



OFFICE OF THE
OMBUDSMAN
CONFIDENTIAL - IMPARTIAL - INDEPENDENT

Office of the Ombudsman

Annual Report (2019-2020)



The Office of the Ombudsman is jointly supported by
Algonquin College and the Algonquin Students' Association

ALGONQUIN
COLLEGE

Algonquin
Students'
ASSOCIATION

1 December 2020

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 our activities and observations for the period 1 May 2019 to 30 April 2020.

Section I of the report begins with a message of reflection and optimism; and an expression of appreciation to the ORC, the Algonquin College leadership, the Algonquin Students’ Association, and the entire College community for their support and collaboration in finding resolutions to the matters we handled, and for advancing the overall success of the learning and working experience at Algonquin College.

Section II of this report shows the highlights of our caseload in the reporting period.

Section III presents a recommendation of the Office of the Ombudsman.

Section IV references the mandate of the Office and the standards of practice that guide our work.

Section V outlines the statistical overview of the activities of the Office. Overall, **539 files** were opened. Of these, there were **456** student files, **79** non-student files (faculty, staff and the Students’ Association), and **4** files involved other stakeholders. The **539 total files** reflect a **7%** increase over the 2018-2019 reporting period. Similarly, the **456 student files** reflect a **5%** increase in our student files from the 2018-2019 reporting period, and an increase of **11%** over the 2017-2018 period. Collectively, these files raised **1304** topics of concern, of which **756** were academic-related. At the request of the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET) and the ORC last year, this Report identified our caseload on international students as well.

Finally, but no less importantly, this report includes case summaries that provide greater insight into the kind of matters for which students (and staff and faculty) seek our assistance. While most of the case summaries are in Section V, a few are sprinkled throughout the report.

Respectfully,

Office of the Ombudsman at Algonquin College.

I – Reflection and Appreciation

The Office of the Ombudsman is inspired daily by the ingenuity, goodwill and collaboration of the Algonquin College community at all levels in seeking to contribute and participate in a positive path to finding reasonable resolutions to the student related challenges that arise. We are privileged to share this path through our work, and by identifying obstacles which may diminish or dim the otherwise positive College experience of our learners, and by proposing solutions, as appropriate.

The Office of the Ombudsman is grateful for the support of the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC). The current ORC members are: Ben Bridgstock – Director, Student Support Services [Co-Chair]; Emily Ferguson – President, Algonquin Students' Association [Co-Chair]; Elise Abrams-Ogg – Director, Algonquin Students' Association; Amanda Stockbridge – Student; Trevor Seay – Student; Jack Doyle – General Manager, Algonquin Students' Association; Leslie Wyman – Faculty Representative; Katherine Root – Academic Administrative Representative; Leo Comunale – Community Representative; and Erin Langevin – Director of Labour Relations, Human Resources.

We also wish to express our appreciation to the leadership of Algonquin College and the Algonquin Students' Association 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 their concerns. We are grateful 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,

George Cole, Ombudsman
Barbara Carswell, Assistant Ombudsman
Carley Davidson, Ombudsman Officer

Office of the Ombudsman

Algonquin College

Ottawa, ON K2G 1V8

Website: www.algonquincollege.com/ombuds



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Highlights (2019-2020)

Reporting Year

Begins
1 May 2019

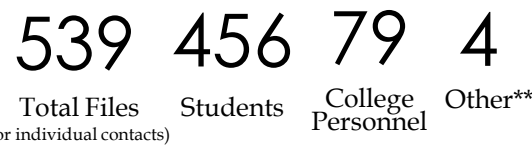
Ends
30 April 2020

Academic Terms

S2019, F2019, W2020



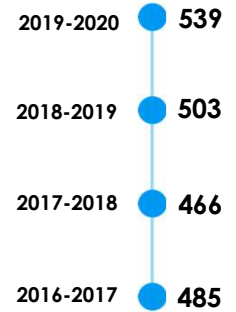
Client Composition*



- See Pages 5-21 for further information on client breakdown
- **Other may indicate non-student stakeholders such as parent/guardians, spouses, partners or community stakeholders such as school liaisons acting on behalf of a student.



Total Caseload Trend



In This Report

Page 2
Appreciation

Page 5
Recommendation

Page 6
About the Office of the Ombudsman

Page 7-26
Caseload Distribution

Page 17, 19-21, 23, 24, 27-33
Case Summaries

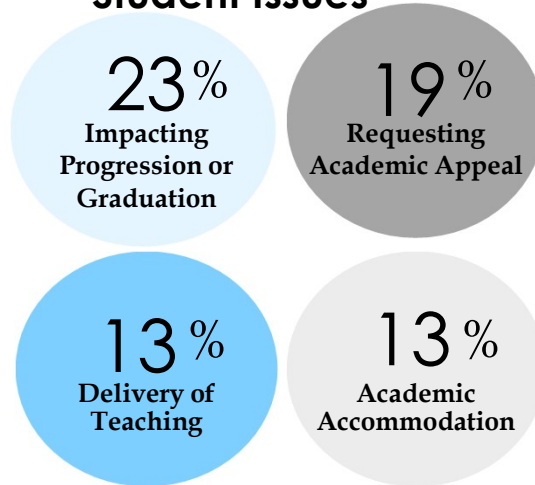
Focus Features

Page 12-13
Onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Page 18-21
Academic Appeals

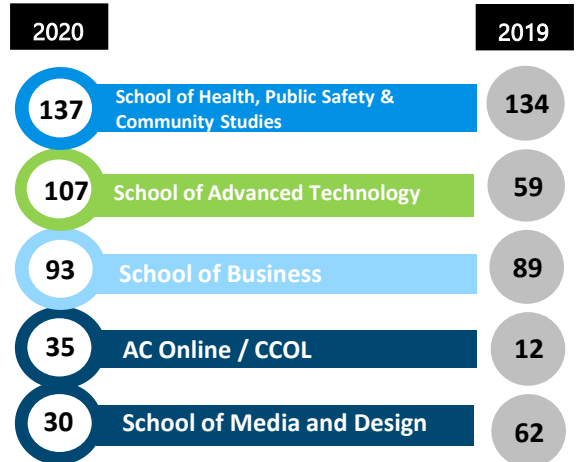
Page 21-24
International Students

Top Presenting Student Issues

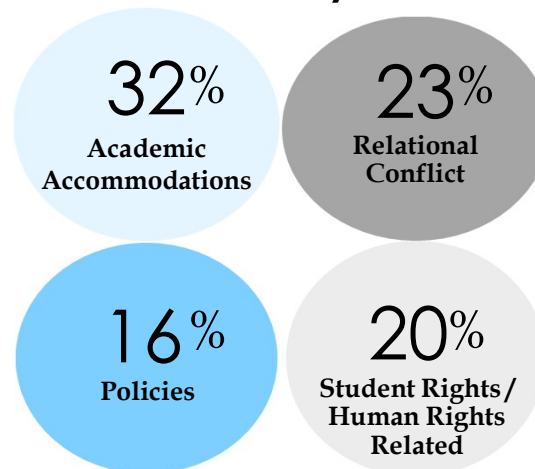


Top Academic Departments in contact

Total number of student contacts

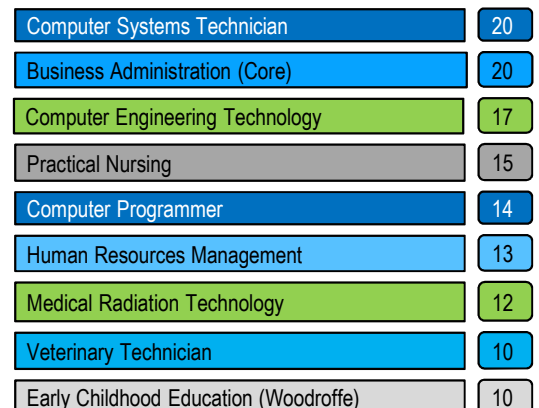


Top Presenting Staff & Faculty Issues



Top Programs in contact

Total number of student contacts



Focus on Top 5 Faculties

Of our 539 total files

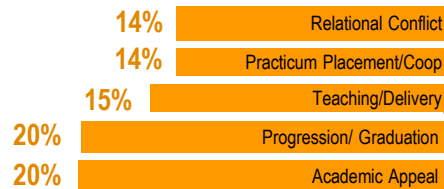
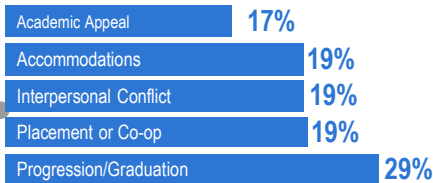


25% are from the School of Health, Public Safety & Community Studies

20% are from the School of Advanced Technology



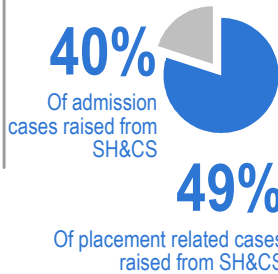
Within H&CS



Within SOAT



137 visitors
Raised 348 topics of concern.



43% Of diversity-related cases raised from SH&CS

40% Of exemption cases raised from SH&CS



107 visitors
Raised 267 topics of concern



In **32%** of cases where students felt the professor was biased, the students were from SOAT (School of Advanced Tech)

26% Of placement and co-op related concerns came from SOAT (second only to SOH&CS).

31% of requests for a Review of Final Grade were from SOAT

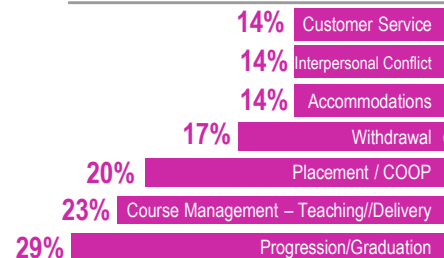
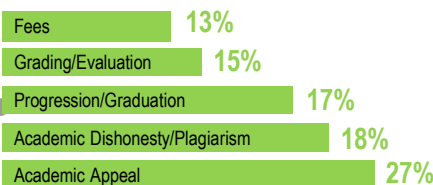


17% are from the School of Business

7% are from AC Online/CCOL



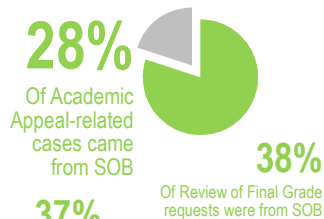
Within SOB



Within AC Online



93 visitors
Raised 236 topics of concern



83% Of students challenging academic discipline sanctions came from SOB

65% Of plagiarism and academic dishonesty related cases came from SOB

37% Of concerns raised about the pedagogical resources in courses were from SOB



35 visitors
Raised 84 topics of concern



20% Of exemption or PLAR-related concerns were raised from AC Online

15% Of course change requests were from AC Online

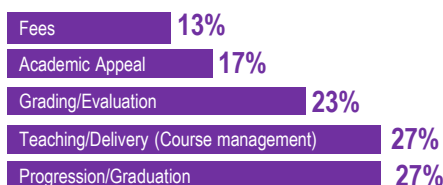
12% Of placement and co-op related concerns were from AC Online

15% Of requests for Review of Final Grade were from AC Online



6% are from the School of Media and Design

Within SOM&D



30 visitors
Raised 59 topics of concern



10% Of admissions-related cases came from SOM&D

12% Of concerns with grading/evaluation came from SOM&D

18% Of workplace concerns (students with employee) came from SOM&D



12% Of concerns with teaching/delivery came from SOM&D

III: Recommendation

To the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET), the Office of the Ombudsman recommends:

A review of the policies on Academic Appeal, Review of Final Grade, Academic Dishonesty, and Plagiarism to ensure their clarity, alignment and consistent application across the College.

We reiterate this recommendation because our caseload in the 2019-2020 reporting period reflects a continuation of trends that suggest confusion, inconsistency, and potential unfairness in the application of policies; particularly, the four policies herein referenced. In this reporting period, both student and non-student visitors to our Office raised concerns in relation to these policies. Our recommendation is consistent with our observation on this matter from previous reporting periods (*See pages 2 and 4 of the Ombudsman Annual Reports 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 respectively*).

It is the understanding of the Office of the Ombudsman, through informal conversation with various College Personnel, that action is currently underway to establish a working group to review some, if not all, of the four policies herein referenced. We applaud this move and welcome the opportunity to assist in the review of the referenced policies.

