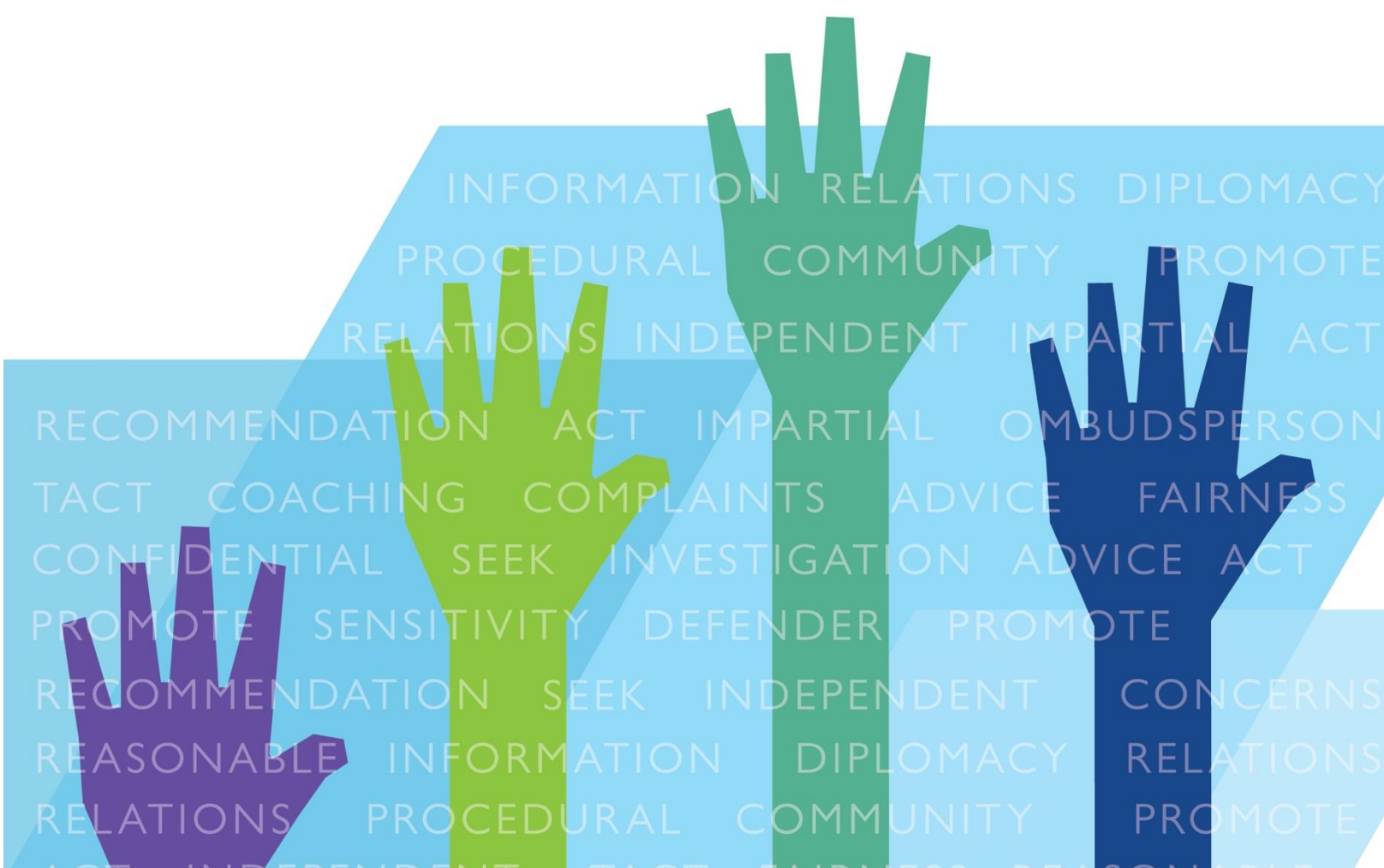




OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2018–19



OMBUDS OFFICE

July 22, 2019

Members of the Board of Governors
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montreal, QC
H3G 1M8

To the Board of Governors;

As per article 29 of the Terms of Reference of the Ombuds Office, I am pleased to submit the **2018-2019 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University**.

The purpose of this report is to provide you with:

- a description of the year's activities from May 1, 2018 to April 30, 2019;
- statistics illustrating our service to the community; and
- sample recommendations from this year.

I look forward to presenting this report to you in person.

Sincerely,

amy fish

Amy Fish, MHSc.

Ombudsperson

Concordia University / Université Concordia

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Ombuds Office Overview

Concordia University was one of the first Universities in Canada to establish an Ombuds Office. The office was founded in 1978, on the principles of impartiality, confidentiality, independence and accessibility.

The Ombuds Office reports directly to the Board of Governors to maintain its independent status.

The Ombudsperson is responsible for promoting fairness in the University.

This objective is achieved through:

- evaluating concerns and determining whether enquiry or investigation is needed;
- investigating where needed;
- de-escalating conflict between and among community members;
- coaching students and faculty regarding opportunity for improved communications where appropriate; and
- developing training workshops and materials for the University community with respect to resolving conflict related issues.

Ombuds Office 2018-2019

This year was stable in terms of staffing, budget and mandate.

File Volume Steady

This year, the Ombuds Office treated 466 files, as compared to 469 the previous year.

Very few of these files became formal or serious complaints.

Since 2013-2014, the Ombuds Office has treated approximately 500 files a year. Generally, the volume of Ombuds files is expected to be approximately 1% of the student population. When you consider that our office also accepts files from faculty and staff, our file volume is exactly what we would expect for a university the size of Concordia.

