Ombuds Office
Report 2025 - 2026

Carolyn Brendon, University Ombuds

OUR FOCUS IS **FAIRNESS**

Acknowledgement of Territory

The Ombuds Office acknowledges with gratitude and respect that we are situated on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations and within the lands protected by the "Dish with One spoon" wampum agreement.

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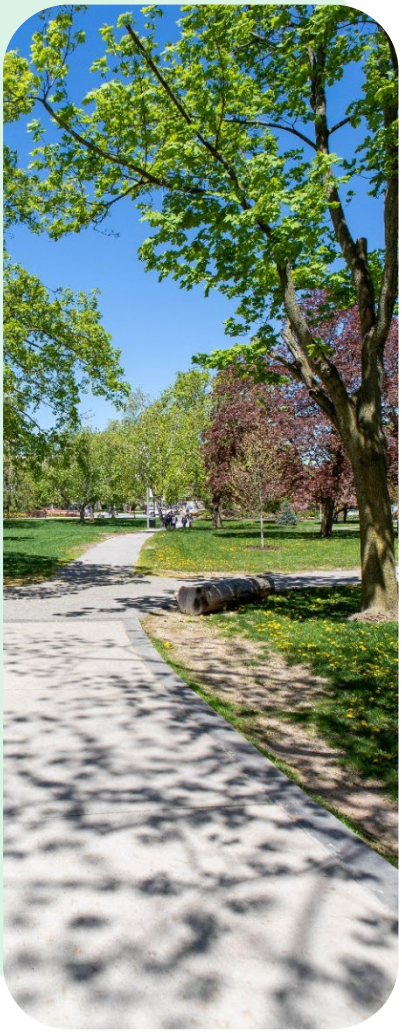

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For more information on the Ombuds Office please visit: www.ombuds.mcmaster.ca

From the Ombuds

It is my privilege to present this year's 2025-26 McMaster *Ombuds Office Annual Report* (the Report) covering work between May 1st, 2025, and April 30th, 2026.

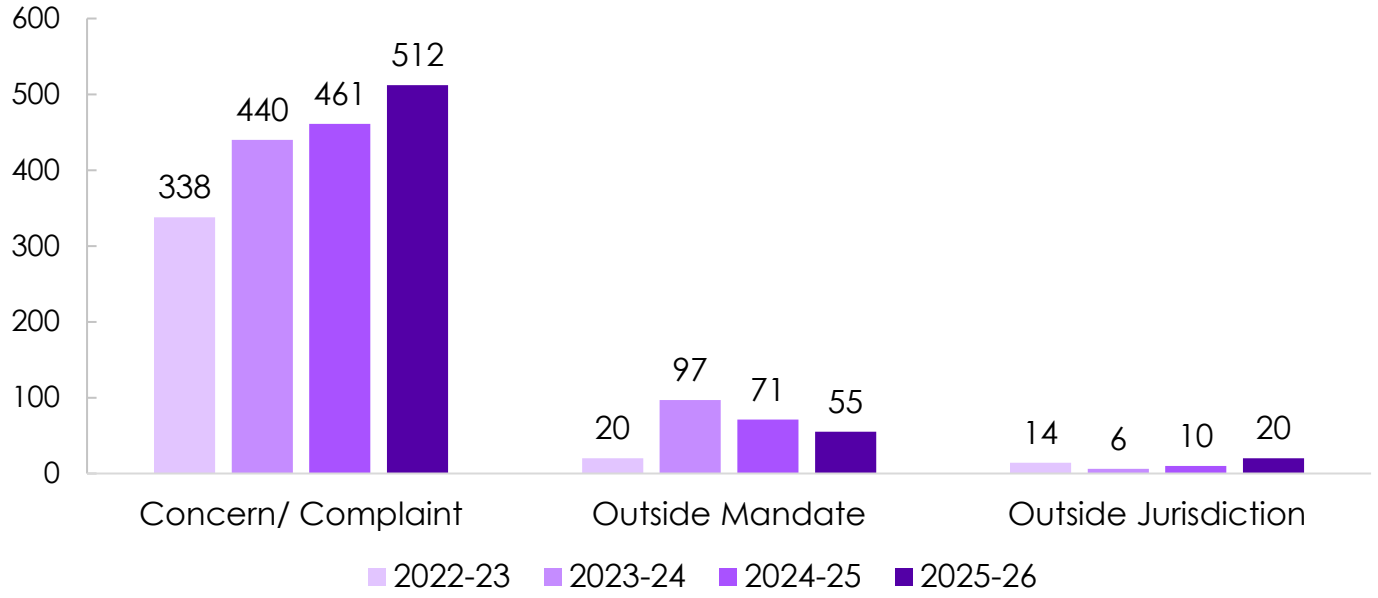
The Office serves as an independent, impartial, and confidential resource for members of the McMaster community seeking information, guidance, or assistance relating to policies, procedures, or decision-making. Guided by principles of independence, impartiality, confidentiality, the Office promotes administrative fairness and equity across the institution. Through listening, facilitating dialogue, clarifying options, and identifying systemic concerns, the Office supports the resolution of individual cases while fostering a culture of respect, accountability, and continuous improvement within the university community.