Of the 756 academic-related concerns we handled, 114 of these specifically regarded academic appeals and review of final grades. Related concerns that led students toward an Academic Appeal or Review of Grade often included plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Academic appeals and review of final grades were the top topic of concern from students in the School of Business, as well as in the School of Advanced Technology. It was also the top topic of concern for international students.

Students submitted **68** formal applications to the College for academic appeals and review of final grades in this academic year. Details of the breakdown of formal applications are outlined on pages 16-18 (Academic Appeals and Review of Final Grades) of this report. It is essential that the College continues tracking of this data to identify trends and opportunities for continuous improvements.

Algonquin College has a proud history, guided by a **mission** of transforming hopes and dreams into lifelong success, and a **vision** to be a global leader in personalized, digitally connected, experiential learning. Arising from the College's mission and vision is an important goal to "attain national standing in quality, impact, and innovation with each school and service." In the pursuit of this goal, it is inevitable that differences of opinion will emerge on many issues, including student-related academic decisions. The academic appeal process and associated processes contain the most formal avenues within the College for addressing disagreements in student-related academic decisions; particularly, matters regarding grading and evaluation that sometimes affect progression and graduation. Hence, any opportunity to improve the associated processes for resolution is a win for all members of the Algonquin College community.

IV: About the Office of the Ombudsman

For 40 years, the Office of the Ombudsman has played a unique role in the Algonquin College community. The Office is jointly supported by Algonquin College and the Algonquin Students' Association without any compromise of the Ombudsman's autonomy. As identified in the [Ombudsman Policy \(SA02\)](#), 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 to 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 natural justice, fairness, and credibility are essential to these standards of practice.

In fulfilling our mandate, the Office uses multiple methods of intervention, including:

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

V: Caseload Distribution

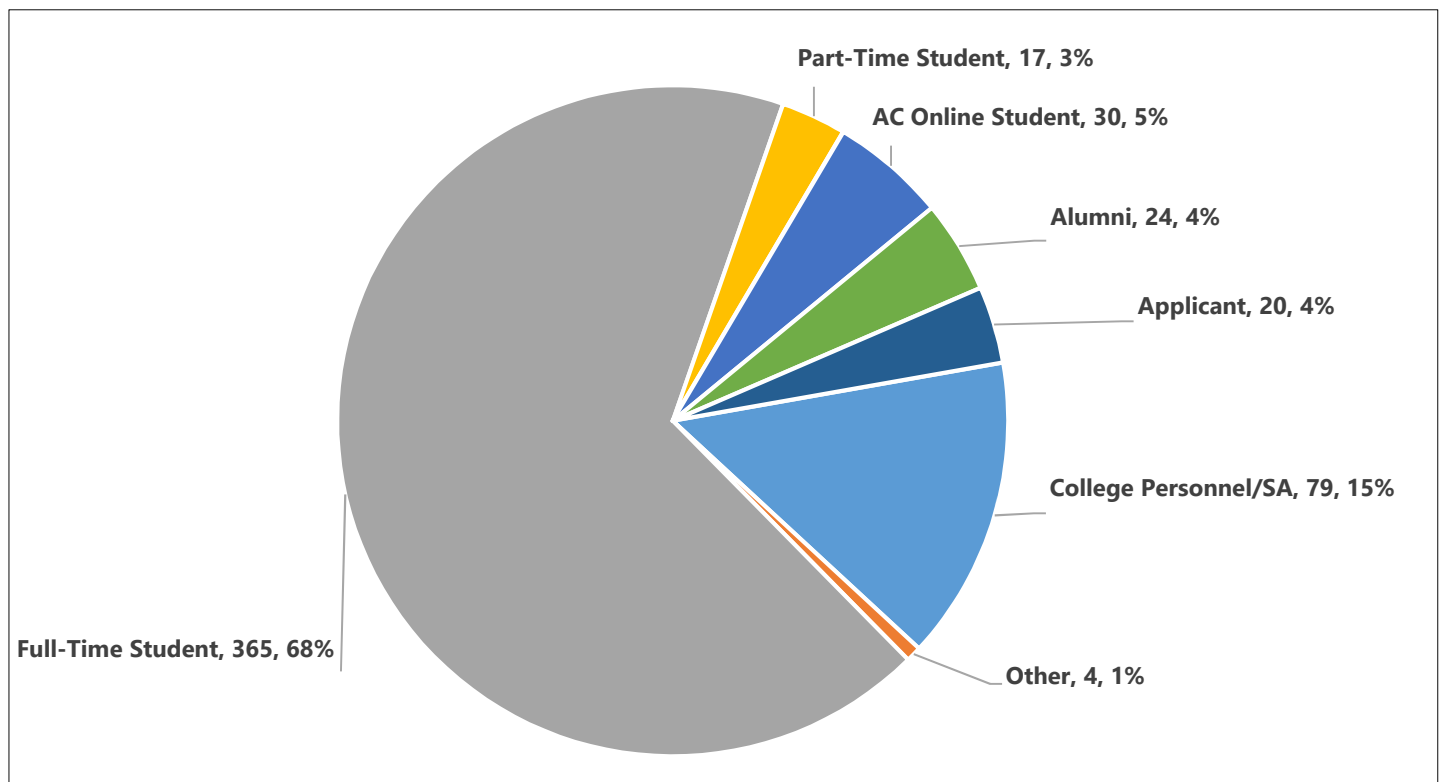
In this reporting period, the Office of the Ombudsman opened **539** files. Of these, **456** were student files, **79** non-student files, and **4** files involved other stakeholders. The non-student files comprised of faculty, staff, administration and the Algonquin Students' Association. The data in this report includes our caseload from the Pembroke and Perth regional campuses, and from AC Online.

Although this report references **539** files, it is important to note that the number of **services offered** exceeds the number of **files handled**, as multiple issues and services may be associated with a single file. Depending on the nature of a visitor's request for assistance, and the complexity of the issues at stake, the Office provides an array of services within the broader spectrum of dispute resolution. While these services range from informal to formal processes, our processes are mostly informal.

Profile of our Clients

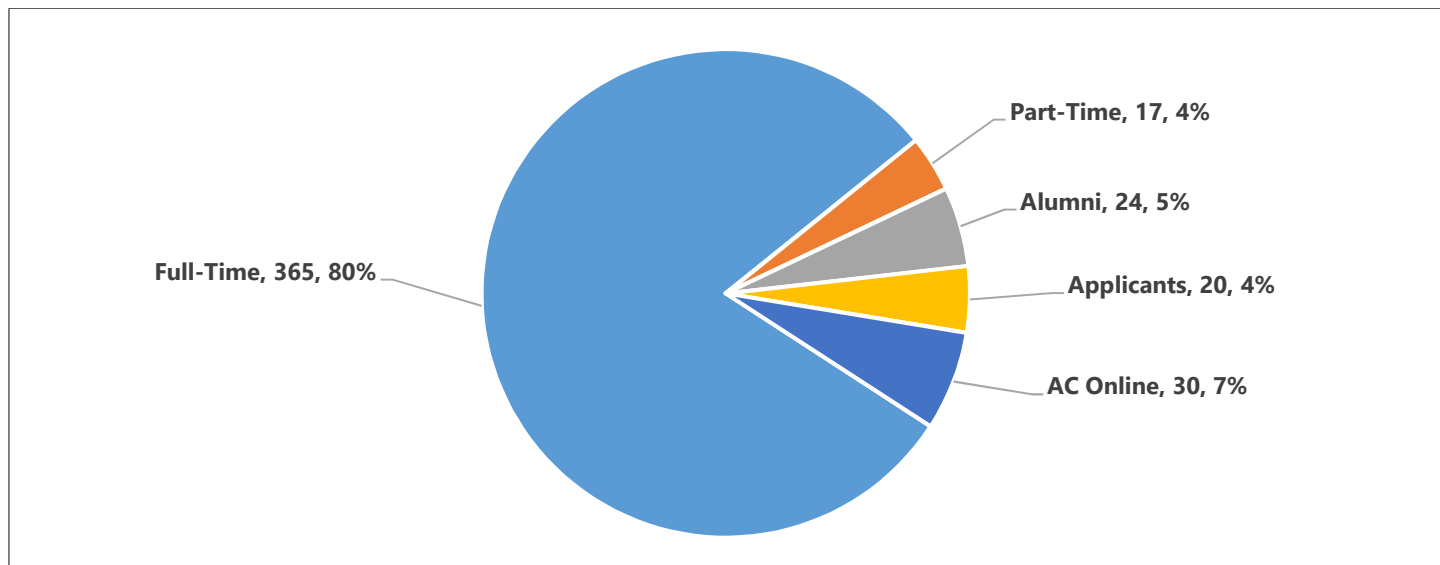
The **539 total files** for this reporting period reflect a 7% increase compared to the previous reporting period. Similarly, the **456 student files from 2018-2019** reflect a 5% increase in our student files since the 2017-2018 reporting period, and an 11% increase since the 2017-2018 reporting period. Further details on our client type by **student** and **non-student status** are shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3 below.