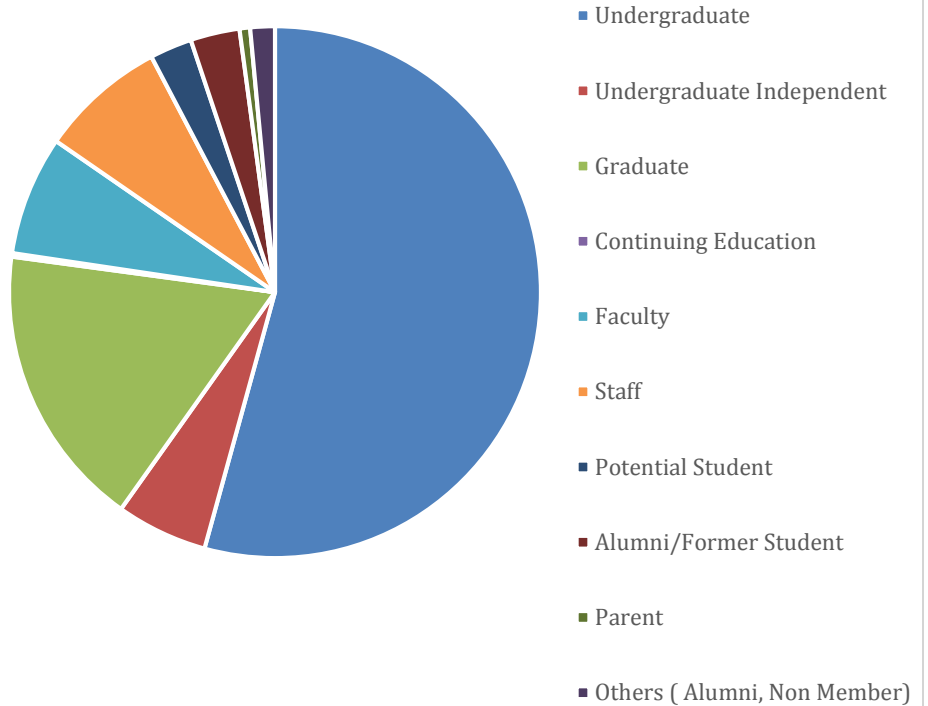
Participation in University Committees

In 2018-19, the Ombudsperson was able to sit on several university committees in an advisory capacity such as the Employee Assistance Program committee and a policy review committee. This role allowed the Ombuds Office to further the community outreach of the office.

Client Overview

466 concerns were brought to the Ombuds Office this year, 78% of which came from students. Please see Chart A, below for a breakdown.

Chart A: Percentage of Clients by Type



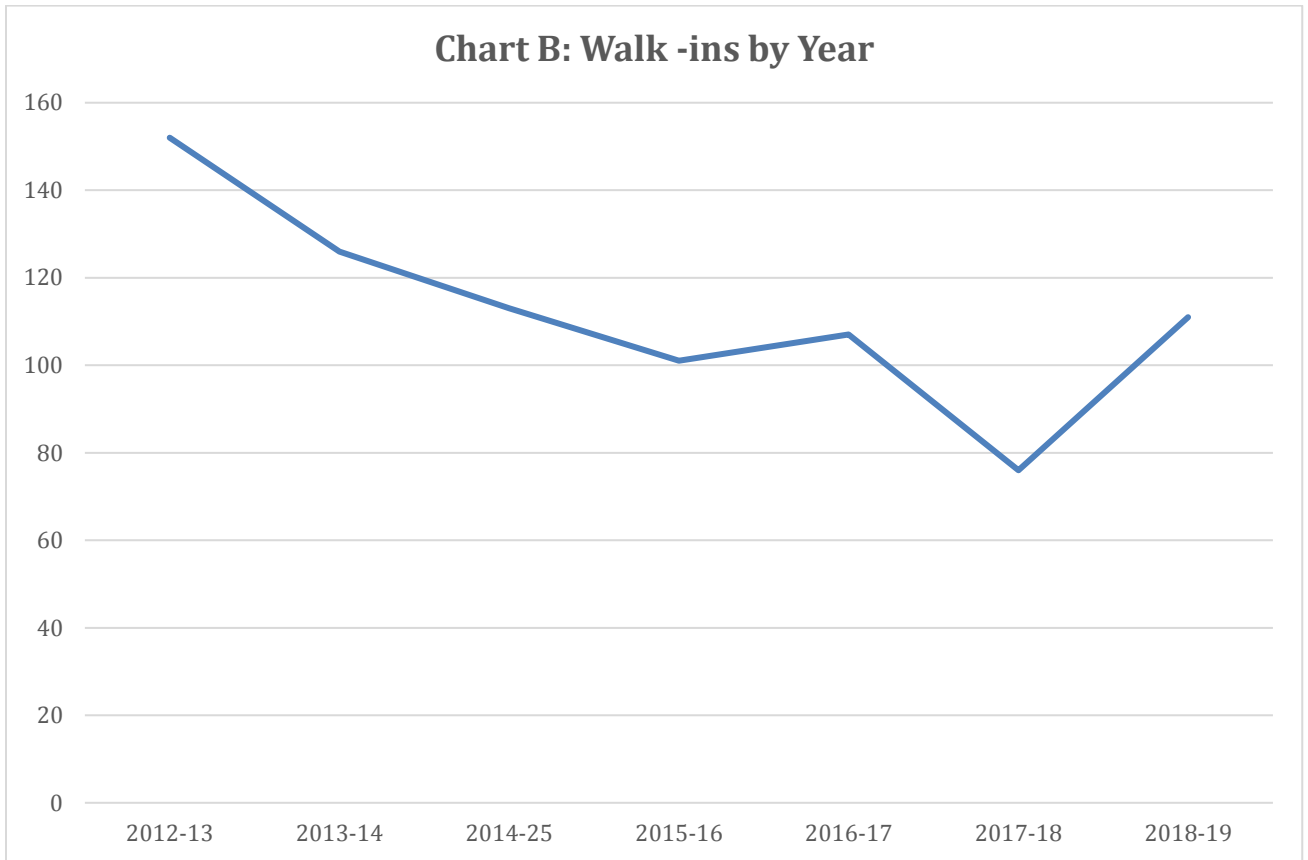
Overall:

