



OFFICE OF THE
OMBUDSMAN

CONFIDENTIAL • IMPARTIAL • INDEPENDENT

Annual Report

2024-2025



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



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Introduction

Dear Members of the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC),

In accordance with section 3, subsection (3.11) of SA02: Ombudsman, Terms of Reference, the Office of the Ombudsman (the “Office”) presents its Annual Report for the period of 1 May 2024 to 30 April 2025.

This year, our Office managed **556** files involving learners, employees of the College and the Algonquin Students’ Association, and community stakeholders. Many of these files contained multiple concerns, as a single case often includes several issues that must be categorized and addressed separately due to their complexity and sensitivity. As a result, the number of issues reviewed and services delivered exceeds the number of individual visitors. Our services span both informal and formal dispute resolution processes, with the majority occurring through informal means.

The statistics provided do not reflect the significant time spent on advisory support to students, faculty, and staff; the delivery of proactive training to stakeholders, including the Algonquin Students’ Association; participation on committees and working groups contributing to the development or review of policies and protocols; and engagement in College events. Additionally, not all contacts result in a formal file being opened. For instance, some matters are redirected to the appropriate department for resolution, while others do not proceed when individuals choose not to complete our intake process.

We remain encouraged by the ongoing collaboration across the College to seek meaningful resolutions to the matters that arise. We also welcome the increased referrals of learners by faculty and staff, as well as the ongoing invitations to contribute to proactive interventions, policy development, and other opportunities that support and strengthen the College community.

The Report presents several recommendations to the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET).

Sincerely,

Office of the Ombudsman at Algonquin College.



Algonquin College campuses in Ottawa, Perth and Pembroke are located on the traditional unceded, and unsurrendered territory of the Anishinàbe Algonquin People. The Algonquin People have inhabited and cared for these lands since time immemorial. We take this time to express our gratitude and respect to them and to the land for all that it has provided and will continue to provide. As a post-secondary institution, we acknowledge the harms done to Indigenous Peoples and are committed to learning from the past. We pledge to promote healing and resilience as we move forward in partnership with the Algonquin Nations, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in a spirit of reconciliation. While we recognize that territorial acknowledgements are only one step in cultivating greater respect for and inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, we commit to accompanying these words with actions. We are dedicated to building a future and community that is better for all. We pledge to continue exploring and making meaningful contributions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action.



Who We Are

Since 1979, 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 \(SA02\) Policy](#), 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.

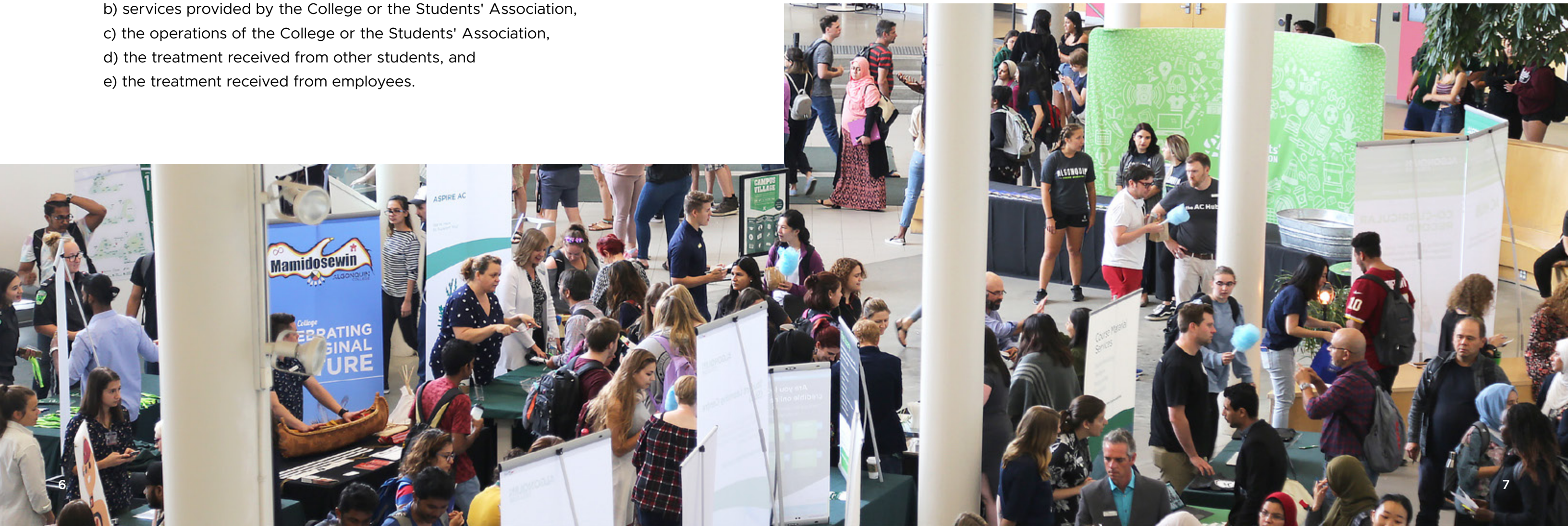
Specifically, the Office of the Ombudsman has the mandate:

1. To provide information to students on College policies and procedures, the rights and responsibilities of students in College situations, and provide advice on options for the resolution of College-related concerns, including where and to whom concerns should be appropriately directed.
2. 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, and
 - e) the treatment received from employees.

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 more details](#)):

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

These standards of practice are essential for the effective functioning of any Office of the Ombudsman. Regarding our operations at Algonquin College, while our services range from informal to formal processes, our processes are mostly informal.



Recommendations

A core responsibility of our Office is the systemic analysis of issues and the identification of trends across the cases we manage. In addition to addressing individual concerns, we consider the broader implication of our work and how it may contribute to the mission, vision, and values of the College and the Algonquin Students' Association. With this intent, we offer the following recommendations to the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET):

Recommendation 1

Strengthen adherence and consistent application of all policies connected to the academic appeal process – namely: AA19, AA37, AA48, and the relevant provisions of AC01. Alongside adherence to established procedures, prioritize stronger use of the informal dispute-resolution mechanisms within these policies to resolve issues early and prevent escalation. With many appeals tied to academic integrity, guidelines, targeted training, and proactive support can improve the consistent application of the Academic Integrity Policy and therefore ensure equitable treatment across the College.

Recommendation 2

Take proactive measures to ensure that students affected by recent program suspensions and/or the impending Perth campus closure – including off-cycle students unable to progress with their cohort due to reduced course loads or temporary medical or compassionate leave – are not left without a feasible path to graduation. To support these students, the College may want to:

- a) Identify at-risk students earlier by reviewing program progression data and academic accommodation records,
- b) Build on existing planning efforts to ensure individualized completion plans are in place for students, particularly off-cycle students, with clear communication of required courses and timelines,
- c) Ensure access to remaining courses through alternative teaching arrangements (for example: cross-college partnerships, AC Online delivery, and/or transfer credit pathway with other post-secondary institutions)
- d) Designate a central coordination team to oversee student transitions and ensure timely follow-through.

Recommendation 3

To further enhance fairness, clarity, and consistency within the refund exception process, the College may want to consider:

- a) Reviewing the related processes for alignment with provincial guidelines, and providing clearer information on the criteria and documentation required to support shared understanding,
- b) Enhancing communication and guidance, particularly for students navigating exceptional circumstances (including medically complex situations, unforeseen medical emergencies related to pregnancy, other verifiable compassionate situations) or who may be unfamiliar with institutional procedures,
- c) Ensuring the Refund Exception Committee (REC) includes members from different departments, guaranteeing a diversity of perspectives (e.g., Registrar's Office, Student Support Services, Finance, and/or another representative, if feasible),
- d) Creating an independent appeal pathway to reinforce procedural fairness expectations and offer students a transparent and trusted option for further review, as appropriate. This step would also bring the refund exception process into closer alignment with comparable processes elsewhere in the College.

Recommendation 4

Augment College-wide supports for the academic accommodation process, given the increasing complexity of medical and disability-related concerns. Strengthening guidance, training, and timely consultation pathways for faculty and staff could help reduce uncertainty and support consistent practice, while also reinforcing trust among students. Clearer communication tools may also assist in preventing unnecessary escalation and ensuring that accommodation processes remain accessible, fair, and sustainable for all parties.

Over the years, and in comparison with many post-secondary institutions, Algonquin College has demonstrated a clear and sustained commitment to procedural fairness through the strength and evolution of its policies. The recommendations in this Report are offered with genuine respect for the College's ongoing efforts to navigate complex and rapidly evolving challenges. They are intended to support the College's longstanding commitment to continuous improvement and to further advance its vision of being "the premier destination for innovation through polytechnic leadership, driving prosperity and impact in the nation's capital and beyond."