Figure 1: Client Type by Status, 2019-2020



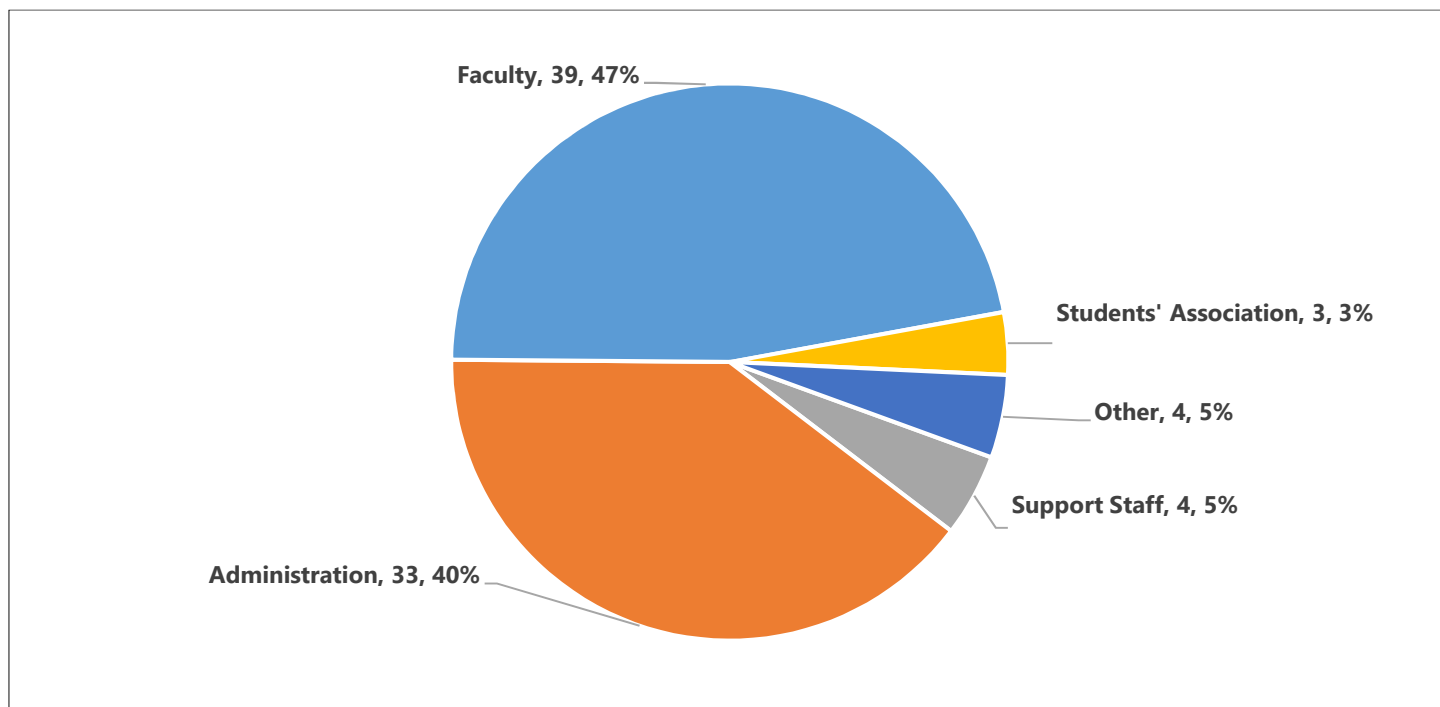
Client Type by Student Status

Figure 2: Client Type by Student Status (Percentage of Total Files), 2019-2020



Client Type by Non-Student Status

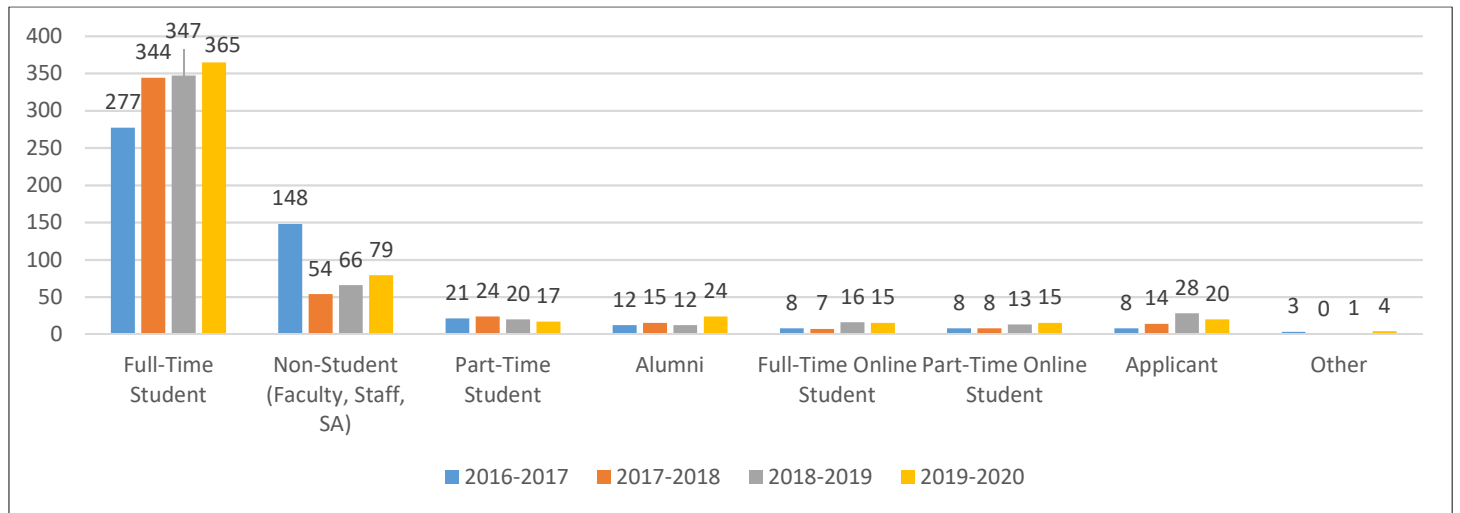
Figure 3: Client Type by Non-Student Status (Percentage of Total Files), 2019-2020



Non-student clients comprise faculty, support staff, administration, the Students' Association and other stakeholders who engaged the Office on a broad range of student-related matters. This year, the non-student files reflect a 23% increase compared to the 2018-2019 reporting period, and a 54% increase over the 2017-2018 reporting period.

Yearly Comparison of Client Type by Student and Non-Student Status

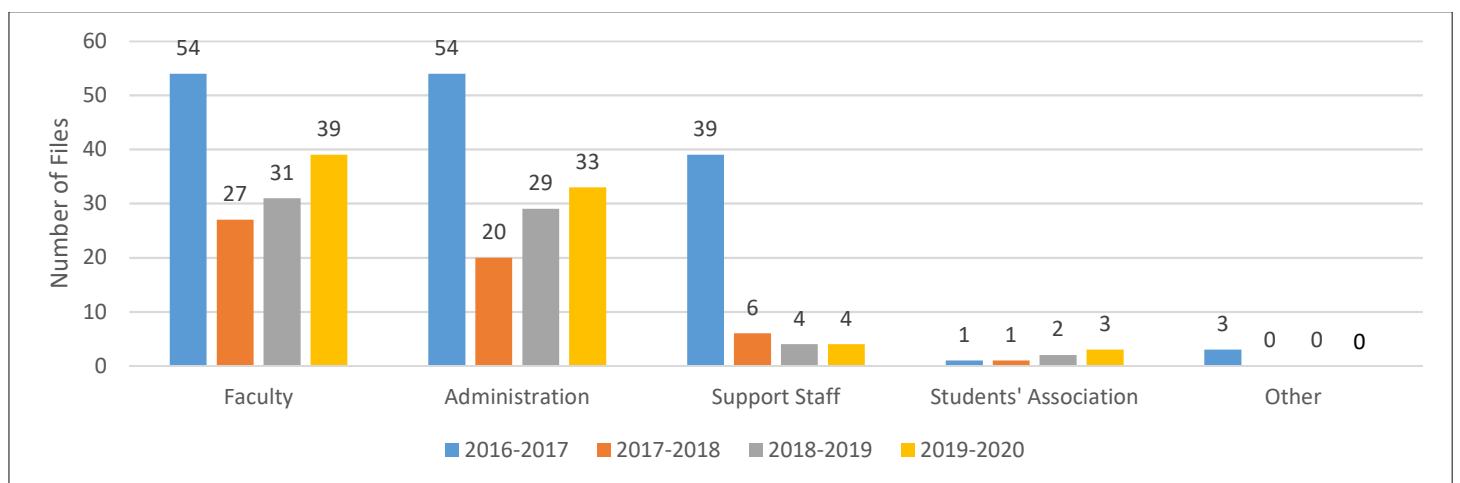
Figure 4: Yearly Comparison of Client Type by Status, 2016 to 2020



Generally, **full-time (on-campus)** students account for the majority of our caseload by student status; followed by **non-students**, then **part-time (on-campus)** students. In this reporting period, our clientele by **applicant status**, i.e. applicants seeking admission to the College, was 29% under the 2018-2019 reporting period but 24% over reporting for the same period in 2017-2018. Noticeably, our intake of Alumni doubled from the 2018-2019 reporting period.

Arguably, the overall number of **student files** in this reporting period, and the categories of the student sub-groups, are proportionally consistent with our data from previous academic years.

Figure 5: Client Type by Non-Student Status, 2016 to 2020



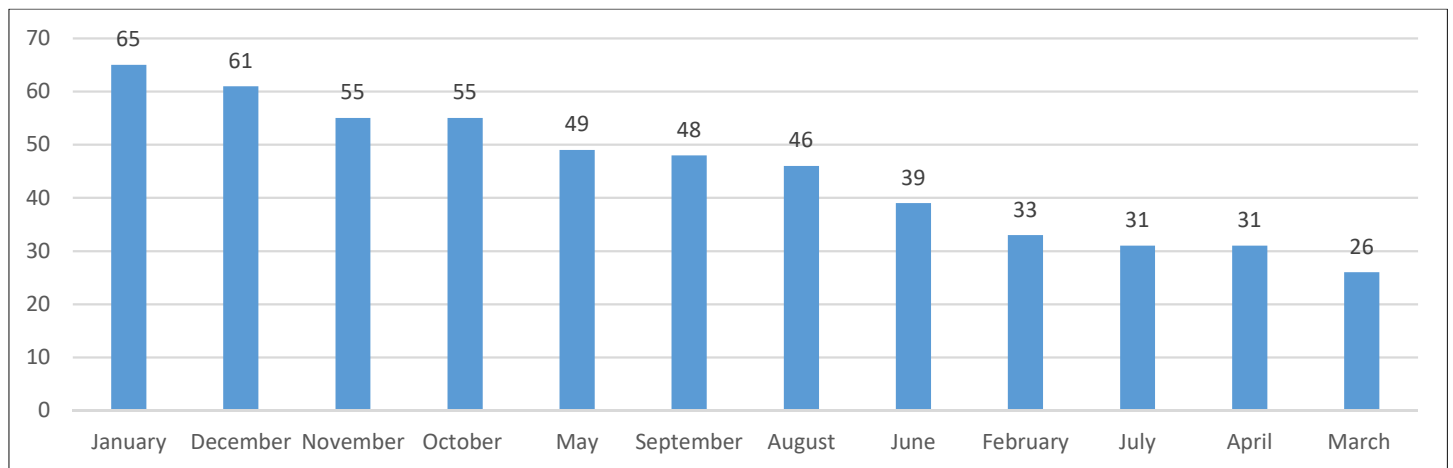
As shown in Figure 5, faculty members on average account for most of our non-student clientele, followed by members of the administration, including academic chairs, deans, directors and other stakeholders. The Office welcomes consultations from our non-student clientele as this interaction often helps to mitigate potential disputes and/or contributes to proactive interventions that prevent potential disputes.

This year, 16% of College Personnel (comprising faculty, administrative staff, support staff and Students' Association staff) raised questions or concerns about College Policies, making it the fourth topic of concern raised by College Personnel.

The primary issue for which faculty and staff consulted our Office was academic accommodations, arising in 32% of the College Personnel consultations. The second highest subject area of concern was requests for assistance in handling relational conflicts. Other human rights / student rights and responsibilities-related issues were raised in another 20% of these visits.

Files Opened per Month

Figure 6: Files Opened per Month in Descending Order, 2019-2020



Historically, our busiest months are April, January and September (correlating with the beginning and end of each term). However, in this reporting period the busiest months were January, December, November and October. Our caseload within these months were linked to mid-term evaluations, final evaluations, and academic appeal-related matters.



Ishkodewan Courtyard, Algonquin College. Courtesy of <https://www.algonquincollege.com/college-blog/ishkodewan-courtyard-soon-to-bloom/>

Figure 7: Files Opened per Month (2019-2020) compared to Previous 3-Year Average (2016-2019)

