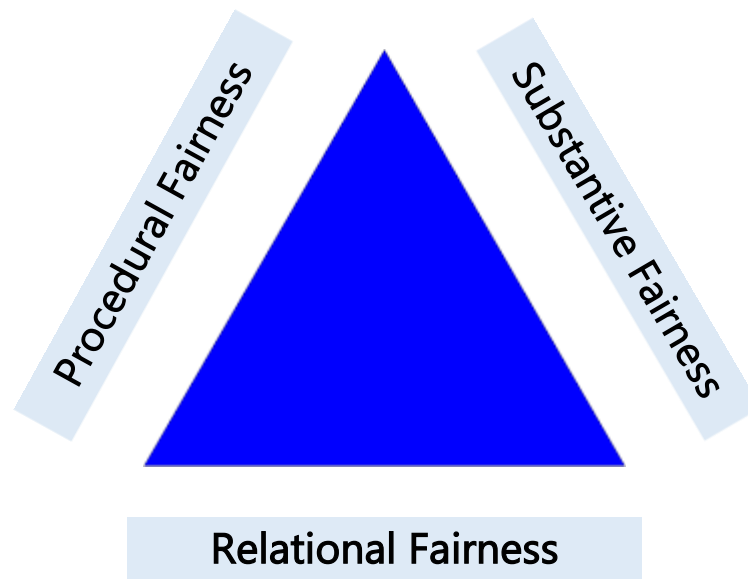
The Fairness Triangle is an essential framework for resolving conflicts at many other institutions.

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[3] Black's Law Dictionary, 715 (10th ed. 2014).
[4] Developed by Ken Fenwick, former Ombudsman, Saskatchewan.
[5] Crean, F. (2010) "Defining Fairness" *The Office of the Ombudsman, City of Toronto, Resources and Publication,* [online].
http://ombudstoronto.ca/publications (Accessed August 24, 2015).
[6] *Ibid*

V – Appreciation

The Office of the Ombudsman expresses sincere appreciation to members of the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC) for their continued support and counsel, when applicable.

To the leadership of Algonquin College and to the Algonquin Students' Association, thank you for understanding the unique role of our office and for supporting the confidential, impartial, and independent nature of our operations.

Our sincere thanks to those who sought our assistance and trusted us with your concerns. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you, to learn from you and to use your situation/matter, in whole or in part, as a catalyst to improve the learning and working experience of members of the Algonquin College community.

To all the students, faculty, staff, members of the Algonquin Students' Association and other stakeholders within and outside the College, who patiently and professionally work with us to resolve the matters that come to our attention, thank you.

Respectfully.

Office of the Ombudsman
1385 Woodroffe Avenue, Room E112
Algonquin College
Ottawa, ON K2G 1V8
(613) 727 4723 ext. 6835
ombuds@algonquincollege.com
Website: www.algonquincollege.com/ombuds