Reflecting on Previous Recommendations

Our Activities

Recommendation	Update On Previous Recommendation
<p>2023-24 Annual Report Recommendation 1: To review the application of policies and procedures to ensure ongoing adherence to policy purpose, process, roles and responsibilities, with particular attention to policies associated with the academic appeal process (AA19, AA37, AA48 AND AC01)</p> <p>2023-24 Annual Report Recommendation 2: That just as students have an obligation and are held accountable to know College policies and requirements relevant to academic success and/or access to services, the College demonstrates reciprocal obligation and ensures the conduct of an extensive internal audit by services and program to ensure information, policies and communications are clear and consistent as well as readily available to those who rely upon them.</p> <p>The College stated in its Response to the 2023-24 Annual Report that: “We recognize these recommendations are focused on the need for ongoing education, awareness, and practical review of student-related policies with emphasis on the shared responsibilities, i.e.: learner and College policy understanding. We appreciate your recognition of the College’s comprehensive policy review process that supports these efforts.</p> <p>In addition to our standard policy and communication review, Student Services commits to lead an internal review of policy communication to students and the internal education that can inform process improvements and application consistency. As the report aptly noted, progress has been made. Yet there is still more work to do. Through practical continuous improvement efforts, we are confident the Office of the Ombudsman will see gains in these areas.</p>	<p>On 2023-2024 Recommendation 1: In 2025, AA48: Academic Integrity Policy review was finalized, and the Office of the Ombudsman was consulted in the prior review process. Our Office is of the opinion that the new AA48: Academic Integrity policy, which combined the former plagiarism and academic dishonesty policies, has made a positive difference in clarifying concepts and in providing procedural guidance intended to ensure due process in decision-making. [See pages 11-12 of this report for additional comments.]</p> <p>Additionally, in this reporting year, we noted meaningful progress, though opportunities for further improvement still remain.</p> <p>We would welcome further updates as they become available.</p> <p>On 2023-2024 Recommendation 2: We recognize that implementing this recommendation will require a comprehensive review and broad consultation. As partners in advancing procedural fairness and supporting student success, we value the College’s stated commitment to this work and would welcome an update on progress and anticipated next steps as the review unfolds.</p> <p>In our previous Report, we observed an imbalance in the enforcement of deadlines and that while the College mostly met its obligations associated with applicable deadlines in the referenced policies, the autonomy of the College to adjust for its own delays was a privilege not usually available to students when they similarly missed deadlines.</p> <p>In this reporting period, we observed that the Registrar’s Office appropriately addressed our concern specific to the academic appeal application process. That initiative is commendable.</p>

As in previous years, the Office of the Ombudsman continued our practice of proactive, constructive, and collaborative ombudsmanship to promote fairness and enhance the overall learning and working experience of the Algonquin College community. Due to our obligation for confidentiality, most of the important work we do to promote fairness occurs behind the scenes and is not reflected in the statistics presented in this report. Overall, our activities included:

1. Managing **556 files** of complex and sensitive matters, which increasingly reflect global, social, political and cultural dynamics. Additional statistical information can be found on the next page,
2. Providing extensive consultation and reciprocal communication with stakeholders who sought our proactive interventions in highly complex matters,
3. Reviewing College policies to ensure alignment with procedural fairness; monitoring the implementation of selected policies to identify gaps arising from the evolving needs of the College community; providing advisory roles on several ad-hoc committees to update College policies and ensure compliance with regulatory requirements, including the Sexual Violence Prevention Working Group,
4. Offering proactive training workshops on procedural fairness. This involved training seminars for stakeholders, including the Students’ Association,
5. Identifying appropriate referrals for students and other members of the College community whose matters do not fall within our mandate to more appropriate contacts, such as: OSAP, Second Career, Landlord and Tenant Board, Legal Aid, Community Associations and helping other stakeholders (including parents and other support people) to better understand the College operations and organization,
6. Participating in several events at the College, and within the professional community of Ombudsman/persons across the country, and
7. Collecting and analyzing data, both internally and from College sources.

The scope and reach of our activities, which exceeds the number of files handled, deepens our observation and understanding of trends and/or systemic issues, and collectively informs the assistance and recommendations we provide to the Algonquin College community.



A Look At Our 2024-2025 Data

During the reporting period, the Office opened **556 files**, consisting of **412 student files**, **131 non-student files** (faculty, staff, and the Algonquin Students' Association), and **13 files** involving other stakeholders (parents, other support people, and interested external parties). The total of 556 files represents a 9% increase from the 2023-2024 reporting period, and a 9% decrease relative to 2021-2022. The 412 student files showed a 5% increase from the 2023-2024 reporting period but an 11% decrease when compared with 2022-2023. In contrast, the 131 non-student files show a 22% increase over the previous reporting period, and a 13% increase from 2022-2023. Files involving 'other stakeholders' represented a 30% increase from 2023-2024, and a 61% decrease compared with 2022-2023.

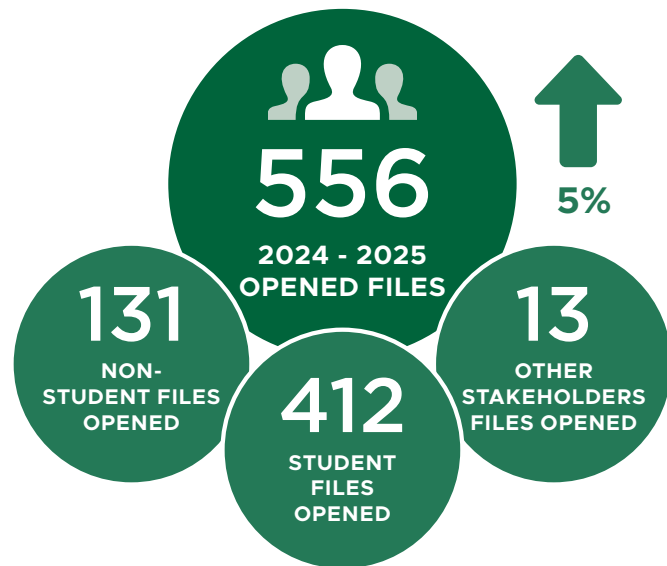
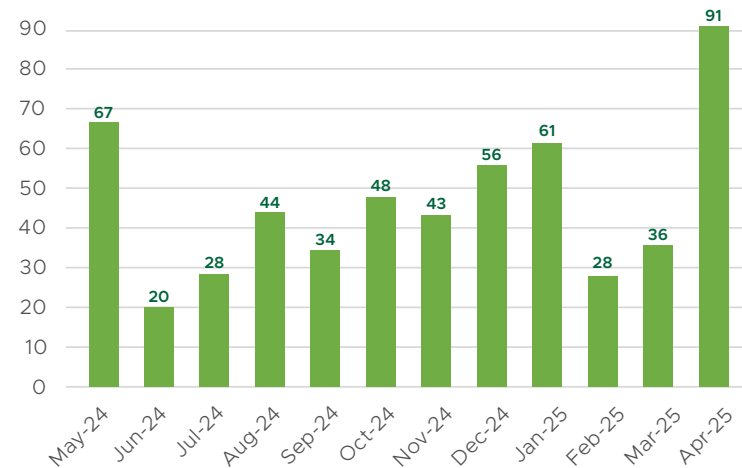


Fig 1: Files Opened Per Month, 2024-2025



As shown in **Figure 1**, the monthly distribution of opened files indicates that April had the highest caseload, followed by May, aligning with patterns observed in previous reporting periods. The predominant categories of concern remained academic appeals, academic accommodations, graduation requirements, student fees and financial aid, and placement-related issues (clinical, co-op, and other field placements). Consistent with prior years, the volume of new cases generally decreases in June and July, and rises again beginning in August.

Consistent with prior reports, we acknowledge that our observations reflect only the experiences of students, faculty, support staff, administration (and other stakeholders) who contacted our Office, and therefore may not represent the experiences of the broader Algonquin College community. At the same time, we remain acutely aware that individuals typically seek our assistance in circumstances where they perceive unfairness and have been unable to secure a satisfactory resolution; where Algonquin College processes are unclear or unknown; or where they feel aggrieved and raise issues that may also be shared by others who elect not to come forward.

Amongst all members who contacted our Office, the top presenting concerns were:

1. **Academic Appeal**
2. **Academic Progression**
3. **Student Fees, Admission and Withdrawal**
4. **Evaluation**
5. **Academic Accommodations**
6. **Student Conduct**
7. **Academic Integrity**
8. **Course Management and Classroom Management**

The Report provides further details on these concerns within **four (4)** broad categories: **Academic Appeal** (encompassing review of grade, evaluation and progression matters, and academic integrity); **Student Fees** (including financial aid and refund exception related matters), **Admission**, and **Withdrawal** related matters; **Academic Accommodations**; and **Course and Classroom Management** (including interpersonal conflicts among students, challenges in group work settings, and matters involving faculty). It is important to note that these categories are not rigid; they often overlap. For instance, an academic accommodation matter arising from an evaluation may evolve into an academic integrity issue, subsequently leading to a program withdrawal, an academic appeal, and a request for refund exception. In addition to the categories outlined above, the Report includes a short section on **Miscellaneous Matters** that fell outside the main categories, but remain noteworthy. Case summaries are provided at the end of each category to illustrate the types of concerns raised. Although confidentiality limits the level of detail we can share, these examples are intended to enhance understanding of the breadth of matters we managed in the reporting year.



Academic Appeal

This category includes matters arising under the Academic Appeal Policy (AA19), Review of Grade Policy (AA37), Academic Integrity Policy (AA48), and the Academic Accommodation for Accessible Learning Policy (AC01). It covers decisions and sanctions related to alleged academic integrity violations; academic progression decisions; non-reviewable grades; matters involving clinical or field placements; academic accommodations; classroom or course management concerns; and other related matters. Academic appeal related matters remained the top presenting concern among students who contacted our Office.

To a large extent, it was also a leading concern for employees (faculty, staff, administration, and others), although their inquiries more often centred on Academic Accommodations (see page 24 for further details). Our records show that 31% of academic appeal files involved academic integrity. Considering that not all students seek assistance from our Office before initiating an academic appeal, this may require further inquiry by the College to identify concerns that are likely to escalate to a formal appeal.

The following observations are provided with a goal to foster continuous improvement:

1. Our previous Report identified several gaps in the Academic Appeal Policy (AA19), Review of Grade Policy (AA37), and the Academic Integrity Policy (AA48). In this reporting year, we noted meaningful progress, though opportunities for further improvement remain. For example, our concern regarding the inconsistent enforcement of deadlines has since been addressed by the Registrar's Office. However, uneven expectations regarding roles and responsibilities persist in practice. For instance, although faculty and staff are required to provide evidence when submitting academic integrity allegations, this standard is not consistently met across all cases. By contrast, students may have their appeals denied when they are unable to provide comparable evidence to substantiate concerns about unfair evaluation. Additionally, there were instances where due process requirements embedded in the policies were not fully followed – for example, students being allotted only fifteen (15) minutes to present their evidence/case in a formal appeal hearing, regardless of the complexity of the matter, despite the policy specifying sixty (60) minutes for the student, and an additional sixty (60) minutes for the respondent (College representative). We also noted cases where academic decisions were issued without the required rationale.