- Very similar to previous years;
- 78% of the concerns were brought forward by students, an increase over 2% since last year;
- 15% came from faculty members or staff, also representing a 2% increase; and
- 6% came from other parties (e.g, alumni, potential students)

The 6% from “other” parties is 5% lower than last year, while the other categories have grown by 2% each. This is due to a change in the way files are categorized. For example, parents who come forward on behalf of students, with the student’s permission, used to be classified as “other”, but now these are classified under the student’s name.

Walk-ins

The Ombuds Office receives complaints and concerns through telephone calls, e-mails and walk-ins. Last year, we noticed a slight reduction in the number of walk-ins. This appears to be changing, as shown below, in Chart B:

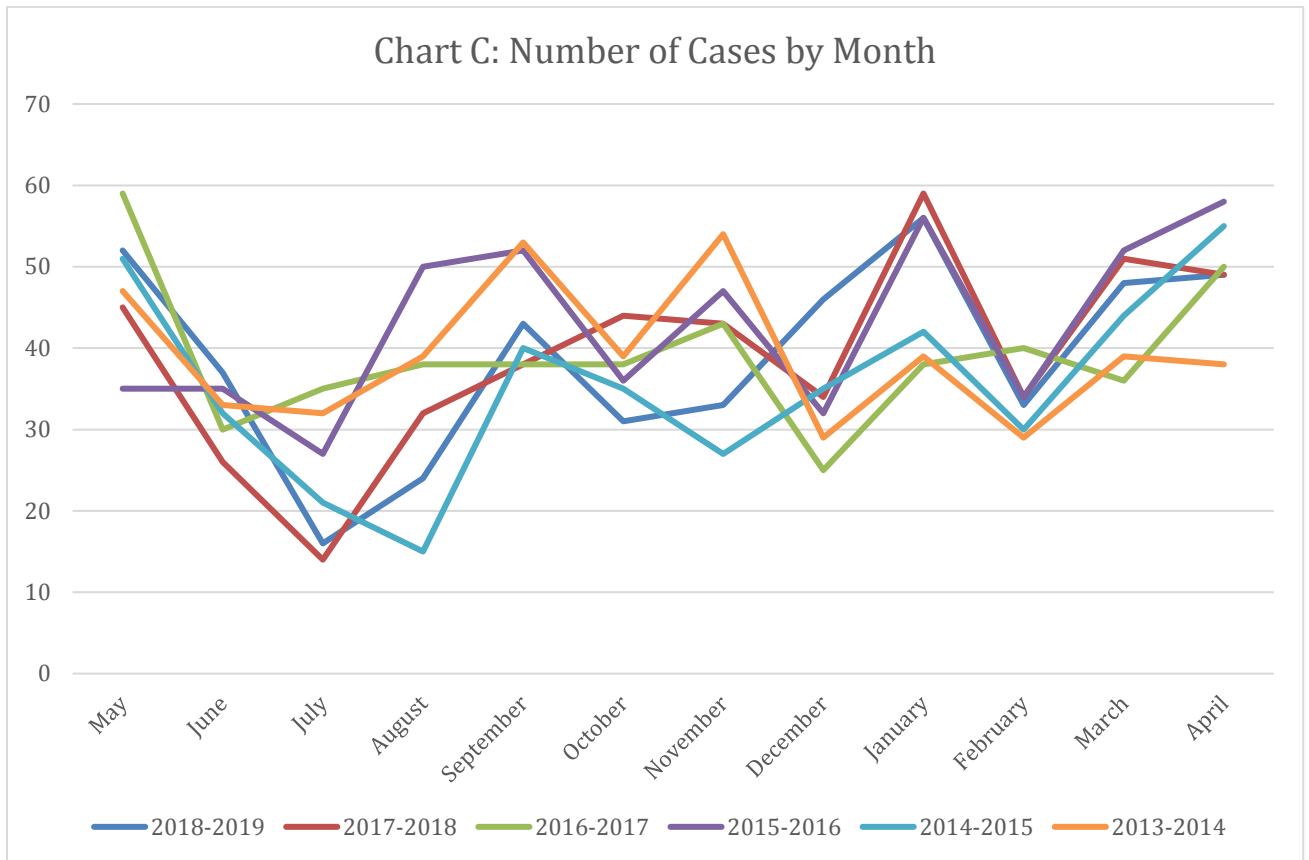


Last year, we saw fewer walk-ins than in previous years. However, this year, the number of walk-ins increased from 76 to 111 which is the highest since 2014-15. One of the objectives of the Ombuds Office is to be as accessible as possible. Increased walk in traffic is a good indication that the Ombuds Office is accessible.

Please note that we are referring to the first point of contact. Clients that walk in without an appointment are seen immediately whenever possible, or given a follow up meeting within the next few days. We regularly receive requests by phone and email and that volume has remained steady over the past six years.