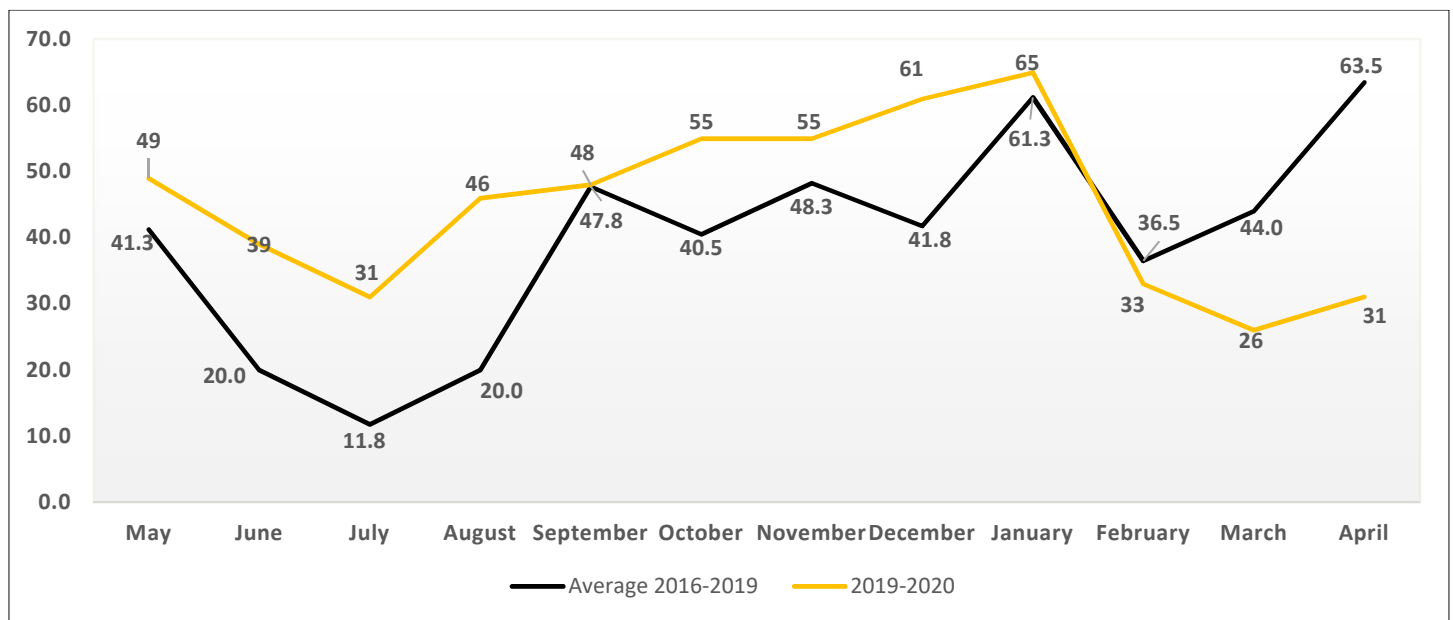
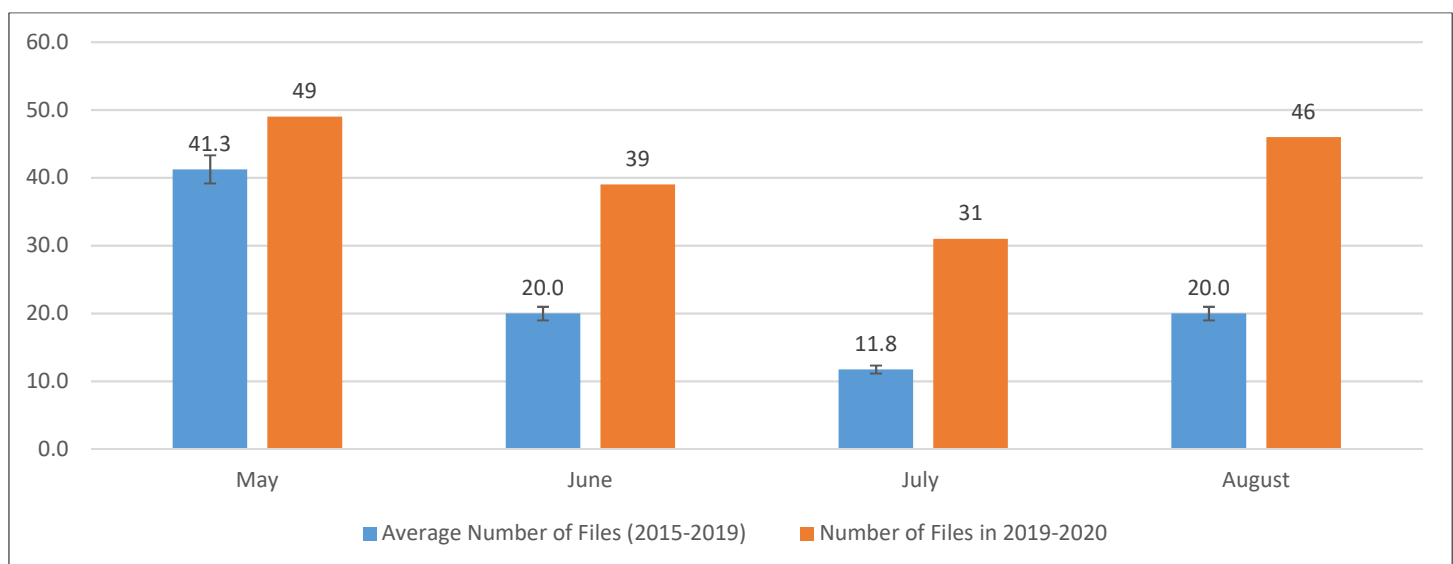


Figure 7 above illustrates the number of files opened per month in 2019-2020 in comparison to the average monthly caseload over the previous 3 reporting years. Of those files opened per month, historically about twenty files are *closed* per month except in the months of April, May and June, when outstanding and/or carry over files from previous semesters are usually finalized. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures that resulted in the extension of timelines for assignments, projects, and final exams, many of our files were not closed until much later (see “Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic” below). Generally, timelines for file closures are unpredictable as cases are fact-specific: a more complex and sensitive case may require an elaborate consultation and therefore more time to find a resolution. While our files are not categorized by levels of complexity or sensitivity, anecdotally, we are seeing an increase in the number of files that are somewhat complex and/or sensitive and therefore require more attention and time for closure.

Figure 8: Spring Term (2019-2020) Number of Files Compared to Previous Average (2015-2019)



For the second straight year, our intake in the Spring 2019 was approximately 100% above previous years. We attribute this to the adoption of the College's 14-week term model and the move from a two- to three-semester academic year. For planning, staffing, and other purposes, the Spring Term is no longer a slower period in our intakes.

In the 2018-2019 reporting period, July and August 2018, respectively, saw a 70% and 53% increase in files compared to the previous years' average. This trend continued, as we can see in Figure 8 that the number of files in July and August of 2019 has doubled from the previous 3-year average.

Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A significant change in the number of new files, compared to previous years, occurred in March and April 2020. This decrease in caseload starting mid-March correlates with the onset of the College's emergency measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020. In alignment with the Ontario Provincial Government's emergency measures, the College temporarily suspended most events, particularly in-person events, starting in mid-March 2020. The College community worked hard to adjust as quickly as possible. Virtual platforms became the new norm.

Prior to the onset of protocol for physical distancing, a small proportion of our clientele were drop-in requests, and most appointments or consultations were in-person at our Office on Woodroffe Campus, or at scheduled appointments at regional campuses. While it could be inferred that our caseload reduced as a result of the College transitioning to remote operations, our Office communicated with common referral contacts, and displayed signage, to indicate that we continued to offer full services remotely with virtual appointments. Alternatively, the reduction in student and faculty requests could be due to the quickly implemented range of options the College provided to students, such that members of the College community found agreeable solutions without needing to consult our Office.

The College implemented a string of measures and options to alleviate the academic challenges students were facing while adjusting to the global uncertainty arising from the pandemic. This flexibility included options to mitigate the variety of potential student impacts on academic studies including an honourable withdrawal (backdated), an aegrotat rather than a letter grade, extended deadlines for completion of assignments, projects and exams, and a host of other supportive measures intended to bolster student success.

The Office of the Ombudsman observes and commends the College's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the early days of the crisis when decisions had to be made in the midst of uncertainty to best serve our students. While some students raised legitimate concerns about specific issues (i.e. technological issues associated with the switch to virtual platforms, learning styles affected by remote learning, impact on academic grades, progression and graduating on time, postponed labs, and financial issues), our repeated perception, when working with the College to address such concerns, was

that the College was doing its best under the circumstances. At the same time, in the majority of cases, we were impressed with the overall resilience and goodwill of our learners despite the obstacles that the pandemic imposed.

The vast majority of COVID-19 related matters we handled were raised after April 2020, which is outside the scope of this reporting period.

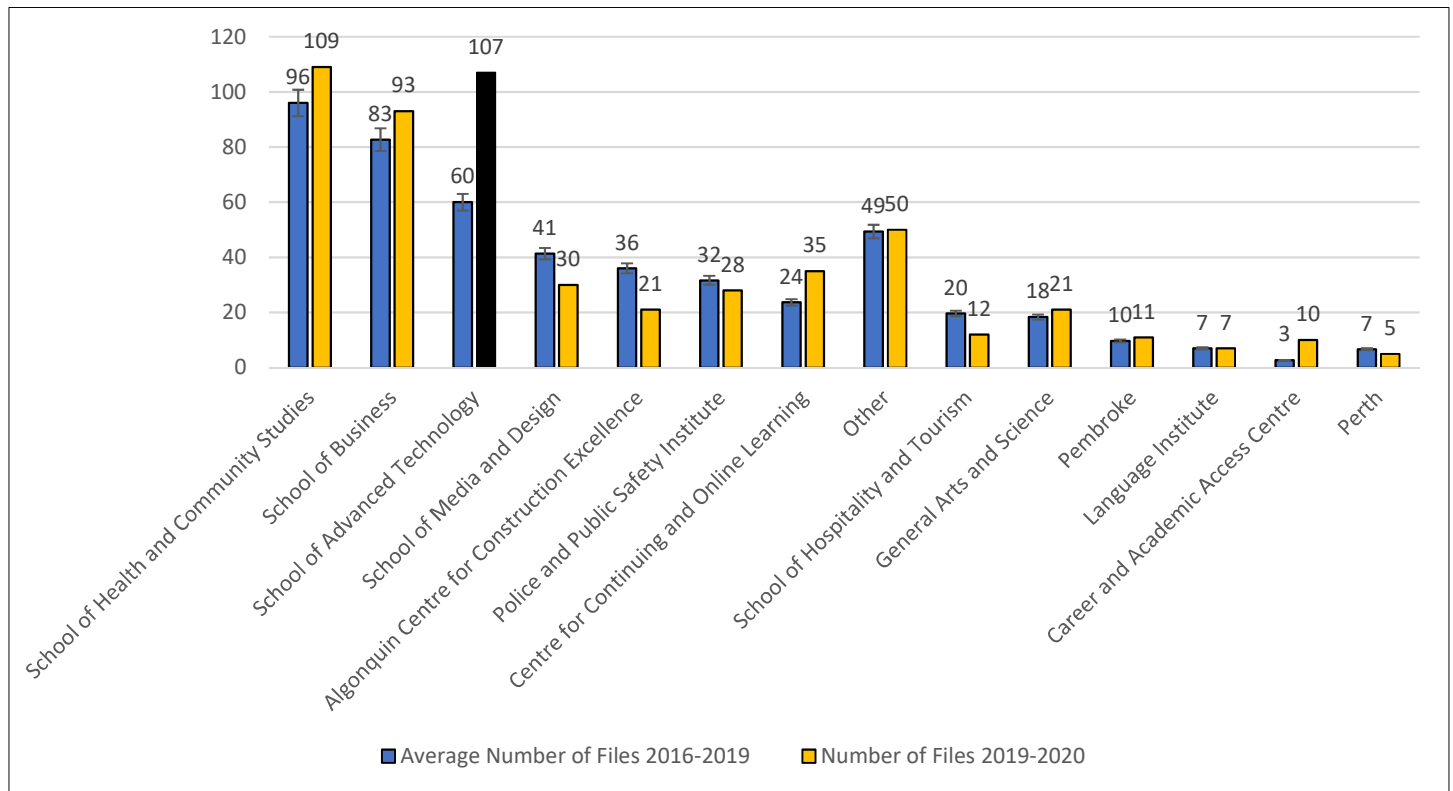
Clients by Affiliated School / Academic Department(s)

Table 1: Profile of our Clients by Affiliated School/Academic Department(s) in 2019-2020

School / Academic Department	2019-2020	%
School of Health and Community Studies	109	20
School of Advanced Technology	107	20
School of Business	93	17
Other: (Admin/Support Staff, Students' Association, Ancillary etc.)	50	9
Centre for Continuing and Online Learning	35	7
School of Media and Design	30	6
Police and Public Safety Institute	28	5
General Arts and Science	21	4
Algonquin Centre for Construction Excellence	21	4
School of Hospitality and Tourism	12	2
Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley – Pembroke	11	2
Career and Academic Access Centre	10	2
Language Institute	7	1
Algonquin College Heritage Institute – Perth	5	1
Totals	539	100

As in previous academic years, it is cautioned that the data in **Table 1** not be mistakenly interpreted as academic areas with more files are problematic. It is important to note that academic areas with more students and/or programs, as well as areas/departments with unique program requirements such as placements/work practicum/internships which invariably involve stakeholders outside the College, certification obligations, and elevated grade requirements, are likely to have more interaction with the Office of the Ombudsman than other areas/departments.

Figure 9: Caseload per Academic Department (2019-2020) Compared to Average (2016-2019)



On average, our caseload per academic area remained proportionally the same except in the School of Advanced Technology which had a significant increase. The 107 visitors from the School of Advanced Technology raised 267 topics of concern. This sharp increase in caseload from the School of Advanced Technology is not consistent with previous years so it is premature to suggest a trend. For the top five departments that contacted our Office most frequently, some notable topics of their concerns are highlighted on page 4.