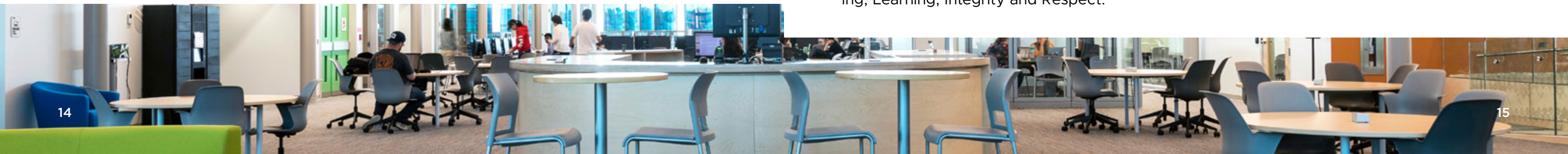
On a positive note, our Office was consulted during the review of several policies, reflecting continuing efforts by the College to address some of the gaps identified in our previous Reports.

2. The ongoing challenge of overlapping roles or jurisdiction in academic decision-making, a concern shared widely across the post-secondary sector, continue to reinforce perceptions of bias or reasonable apprehension of bias. To maintain the integrity of the policies, processes and procedures, we consistently advise that decision makers recognize the importance of objectivity in all interactions that may create actual or perceived bias.
3. International students were disproportionately represented in formal academic appeal applications relative to their share of the student body, and it appears that they may also be more frequently involved in academic integrity matters.
4. Variations in how policies are applied continue to result in differing outcomes in situations with similar fact patterns. Such variations can erode trust in decision-making processes, contribute to perceptions of inequity, and highlight the need for clearer guidance, training and oversight to support consistent practice across departments. While some differences may reflect case-specific nuances, greater consistency would help support fairness, transparency and predictability for all parties.

Notwithstanding these observations, our Office commends Algonquin College for its ongoing efforts to respond thoughtfully to these challenges. For instance, our Office is of the opinion that the new AA48: Academic Integrity policy, which combined the former plagiarism and academic dishonesty policies, has made a positive difference in clarifying concepts and in providing procedural guidance intended to ensure due process in decision-making.

This is particularly important in areas that can have a significant impact on students, particularly international students who must manage issues such as visa restrictions, IRCC limits on academic breaks, and the international premium where courses must be repeated. However, it is clear that further work is needed to address procedural issues in the application of the policy from the point where an academic integrity infraction is suspected. With the news that the Academic Integrity Office will soon be phased out, our Office is attentive to the development of the model that will replace the previous process. We look forward to knowing more about whichever framework is adopted, and emphasize the importance of ensuring that the new approach continues to support procedural fairness and fosters greater consistency in the handling of academic integrity matters across the College.

The continued attention to policy clarity, decision-making consistency, address of gaps that arise from divergence of policy intent and on-the-ground application, and student support reflects a strong commitment to continuous improvements and the College's values – Caring, Learning, Integrity and Respect.



Academic Appeal

Case Summary: Theory, Lab and Missing Percent

A student enrolled in a program which required separate passing grades for both the lab and theory components of a course calculated that he had passed the course, because he mistakenly believed that quizzes would be part of the theory grade. In reality, the theory mark was based solely on the midterm and final examinations. When the final grade fell short of the passing threshold by 0.6 %, the student found the outcome difficult to accept and submitted a Review of Grade request prior to consulting the Office of the Ombudsman. After meeting with the student, our Office referred him to the academic appeal process, as his concerns centered on the fairness and clarity of the grade breakdown rather than a calculation or grading error. The student felt that it was unfair that assessment weighting did not explicitly indicate which components were attributed to the lab versus the theory grade.

Note: Our Office often finds that because grades are ultimately in question, students sometimes pursue or are directed to the Review of Grade process, rather than the more appropriate academic appeal process which allows students to challenge academic decisions they believe to be unfair or inconsistent with established expectations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In alignment with our broader recommendation on strengthening the academic appeal process, this case summary underscores a recurring misunderstanding about the options available to students when challenging academic decisions. Developing an accessible decision-tree or brief explainer that clearly distinguishes the Review of Grade process from the Academic Appeal process, as well as a flowchart that visually demonstrates the progression through the informal and formal processes, may help reduce confusion and guide students more effectively.

Additionally, to enhance consistent practices across the academic areas, it may be helpful to provide clearer guidance on whether any consideration is intended when applying percentage grade rounding in courses that combine theory and lab components.

Case Summary: Safety Implications Pending Appeal Decision

A student was unsuccessful for the second time in a Level 3 course within a clinically based program, and disagreed with the program's decision not to offer a supplemental exam. The Failure with Supplemental Privilege (FSP) eligibility criteria outlined to students included a minimum exam percentage, and no prior failed attempts.

After receiving the exam results, the student met with both the Academic Chair and the Dean, explaining that personal family losses had occurred before each of the two midterms. This information, however, had not been shared with faculty until after the grades were issued. Further, there was no documentation to substantiate the assertion.

The student was advised of their right to challenge the academic decision through the applicable appeal processes. While the Academic Appeal Policy permits students, subject to specific caveats, to progress in their studies pending the outcome of an appeal, the program declined to allow progression on the basis of safety, noting that the student would be entering a clinical environment involving the care of acutely ill patients.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

There are circumstances in which, notwithstanding everyone's best efforts to provide guidance or support, the outcome may not reflect a student's preferred path. In programs where safety is paramount, repeating a course or courses may be required to ensure readiness for clinical or applied setting, even when this presents significant challenges for the individual.

In this case summary, while the decision itself may reasonably emphasize the importance of safety, particularly in health-related fields, fairness also requires careful consideration of how the decision was reached, including the information reviewed and how the individual was treated throughout the process. It is also important to note that an institution's reliance on "safety" as justification can be scrutinized and challenged in external reviews.

Academic Appeal

Case Summary: Group Work Tension: From Collaboration to Confrontation

Two students in a group experienced ongoing conflict after one member repeatedly failed to complete assigned work. The conflict escalated, occurring in the classroom and boiling over after class, with the group left to manage the situation until the Professor intervened only after insults were exchanged. The matter was then brought to the Academic Chair, who held a meeting with both students and the Professor; however, without clear expectations or ground rules, the meeting quickly devolved into further interruptions and discourtesy.

In response to the Academic Chair's direction that both students use the encounter to write what they had learned, the frustrated student that approached our Office stated that what they had learned was both that bullying was acceptable, and that not complying with the Chair's direction had no consequence. The student also expressed feeling unsafe and was referred to Security Services but withdrew their complaint when the Professor declined to act as a witness. Ultimately, the student did not pursue the matter further, noting that the group work and the semester were almost over and the grade earned was acceptable; as they had been able to share their frustration, nothing further was needed.

Note: Among the many concerns raised by students about group work, one of the most common is their difficulty in obtaining effective intervention when group dynamics break down, and the expectation that they resolve conflicts independently despite lacking the authority or tools to do so.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The College may wish to provide clearer guidance for instructor intervention when students seek support in resolving group conflicts. This could include establishing expectations, employing student contracts, outlining structured processes for facilitated meetings, and recognizing the significant difference between workplace hierarchies and student group dynamics – and how these differences affect conflict resolution. Clear procedural steps for instructors to follow would further support timely and fair interventions.

We also recognize that many faculty members/academic programs already implement proactive measures such as group contracts, defined rules of engagement, instructor outreach points, and staged accountability steps. Nonetheless, these systems sometimes fail, leaving students (and faculty) in difficult situations where the student can no longer remain in their group, cannot reasonably complete the project alone, and/or cannot join another group because the term is too far advanced.

Case Summary: Plagiarized By Association – Group Work Challenges

A student contacted our Office after receiving a zero on a group assignment for alleged plagiarism. The professor had emailed the group about the concern at approximately 2:00 A.M. The student responded immediately but later explained that having been abruptly awakened, she omitted key information; namely, that her partner had completed sections 2 and 3, where the plagiarism was found.

The next day, an academic administrator followed up regarding the allegation. The student submitted a detailed explanation showing that she had completed only sections 1 and 4, including documentation tracing her work to valid sources. After hearing nothing for about a week, she followed up and was invited to an in-person meeting, where she again demonstrated her authorship and provided evidence supporting her claims. Despite this, the decision held her responsible for the entire assignment. The rationale relied heavily on her initial 2:00 A.M. email, which was interpreted as an admission of involvement, and on the interpretation of the AA48 Academic Integrity Policy, which at the time assigned equal responsibility to all group members for academic integrity infractions.

The student felt that her later evidence was not meaningfully considered and that being penalized for portions she neither authored nor had an opportunity to review was fundamentally unfair. The plagiarism could be clearly traced to work completed by another student, yet she was held equally accountable.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

This case highlights a recurring concern we hear about group work: students are often placed in groups without choice, tasks are divided with limited oversight, and individuals may have little or no realistic opportunity to review their peers' contributions before submission. Yet, under the interpretation of AA48 in the reporting year, all group members could be held fully responsible for an academic integrity violation, regardless of their specific responsibilities or level of access to the work. By contrast, in professional environments, accountability is typically tied to one's actual contribution and degree of control.

An earlier version of the College's Academic Integrity Policy allowed decision-makers to assign sanctions only to the individuals clearly responsible for the misconduct; rather than presuming collective responsibility. During the recent AA48 review, our Office recommended reinstating this provision to support fairness and better reflect real-world expectations of individual accountability. We are pleased to note that this recommendation has now been incorporated into policy, and we hope it continues to extend to practice (i.e., on-the-ground application).



Academic Appeal

Case Summary: Grade Discrepancy Resolution

An international student, still recovering from a profound family tragedy, had progressed through their program with multiple accommodations, including deferred coursework. In their final course, the student submitted an exam answer only micro-seconds after the deadline, due to established technological reasons, and missed the passing grade by 1%. Although the professor had repeatedly encouraged early submission to avoid such risks, the student explained that the ongoing emotional trauma left them “only half-present” during the exam period.

The consequences of not passing were severe. With an expiring study permit and no remaining financial means to extend their stay, the student faced the prospect of being unable to complete their program despite having come so close. While the academic area sympathized with the situation, they felt that, given the extensive accommodations already afforded, further flexibility would compromise the academic integrity of the course and program.