Caseload per Month

Chart C, below, shows a month by month breakdown of our caseload for the past six years. As you can see, the busiest times are January, due to registration and Fall semester exam results. April and May are next due to exams, graduation and program degree requirements. June, July, August and December are consistently lower in volume.



Undergraduate Student Academic Concerns

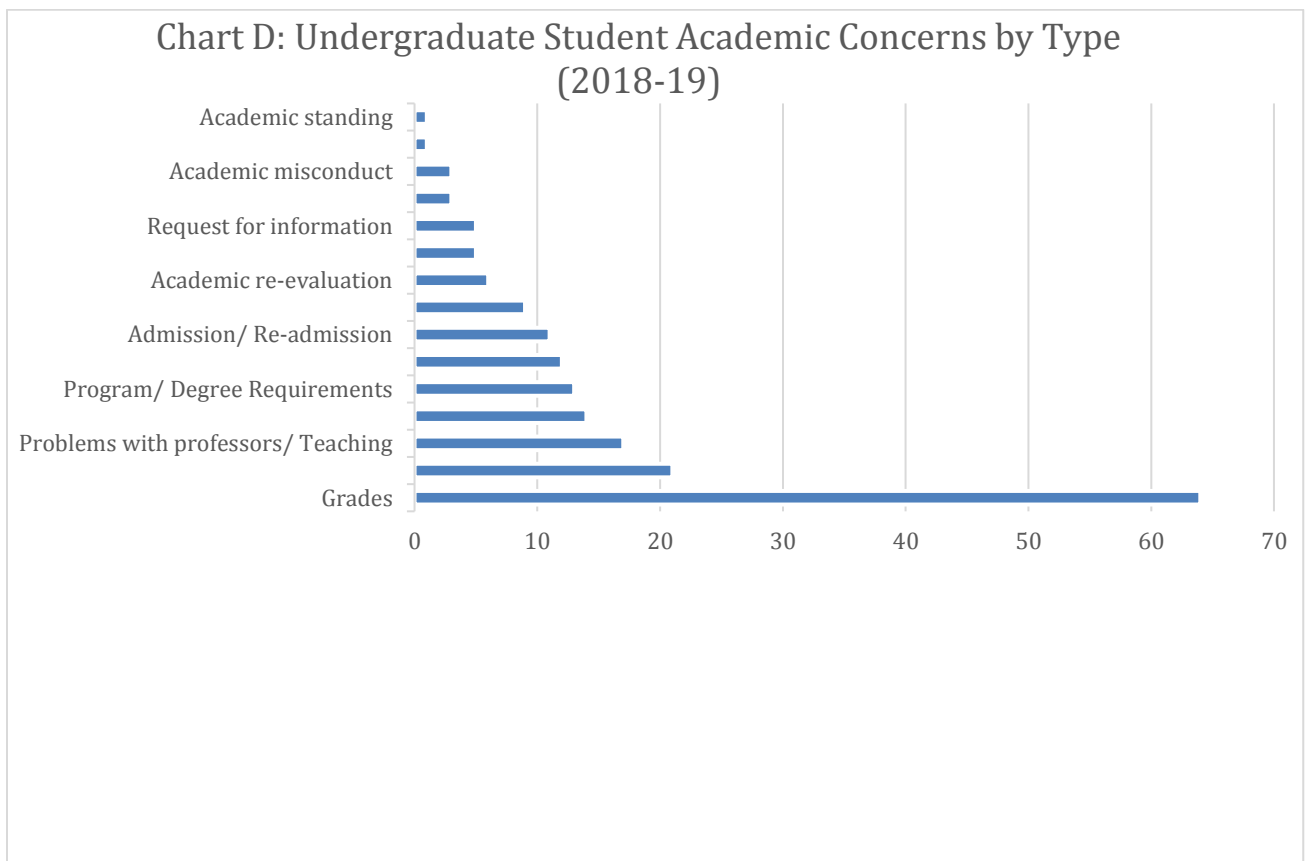
Students bring a wide variety of academic concerns to our office. There are a greater number of Undergraduate students than Graduate students at Concordia University, and it makes sense that they would represent a greater volume of files with a wider range of concerns. This is illustrated in the graphs below.

The vast majority of visits to our office relate to grades. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Students who need help getting graded exams or papers back from their Professors;
- Questions related to grade breakdowns that don't reflect the course outline;
- Conflicts regarding percentage grades and associated letters;
- Students who believe they were graded unfairly; and/or
- Requests for coaching regarding how to address grading issues with professors.

The next biggest category encompasses issues with registration and course selections such as:

- Student received conflicting advice regarding course selections;
- Required course is full;
- Required course given at a time/day that is impossible for student;
- Student registered for wrong course/incorrect section; and/or
- Student inadvertently missed deadline and needs to know options.