The Report contains statistics on the type of visitors, the nature of their concerns, and how the Office assisted them. Recognizing that numbers don't tell the whole story, the Report also includes key observations, emerging trends and case stories that reflect the experiences of those seeking assistance and how the Office helped. In addition, the Report includes recommendations aimed at improving the clarity, consistency, and accessibility of student-facing policies, thereby increasing the likelihood of fair and equitable treatment of students and supporting decision-making grounded in the principles of administrative fairness.

This year, the Office received 587 Requests for Assistance (RFAs), continuing a trend of successive year-over-year increases over the past several years. The increase this year can be seen predominantly in the number of undergraduate students approaching the Office regarding issues such as grading practices, academic integrity, course management, academic accommodation of students with disabilities, and financial matters. Still, the number of RFAs from students represents a relatively small percentage of the overall number of students studying at McMaster.

Requests for Assistance

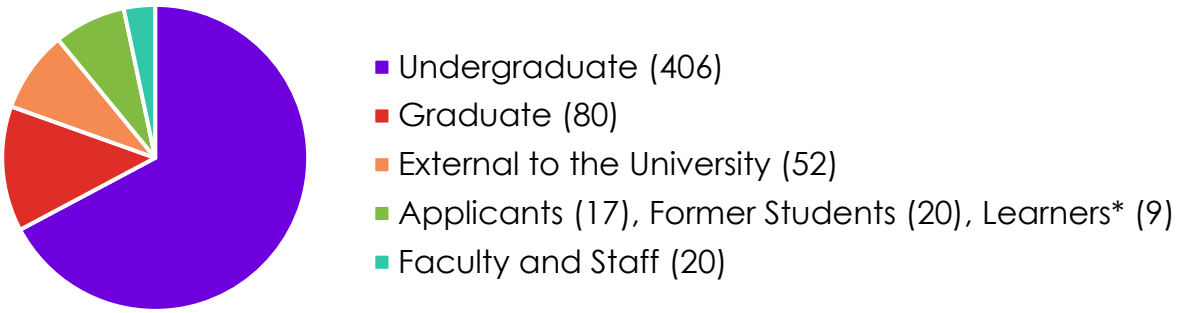
We classify RFAs into three groups. The category "Concern/Complaint" refers to student-related RFAs that come from those within the McMaster community. The other two categories, "Outside Mandate" and "Outside Jurisdiction", refer to matters that exceed the scope of the Office according to its Terms of Reference. The category "Outside Mandate" refers to RFAs that are either from those outside the McMaster community and are student-related, or from McMaster community members that are unrelated to students. The category "Outside Jurisdiction" refers to RFAs that have no connection to the university.



Previous Ombuds Office Annual Reports can be found at ombuds.mcmaster.ca

Who Contacted the Office

RFAs were brought forward by students, former students, applicants, learners, faculty, staff, and those outside the McMaster community as shown in the chart below. The number of individuals requesting assistance (604) was slightly higher than the number of RFAs (587) because some RFAs were brought forward by more than one individual.



** A Learner is an individual recorded by a faculty office, the Inspire Office, MCE, or a department as enrolled in a Non-Academic Credential, as per the Certificate, Diplomas and Microcredentials Policy.*

Key Observations, Emerging Trends, and Illustrative Case Stories

Over the past year, the Office has identified five areas of focus that convey themes we are seeing in our casework, particularly those related to academic assessments, academic misconduct, accommodation requests, procedural barriers, and policy clarification.

Academic Assessments

Academic assessments are a significant part of the university experience as grades play an important role in a student's academic progression and future opportunities. Consequently, concerns regarding the fairness of assessments and grades received are among the most frequent RFAs from current students. Although some concerns relate to an instructor's academic judgment, others may focus on unfair evaluation methods, inaccurate grade calculations, lack of feedback, and deviations from the course syllabus. Such issues can affect a student's understanding of how their performance was evaluated and may contribute to the perception of unfairness.