Our Office referred the student to the Dean and to the formal academic appeal process. The Dean undertook a careful and balanced informal review of the matter, one that respected both the need to uphold academic standards and the importance of ensuring a fair and thorough assessment of the student’s circumstances. Recognizing the urgency, the Dean also encouraged the student to identify an acceptable online equivalent of the course, preserving the integrity of the process while proactively exploring time-sensitive options.

The informal review of the student’s grade revealed that assessment weighting had changed between semesters, resulting in a calculation error. Once corrected, it became clear that the student had, in fact, met the requirements to pass the course. This outcome reflected a measured approach that upheld the academic integrity of the program while ensuring that the student received a fair, accurate, and compassionate review; one that had a profoundly positive impact on their ability to complete their studies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Deans are generally not involved in the informal stage of an appeal before a student pursues a formal application (which is adjudicated by an Academic Appeal Committee). This practice appropriately avoids any action that could appear to circumvent or compromise the procedural fairness of the formal review. In this case, however, the Dean’s informal intervention offers a unique example of a circumstance in which an exception to the usual process was both appropriate and more effective than relying solely on a formal appeal.



Student Fees, Admissions and Withdrawals

This category encompasses a broad range of inquiries, including tuition, refund exception requests, financial aid, U-Pass, student activity fees, health insurance premiums, admissions, and withdrawals. Refund exception requests were among the most frequently raised concerns within this category. The case summaries below offers additional context on the matters addressed by our Office.

Case Summary: When A Flare-Up Isn't 'Unforeseen'; A Refund Dilemma

A student who had been progressing part-time in an academic program experienced a significant setback after a recent move and unexpected flooding in their home triggered a severe flare-up of an existing medical condition. As a result, the student struggled to keep up with coursework and ultimately withdrew; unfortunately, this was three (3) days past the withdrawal deadline. The student applied to the Refund Exception Committee but was denied on the basis that the medical condition was pre-existing and therefore not considered "unforeseen," and that refunds are generally not issued for housing-related disruptions such as flooding.

This decision raised concerns about fairness, as the provincial ministry guidelines governing tuition refund considerations do not appear to restrict eligibility on the basis of a pre-existing medical condition; rather, the guidelines make provision for refund for students who withdraw for "reasonable circumstances (for example, parental or medical leave)." The rigid interpretation applied in this case may unintentionally disadvantage students with chronic or episodic conditions whose symptoms can worsen unexpectedly due to environmental stressors and/or circumstances beyond the student's control.

Our Office explored potential academic pathways to help the student retain their academic progress and referred them to the Academic Chair to consider whether their registration could be moved to a later term without requiring repayment of fees. The Academic Chair was sympathetic to the student's situation and identified a reasonable basis for compassionate consideration. Unfortunately, we were unable to re-establish contact with the student, and available records did not clearly confirm whether the student held full-time registered status.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The College is advised to review its refund practices to ensure they more closely align with the provincial ministry directives and with human rights protections, particularly regarding students with medical circumstances (chronic, episodic, or pre-existing medical conditions) whose symptoms may worsen unexpectedly. Clarifying that an unforeseen flare-up of a known condition can warrant consideration would help support fairness and consistency. The College may also benefit from providing the designated committee(s) with clearer guidance on how external disruptions – particularly verifiable emergencies – can exacerbate disability-related challenges.



Student Fees, Admissions and Withdrawals

Case Summary: More Miles Than The U-Pass Could Handle

A student contacted our Office after their request to opt-out of the U-Pass was allegedly denied without explanation. The student argued that individuals living outside the OC Transpo service area are eligible for an opt-out and that their driver's license demonstrated residency in the State of Ohio, USA. They asserted that they physically commute from Ohio to Ottawa approximately three days per week, roughly a 12-hour round trip, because of significant personal obligations at home.

The student was frustrated both by the decision and by the lack of opportunity to provide evidence supporting their claim. Upon reviewing the matter, our Office recognized the unusual nature of the request but agreed to contact the Registrar's Office to better understand the rationale. The Registrar's Office initially accepted our suggestion that the student be given an opportunity to submit evidence of their commute so the committee could reassess the application.

However, a few days later, the Registrar's Office informed us that, following further internal consultation, they had determined the request to be unreasonable and would not be considering any further documentation from the student or their request to opt-out. At this point, our concern centered not on the merits of the application, which were admittedly unusual, but on the procedural fairness of the decision-making process. As a publicly assisted institution, there is a general expectation that even unlikely or extraordinary assertions be assessed through fair and transparent procedures, including the opportunity for individuals to be heard.

Following our intervention, the Registrar's Office allowed the student to provide evidence of their commuting pattern. The student was invited to submit one month's worth of documentation such as gas receipts, odometer readings, boarding passes (if applicable), or train/bus tickets. When our Office relayed this to the student, they advised that they were unable to provide the requested information. We therefore informed the student that while their request raised questions due to its unusual nature, our Office's role was to ensure that the decision was made through a fair process. Without the supporting documentation, we noted that our Office could not conclude that the College's denial of their U-pass opt-out request was unfair.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

As a publicly assisted institution, Algonquin College has an obligation to uphold procedural fairness in all decisions that affect students. This includes ensuring that students have an opportunity to present relevant information before a decision is made and that any decision is accompanied by a clear explanation of the reasons. Even if the ultimate outcome for this student remains the same, a fair and transparent process supports equitable treatment and promotes consistency, accountability, and confidence in the system.

Case Summary: A Deferred Start that Wasn't: One Deposit, Double Confusion

A prospective international student applied to a program of study for the Spring 2024 term but was denied a study permit. In the international applicants' chat portal, she informed the admissions team that she had made an error in her application, intended to correct it, and would resubmit. Although she was eligible for a refund at that time, she instead chose to defer to a future start date, and the refund was not issued.

For international admissions, two letters are issued: an Offer of Acceptance, after which students pay the tuition deposit, and the formal Letter of Acceptance (LOA), which must be submitted to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to support the study permit application. When offered a seat in the updated program, the student was instructed to pay the tuition deposit. She did not submit a new deposit: however, because the original deposit amount remained in her account, later correspondence in the chat portal appeared to show that she had paid the required deposit for the new start date.

Despite this, she did not receive a new formal LOA reflecting the updated program dates, and therefore could not update her application with IRCC. As a result, her study permit application remained pending. Believing she had not effectively accepted the new program start – considering that she had not paid a second deposit or received a LOA reflecting the updated program start dates – she did not take further action.

During subsequent communications, one admissions representative advised her that she had 24 hours to accept the offer, or her application would be cancelled. She did not respond within the 24 hours so concluded that her application had effectively been cancelled. When she did not respond, later messages from the College (likely based on the assumption that the deposit in her account reflected a new payment), continued to request updates on her visa status.



Student Fees, Admissions and Withdrawals

When the student later attempted to withdraw her application, she received notices indicating fees were owed. It appeared she was just past the withdrawal deadline and was therefore being charged full tuition. Confused about whether she was being withdrawn from the Spring 2024 or Fall 2024 intake, and noting that she still did not have a study permit, she requested that the fees be waived. Her request was denied and she was advised that she still owed full tuition.

The student contacted the Office of the Ombudsman, prompting a review of the chat history, which showed that the miscommunication arose on both sides. After consulting with the designated College representative, we jointly concluded that the student had not effectively accepted the Fall 2024 seat and therefore should not be charged full tuition for that term.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Miscommunications are inevitable, and in this case they led to a decision that understandably raised fairness concerns. However, once the misunderstanding was recognized, the issue was revisited and ultimately resolved. This illustrates the importance of timely clarification and open communication in ensuring fair outcomes.

Case Summary: Re-evaluating a Refund Request During A Change in Status

An upper-level international student was referred to the Office of the Ombudsman due to outstanding tuition fees after she indicated she could not continue with the term/semester. She applied to the Refund Exception Committee (REC), as required, outlining compassionate circumstances and medical challenges. Her documentation included a death certificate, medical prescription and diagnosis, evidence of attempts to opt-out of the international insurance plan, and confirmation that she had recently been granted refugee status, thereby changing her residency status from international to domestic. She also provided proof of tentative acceptance of her refugee claim.

The REC denied the initial application, noting that the documentation did not clearly demonstrate a direct connection between the circumstances and her need to discontinue her studies. The REC also found that because her Canadian residency status changed after the start of the term, international tuition and insurance requirements were still applicable. For clarity, international students must pay \$2,200 deposit each term/semester, whereas domestic students pay a \$500 deposit once per academic year to secure their seat. Had she been considered a domestic student at the start of the term/semester, she would not have been required to pay the deposit in advance of that term/semester.

Through our Office's guidance, the student was able to obtain additional documentation confirming a medical need to withdraw from the program and take a leave of absence. With this new information, the REC agreed to reconsider the application and subsequently approved the refund request.

Absent this medical documentation, the student might have pursued a payment plan for the fees owed; however, given her leave of absence on medical grounds, visa restrictions regarding work on an unscheduled leave of absence from studies, and significant personal hardship related to family circumstances abroad, it was unlikely she would have been able to meet the payment requirements.

The student acknowledged her responsibility to pay the international health insurance premium, recognizing that she remained ineligible for OHIP until her change in status was finalized. As well, at the start of the term/semester, her visa status was still a student, not yet a refugee status, and she did not have eligible OHIP coverage (or any other qualifying insurance coverage) to opt-out of the health insurance coverage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

This case highlights key considerations within the refund framework. Clear communication about documentation requirements, consistent application of criteria, and transparent reasons for decisions help students navigate the process with confidence and support perceptions of fairness.

Because the framework lacks a formal appeal mechanism, our Office initiated contact that led to an exceptional review by the same committee, without clarity on whether its membership differed from the original decision-makers. While this raises broader questions about procedural fairness, the review ultimately produced an outcome acceptable to both parties.



Student Fees, Admissions and Withdrawals

Case Summary: Proving Fee Status Eligibility

A student applied to a program and requested domestic tuition rates based on her pending Permanent Residency (PR) application. Admissions informed her that the documentation she provided could not be accepted, even though she believed it met – and exceeded – the requirements listed on the College website. She also noted that similar documents appeared to be accepted at other institutions.