Algonquin College, Pembroke Campus. Courtesy of <https://www.algonquincollege.com/public-relations/algonquin-college-history/>

Types of Concerns

Table 2: Types of Concerns

Types of Concern	Number of Occurrences									
	2015-2016	%	2016-2017	%	2017-2018	%	2018-2019	%	2019-2020	%
Academic	805	70	845	73	820	74	705	65	756	58
Services	124	11	112	10	138	15	197	18	271	21
Non-Academic Student Conduct	36	3	20	1.7	16	2	48	4	34	3
Human Rights / Student Rights	8	1	33	3	15	1	31	3	72	6
Algonquin Students' Association	6	1	3	0.3	6	1	1	1	9	1
Other (Interpersonal Conflict, External - Landlord/Tenant, Co-op, Notary, etc.)	168	14	139	12	78	7	102	9	162	12
Total	1147	100	1152	100	1073	100	1084	100	1304	100

It is imperative that the **number of files opened** are not confused with the **number of concerns (complaints)**. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the number of concerns exceeds the number of actual files handled, as multiple concerns can be associated with a single file. Often, each file entails several concerns, each requiring different services. A single file may, for example, entail the following concerns:

- 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 medically-related accommodation that is creating challenges,
- an OSAP-related matter affecting the student's ability to purchase required textbooks, and
- a U-Pass related concern regarding OC Transpo service.

Similar matters are combined under single headings, although they may require distinct attention. The Case Summaries in Section V illustrates how seemingly one concern can cascade into multiple areas when exploring resolution options.

Generally, our academic related caseload is higher than our non-academic caseload. In this reporting period, 58% of the total caseload pertained to academic concerns. This reflects a 7% increase over the 2018-2019 reporting period.



Image obtained from [google.com](https://www.google.com)

Table 3: Types of Concerns (Academic and Services), 2015-2016 to 2019-2020

Academic	2015/16	%	2016/17	%	2017/18	%	2018/19	%	2019/20	%
Progression / Graduation	151	19	132	16	113	14	101	14	115	15
Academic Appeal / Review of Grades	102	13	132	16	152	18	99	14	114	15
Accommodation of Disability/Special Allowance	58	7	83	10	66	8	76	11	96	13
Course Management - Teaching/Delivery	73	9	78	9	89	11	50	7	71	9
Course Management- Professor Bias/Treatment	57	7	56	7	61	7	47	7	41	5
Course Management- Course Policies	31	4	49	6	42	5	43	6	28	4
Course Management- Pedagogical Support	48	6	49	6	50	6	30	4	21	3
Course Management - Course Outline	15	2	41	5	22	3	14	2	21	3
Course Management- Classroom Mgt.	48	6	35	4	26	3	24	3	18	2
Academic Integrity - Discipline/Plagiarism	59	7	34	4	31	4	39	6	39	5
Practicum/Clinical & Field Placement	68	9	31	4	41	5	43	6	58	8
Exemptions/Advanced Standing/PLAR/Transfer Credit/Other	17	1	20	2	16	2	3	1	17	2
Academic – Examinations	10	1	18	2	8	1	23	3	33	4
Other (Access to information/Confidentiality, Grading/Evaluation, Advising, etc.)	68	9	87	10	103	13	113	16	84	11
Total	805	100	845	100	820	100	705	100	756	100
Services										
Services	2015/16	%	2016/17	%	2017/18	%	2018/19	%	2019/20	%
Registrar's Office	74	60	62	55	98	71	105	53	154	57
Financial Aid	13	11	27	24	30	22	44	22	56	21
Safety & Security	5	4	8	7	2	1	10	5	16	6
Residence	3	2	5	4	2	1	5	3	6	2
Parking/Lockers	5	4	4	4	4	3	10	5	7	3
Ancillary Other - Campus Stores, etc.	4	3	1	1	1	1	3	2	2	1
Other (Student Services, Health Services, Mamidosewin Centre, etc.)	20	16	5	4	1	1	20	10	30	11
Total	124	100	112	100	138	100	197	100	271	100

The “Other” in Table 3 is simply a summation of several caseload categories, which in the interest of space is aggregated. Progression/graduation related matters accounted for most of the concerns followed by academic appeal and review of final grades.

There was an increase in the total number of service-related concerns as in our previous annual report. Student concerns associated with the Registrar’s Office pertained to admissions, change of program after accepting admission offers (*mostly with international students*), fees, registration, change of courses, academic records, and withdrawals. As identified in our recommendation in the Office of the Ombudsman’s Annual Report (2018-2019), there is an opportunity to improve the overall experience of our learners by having a unified approach in the processes and practices for supporting students. The areas for attention include: the timeliness and accuracy of information associated with the collaboration between the Registrar’s Office and academic areas for academic appeals; the CAL, the Test Centre,

Physical Resources, and the academic areas for accommodations; the academic areas, the Registrar's Office, marketing/communications (and sometimes Co-op and the International Education Centre) for student application and admissions offers.



Algonquin College, Perth Campus. Courtesy of <https://www.algonquincollege.com/perth/home/algonquin-1950-602x349/>

Case Summary

Safety?

Erin, a student in Program XYZ, was 3 shifts short of completing her final placement when she was summarily asked to leave the placement site. Allegedly, she was told that her removal was for health and safety reasons but was not provided any documentation or detailed explanation. Erin stated that, prior to her placement, she was cleared by a physician to complete the placement, and provided the necessary documentation to her academic department.

Following a meeting with the academic department, Erin was advised to contact the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) to obtain the necessary assistance to resume her studies. Erin alleged that after obtaining a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) from CAL, her academic department said they could not provide the requested accommodation due to health and safety reasons. Essentially, Erin sought to complete her placement at a facility/location that provided services that aligned with her interest in a particular area of her studies. Further, Erin was frustrated that she had not been provided an explanation for her removal from the final placement.

The Office of the Ombudsman worked with Erin, the academic department and CAL to find a resolution that allowed Erin to complete her final placement, while addressing the safety related concerns that was identified. In the end, it was a matter of miscommunication and the respective interests were addressed.

Academic Appeals and Review of Final Grades

In this reporting period, academic-related matters constituted the vast majority of our caseload. This is proportionally consistent with caseload distribution in our previous annual reports (see Table 2 and 3). Of the total 756 academic-related concerns we handled, 114 were specific to **academic appeals and review of final grades**. Other concerns which may be directly or indirectly linked with appeals included: course management (comprised of teaching/delivery, course policies, pedagogical support, course outline, classroom management, and perceived professor bias/unfair treatment), academic discipline and plagiarism, academic accommodations, and clinical/field placements.

The majority of the academic appeal-related matters we handled were referred to informal resolution pathways (such as conversation with the decision maker or the manager of the decision maker). Since we do not always have contact with visitors after providing advice or information, our Office does not always know the outcome of informal pursuits. Depending on the nature of the case, we facilitated informal discussions with the parties involved and found resolutions that addressed their respective interests through collaborative discussions with students, academic departments, the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL), and other stakeholders.

In this reporting period, students filed **68 formal applications** for academic appeal or review of final grade with the Registrar's Office. Some of these were cases where the student was unaware of the existence of our Office; the parties proceeded to a formal appeal hearing or review of final grade without consulting our Office; or the parties consulted our Office but a formal appeal hearing or review of final grade was deemed the most appropriate recourse for resolution.

Of the 68 formal applications:

- **6** were in Spring 2019 Semester (5 academic appeal and 1 review of final grade);
- **39** formal requests were from Fall 2019 Semester (25 academic appeal, 13 review of grade, and 1 review of academic appeal);
- **23** formal requests were from Winter 2020 Semester (13 academic appeal, 10 review of grade).

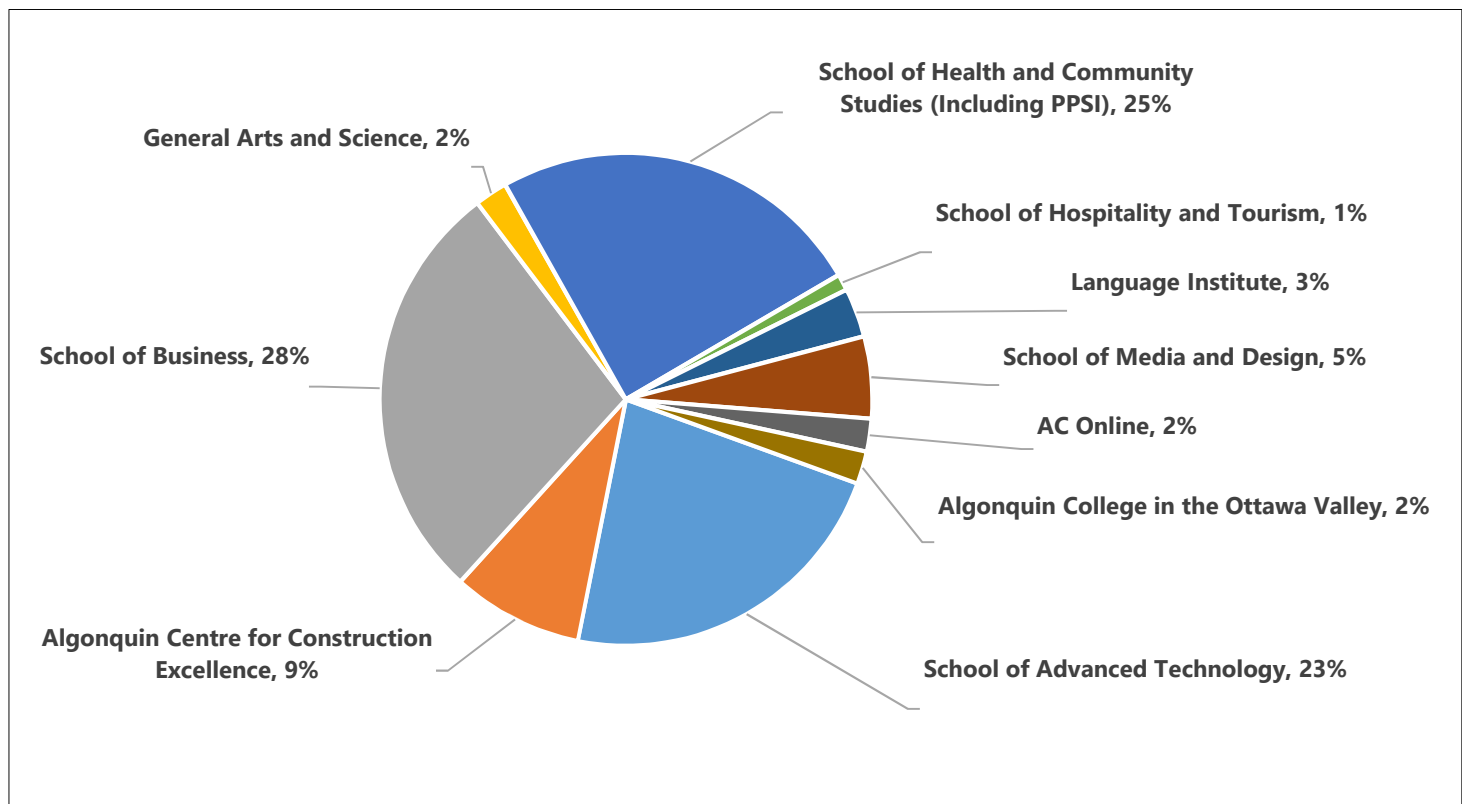
- **43** (of the 68 formal applications) proceeded to a formal hearing or review of final grade where:
 - 17 were approved
 - 25 were denied
 - 1 outcome was unknown.

- **25** (of the 68 formal applications) did not proceed to a formal hearing or review of final grade because they were either resolved informally or the application was withdrawn for unknown reasons.

Our records show that, in 94% of formal applications submitted and resolved informally, one or more of the parties had consulted with the Office of the Ombudsman.

Figure 10 shows our caseload on academic appeal and review of final grades from the respective academic departments. This does not include matters indirectly linked to academic appeals.

Figure 10: Caseload on Academic Appeal and Review of Final Grades per Academic Department



Academic appeal and review of final grades were among the top presenting concerns from most of the academic departments. It was the top presenting concern from the School of Business (which also had the highest number of academic appeals and review of final grades in our caseload), and the School of Advanced Technology. Several underlying factors culminated in students' decisions to consider an academic appeal or a review of final grade. Prominent among these were: allegations of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, a perception of unfair treatment or personal bias (especially in grading/evaluation), matters of a medical nature, and course management.

Of our caseload on plagiarism and academic dishonesty, 65% were from the School of Business. Relatedly, 83% of all students in our caseload who challenged academic discipline sanctions were also from the School of Business. Concern about consistency in the interpretation and application of certain policies, including the academic appeal, review of final grade, plagiarism and academic dishonesty policies, have been raised through recommendations of this Office for the past several years. The College would be well served to review the application of academic integrity processes in general, and the associated underlying factors from the perspective of students, faculty and other stakeholders, to: strike a fair balance in holding students accountable for the integrity of their work; help students to know and/or improve on citing the appropriate references in their work; and to explore proactive systems or processes to address academic integrity related matters.