Although primarily serving as administrative frameworks for instructors, the Undergraduate Course Management Policy and the Graduate Course Management Policy (the Policies) are directly relevant to many grading-related concerns raised by students. Among other things, the Policies require that instructors provide information in their course syllabi for students on how their performance will be evaluated, including the calculation of final grades, the types of assessments that will be used, the relative weight of each assessment, and the schedule or due date for each assessment.

By ensuring that assessment information is communicated clearly at the beginning of the course, the Policies seek to reduce misunderstandings and provide students with a transparent basis for evaluating the fairness and accuracy of their final grades.

In previous reports, I made recommendations for improvements to the Undergraduate Course Management Policy (the Policy) regarding other common grading issues not currently addressed by the Policy. These included situations where:

- A passing grade in a course is not based on a student's final course average, but on an additional requirement of having to pass a particular component of the course. This component is often an exam, but in some cases, students are required to pass a low-value or discretionary component such as a reflection paper or a tutorial to pass the course;
- A final grade for a course is released but students are not given the grades for all components of the course used in the calculation. In these scenarios, students cannot check the math to ensure the accuracy of their grade. Further, knowing the grade for each component of a course is necessary for a student to be able to request a reassessment of a piece of work under the Re-Read Procedures of the Student Appeal Procedures;
- Student work is evaluated using generative AI without sufficient protections, including safeguards to ensure accuracy and mitigate bias, transparency about privacy and ownership protections, and meaningful opportunities for students to opt out of generative AI-based assessments.

I am pleased to report that the university has established an *ad hoc* committee to review and recommend revisions to the *Policy*. As part of its terms of reference, the committee will consider the recommendations for policy revisions outlined in the 2022-2023, 2023-2024, and 2024-2025 Ombuds Reports. In my role as Ombuds, I serve on the committee as a non-voting consultant.

"I truly appreciate your efforts and support… Regardless of the outcome, I'm sincerely grateful for your time, attention, and dedication."

– Graduate Student

Academic Integrity

"Procedural fairness requires that students be informed of the concerns regarding their work, provided with a meaningful opportunity to respond, and advised of their right to appeal… "

I have become aware of instances in which instructors have responded to suspected unauthorized use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in student assignments in ways that are inconsistent with the Academic Integrity Policy (the Policy), particularly the provisions requiring procedural fairness for students and the reporting of adverse findings to the Academic Integrity Office.

Procedural fairness requires that students be informed of the concerns regarding their work, provided with a meaningful opportunity to respond, and advised of their right to appeal a decision that they have violated the Policy; however, some instructors are reducing assignment grades without providing these procedural safeguards. In certain cases, students became aware that a grade reduction had been imposed as a penalty for suspected generative AI use only after contacting the instructor to discuss their grade.

In addition to disregarding the procedural protections afforded to students, some instructors are also failing to comply with the Policy's reporting requirements. As a result, data reported by the Academic Integrity Office may understate the actual incidence of academic misconduct within the university. The underreporting obscures the extent of the issue and reduces the likelihood that it will receive the attention, oversight, and resources necessary to address it effectively.

"We really appreciate the time and support you both gave us throughout this process. Your guidance, insights, and help in communicating our perspective made a significant difference. Since this was our first time navigating something like this, your leadership meant a lot to us, and we're very grateful. Thank you again for everything."

– Undergraduate Students

Accommodation Requests

The number of students reporting disabilities and making accommodation requests to the university has increased in recent years, likely due to the rise in mental health awareness and the decrease in stigmatization. To ensure equitable treatment for students with disabilities, the university has a duty to provide reasonable academic accommodation subject to certain limitations.

Requests for retroactive accommodation can be particularly challenging to assess. Because they are made months, and sometimes years, after a forward-looking accommodation could have been implemented, they frequently require extensive medical or other supporting documentation. They may also involve complex considerations such as the reasons for the delayed request, the level of participation in a course, the nature of the requested remedy, and administrative feasibility.

Unlike the more general *Petitions for Special Consideration* which allow faculties to grant exceptions to academic regulations based on a student's compelling medical or personal circumstances, disability-related requests are addressed under the Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities Policy. This distinction reflects the specialized knowledge and expertise required to assess disability-related accommodation needs within the academic environment.

The university's Undergraduate and Graduate Calendars state:

> "Requests related to temporary or permanent disabilities, or for retroactive accommodations related to a disability, are excluded from petitions and must be processed under the *Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities* Policy."