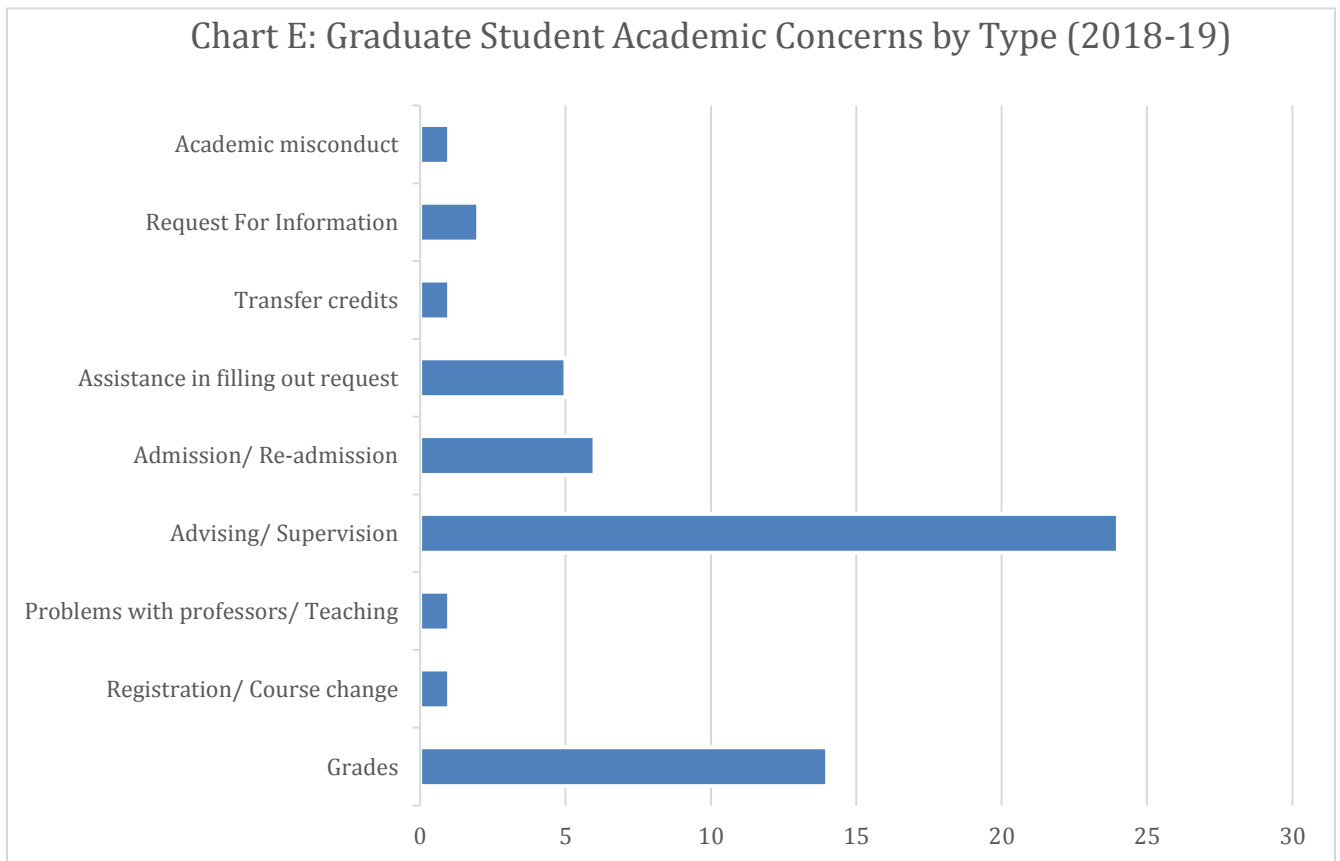


Graduate Student Academic Concerns

For Graduate students, the biggest concerns relate to advising and/or supervision. Some examples could be:

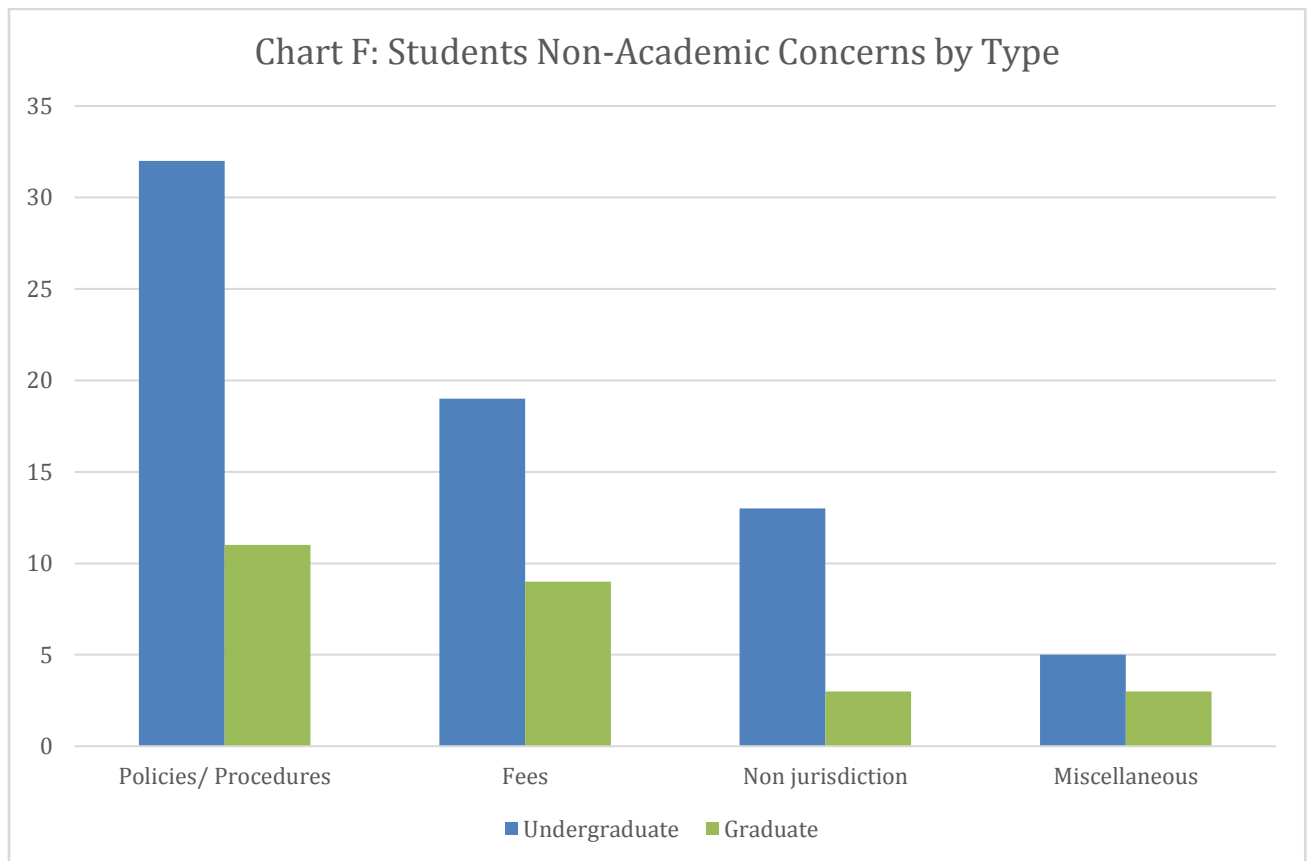
- Misunderstanding with supervisor regarding funding;
- Conflict with supervisor regarding research methodology or ethics;
- Varying expectations regarding time to completion for PhD;
- Disagreements regarding authorship or conference submissions; and/or
- General advice needed to improve communication.