Appendices

Appendix A

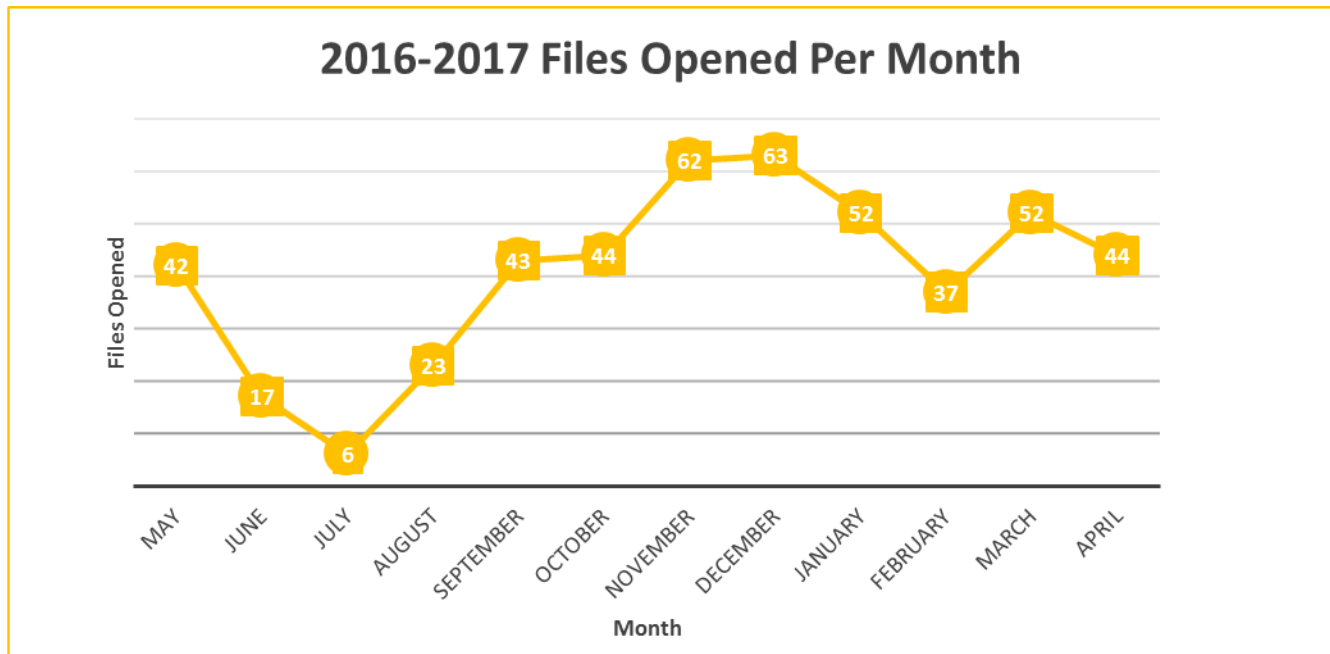**Graph A1:** Files opened per month, chronologically, in 2016-2017.

Table A: Files opened per month, chronologically, in 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2017.

Month	2013-2014	%		2014-2015	%		2015-2016	%		2016-2017	%
May	37	8		35	8		40	9		42	9
June	15	3		36	8		25	5		17	4
July	22	5		21	5		14	3		6	1
August	10	2		25	6		22	5		23	5
September	30	7		61	14		50	11		43	9
October	31	7		45	10		45	10		44	9
November	67	15		46	10		44	9		62	13
December	26	6		37	8		29	6		63	13
January	43	9		41	9		65	14		52	11
February	55	12		24	5		28	6		37	8
March	63	14		38	8		42	9		52	11
April	53	12		44	10		62	13		44	9
Totals	452	100		453	100		466	100		485	100