The student referenced provincial ministry guidelines, other institutions' policies, and federal information to support her position. Our Office assisted by directing her request to successive levels of management; however, each level maintained that a specific format of documentation was required. The student reported that the federal helpline advised her that the requested document type did not apply to her PR application category, making it impossible for her to obtain.

The student was ultimately accepted as a domestic student at a university and withdrew her application at Algonquin College. Throughout the process, she expressed frustration with being redirected among departments, long wait times, and uncertainty about whom to contact. She felt that staff were at times impatient or frustrated with her attempts to seek clarification, which contributed to her dissatisfaction with the experience, and eventual decision to withdraw her application.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

As a large institution with many specialized roles, it can be difficult for students to identify the appropriate office/department or decision-maker to address their concerns, sometimes leaving them feeling as though they are being sent in circles. In some situations, the resolution the student seeks does not exist within the College's current structures, or the unusual nature of the issue reveals gaps in established processes.

Depending on the circumstances, our Office may direct the student to the appropriate point of contact, clarify relevant policies and procedures, provide guidance on how to present their concerns effectively, reach out to the relevant offices or personnel and connect them with the student, or participate in discussions to help advance a resolution. In this instance, however, the student ultimately chose to withdraw out of frustration, concluding our involvement.

Case Summary: The Unexpected... When Expecting

A third-year student in a full-time program was expecting to give birth in December and planned to switch to part-time online studies for the Fall semester. She had email correspondence with her academic area about taking a semester off from the full-time program and later returning, and she applied for part-time OSAP in September. She was initially advised that her courses would be online and self-paced but later learned that final exams would be held in person. Concerned that she would be unable to attend on-campus exams due to the late stage of her pregnancy, she chose not to register for any courses and decided on September 26th not to continue her studies for the term.

The student contacted our Office after receiving notice that she had been charged full tuition. Her application to the Refund Exception Committee (REC) resulted in the fees being adjusted from full-time to part-time rates based on her email history. However, she remained confused because she believed, based on earlier communications, that she would not be charged at all if she had not self-registered for the online courses.

When our Office reached out to relevant personnel, they confirmed that the part-time fees did not align with her registration status as an AC Online course registrant and should not have been charged. Some complications arose from the student having mistyped email addresses to key contacts who could have directed her to the proper withdrawal process or registration adjustments. Ultimately, the tuition was refunded.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Human error, whether on the part of the College or the student, will inevitably create challenges, as seen in this situation. When concerns are raised, however unlikely or unusual they may appear, it is important to approach each case with openness and curiosity, seeking feasible and creative solutions that align with the College's values.



Academic Accommodations

Concerns under this category were primarily based on disability (medical) and other protected grounds under the Ontario Human Rights Code, such as family status and creed (religion/faith).

In our previous three reporting years, Academic Accommodation was the top presenting concern raised by faculty and staff who contacted us for assistance (Refer to our 2021-2022 Annual Report for an explanation of the general theme of concerns we usually handle).

Case Summary: Funding and Accommodation Challenges

A student who had been approved for both a Bursary for Students with Disability (BSWD) and the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) repeatedly rejected CAL's explanations regarding the required protocol for purchasing accommodation-related equipment. As a result, the student did not obtain the needed equipment well into the middle of the fall semester. The student eventually decided to withdraw, having already received failing grades from late withdrawal in the previous semester/term. Although the Financial Aid Office had warned the student about the consequences of late withdrawal, this guidance was also disregarded.

When the resulting restrictions to the student's OSAP status were applied, the student attributed responsibility to both CAL and the Financial Aid Office and contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for assistance. Our Office consulted the Financial Aid Office, which offered an option through which the student could request a review of circumstances by OSAP. However, these options required supporting documentation from CAL indicating that the student's challenges were disability related. The student did not provide the necessary documentation to Financial Aid to enable such a review.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

This case underscores the student's role in actively participating in the accommodation process. As a caveat, case-by-case assessments may need to account for situations in which a student's medical circumstances impair their ability to make informed decisions, and alternative approaches to accommodation may be considered, as appropriate.



Course Management & Classroom Management

Course Management and Classroom Management in this Report generally comprises matters arising from teaching and delivery, course-related learning resources, course outlines, weekly schedule, course scheduling and schedule changes, course policies, group work, and other concerns associated with the learning process. The phrase “classroom management” applies to both in-person and remote learning delivery platforms. Course and classroom management-related matters most often intersected with interpersonal conflict, academic accommodation, academic appeal, evaluation, and academic progression.

Case Summary: When Policy Meets Practice: A Midterm Deferral Decision

A student contacted his professor on Sunday before a midterm exam to report flu-like symptoms and a suspected case of COVID-19, and requested a deferred evaluation. The professor responded by citing the course manual, which states that a student receives a grade of zero for a missed evaluation and that the Evaluation & Progression (E&P) Committee determines at the end of the academic year whether a makeup assessment is warranted. He subsequently obtained a doctor’s note and a confirmed positive COVID-19 test, then approached the academic program to challenge the decision and request a deferred evaluation but did not have an opportunity to provide his documentation.

The student was advised that the E&P Committee was responsible for the decision and that he would need to wait until the end of the term for an outcome. When the matter came to the attention of the Office of the Ombudsman, we advised that waiting until the end of the term or reweighting the student’s grade, or even the potential that the student would still have a zero grade, would not be a fair resolution due to the impact to the student after they followed the necessary steps under the AA21 Deferred Evaluation policy. The academic program ultimately agreed.

Our Office heard informally that previous students in the same course, with the same professor, may not have received the same consideration or may have been denied deferred evaluations in similar circumstances. However, those students did not contact our Office, and we could not follow up on those reports.

The student later returned to our Office with concerns that the proposed dates for the make-up exam were inconvenient. We encouraged the student to discuss with the professor and explore alternative dates. The student acknowledged that the professor had not indicated any resistance to accommodating his request and agreed to follow up directly. Our Office did not hear further from the student; however, the academic program later confirmed that the student completed the makeup exam shortly after a study break, that it had been graded, and that the matter was resolved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Encouraging consistent application of AA21 Deferred Evaluation, which takes precedence over any internal departmental practice, helps ensure that students who meet the established requirements are not disadvantaged by alternative options. For example, delaying evaluation until the end of term may undermine a student’s ability to be assessed when the material is still fresh, while reweighting may place disproportionate emphasis on other forms of assessment rather than the student’s demonstrated knowledge. At the same time, careful review of requests remains essential to uphold the integrity of the process and to distinguish genuine need from situations where the policy is invoked without sufficient grounds. In addition, it may be helpful for academic leadership to reinforce key policy points with faculty, especially by incorporating them into new faculty orientation.



Course Management & Classroom Management

Case Summary: When Old Questions Create New Problems

A student raised concerns about several assignments, quizzes, and in-class tests that appeared to rely on outdated materials allegedly re-used from previous years. The student described situations in which students in the course were unexpectedly required to take a quiz or submit a short assignment at the start of the class, after which the professor would allegedly check the questions to determine whether the information was still current. When questions were found to be outdated or unverifiable, the professor allegedly adjusted students' scores retroactively. The student found this practice stressful and unprofessional, noting that they were being assessed on information that could not reasonably be found.

The student also stated that certain tests evaluated skills that were not taught until weeks later by guest speakers, and that shifting deadlines affected their ability to access accommodation extensions outlined in their Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) Letter of Accommodation (LOA). The student was already in contact with their CAL Counsellor to address accommodation concerns.

Given the timing was near the end of the term, our Office advised the student of the SA03 Student Complaints policy and provided a referral to the Academic Chair, as raising course concerns through the Class Representative or Program Council was no longer feasible. The student's primary goal was to seek corrections to outdated materials, and ensure clearer assignment expectations and more consistent instructional practices for her next semester, when she anticipated having the same professor again.

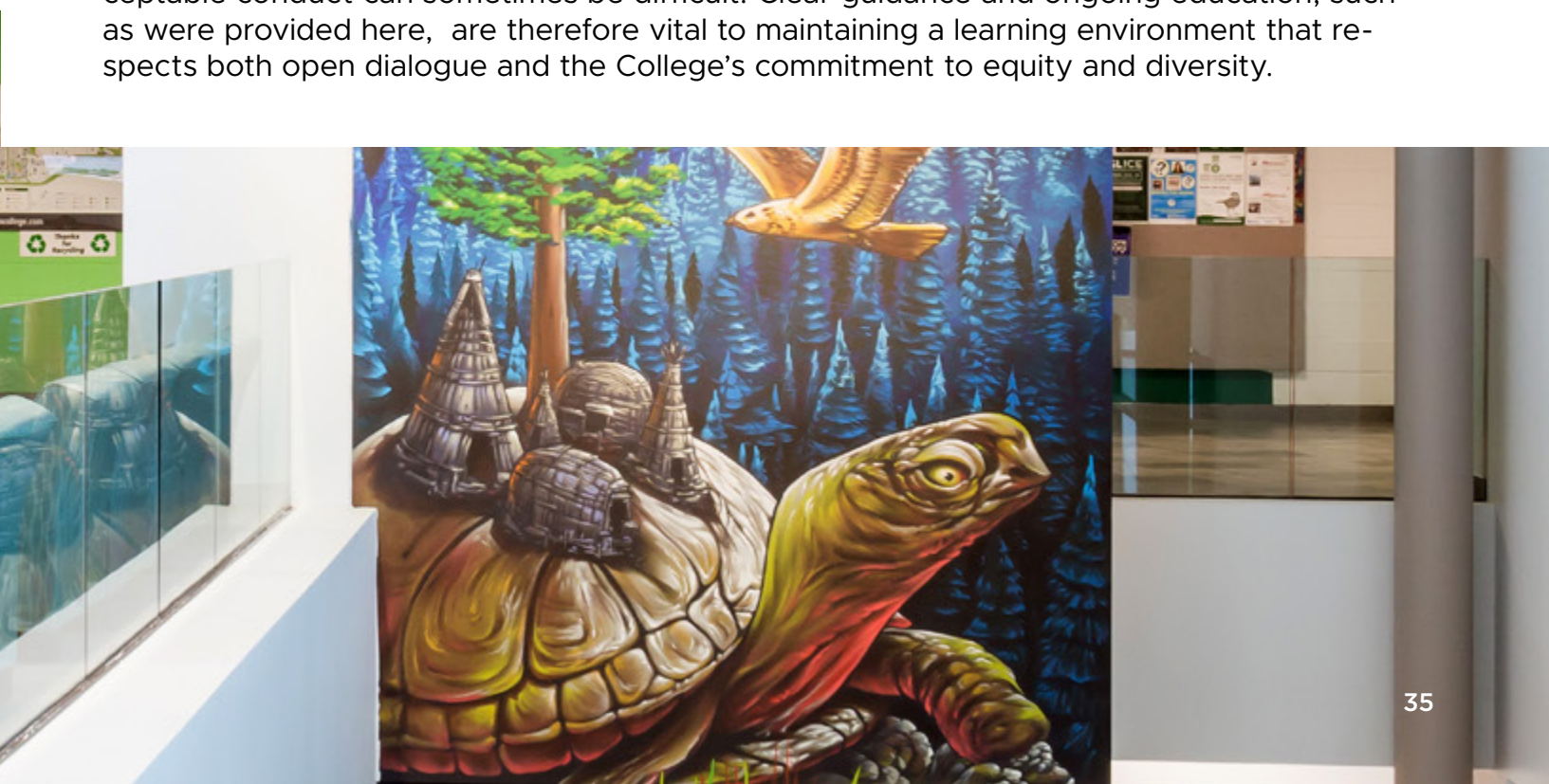
Case Summary: Facilitating Inclusive Dialogue in a Challenging Classroom Climate