Grades are second in the list, and these would be similar to the Undergraduate concerns listed previously.



Student Non-Academic Concerns

In addition to the academic concerns outlined, the Ombuds Office assists Undergraduate and Graduate students with Non-Academic concerns, as shown in Chart F, below.



As in previous years, the majority of non-academic concerns for both Undergraduate Students and Graduate Students relate to Policies and Procedures and Fees. Policy and Procedure questions might include the Academic Re-evaluation policy and how it applies to their particular situation. Students may also ask about how they can find policies that are not readily available online. In some cases, students come to our office for help in interpreting policies that may be specific to a particular department.

Fees are the second highest category of concerns. These are usually related to communication. For example, a student may be charged fees and not know why, or a student may be expecting a particular disbursement and would like to know when to expect it.

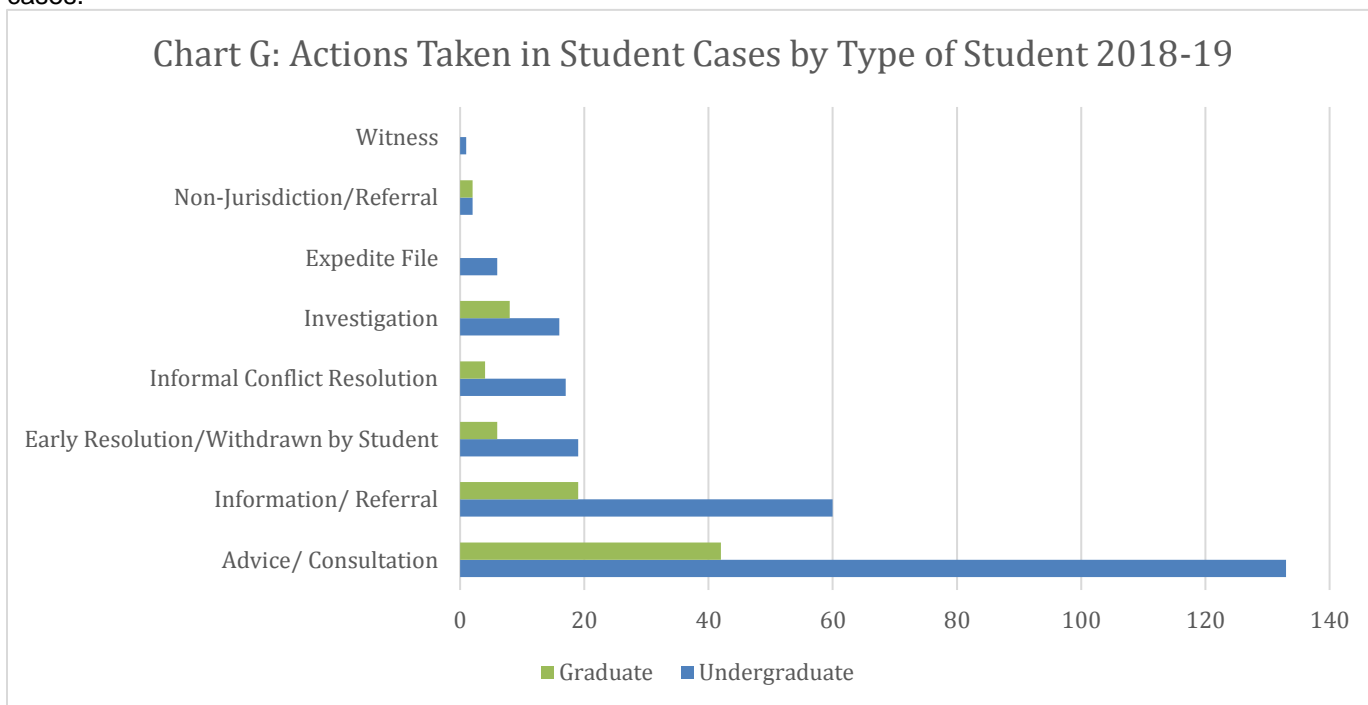
When we classify a concern as non-jurisdiction or referral, that's because we spoke with the community member, and based on our conversation, we decided the best option was to redirect the community member to the correct department. This could be issues with classroom temperature or noise level, conflicts within fee-levy groups on campus, or concerns that would be better addressed directly with the faculty or department in question.