Graph A2: Timeline Trend of number of files opened per month from 2013-2014 to 2016-2017.
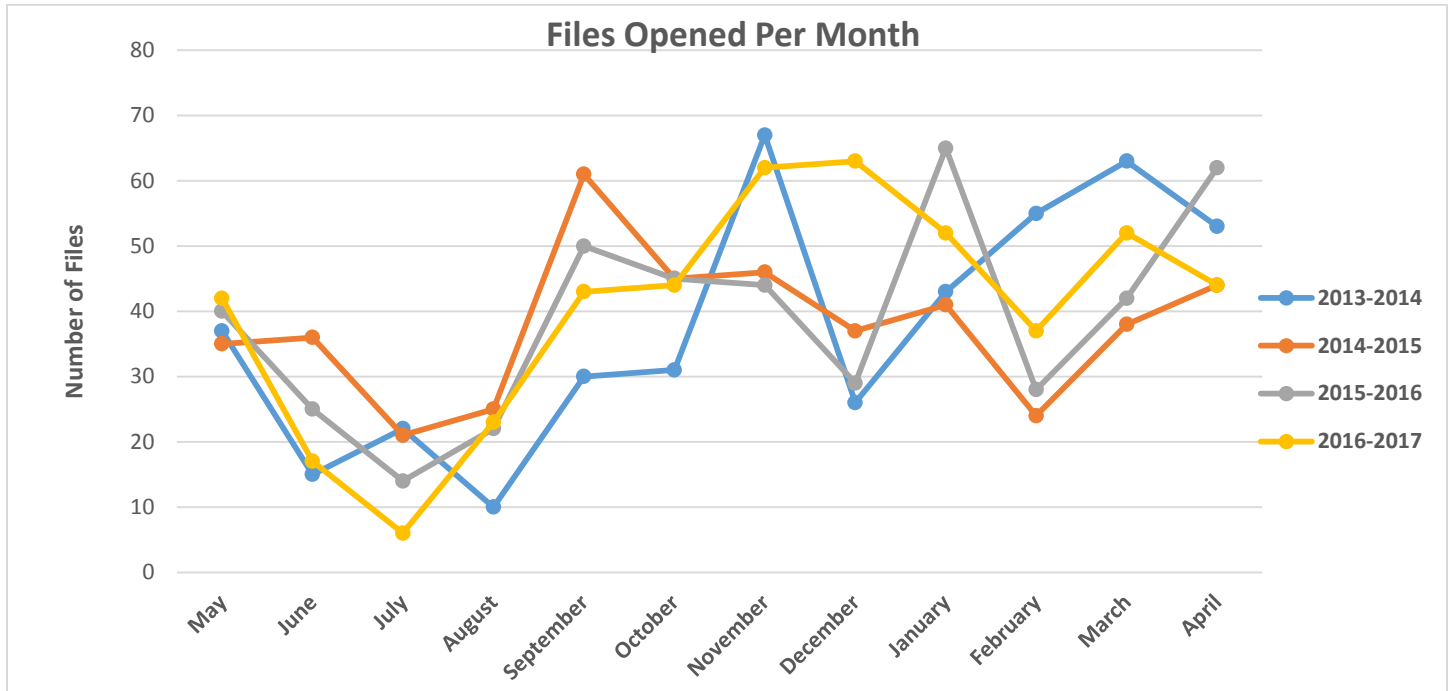
Graph A3: Timeline Trend of number of files opened per month from 2013-2014 to 2016-2017.
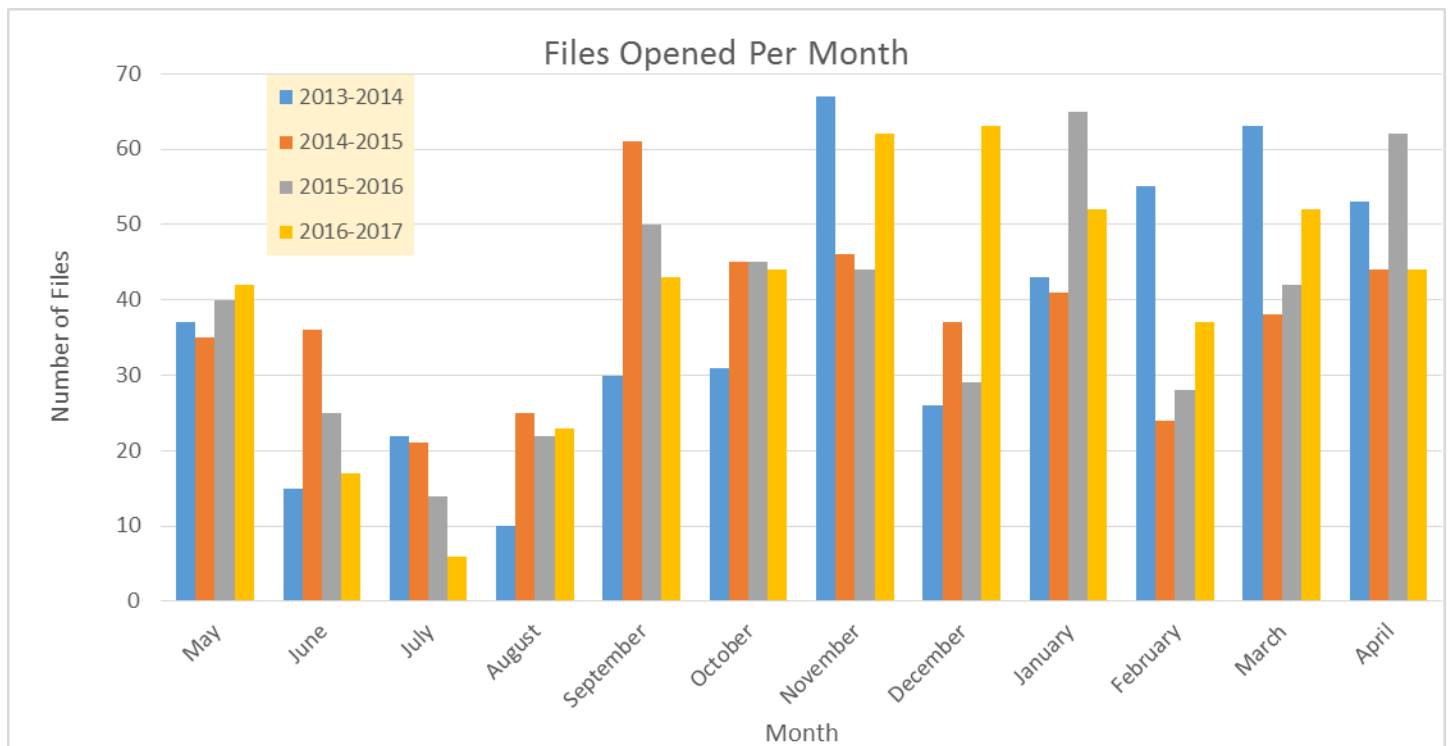
Appendix B: Clients by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s)