In an academic program where open discussion and critical debate form an essential part of the learning experience, a classroom conversation became tense when a student voiced concerns about another peer's comments during course discussions. The concerned student felt that certain remarks – particularly those touching on pronoun use, LGBTQ2SL+ topics, and the histories and experiences of Indigenous communities – were creating discomfort and detracting from a respectful learning environment.

The Professor responded by reminding the class of the College's values and steadfast commitment to the dignity of a person, respect, and inclusion. The Professor also shared many supportive resources related to equitable communication and campus support services. While the instructor's approach helped to re-center the conversation, questions arose about how to continue fostering constructive dialogue in a course where discussions naturally engage with complex and potentially polarizing social issues.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The case summary reflects a broader challenge frequently encountered in academic environments; namely, how to foster inclusive participation while also supporting open inquiry and debate. It underscores the need for proactive strategies that help students engage with sensitive or complex topics in ways that uphold the dignity and safety of others. While freedom of expression is essential to academic life, it does not extend to rhetoric that is discriminatory or harmful, and distinguishing between robust discourse and unacceptable conduct can sometimes be difficult. Clear guidance and ongoing education, such as were provided here, are therefore vital to maintaining a learning environment that respects both open dialogue and the College's commitment to equity and diversity.



Course Management & Classroom Management

Case Summary: When Technology and Expectations Do Not Align

A student used a built-in browser translation tool during a proctored, computer-based quiz. She believed this was allowed because it was not explicitly listed as prohibited and she was following the instructions to stay on the quiz webpage. The instructor, however, considered the translator to fall under the instruction to “close all other applications.”

According to the student, the instructor shut down her laptop without giving her a chance to explain and later refused to show her a two-minute video she was told had been recorded during the incident. She received only partial marks for the answers completed before the interruption. The professor recalled that the student closed other browser tabs only after being asked to hand over the laptop. Both felt that the other raised their voice.

The student contacted the Office of the Ombudsman for advice to raise concerns about the allegation and request an opportunity to complete the quiz. The student also believed that some of the quiz questions covered materials not taught and that she had been graded unfairly on a group project. Our Office referred her to the Academic Chair.

The student contacted the Academic Chair via email and received a response that she had missed the 30-day window for submitting a complaint and was directed to the Review of Grade process for concerns about her group mark. She was also informed that translation tools were not permitted, which left her feeling unheard as there had been no discussion of the incident.

Our Office recommended a meeting between the student and department to clarify expectations, address her concerns about communication during the incident, and explore options for a resolution. Before the meeting, the student shared that she now understood why the translator was not allowed, but her primary concerns remained how she felt treated during the incident. She was aware of her right to be accompanied by a support in her meeting with the department.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Although the student raised multiple concerns about course management, the primary focus of this matter was on circumstances around the alleged breach of academic integrity. While it is possible that the outcome may have differed had the case been managed by the centralized Academic Integrity Office (AIO), under the AA48 policy then in effect, the process in this instance did not reflect several elements of procedural fairness. These elements include (a) providing the student with a reasonable opportunity to be heard (present her side of the story) before a decision was made, (b) ensuring an impartial decision-maker, and (c) upholding an expectation of respectful and professional communication by both the instructor and the student – an equally important element of relational fairness.

Case Summary: Co-op Readiness and Program Transfer Challenges

A student learned about an academic program through her employer and enrolled in the AC Online version when the on-campus option was unavailable. She later discovered that co-op was not offered in the AC Online stream and worked with the Registrar’s Office to transfer into the on-campus program at the next opportunity.

Because she joined the co-op stream after the usual deadline, she was required to complete the “co-op readiness course” by a custom extended deadline. Due to her disability-related accommodations, she requested an extension to December 7th but was granted an extension only to December 1st. She completed all course components by the deadline but mistakenly omitted one of the four required attachments. She later demonstrated that she had completed the missing component on time, and with guidance from our Office, appealed to the appropriate manager when the instructor declined to accept it. She ultimately received a passing grade and was permitted to proceed to co-op.

At the same time, the program coordinator in the student’s new on-campus program advised her to take a full course load to maintain co-op eligibility requirements, contrary to her CAL-approved reduced course load. The Co-op manager later confirmed that students approved for reduced course loads through CAL are still considered full-time for co-op purposes. The student was further advised that she was required to complete the two-year program within four years, although AA39: Program Progression and Graduation Requirements Policy provides for rare exceptions (on an individual basis) to the graduation timeline requirement, including where documented medical circumstances are present. Our Office consulted with the Academic Chair to ensure this provision was appropriately considered.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

An ongoing challenge exists to ensure that staff, faculty and students are familiar with the policies that guide all aspects of program delivery, teaching and learning to ensure that misinformation does not impose unnecessary limitations on progression.



International Students

The emphasis on International Students in this portion of the Report stems from a request made by the Algonquin College Executive Team (ACET) and the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC) to better understand the distinct challenges this population may encounter. For clarity, this focus is not intended to suggest that international students face concerns wholly separate from those of domestic students. The observations below should therefore be read as supplementary to, rather than separate from, the broader themes affecting the student body as a whole.

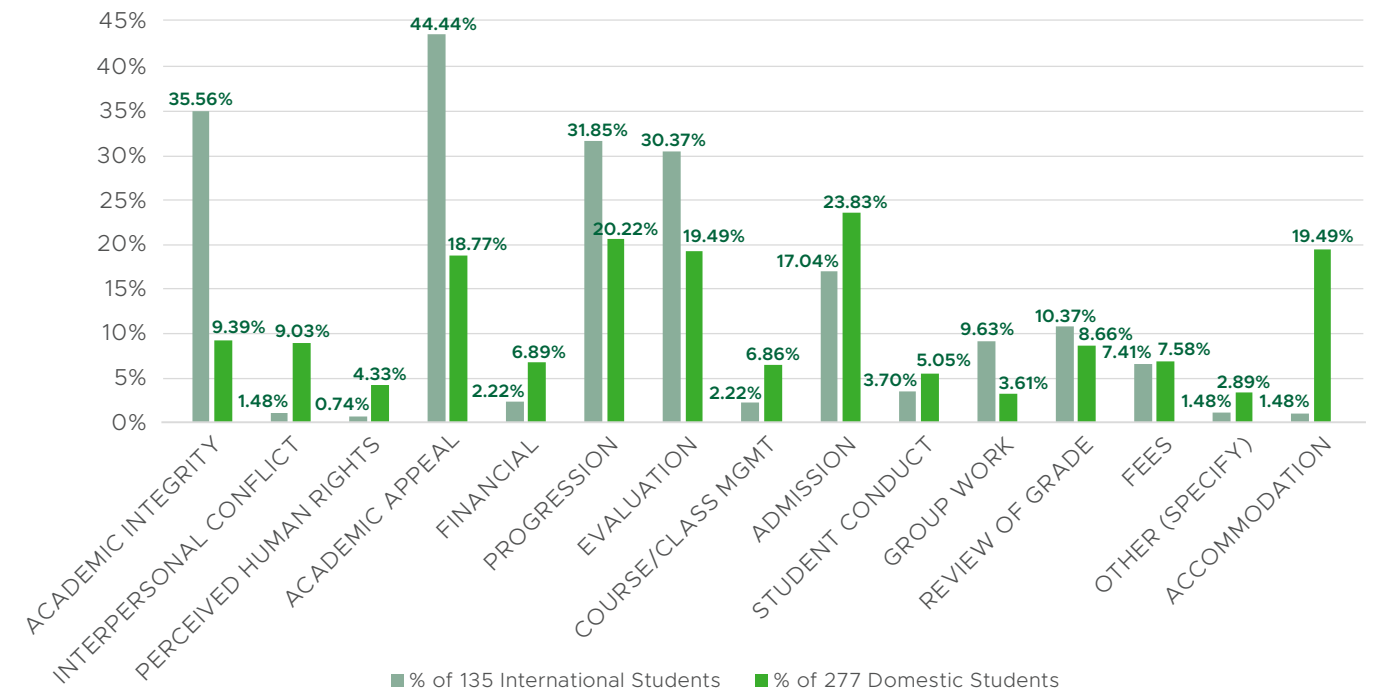
International and domestic students encounter academic pressures, financial concerns, navigation of institutional processes, and management of competing responsibilities. However, the impact of these challenges is often heightened for international students. For example, delays in academic accommodations or registration issues may jeopardize immigration status; unexpected financial hardships can be amplified by limits on work hours; and academic or procedural missteps may carry consequences that extend far beyond the classroom.