Despite established policies, administrators occasionally misdirect students toward the *Petition for Special Consideration* process for disability-related accommodations, particularly retroactive requests. This advice is inconsistent with the established policy framework and may result in inequitable outcomes by directing disability-related requests through a process that is expressly excluded from considering them.

Procedural Gatekeeping

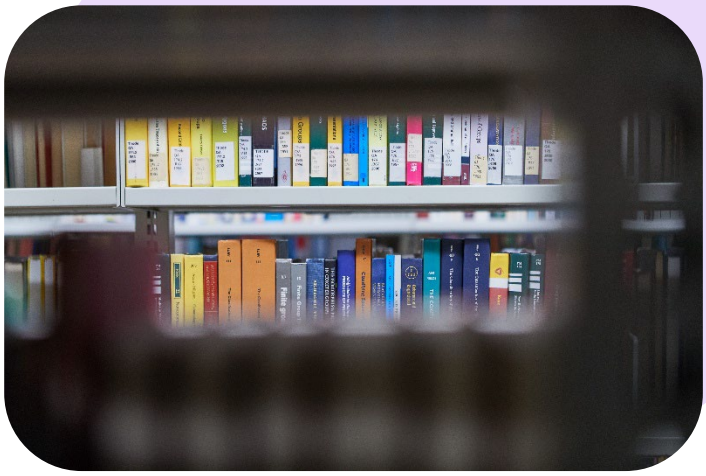
> "Administrators should not act as gatekeepers for processes that are available to students under university policies."

In a recent case, a student was required to use a faculty-specific form to request a *Petition for Special Consideration* (Petition). To obtain this form, however, the student first had to discuss the matter with an academic advisor who ultimately refused to provide the form necessary to initiate the process.

Administrators should not act as gatekeepers for processes that are available to students under university policies. In the 2022-23 Ombuds Report, I recommended that all forms necessary to access university processes be made directly available to students without requiring them to request forms from an administrator and being denied access without justification.

Following the advisor's refusal, the student was unable to pursue the Petition process and subsequently sought assistance from the Ombuds Office. After the Office's intervention, the Petition form was provided to the student; however, the student felt that the unnecessary delay reduced the likelihood of their petition being approved.

Since then, the faculty has made the Petition form available for download on its website, reducing the likelihood that other students will face the same barrier.



Policy Proliferation

Good governance requires that new or amended student-facing academic policies follow an established review process, including consideration by appropriate university governance bodies and final approval by Senate. This process helps ensure consistency, transparency and equitable application across the institution. Yet I have identified several faculty-specific and context-specific policies that do not appear to have undergone this approval process. Their existence creates the potential for inconsistency, confusion, and unequal treatment of students.

In one recent case, a student reported having reviewed and followed the Student Appeal Procedures regarding a request for the regrading of an assignment. After submitting the appropriate form, the student was informed by the faculty office that students within their faculty were expected to follow a separate faculty-specific policy.

Although the faculty policy was largely consistent with the university's procedures, it included an additional procedural step that increased what the student already perceived to be a burdensome process. The existence of both university and faculty policies created confusion regarding which process governed the student's request and suggests different standards apply depending on a student's faculty.

Upon review, I recommended that the faculty-specific policy be removed from the faculty website and replaced with the university's senate-approved procedures. Alternatively, if the faculty wished to maintain a separate policy, I recommended that it be submitted through the appropriate governance and approval process to ensure its authority and consistency with university-wide procedures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

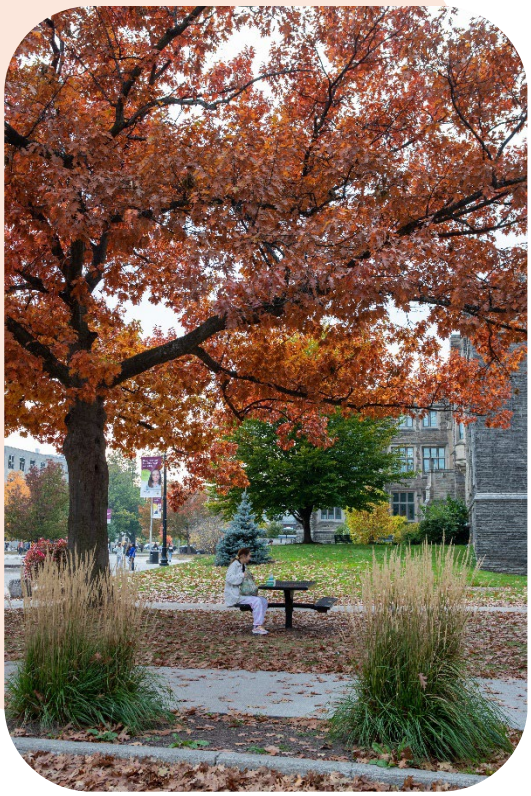
To improve clarity, consistency, and accessibility across student-facing policies increasing the likelihood of fair treatment for students, I recommend the following:

That, because policies establish standards that reflect the university's principles, goals, and values, all policies that affect students' rights, regardless of whether their application is limited to specific faculties or contexts, be subject to Senate-approval;

That, to increase transparency and accessibility, the university maintain a single, centralized repository containing all policies that affect students' rights regardless of whether those policies apply to all students or only to those within certain faculties or contexts;

That, to maintain a cohesive and navigable policy framework, all student-facing university policies indicate the authority responsible for determining the appropriate policy or process for a matter where multiple pathways exist or where policies conflict, overlap, or otherwise create uncertainty.

Why Visitors Contacted the Office



Visitors contacted the Office for confidential, independent, and impartial advice on a range of challenges including navigating administrative processes, interpreting complex policies, resolving disputes with instructors, and addressing concerns about perceived unfairness. Because an RFA may involve multiple concerns, the total number of issues is higher than the number of RFAs received.

RFAs brought by current students accounted for most of the issues identified (824) and are divided into four categories: undergraduate academic, undergraduate non-academic, graduate academic and graduate non-academic concerns.

The issue types for all visitors are presented in charts and tables below.

Undergraduate Students

A total of 664 academic and non-academic issues were identified in connection with RFAs from undergraduate students.

Academic (504)	Non-Academic (160)

"I wanted to sincerely thank you for taking the time to meet with me… I really appreciated the opportunity to share my perspective, and it meant a lot that you were willing to listen and engage thoughtfully with my concerns. I am grateful for your time, understanding, and the supportive space you provided during our conversation. Thank you again, and I truly appreciate your help."

– Undergraduate Student

"I wanted to thank you for supporting me today…"