Case Summary

Theirs was easy; ours, difficult

Ed enrolled in a course for which the second assignment was a choice between two tasks: Task #1 and Task #2. The professor sufficiently informed the class that one of the tasks might be more difficult than the other. Ed chose Task #2, and was unhappy with his grade on this assignment. Upon surveying some of the students in his class, he felt that there was an unfair distribution of grades, perceiving that all students who chose Task #1 did well, and all students that chose Task #2 did poorly or did not pass the assignment. Ed's ideal solution was for the class grades to be bell curved for the Task #2 assignment only which students, as a group, performed poorly.

Ed expressed his concerns to the professor and presented the idea of a bell curve of the grades for students who completed Task #2. The professor disagreed, explaining that all students had the option to choose their preferred tasks. It would therefore be unfair to bell curve the grades for only one group of students.

Ed contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for advice on the relevant policies on this matter and to explore his options for a resolution. Following a discussion of the matter, and a review of the applicable policies, Ed was referred to his Academic Chair for further discussion.

Case Summary

Different standards

Student Ava failed a course and needed to repeat it. The academic department had a policy for academic probation if a student failed more than three courses. This was the first course Ava failed but Ava was asked to sign a contract with the department that she would not be allowed to continue in the program, or any similar program, if not successful in this course. Furthermore, the contract required Ava to pass with a grade of C instead of a D (i.e. 50%). Ava was only upset about the new grade requirement, because in the original course – *that she was repeating* – a passing grade was D.

Ava felt it was unfair that the pass grade had now changed to C *for her or any other student signing the contract*, but the course structure and all other students completing the course could pass with D. Ava was under the impression that the academic department could just change policies whenever they wanted to exercise control over its programs. Our Office assisted Ava to work with her Academic Chair for an informal resolution that addressed their concerns.

Case Summary

Oh no!

In Margot's final year in Program XTP, she took a course where the course outline and related course documents stated that the final grade would be a letter grade on the A-F scale. However, at the end of the course, Margot and her colleagues were informed that the academic department had changed the grading system for that course to a **Pass or Fail**; a designation that has no credit value for Grade Point Average (GPA) calculation.

Margot was frustrated by the sudden change in the grading system and the associated impact on her future plans. Apparently, Margot had applied for admission and a scholarship to a competitive program at NextStep University. She did very well in this course and was counting on a letter grade to boost her overall grade point average to make her application for admission and scholarship more competitive.

Unfortunately, by the time Margot and her colleagues became aware of the adjusted grading system, the application deadline for the program she had applied at NextStep University had elapsed. Consequently, Algonquin College automatically sent her transcript, containing the pass/fail grade, to NextStep University. Upon checking on the status of her application at NextStep University, she was informed that her transcripts had been received and pending review for equal consideration. Fortunately, the equal consideration date was a few days away.

The academic department for Program XTP reversed the grading decision to re-align with what had been published in the course outlines. Arrangements were made for a new transcript, reflecting the letter grade, to be sent to NextStep University.

Caseload on International Students

At the request of the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET) and the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC), matters affecting international students specifically are hereby identified in this report. This request aligns with Algonquin Students' Association priority on international students. It is also consistent with Algonquin College's stated belief in global citizenship – an integral part of the international strategic plan – and the aspiration to *“develop and empower globally minded learners with the skills and experience to build sustainable, diverse communities.”*

As this is our first time to specifically analyze and publish our caseload on international students, we do not have any previous data for the purposes of comparison. Consequently, our data is fairly basic and exploratory; we cannot conclude that our observations suggest any trend.

In this reporting period, international students represented 17% of the students who consulted our Office. Academic Appeal related matters were their top topic of concern. Approximately 18% of our

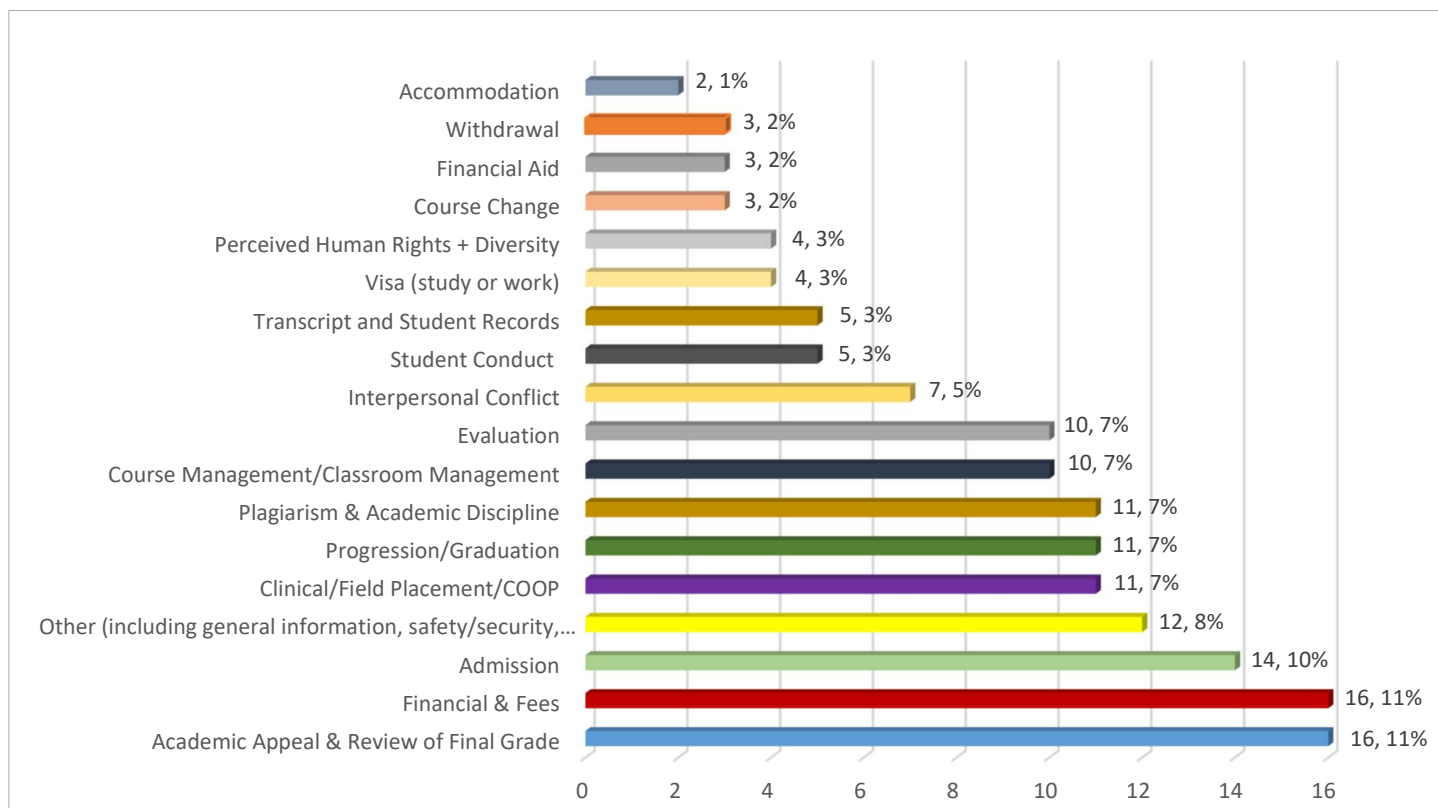
caseload on academic appeals and review of final grades were initiated by international students. This is fairly consistent with the fact that international students represented 17% of the students who consulted our Office in the reporting year. Within our total caseload, international students also accounted for:

- 34% of cases on plagiarism, academic dishonesty and academic discipline,
- 56% of cases on admission-related matters*,
- 23% of cases on fees and financial related matters, and
- 22% of cases on placement and co-op related matters.

**The international admissions concerns may be inflated due to two exceptional cases that impacted multiple students approaching our Office (see the case summaries on pages 22-23). However, not all students impacted by the international admissions concern contacted our Office, and these percentages only reflect the students with whom we had contact.*

Approximately 150 topics of concern arose from the 76 individual international student files we opened in this reporting period. The respective topics of concern are shown in Figure 11, along with the associated number of occurrences and percentages for each category in our caseload on international students only. **(NOTE: the percentages reported in the preceding paragraph are based on our total caseload on all students who consulted our Office; the percentages in Figure 11 below are based on our caseload on international students only.)**

Figure 11: Profile of Concerns Raised by International Students



As shown in Figure 11, academic appeal related matters were their top concern. In some instances, these matters were linked to their progression and graduation status.

We observed from our interactions that in some instances, although the students perceived unfairness in the issues they presented, they were equally reluctant to advance their concerns through formal processes. Almost without exception, the students emphasized the ripple effect of the impact of the issues they presented. We will continue to observe the issues that affect international students.

Case Summary

Misquoted tuition on letter of acceptance

Several international students contacted the Office of the Ombudsman about a matter they believed was unfair. The students received Letters of Acceptance for 45-week programs that were scheduled to run three consecutive semesters and be completed within a year. Their letters of acceptance mistakenly quoted a tuition amount that was less than the actual cost of tuition for the year. Consequentially, they were mistakenly charged for two instead of three semesters. In their first weekend in school, they received an email from the College advising them of the discrepancy with the estimated cost of tuition for the year on their letters of acceptance. According to the College, some students were quoted the full three-semester tuition amount while others were given a two-semester quote. The difference was approximately \$8,000 per student and the College reached out to advise that all students in the program would pay the same amount of tuition for three semesters.

The students were confused, frustrated and disappointed as they had just arrived on campus and started their studies. Some explained that in applying for schools in Canada, they considered similar or different programs at other post-secondary institutions and chose Algonquin College partly because of the tuition quoted in their letters of acceptance. They would have made a more informed decision in their choice of schools/programs had they known there would be additional tuition.

They also stated that the College had presented some options for resolution, including withdrawal from the College without any financial penalty; however, students who remained in the same programs of study would be required to pay the difference in tuition. Some of the students considered withdrawing but were concerned about the costs they had already incurred in their flights to Ottawa, year long leases already signed with their new landlords, and other pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs already incurred. There was also the serious concern that because the semester had already started, should they withdraw from the College, they may not get admission to another post-secondary institution and thereby jeopardize their visa status in Canada.

Our Office contacted some stakeholders in the College for a discussion that resulted in expanding the options for resolution. Under the circumstances, there were no perfect solutions but the expanded options alleviated a lot of the concerns raised. Accordingly, the students were also advised of their recourses for resolution. Our Office was also pleased about the College's commitment to review current reporting practices and implement safeguards to ensure that students are provided the most accurate estimate of tuition fees to avoid a repeat of this unfortunate situation.

Lost Opportunity Related to Early Applications for Admission

Seven individual international students approached the Office of the Ombudsman between mid- and late September 2019 asserting that they had understood they were eligible for co-op in their Program, but that they were not being allowed into co-op. They pointed to their Letters of Offer, which required them to obtain both a Study Permit and a Co-op Work Permit. Although careful reading of the earlier and later versions of the letter indicated that the co-op work permit, "is required for paid and unpaid work experience" (and in the more recent version had directed students to the website for additional information), the students had consistently missed this distinction.

These international students were further confused when, upon starting classes, they learned that their classmates were scheduled into co-op training classes, but they were not. When they raised their concern to their Program, they were asked to provide their names and student numbers if they were interested in co-op, only to be told nothing could be done and re-directed to the Office of the Ombudsman.

Our Office learned that although this Program was one of a number of programs changed to include a "split" (or co-op) option in October 2019, some aspects of the implementation had negatively affected international students. The first issue was that, although the option to apply for either a co-op or non-co-op option was advertised in late December 2018 on the Program's landing page, most international students apply to Algonquin programs almost a semester earlier than domestic students so would not have seen the change on the Program's website. Secondly, although domestic students applying to the Program received an email notice in February advising them that they could change their application to apply for the co-op option through Ontario College Application Service (OCAS), no equivalent notification was sent to their international counterparts. Thirdly, wording in letters sent to international students requiring them to obtain both a work study and a co-op work permit reasonably led to the impression that co-op was part of their Program. Finally, when the students raised their concern with the Program and looked for answers, they were given no formal response and were instead referred to the Ombudsman.