These elevated pressures appear to be part of the reason why international students are disproportionately represented in the academic appeal processes. Many are navigating significant transitions: living far from family support systems, adjusting to unfamiliar cultural and societal norms, learning new communication expectations, and adapting to educational standards that may differ from those in their home countries. These factors do not excuse academic misconduct or policy violations, nor do they necessarily warrant leniency in decision-making. Rather, they underscore the higher impact on these students which therefore necessitates a higher degree of procedural fairness when making decisions that affect them.

Recognizing the broader context in which international students learn and make decisions allows for more constructive communication, clearer expectations, and processes that remain fair, rigorous, and consistent. Supporting students through compassion, clarity, and cultural awareness not only aligns with the College values but also strengthens the integrity and inclusiveness of the academic community.



Fig 2: Complaints Raised by Student Status (Domestic & International)

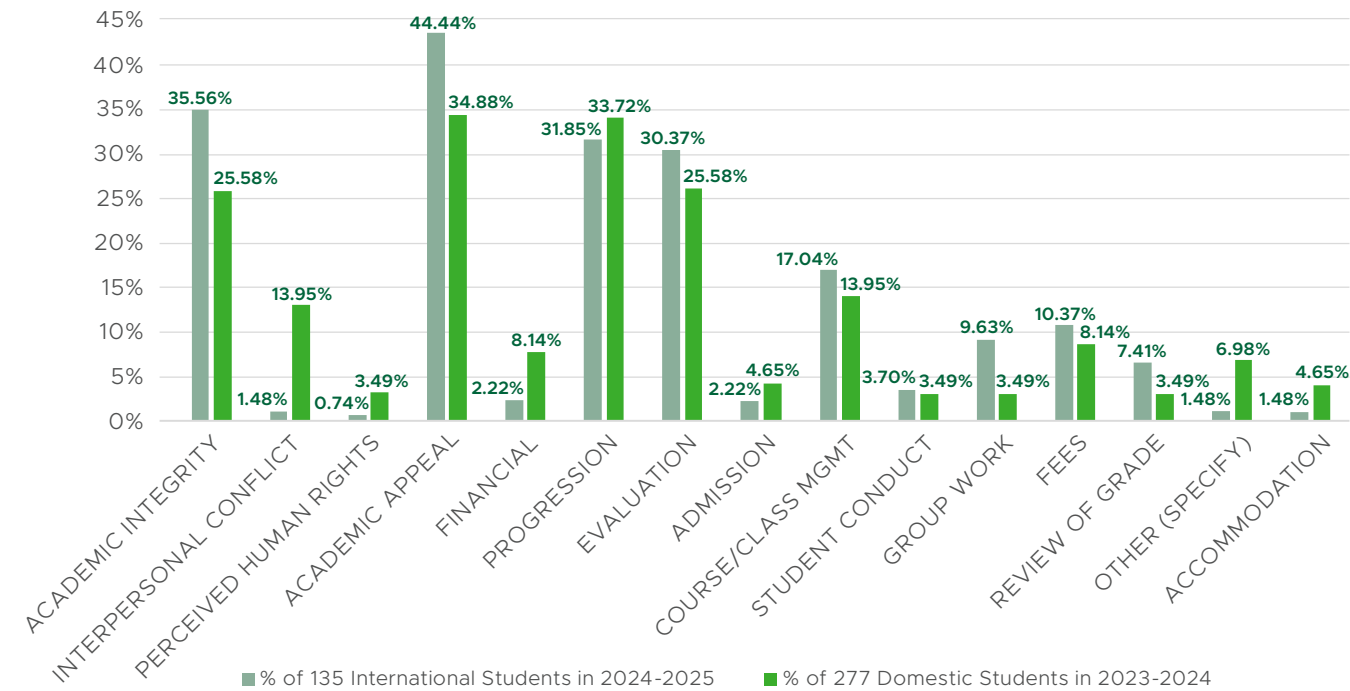


As shown in **Fig 2**, the frequency of topics raised have been converted to a percentage of each student group (international students, 135 visitors; and domestic students 277 visitors). If both groups experienced the same kinds of unfairness, we would expect similar proportional distributions. Instead, international students were more likely to contact our Office about (1) how to file an academic appeal (fairness-related concerns about academic decisions and/or circumstances resulting in an academic outcome); (2) academic integrity concerns (including how to respond to an allegation and concerns about sanction severity or impact); and (3) progression-related concerns (ability to proceed in their program).

In comparison, domestic students were more likely to contact us with fairness-related issues: (1) classroom/course management (teaching approaches, course resources, timing, or course-specific policies); (2) academic accommodation concerns (primarily disability-related, but also other human-rights grounds such as family status); and (3) conflict with a professor or other student.

International Students

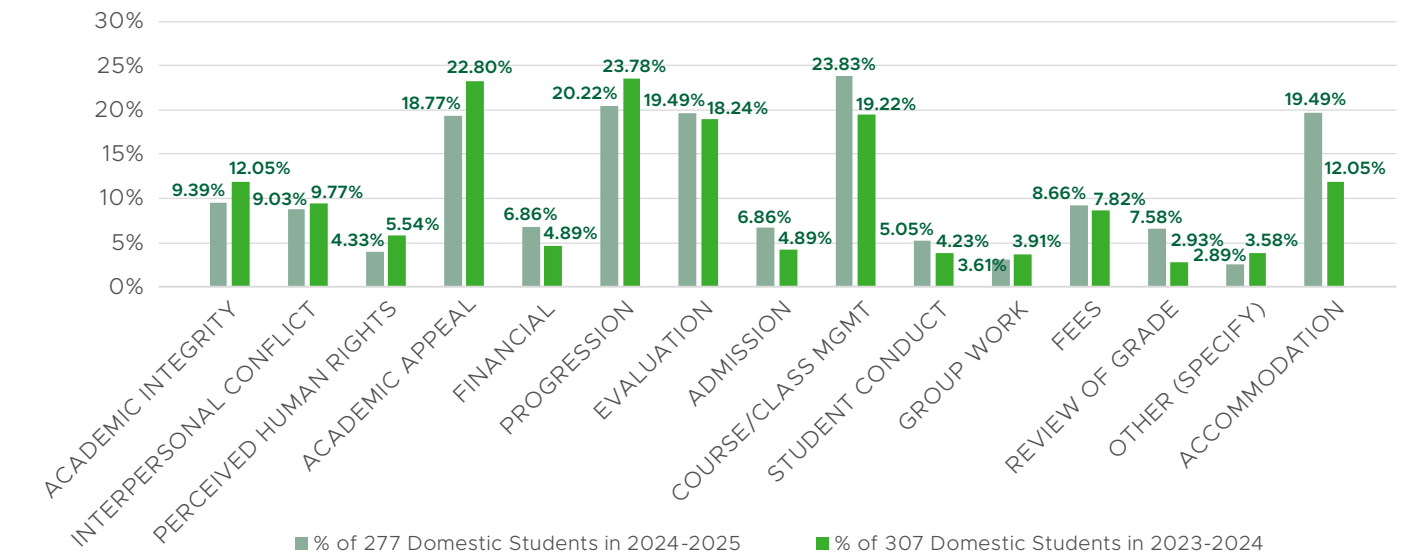
Fig 3: Comparison of International Student Complaint Topics (2024 & 2025)



In this reporting period, we observed a 10% increase in international student complaints regarding academic integrity, as well as 10% increase in international student concerns relating to academic appeal. While further information would be needed to confirm any correlation, it is possible that the increase in academic appeals among international students is connected to the increase in academic integrity concerns.

As highlighted in our previous Report, our Office recognizes the important work of the International Education Centre (IEC), in collaboration with partners across the College, to provide orientation and support for international students. These efforts create a valuable opportunity to proactively address the College’s expectations regarding academic integrity. We strongly encourage the continuation of these orientation initiatives – before students arrive, upon arrival, and throughout their studies – with particular emphasis on supporting international students’ understanding of academic integrity and related responsibilities.

Fig 4: Comparison of Domestic Student Complaint Topics (2024 & 2025)



As shown in **Fig. 4**, there was very little change in the top presenting concerns among domestic students compared to the previous reporting period, aside from a slight increase in academic accommodation-related concerns. There was also a modest rise in course management / classroom management related concerns.



Miscellaneous Matters

This section highlights a set of issues that, while not rising to the level of the four major categories discussed earlier in this Report, may provide important insight into the breadth of our Office's work and matters that come to our attention. These matters may represent isolated incidents or a very small proportion of our caseload, yet their significance should not be underestimated. As sociologist William Bruce Cameron famously observed – often misattributed to Albert Einstein – *“not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”*

This insight captures the spirit of the cases featured here. Their value is not in their frequency, but in what they reveal about the student experience, institutional processes, and opportunities for continuous improvement. Rather than offer lengthy explanations or pre-emptive justifications for their inclusion, we present these case summaries on their own merits, inviting readers to consider their implications against the backdrop of Cameron's reminder.

These snapshots provide a nuanced understanding of the kinds of challenges that can arise, even in well-functioning systems, and illustrate why careful attention to the “small” or infrequent matters can be just as critical as addressing the dominant trends.

Case Summary: Unintentionally Overlooked – Off-Cycle Student in Program Transfer

When Sally enrolled in her program in September 2023, she was not informed that the College was already considering relocating the program to another campus; information that would have been essential for her decision-making. Because she could not relocate or drive, and was studying on a reduced course load for medical reasons, this lack of disclosure placed her in a vulnerable position from the outset.

Later in the semester, once she was already established in her studies, the program announced that a relocation was possible. From that point forward, Sally received no clear direction on how she, an off-cycle student with a non-standard progression, would be able to complete the specialized courses required for graduation.

By summer 2024, she learned that low enrollment prevented the program from running in September and that it would be suspended until January 2025. In December, she was told again that enrollment remained too low for the program to restart. Although the program head at the new campus made commendable efforts to place her in general education courses, the core courses she needed were unavailable until the program could resume, without any guarantee of when that would occur.