- Undergraduate Student

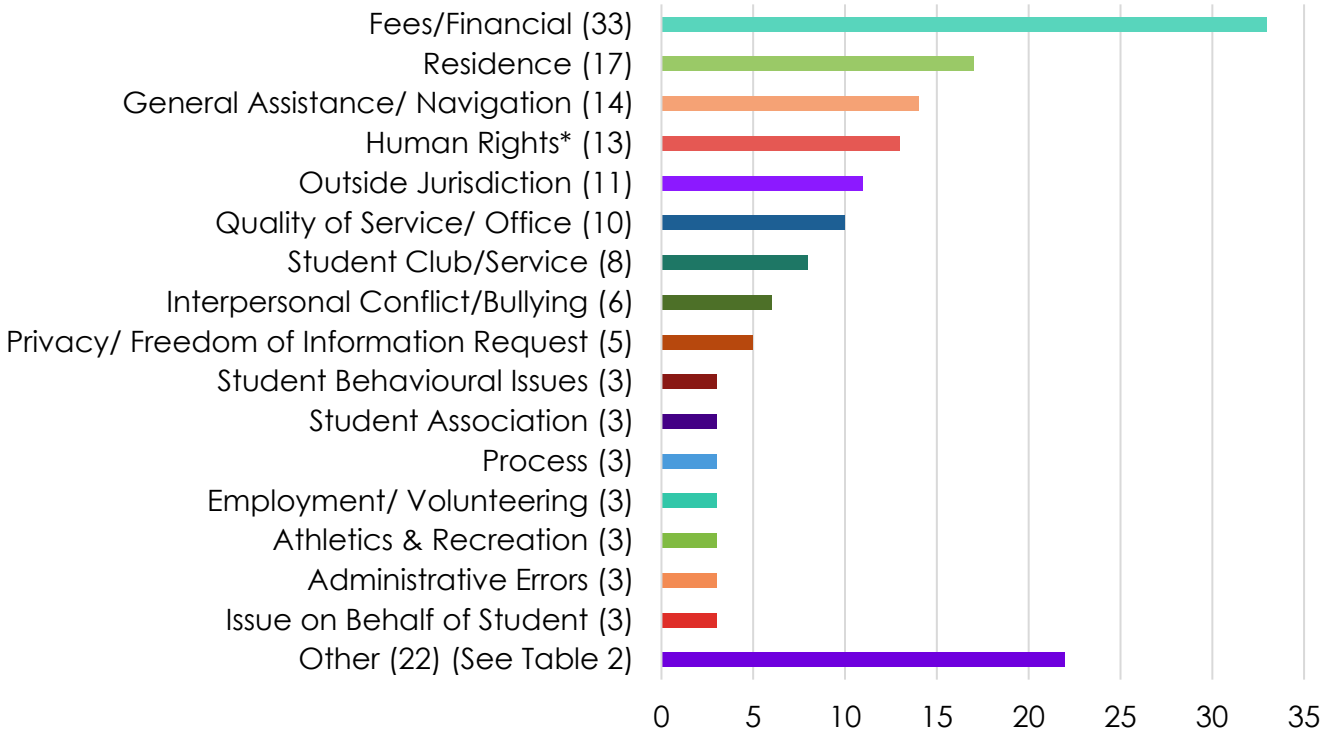
Undergraduate Academic Issues

- Grade/Evaluation (75)
- Accommodation (61)
- Academic Integrity (60)
- Course Management (54)
- Petitions/MSAF*/Late Withdrawal (36)
- Appeals (35)
- Process (25)
- Behaviour of Instructor/ Teaching Assistant (23)
- Course Enrolment and Withdrawal (15)
- Administrative Errors/ Quality of Service/ Bureaucracy (15)
- Human Rights** (13)
- Program Management (11)
- Technological Issue/ Barrier (10)
- Application of Policy/Regulation (9)
- Co-op/Placement/ Internship (9)
- Examination (9)
- Withdrawal/Reinstatement (7)
- Other (43) (See Table 1)

** MSAF refers to the "Missed Student Absence Form."*
*** This category includes matters related to discrimination, including code-based harassment and sexual or gender-based violence.*

TABLE 1: Other Academic Issues		
Academic Advising	Admission	Student Behaviour
General Assistance/ Navigation	Freedom of Expression	Thesis/Supervision
Fairness/Equity of Policy/Regulation	Leave of Absence	Program/Degree Requirements
Reprisal/ Retaliation	Professionalism Policies	Quality of Instruction
Transcript/Records	Privacy/ Freedom of Information Request	

Undergraduate Non-Academic Issues



** This category includes matters related to discrimination, including code-based harassment and sexual or gender-based violence.*

TABLE 2: Other Non-Academic Issues		
Appeals	Accommodation	Application of Policy/Regulation
Concern about University Member	Outside Mandate	Transcripts/Records
Withdrawn	Technological Barrier/ Issue	