Table B: Annual comparison of our Client Profile by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s), in descending order: 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017.

School / Academic Department	Number of Cases							
	2013-14	%	2014-15	%	2015-16	%	2016-17	%
School of Health and Community Studies	97	21	111	24.5	85	18	93	19
Other: *(Support/Admin Staff, Faculty, Students' Association/Ancillary etc.)*	98	22	68	15	53	11	84	17
School of Business	87	19	95	21	84	18	62	13
School of Advanced Technology	43	10	36	7.9	78	17	57	12
School of Media and Design	35	8	34	7.5	21	4	38	8
Police and Public Safety Institute	19	4	25	5.5	21	4	35	7
Algonquin Centre for Construction Excellence	14	3	24	5.3	40	9	32	7
School of Hospitality and Tourism	22	5	22	4.9	26	6	22	5
Centre for Continuing and Online Learning	9	2	18	4	23	5	21	4
General Arts and Science	4	1	6	1.3	12	3	20	4
Language Institute	4	1	6	1.3	8	2	7	1
Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley – Pembroke	6	1	4	0.9	7	2	7	1
Algonquin College Heritage Institute – Perth	10	2	1	0.2	5	1	7	1
Career and Academic Access Centre	4	1	3	0.7	3	1	0	0
Totals	452	100	453	100	466	100	485	100

Figure B: Annual comparison of our Client Profile by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s), descending by 2016-2017 data. See Appendix 3 for table of values.