Faced with indefinite uncertainty and no viable path to completion, Sally withdrew. By this time, it had been three terms that Sally had been unable to take courses while waiting for the program to run or for alternative arrangements to be finalized. This had serious consequences: because her progression stalled through no fault of her own, she breached the conditions of her funding arrangement, was placed in default, was required to repay her loan immediately, and became ineligible for further financial support. She described feeling forgotten and excluded from planning that supported the main cohort, who were given a pathway to finish.

When Sally contacted our Office, we raised the matter with the College. Through extensive consultation, a path forward was eventually established to support her studies. Our Office later learned that other off-cycle students experienced similar difficulties.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Sally's experience highlights a significant gap in institutional processes: during program relocations or suspensions, students who are progressing off-cycle are at high risk of being unintentionally overlooked, leading to profound academic and financial consequences. Pro-active mechanisms are needed to ensure these students receive clear communication and a viable path to program completion.



Miscellaneous Matters

Case Summary: Bake Sale – A Recipe for Frustration

A student planned to hold an on-campus bake sale as part of a course-related initiative. Although the assignment did not require a bake sale, her professor approved the idea, unaware that the College has specific restrictions regarding the sale of baked goods on campus. When the student sought the necessary approvals, her request was denied on the basis of food-safety policies.

While the student understood the health and safety rationale, she became frustrated after observing other student groups selling baked goods without apparent authorization. She felt it was inequitable that she followed the proper channels and was denied, while others seemed to proceed without oversight.

In an effort to explore alternatives, the student sought a meeting with a manager; however, she felt the email responses were dismissive and did not provide a clear point of escalation. Several managers, each temporarily covering for the individual who normally handled such matters, denied her request and referred broadly to direction from Risk Management. When the student asked to see the food-safety policy, no documentation was provided. This lack of clarity heightened her frustration and further strained the communication process. It remained unclear both what specifically justified the denial, and which department was responsible for enforcing the policy.

Our Office identified the need for a clearer mechanism to review and apply food-safety requirements and referred the student to a senior administrator to address concerns about communication and the handling of her request. Ultimately, the student also connected with the Students' Association, which applies the same policy for certain campus spaces under their jurisdiction, and was able to develop a fundraiser that complied with relevant policies and aligned with her course initiative. Nonetheless, she remained frustrated by the lack of clarity, consistency, and collaboration she experienced, particularly in comparison to other bake sales that appeared to proceed without formal approval.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Relating to the appeal mechanism, although not directly academic related, the student perceived unfairness in how the policy was inconsistently applied (i.e. students who properly requested permission were disadvantaged), and then when seeking a resolution directly with the apparent decision maker, was not aware of which appropriate personnel to contact. The concern was seemingly escalated further for relational fairness reasons (i.e. the student did not feel respected, heard, or understood, when the College could not provide documentation to support the reasons for its decision not to address the matter raised). Conversely, some of the managers the student contacted perceived the tone of her emails as disrespectful, reflecting the frustration on both sides. This case also highlights how interpretation of the same policy, by another decision maker, allowed room to explore the needs of both parties (i.e. the food related safety concerns and the fundraising goals of the student) in a collaborative way.

Case Summary: When a Campus Venue Meets a Controversial Voice

A member of the Ottawa community expressed deep concern about an upcoming public event scheduled to take place at a campus facility. The event featured a speaker known for highly controversial performances, including content that the individual described as hateful, inflammatory, and inconsistent with the values of the College community.

The event had been booked several months in advance, related rental fees paid, and tickets were sold out. At the time of the concern was raised, the performance was approximately two weeks away and had already been widely advertised. The facility in question operates as a public venue available for external bookings, and the speaker's Ottawa performance was one stop in a broader national and international tour.

The community member was frustrated that the College would allow such a performance to proceed on its campus, arguing that hosting a speaker known for objectionable speech was incompatible with Algonquin College values. They questioned how the College could reconcile its stated commitments to equity, inclusion, and community well-being with providing a platform, albeit indirectly, for perspectives many find deeply harmful.

This matter highlighted the ongoing tension that post-secondary educational institutions must navigate in balancing freedom of expression, public access to facilities, contractual obligations, and community expectations. It also underscored the complexities that arise when broader social and political debates filter into campus spaces. As academic communities increasingly reflect the diverse, and sometimes fractured, realities of the wider society, the College must carefully consider how decisions about external events intersect with safety, inclusivity, legal obligations, and the integrity of the College's mission.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The College may want to review and clarify its guidelines for external facility rentals, particularly for events that raise concerns about controversial or harmful expression. While freedom of expression, including satirical expression, is protected within academic settings, it can at times intersect with content that some community members experience as harmful or unsafe, and the line between satire and harm is not always clear.

To support consistency and understanding, the College and Students' Association may consider reviewing their procedures to ensure clearer communication about the distinction between venue use and institutional endorsement, as well as the legal and policy constraints governing external bookings. Developing a coordinated internal process for responding to concerns of this nature – one that considers freedom of expression, safety, equity impacts, and contractual obligations – may also help ensure careful and balanced decision-making when events involve competing values.

Miscellaneous Matters

Case Scenarios: When Fairness Is Viewed Differently

We sometimes meet with students (and their support people) who feel strongly that they have been treated unfairly. At times, it is clear that the argument presented has little likelihood of success – for example, when a student seeks exceptions to established policy, focuses narrowly on only one part of an academic requirement, assumes no responsibility for their own progress, or advances arguments that are not reasonably grounded. We have also observed an increasing self-focus where individual students perceive that their own particular interest or personal belief or preferences should be accommodated, without a clear basis or regard for the broader impact on the College community of which they are a member. In some cases, these students rely solely on their membership in the College community as the basis for their demand.

Although we are not always successful in helping students understand why their argument is unlikely to succeed, we still consider each interaction valuable. In many of these cases, students tell us that although they are disappointed, at least they felt heard.

The following scenarios may provide some insight:

Scenario 1:

An international student taking a scheduled break over the Winter semester recognized that her U-Pass was not active as she was not paying tuition. However, she discovered that a few classmates were similarly not registered, but (because these students had not yet been removed from the system) continued to be able to use their U-Pass. The student perceived that she was being treated unfairly by the College in comparison to her two friends – and could not accept the perspective that thousands of other students were similarly unable to use a U-Pass unless they were registered in a semester, or that the U-Pass policy was very clear about the period of effectiveness of a U-Pass.

Scenario 2:

A student in an AC Online misunderstood the assignment instructions and was therefore graded only on the portion completed correctly, which was not sufficient to earn a passing grade. The facilitator denied the student's request to resubmit, citing fairness to others who did not have a second opportunity to similarly improve their grades. Upon hearing that our Office focuses on fairness, the student sought our assistance in getting the assessment resubmitted, arguing that resubmission would not disadvantage others because they too could request the same opportunity, and it would be “on them” if they chose not to make the same request.

Scenario 3:

A student discovered upon arrival that their newly assigned locker was already occupied. Rather than notifying Parking Services, the student chose to simply use the adjacent unassigned locker. Approximately five weeks later, that adjacent locker was formally assigned to another student, who did notify Parking Services. Subsequently, Parking Services cut the first student's lock and advised that a \$25.00 fee would be required to retrieve their belongings. The student was upset, focusing on the initial reason he had used the unassigned locker and – without seeming to appreciate the irony – insisting that the College should only charge those who use lockers not assigned to them.

As in the scenarios above, some students interpret our inability to support their preferred outcome as a lack of assistance, even when our role has been to provide clarification, guidance, and an impartial assessment of the situation. When the fairness analysis does not support the remedy they seek, disappointment can understandably shape their perception of our involvement. Nevertheless, depending on the circumstances, our focus remains on helping our visitors understand the factors that inform the outcome, even when those factors do not align with the result they had hoped for.



Appreciation

The Office of the Ombudsman is continually encouraged by the ingenuity, goodwill, and collaboration demonstrated across the Algonquin College community as it works to overcome post-pandemic challenges and the ongoing impact on students. We also acknowledge that compounding these issues are new challenges; prominent among these are the increasing financial pressure of managing funding shortfalls while continuing to offer the quality of education for which Algonquin College is known, and the concerted efforts to harness the opportunities of the ever-expanding reach of artificial intelligence, while thoughtfully addressing its impact on conventional approaches to teaching and learning. We particularly appreciate and have the greatest respect for the fact that, in the face of all of this, the College's values of caring, learning, integrity and respect continue to provide guideposts for decision-making and direction.

The Office of the Ombudsman remains grateful for the support of the Ombudsman Review Committee (ORC). The current ORC members are: Vanshika Sharma – President, Algonquin Students' Association [Co-Chair]; Ben Bridgstock – Director, Student Support Services [Co-Chair]; Kylie Jardine – Director, Algonquin Students' Association; Phorcas Katto – Director, Algonquin Students' Association; Pauline Thomson – Director, Algonquin Students' Association; Ben Dinh – General Manager, Algonquin Students' Association; Jon Parker – Faculty Representative; Jennifer Lexmond – Academic Administrative Representative; Leo Comunale – Community Representative; and [Vacant] – formerly, Human Resources Representative.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the Algonquin College Leadership Team and the Algonquin Students' Association for recognizing our Office's unique role and supporting the confidential, impartial, and independent nature of our work.

Thank you to the students who entrusted us with their concerns; your engagement helps resolve individual matters and strengthens the College community. We are also grateful to the faculty, staff, the Students' Association, and others who worked with us patiently and professionally throughout the year. A special thank you to the AC Hub Team and Student Support Services for their ongoing support and creativity in preparing this report.

As we look ahead, we remain appreciative of the dedication and collaboration that continue to shape Algonquin College and the Algonquin Students' Association's collective commitment to student success.

Sincerely,

George Cole, Ombudsman.

Barbara Carswell, Assistant Ombudsman.

Carley Davidson, Ombudsman Officer (October 2024 - Present).

Marsha Walters, Ombudsman Officer (Interim to October 2024).



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