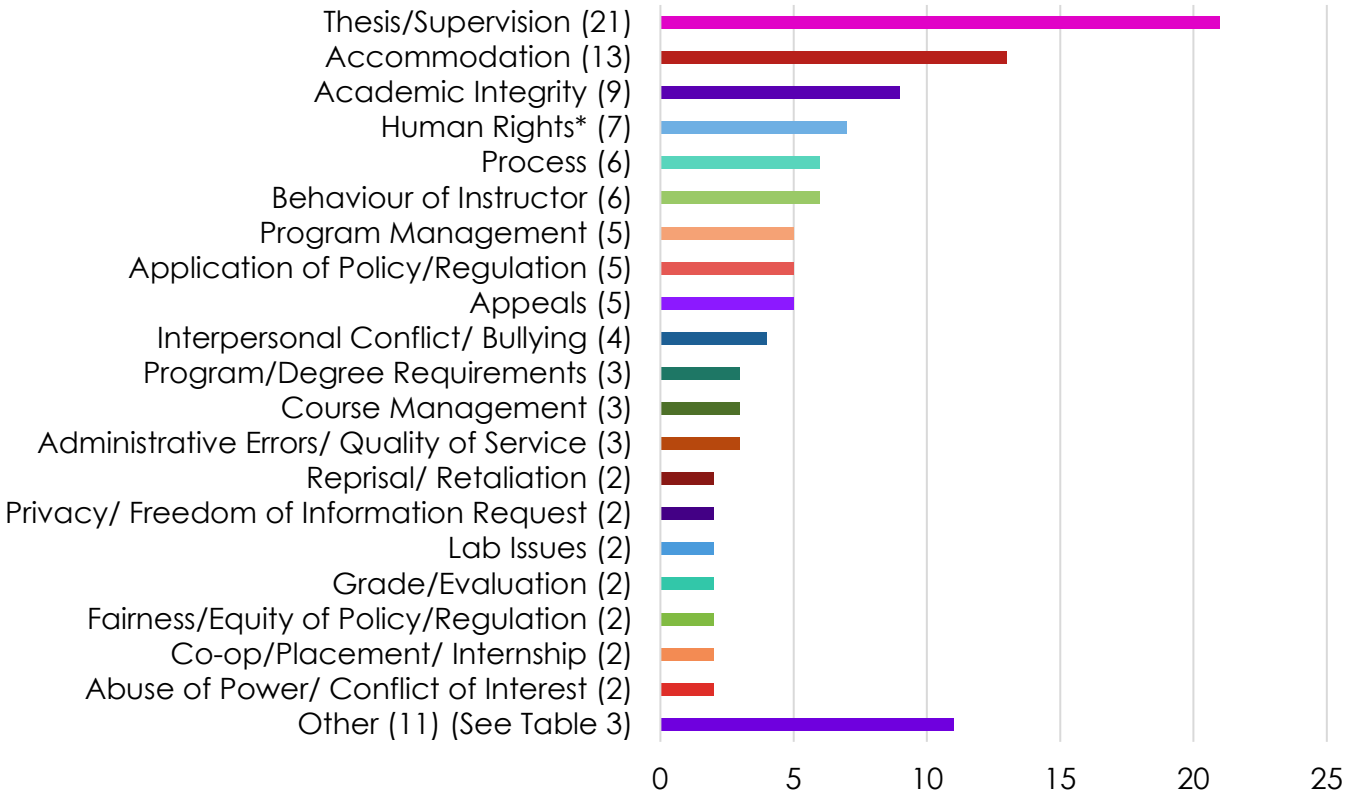
Graduate Students

A total of 160 academic and non-academic issues were identified in connection with RFAs from graduate students.

Academic (115)	Non-Academic (45)

> "I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your support and guidance during this very difficult time for me. I truly appreciate it."
>
> - Graduate Student

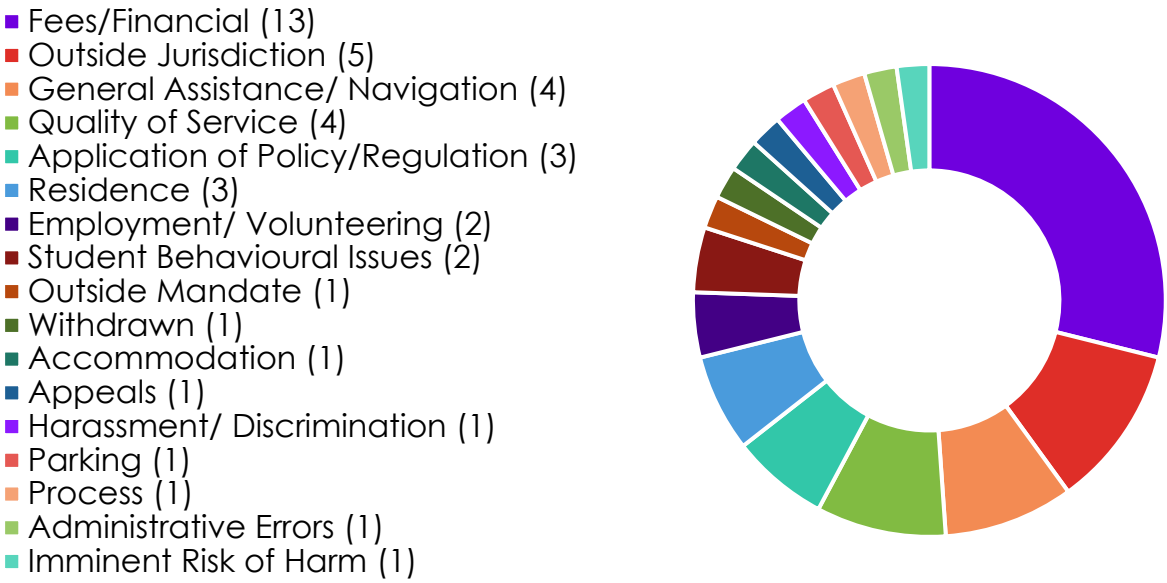
Graduate Academic Issues



** This category includes matters related to discrimination, including code-based harassment and sexual or gender-based violence.*

TABLE 3: Other Academic Issues		
Academic Advising	Petitions/MSAF/LW	Transcript/Records
Admission	Professionalism Policies	Withdrawal/Reinstatement
Leave of Absence	Research Integrity	Ownership/ Authorship
General Assistance/ Navigation		