The Office of the Ombudsman reached out to a variety of stakeholders in the College, including the Program, Communications, the International Education Centre, the Registrar's Office, and Co-operative Education to understand what had happened. In the end, for those international students who applied before a specified date in December 2018 but had not been made aware of the (changed) requirement to specifically select the co-op option, we arranged with the Co-op department to provide access to the accelerated co-op training program. The College agreed that the usual co-op fees for this abbreviated training be waived under the circumstances. We were also pleased to hear that the Letter of Offer template for international students, including references to work permits, was revised to reduce the opportunity for misinterpretation.

Nature of Services Provided

The Office of the Ombudsman works to empower students to address issues at the lowest and most informal level possible by identifying policies, explaining processes, and suggesting referrals and contacts. The Office works to ensure that existing recourse mechanisms for resolution are reasonably exhausted before we choose to intervene. As mentioned earlier, the number of services offered exceeds the number of files handled, as multiple services can be associated with a single file.

Figure 12: Services Provided, by Percentage of Total Caseload, 2019-2020

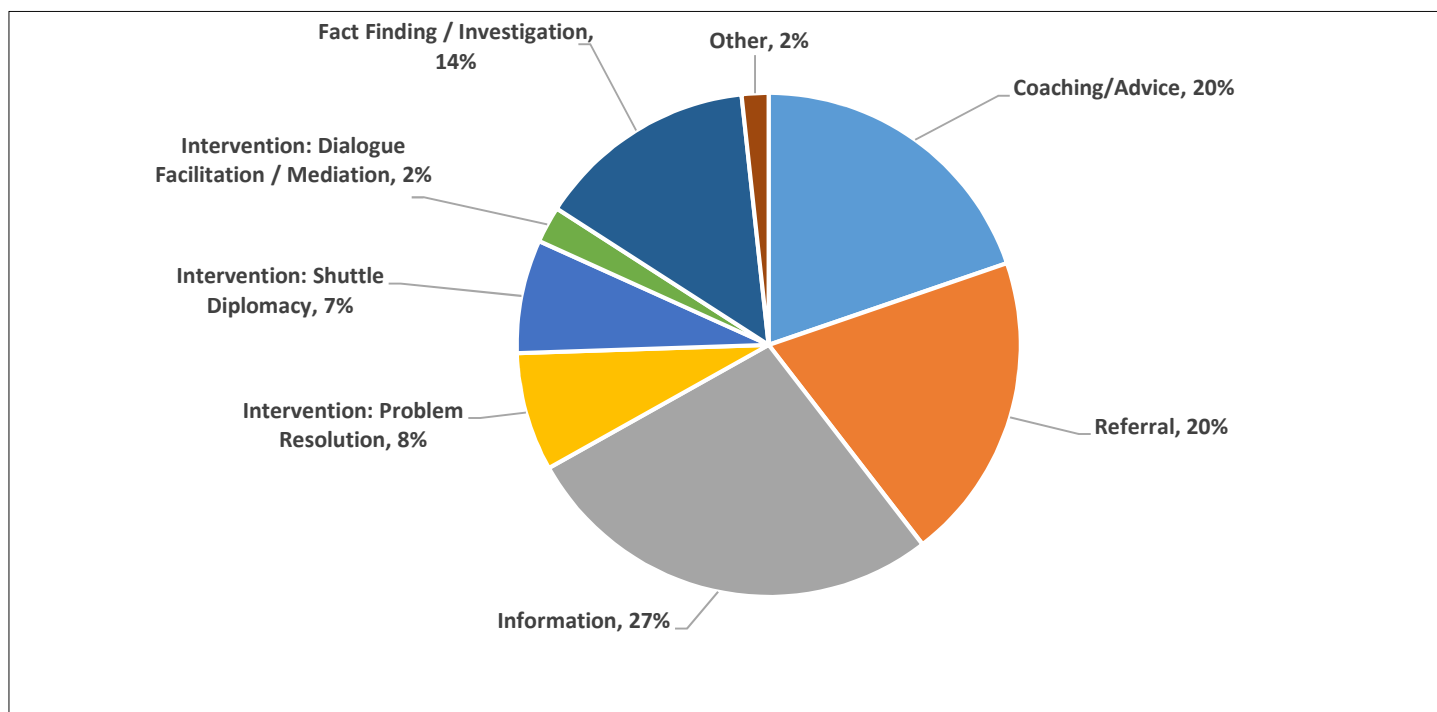
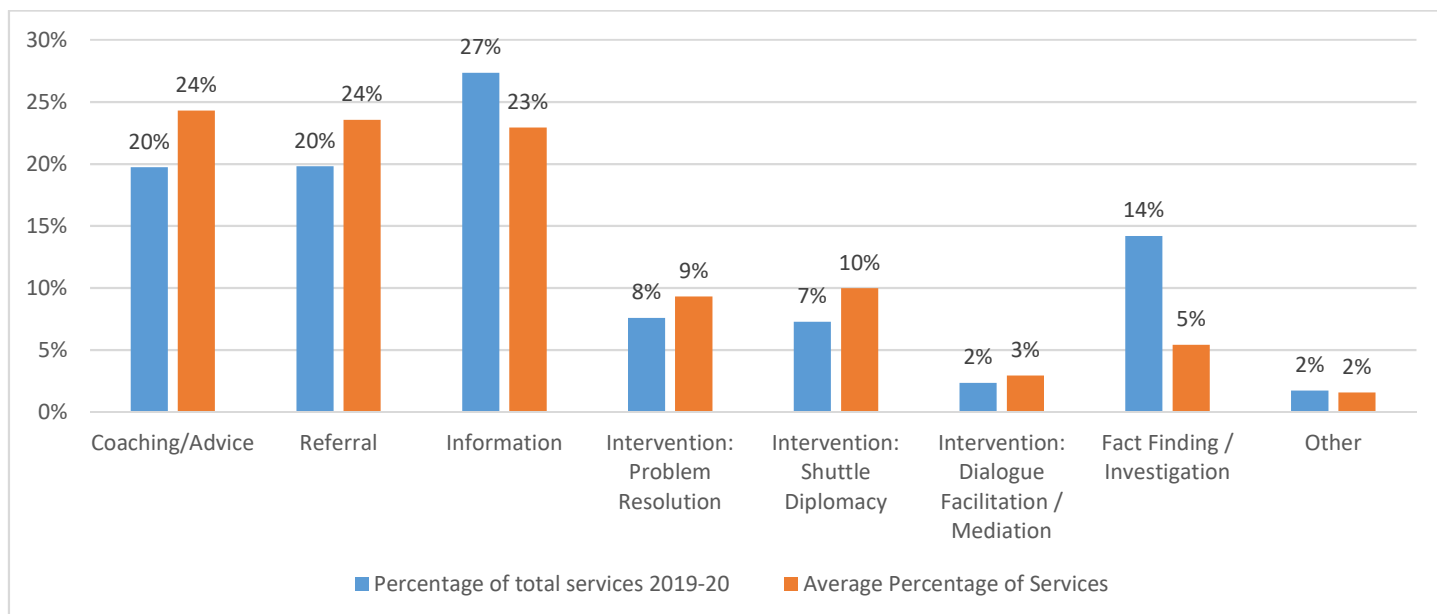


Figure 13: Percentage of Total Services (2019-2020) Compared to Average (2016-2019)



With a few exceptions, the services we provided were relatively consistent with previous years. The increase in fact finding/investigation is a function of the types of cases we handled. All our services, collectively, require an extensive amount of collaboration with stakeholders within and outside the Algonquin College community.

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.'

As shown in Figures 12 and 13, 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 understanding 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 formal investigation. Most services in this category are informal inquiries, and review of relevant documents/files in order to obtain a better understanding of a situation to inform appropriate recommendations.
- 3. Information** - Providing information on policies, procedures/directives, and channels of appeal.
- 4. Intervention: Dialogue Facilitation/Mediation** - Facilitating a dialogue between the parties in conflict 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 were provided in the cases we handled in this reporting period. In addition to services provided to students at the Ottawa campus, the Ombudsman made periodic visits to the Pembroke and Perth campuses. Additionally, the Office provided services to our students from AC Online.

VI - Case Summaries

The following case studies, as well those appearing earlier in the Report, are intended to provide insight into the kind of concerns that are brought to this Office, some of which ultimately lead to the development of our annual recommendation. While confidentiality prevents us from providing the details of specific cases, we hope these examples are useful to a better understanding of the range of issues we handled.

Can't afford to stay in school nor drop out

Samantha started her studies in the Program MZK (Intensive). She was passionate about the program and excited at the prospect of completing her studies a year earlier than the standard version of the same program. After the second semester, she transferred to the standard version of the program due to her pregnancy and some related complications that made the fast-paced schedule of the intensive program untenable, in her circumstances. About a month into the third semester, Samantha was unsure of the suitability of an elective course she was taking. She contacted an academic advisor to inquire about dropping the elective course and adding another. Samantha was informed that she had missed the deadline for adding another elective course, but could drop her current elective course, without an academic penalty; she could then take her preferred elective course in her (fourth) final semester. Samantha did not disclose that she had dropped another course about a week or two earlier; she assumed that the academic advisor would see that information in the College records. The elective course was her fifth registered course for the semester and thinking that four courses (i.e. after dropping the elective course) was equivalent to full-time student status, she consented to dropping the elective course. There was no discussion about the impact of the change on her full-time student status.

Closer to the start of Samantha's final semester, she got a letter from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) advising that her funding had been re-calculated due to her part-time student status in the third term; hence, the grant portion of her funding had been converted to a loan resulting in a higher amount owed to OSAP. Consequently, she would not receive further funding from OSAP until the amount owed was settled. Samantha was informed that per their contractual agreement, she had the responsibility to notify OSAP of a change in her full-time student status. Moreover, she should have contacted the Financial Aid Office at the College for advice before dropping that elective course. Apparently, it was only then that Samantha realized that by dropping the elective course, her student status switched from full-time to part-time.

Samantha felt that the academic advisor who processed the dropping of the elective course should have advised her of the OSAP implications. The academic department explained that academic advisors assist with academic related matters not OSAP/financial matters; it was Samantha's responsibility to seek advice from the Financial Aid Office and/or OSAP.

Samantha contacted our Office for assistance stating that although she had just started her final semester, she would have to drop out without funding for her studies. She explained that she had

worked very hard in her life; had overcome many obstacles to get to the final semester; had younger kids – both under 6 years, and one only 7 months old – so could not take care of her kids, get a part-time job, and maintain a full-time student schedule to complete her studies. Essentially, she thought that it was unfair that she would have to drop out of school under the circumstances. The Office of the Ombudsman worked with Samantha, the academic department and other stakeholders to find a resolution that allowed Samantha to successfully complete her studies and graduate on schedule.

Misunderstanding

Sue received funding from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) for F2018 and W2019. However, she required serious surgery during the winter semester (W2019). She provided medical documentation to her instructors and the Financial Aid Office, and withdrew, receiving a tuition refund. She restarted second semester in F2019, using the saved OSAP funding originally provided to her for W2019. She completed her final semester in F2019, and had been accepted into a new one-year online program for W2020.

In late fall 2019, OSAP demanded repayment of the OSAP funds provided for W2019 as their records showed she had withdrawn. Sue did not understand the problem: she had notified her professors and the Refund Committee when she became ill and provided medical documentation, and she had withdrawn using formal channels. She did not know who else to speak to, as she perceived the College already knew of her situation. She eventually contacted the Ombudsman of Ontario, who referred her to the Office of the Ombudsman at Algonquin College. By this point in W2020, she had already begun the one-year XYZ Diploma program, counting on OSAP funding.

Our Office helped Sue understand what had happened and explore options. She had not been aware that because OSAP's fiscal year ends in July, she could not simply "roll forward" funding received for a previous semester. Like many students, she had erroneously perceived that any information provided to her professors meant that "the College" had access to this information. In particular, she believed that information provided to the Financial Aid Office was automatically available to OSAP. On the advice of the Financial Aid Office, Sue was encouraged to write an Exceptional Circumstances appeal to address the "overpayment" issue, as well as dated medical documentation. Sue was also advised of the upcoming academic withdrawal with refund deadline, understanding that a decision to remain in the program now meant that she was incurring tuition fees for the upcoming semester regardless of the outcome of her OSAP appeal.