MEMO

ALGONQUIN COLLEGE
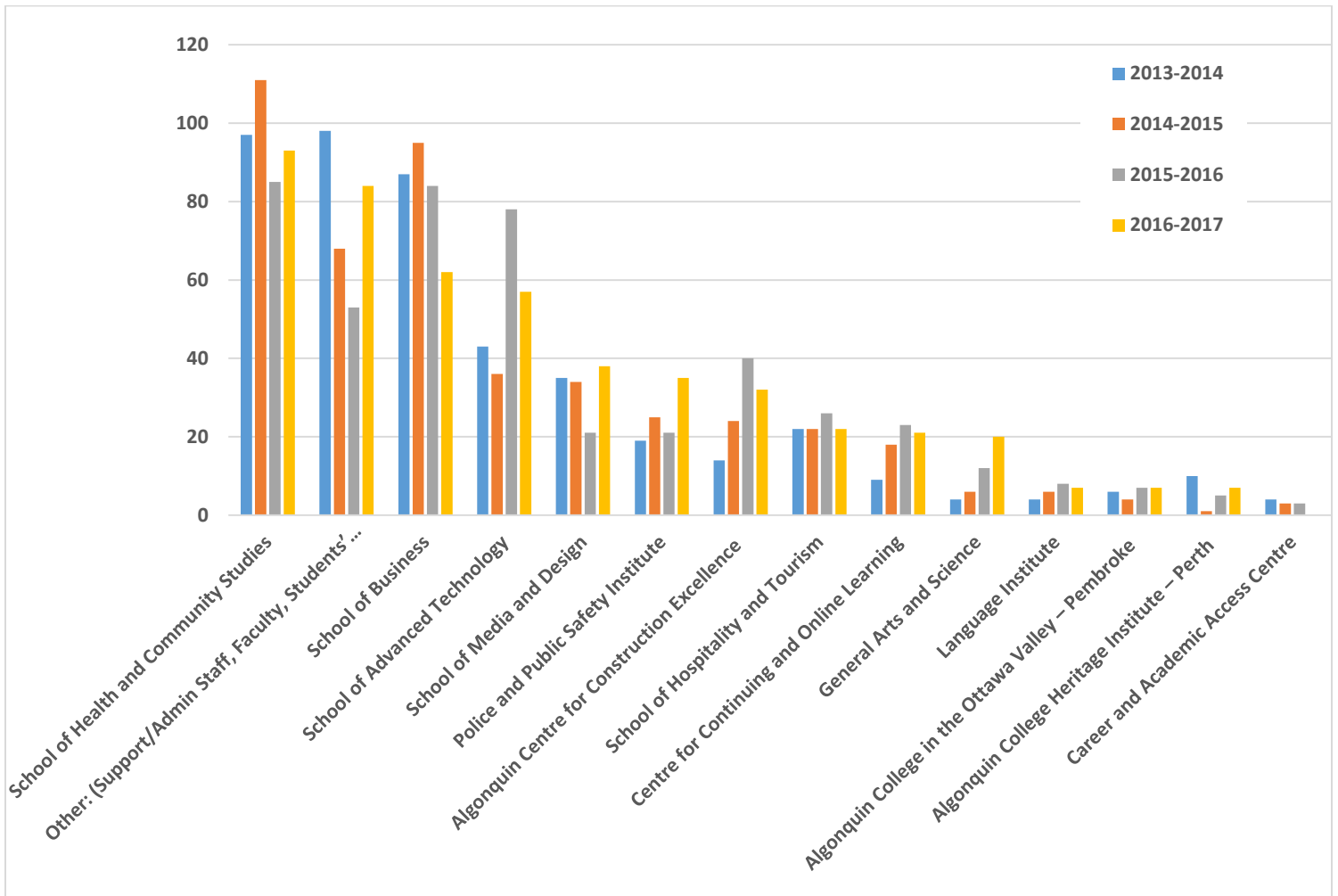
Date: February 1, 2018

To: George E. Cole, Ombudsman

From: Claude Brulé, Senior Vice President, Academic
        Laura Stanbra, Vice President, Student Services

Cc: Shelley Styles, Director of Student Support Services & Co-Chair, Ombudsman Review Committee
        Victoria Ventura, President, Students' Association & Co-Chair, Ombudsman Review Committee

Subject: **Ombudsman's Annual Report 2016-17**

This is to acknowledge receipt of the annual report of the activities and observations of the Ombudsman for the period of May 1, 2016 to April 30, 2017. Thank you for providing a presentation of this report to the President's Executive Team on January 10, 2018.

On behalf of the Executive Team we would like to thank you and your staff for this report and acknowledge the value of your work in support of the College community, guided by the College's core values of caring, learning, integrity and respect.

We appreciate this year's report has incorporated the suggested changes to reporting data as outlined in the College's response to the 2015-16 report. And as such, it is our understanding that the items brought forward in your report for further monitoring are based upon an alignment between the "top presenting items" statistics outlined in the report. The Executive Team welcomes suggested pro-active, solutions to reoccurring issues, in the Ombudsman's reports.

We acknowledge that your report has not put forward specific recommendations, as you require further monitoring of these matters. However, your report included a specific recommendation concerning revising policies and processes related to group work. As group work is an essential employability skill of Programs of Instruction Standards, we invite you to present your report to the College Academic Council at the meeting of March 5, 2018. As part of your presentation, we ask that you discuss the group work element with members of this committee, in order to develop a suggested way forward.

The College's 2017-2020 Strategic Plan highlights a commitment to personalized learning and a personalized college experience for all learners. This vision will guide the College's efforts of evaluating and evolving approaches in the areas of accommodation and learning pathways that have been outlined in your report. Accordingly, the Ombudsman's Reports will be resource documents in the development of the Learner Driven Plan, and we welcome you, and members of your team, to play an active role in providing insight into the plan.

Once again, thank you for this year's report. Your report, as well as this response will be provided for information, to the Academic and Student Affairs, sub-committee of the Board of Governors, on March 22, 2018.