Resolutions of Student Cases

The Ombuds Office has several techniques to assist students in resolving their concerns. For instance, we:

- Advise student and suggest next steps;
- Refer the student to a more appropriate resource;
- Offer additional information and/or coaching;
- Assist with informal conflict resolution such as mediation; or
- Provide additional follow up where possible.

Please see Chart G, below for the breakdown of actions taken in Undergraduate and Graduate cases.

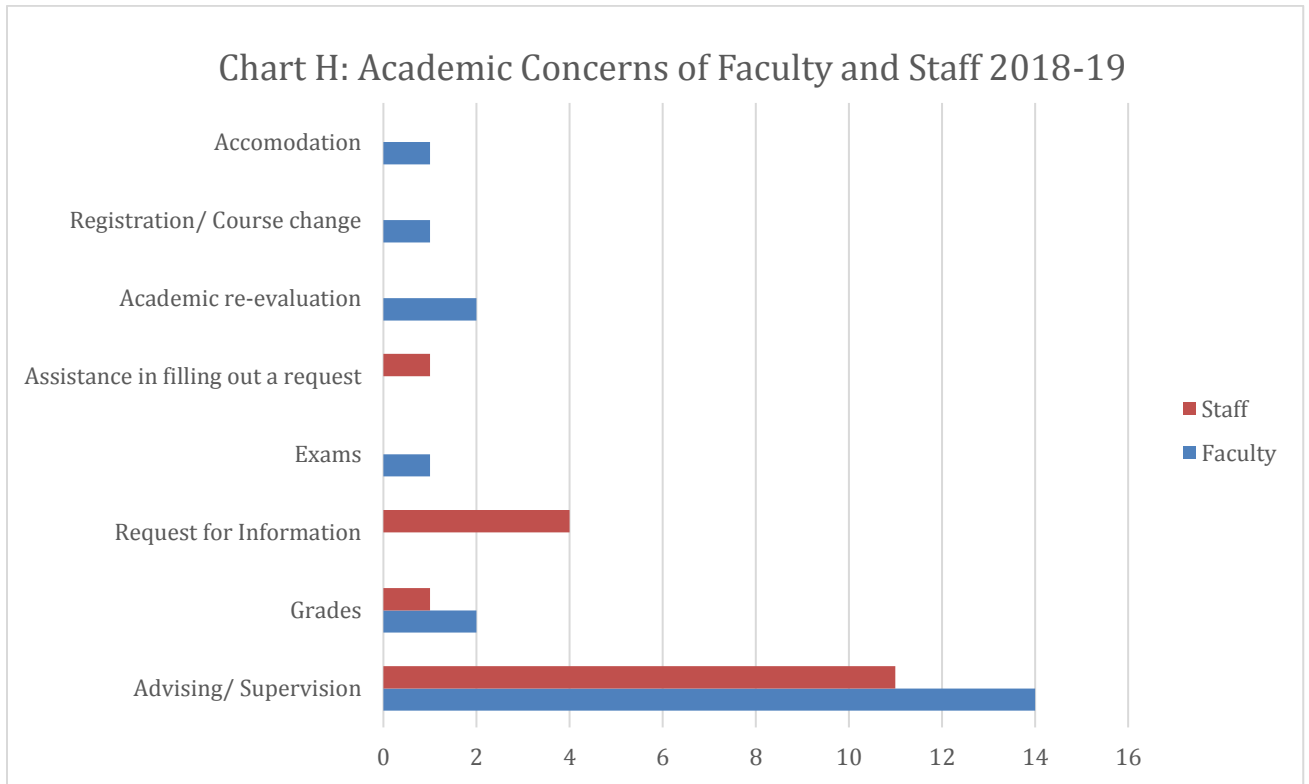


In 8% of cases, students resolve their concerns without our assistance and withdraw from the Ombuds Office before we have had a chance to offer our input. Sometimes they notify us of their decision, and in other cases, we understand from the lack of continued correspondence that the case has been withdrawn or resolved. This often occurs in situations when the student contacts many different offices at once, and another office is more appropriate for responding to this issue.

76% of the time, we respond with advice, consultation, information and/or referral. This means that we meet with the students involved and listen to their concerns and offer suggestions as to how to proceed. Sometimes, students will come back multiple times over the course of the semester and ask for advice as the issue progresses. Other times, this represents a one-time resolution.

When the Ombuds Office expedites a file, that means we follow up on a student's behalf and gently remind the person in question (faculty, department administration) that a response is required.

Faculty and Staff Concerns



Academic Concerns

We saw an increase in academic concerns from faculty and staff, from 31 last year to 42 this year. We believe that this is because we have been encouraging faculty members to contact the Ombuds Office for advice early in the process (i.e. before a problem arises). The Ombuds Office appreciates the opportunity to consult on issues such as advising, supervision and grades and we look forward to continuing to partner with faculty and staff in this capacity.