Ripple effect

Joe began his studies in a highly competitive program. As he had been managing his disabilities independently for several years before deciding to return to school, he did not see the need to register

with the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL). He worked hard and managed to achieve excellent grades in his first year. However, during his second year, he was required to become a caregiver and respond to multiple, unanticipated, family needs, sometimes necessitating unpredictable last-minute absences from school. Joe's grades were dramatically affected, and his own health suffered as well. He shared very little of what was happening with his instructors, as he considered the family situation personal and his responsibility, and did not see the issue as being relevant or directly related to disability. Ultimately, after several warnings (which had the effect of exacerbating his own disability as he tried even harder to succeed), his Program permanently suspended him.

Once his family responsibilities ended, and his health stabilized, Joe sought advice from the Office of the Ombudsman to see what options were available to him, hoping to resume his Program or at least to be able to salvage some of his credits to be applied to a related academic stream.

The Office of the Ombudsman facilitated a conversation with the Academic Chair of his Program, who agreed to meet with Joe, and to approve retroactive accommodation to allow him to complete some of the courses, which had been in progress before family responsibilities intervened. Joe was also encouraged to register with CAL to benefit from the multiple support available to him as he resumed his Program's regular path.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Each student-related matter on retroactive accommodation is fact specific and addressed based on the particular circumstances of the situation. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (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.

Grieving and didn't know what to ask

Jordan paid for a full year in residence, and in F2019 began her program. The day before an important test, Jordan learned that a relative, with whom she had been very close, had unexpectedly passed away. She emailed her instructors that day to explain what had happened and why, when she came in to write an important test the next day, she might appear unwell. She wrote the test and was unsuccessful. She spoke to her instructor to see if there was a way she could make up this poor result, but was told that tests cannot be rewritten, and that she should just make it up on subsequent evaluations.

The following week, still grieving but not being aware that she had any option, she proceeded to write the midterm with her classmates. She was again unsuccessful. She was allowed to write a make-up exam, under the Failure with Supplemental Privilege (FSP) process, for the final exam early in W2020, but she was again unsuccessful. Consequently, she was advised that she was being removed from the Program,

as this course was a prerequisite to three other courses in the winter semester. Adding to the academic impact of failing this course, the terms of Jordan's full academic year residence contract meant that she would be paying almost the full cost of the winter term, even though she could not remain in residence.

The Office of the Ombudsman advised Jordan that under the Deferred Evaluation Policy, which recognizes that students may face exceptional circumstances, such as personal or family tragedy, she could have asked to defer evaluations when she had the death in her family. Although Jordan had not asked for a deferral, she had advised her instructors of the circumstances surrounding her test and exam, and had subsequently asked if she could rewrite her test, and had been refused without mention of the option of a deferral.

The Ombudsman referred Jordan to the Academic Chair, who agreed that she should have been provided the opportunity to defer her evaluations, especially given evidence from her academic record that her success may have been affected by these life events. Jordan was allowed to continue her studies pending opportunities for her to redo the test and exam.

Why?

Student Billy completed some, but not all, of the mandatory community service hours required for a core course in Program ABX. He contacted the professor to discuss the prospect of getting credit for the hours completed. The professor explained that Billy could not get credit for the hours completed because of the expectation for students to get 'all or nothing.' Billy withdrew from the course after concluding that it would not be possible to get enough community service hours before the end of term. Unfortunately, he missed the academic penalty date by one day and ended up with an F grade.

Billy then enrolled in the equivalent AC Online course. However, in the online version, community service hours are not required. Billy felt that he had completed all the required course requirements and only failed previously based on the community service hours; therefore, it was unfair to have to pay for this additional online course and still have an F on his transcript considering the discrepancy between requirements for the same course credit, within the same College.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Considering the College's strategic focus on retention, personalized and flexible learning pathways in relation to the Learner Driven Plan (LDP), it is suggested that the College continuously review its processes and procedures to promote a smoother transition across programs and learning pathways, as has been recommended in the 2018-2019 Annual Report of the Office of the Ombudsman (recommendation 2).

Who should I contact?

Glenda switched from the on-campus delivery to the AC Online delivery of the same program after first year. In November, she submitted an advanced standing request. After 3 weeks without news, Glenda contacted the Registrar's Office and was referred to a staff member – Zoe – who was listed as the main contact person on her application. Glenda was frustrated about having to send multiple emails to get a response from Zoe. By January 7th, her application was still pending; she had not been registered; and Winter courses had begun. By the second week of January, she still had no access to her Brightspace courses. By the third week of January, she still could not access two courses that were administered through OntarioLearn because she needed to retrieve the password that was sent to her Algonquin College email account. Regrettably, her attempts to log-in to her Algonquin email account were unsuccessful and she kept receiving an error message. She contacted Information Technology Services (ITS) and was advised that the problem would take a while to be resolved. Glenda was stressed about missing content and sent more emails to Zoe, the only contact she knew as assigned to her case. When she did not receive a response, Glenda contacted our Office, concerned about the snowballing effects of having missed three weeks of courses and trying to catch up.

Zoe eventually informed Glenda that the glitches were due to a tuition deposit that had not been paid, and that was also why ITS could not resolve her issue. After settling the required payment, the glitches were resolved. Although the technical difficulties and course registrations had been resolved by the time Glenda contacted our Office, she was frustrated by what she felt was an unnecessary run-around and extended process for a request she had proactively started months before the start of term.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Students sometimes do not know who to contact, or have difficulty reaching their designated contacts. At other times, students expect faster responses and are surprised when the large organizational structure complicates and slows processes. Supporting students requires the collaboration of various stakeholders, depending on the circumstances. In an institution of this size, it is inevitable that errors would occur. When this happens, it is helpful to explore all reasonable options for a resolution.

That was advertised

Tom, a student enrolled in Program ABC Online, alleged that he chose Algonquin College primarily because it was advertised that the program offered an opportunity for students to complete an unpaid work placement; this would help students to practice their skills and integrate their knowledge in a real-world organization. Specifically, the program description on the College website stated that students may qualify to complete an unpaid work placement in their final semester. There was a GPA requirement for placement eligibility.

Tom worked very hard to obtain grades above the minimum requirements for placement. In the final month of the semester before the start of the final semester, he contacted the academic department to enquire about the necessary arrangements to register for the field placement. Much to his surprise, he was informed that the field placement option was only available to students taking the program in-person on campus. He was directed to contact the Registrar's Office for assistance. When he contacted the Registrar's Office, he was informed that it was an academic decision and so he should contact his academic department. Feeling frustrated that he was getting a run-around, Tom contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance.

Upon checking the program website, the Office of the Ombudsman noticed that both the Online and On-Campus versions of the program had been advertised to offer field placement opportunities to students. Apparently, a decision had been made to limit field placement opportunities only to On-Campus students. Regrettably, the program website was not adjusted to reflect that decision.

The Office of the Ombudsman worked with the student, the academic department, and other stakeholders to find a resolution. Unfortunately, the student later informed our Office that he decided not to do the field placement because by the time we reached a resolution, the field placement had already begun and he had already missed some critical preparatory sessions for a successful completion of the placement. Tom took another course, in lieu of placement, which allowed him to complete his studies and graduate on schedule.

Is it fair?

Carl, a student in Program BBC, unexpectedly lost his mother in a tragic accident. Obviously, the loss was devastating and triggered a pre-existing medical condition. Carl was already registered with the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL). Carl went home to join the grieving family and participate in the final rites of passage. While away, he missed some assignments and exams; he notified his professors about the situation and asked for advice on his options. In order to alleviate the burden of having to contact all the different professors, a designated representative from the academic department contacted Carl to make the necessary arrangements.

The academic department developed an academic accommodation plan to help Carl complete his studies. Regrettably, Carl and the academic department disagreed on the details of the arrangements. Carl felt he was not being treated fairly and contacted our Office to inquire about his rights and explore his options. Our office worked with Carl, the academic department and other stakeholders and found a resolution.

Comment(s)/Feedback: Each matter on academic accommodation is fact specific and addressed based on the particular circumstances of the situation. It is acknowledged that academic accommodations require, among other things, extensive coordination, creativity, sensitivity, and confidentiality.

Too little too late, unfortunately

Sally last attended the College in 2009. At the time, she had one remaining course to graduate from Program XXX. Around 2012, the program was phased out and no longer offered at the College. In 2016, Sally contacted the academic department to explore options to complete her studies. Although Sally was beyond the permitted timeline for completing her studies, and the program phased out, the academic department agreed to offer an alternate course, in lieu of the remaining course, for Sally to complete her studies. For unknown reasons, Sally did not take the offer to complete the alternate course to graduate.

In 2019, Sally contacted the academic department to inquire about taking the alternate course they offered in 2016. By then, the leader of the academic department who approved the arrangements in 2016 was no longer with the College. The new leader of the department, in consultation with other stakeholders at the College, referenced the applicable College policy and concluded that Sally had exceeded the timeline for completing the program requirements. Essentially, Sally had been away for approximately 10 years, and did not take advantage of the offer to complete her studies in 2016 although it was beyond the timeline for program completion. The program had long been phased out and the College was not willing to issue a diploma whose design and requirements was informed by considerations in 2009.

Sally contacted our Office for assistance. Following our review of the matter we concluded that Sally had been away a little too long, and the College's decision was consistent with the applicable policy. Sally had the option to find another program at the College and her previously earned credits assessed for transfer purposes, as well as considerations for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

References:

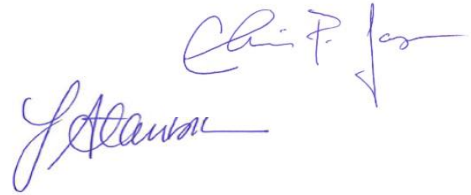
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MEMO

Date: March 10, 2021

To: George E. Cole, Ombudsman

From: Chris Janzen, Senior Vice President, Academic
Laura Stanbra, Vice President, Student Services



Cc: Ben Bridgstock, Director, Student Support Services & Co-Chair, Ombudsman Review Committee
Emily Ferguson, President, Students' Association & Co-Chair, Ombudsman Review Committee

Subject: Ombudsman's Annual Report 2019-20

This is to acknowledge receipt of the annual report of the activities and observations of the Ombudsman for the period of May 1, 2019 to April 30, 2020. Thank you for providing a presentation of this report to the Algonquin College Executive Team on February 10, 2021.

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. As always, the Executive Team welcomes suggested proactive solutions to reoccurring issues in the Ombudsman's reports.

Further, in recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the emergence of new challenges and uncertainties for our learners, as noted in your report, we remain dedicated to our evolving approach in serving students remotely, using a variety of different methods and approaches to ensure our learners continue to remain the focal point of our endeavors.

In response to your recommendation:

1. *Review the policies on Academic Appeal, Review of Final Grade, Academic Dishonesty, and Plagiarism to ensure their clarity, alignment and consistent application across the College.*

We acknowledge that this recommendation has carried forward from past reports including the Ombudsman's Annual Reports of 2017-18 and 2018-19. It is with regret that our efforts to date to improve the application of these policies has not yet demonstrated satisfactory outcomes for our learners.

We are pleased to advise that in Fall 2020, a working group was struck to review and revise policy AA18 Academic Dishonesty and policy AA20 Plagiarism with the intent to provide clarity and collapse the two policies into one. The policy is targeted for approval by the Algonquin College Executive Team in June 2021.

The working group will then move its focus to the review and revision of policy AA19 Academic Appeal and AA37 Review of Final Grade with the intent to obtain approval from the Algonquin College Executive Team in December 2021.

In further building upon these efforts, we will be sure to involve the use of the AC Way process improvement model and the *Plan, Do, Study, Adjust* methodology.

As discussed at the Executive Team meeting, it is suggested that next year's report (2020-21) include statistical information in comparison to enrolment, recognizing that the College's enrolment has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Once again, thank you for this year's report. It will serve us well as we continue to build on our strategic objective of being a more learner-driven organization. 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 24, 2021.