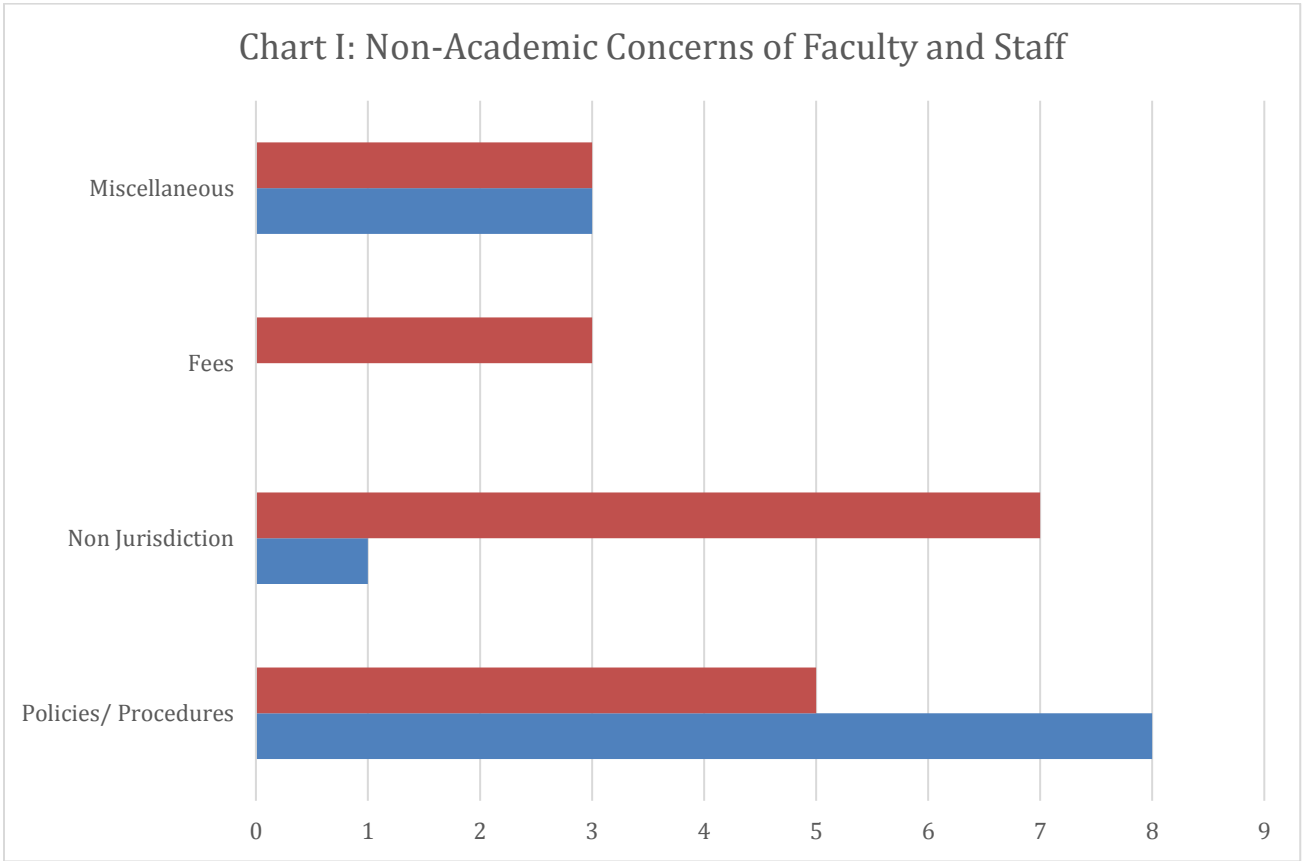
As you can see in Chart H, above, faculty and staff are both concerned with advising and supervision. Some examples of these concerns are: work completion, expectations regarding proposal requirements or coursework and/or challenges with communication.

Staff sometimes contact the Ombuds Office for information regarding their rights, or where to go for specific concerns. They may also have questions regarding how to fill out a request or how to help a student. Faculty seek assistance on a wider variety of issues such as exams, academic re-evaluations and/or accommodations for students with special needs.

Non-Academic Concerns

This year, there were 36 non-academic concerns brought to the Ombuds Office by Faculty and Staff as presented in Chart I, below.

Chart I: Non-Academic Concerns of Faculty and Staff



The majority of concerns relate to Policies and Procedures. These questions range from consulting our office regarding the fairness of a policy to requesting assistance in locating the latest version of a policy. Non-jurisdiction issues brought to our office by staff are mainly employment issues that were referred back to the department or human resources for assistance. Questions relating to fees might include advice about whether a student should be charged or whether a particular fee should be waived.

It is our goal to encourage faculty and staff to continue to consult with our office regarding concerns or challenging situations. Our intention is to continue to improve communication and to prevent the escalation of complaints at Concordia University.

Review of Prior Recommendations

No formal recommendations were made in 2018-19.

Examples of Assistance Provided for 2018-2019

Over the course of this year, the Ombuds Office has assisted many clients with their concerns. Some examples follow, with a few details changed to preserve confidentiality:

- In a particular department, undergraduate students are required to participate in lab work for extra credit, distributed across several courses. A student came to our office saying that she had completed the lab work, but accidentally assigned the hours to the wrong course. She said that she was not being given credit due to a computer glitch. Initially, this sounded unfair. However, an investigation showed that students are warned multiple times that they need to correctly assign credits. The faculty member involved explained that students often allocate their lab credits to the course where they will see the best possible increase in their grade. The course outline, Moodle and additional correspondence all warned against this practice. It was explained to the student that unfortunately there was nothing we could do in this case.
- A former student came to our office requesting that his name be removed from a Professor's website where he was listed as a former researcher. The professor refused to remove the name, at first, however once this was escalated to the Chair, the professor agreed.
- A staff member asked for our advice in dealing with a student who was dissatisfied with the shuttle bus service. The staff wanted to know whether we thought the student was treated fairly, and wanted to know the best way to handle the situation going forward. We referred the situation to the Office of Rights and Responsibilities.