Graduate Non-Academic Issues

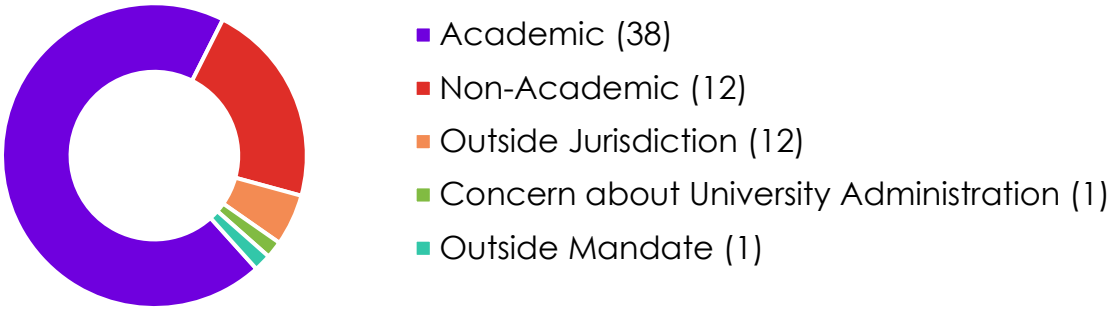


"I wanted to sincerely thank you both for all your help in this process. It was one of the toughest paths I've had to navigate in my life, but you both were very responsive, helpful, and provided me with amazing advice. I do not believe that I would have navigated the situation nearly the same without your guidance. Sincerely, thank you so much for all of the help."

- Graduate Student

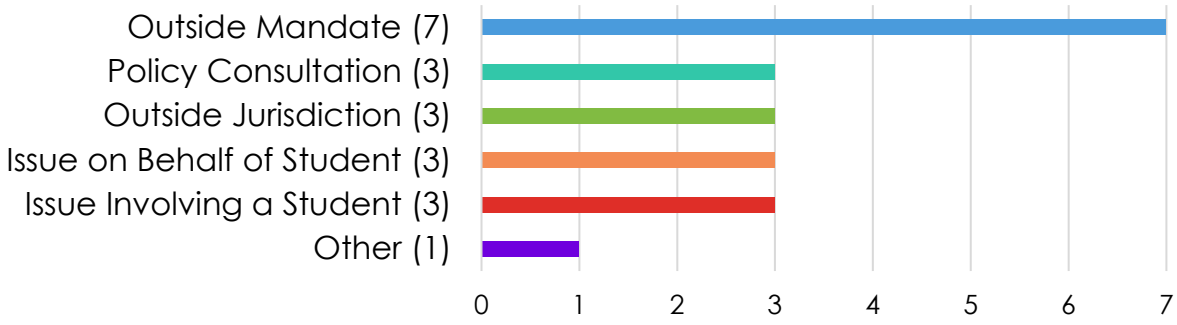
Applicants, Former Students, Learners

Given the relatively small number of RFAs from applicants, former students, and learners respectively, these visitors are reported together. RFAs brought by visitors in this category raised a variety of concerns comprising a total of 55 issues.



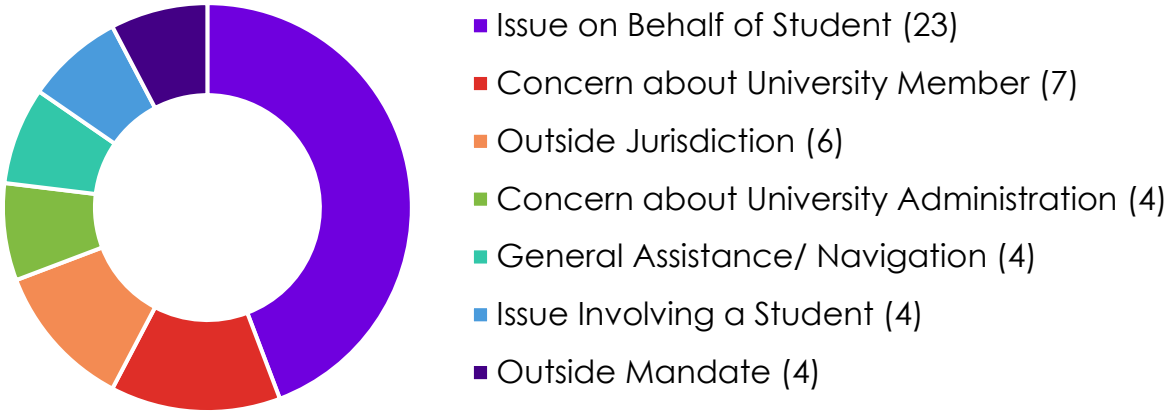
Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff contacted the Office regarding 21 issues, many related to policy matters or situations involving a student. For RFAs unrelated to students, visitors were informed about other university resources or offices to address the matter as appropriate.



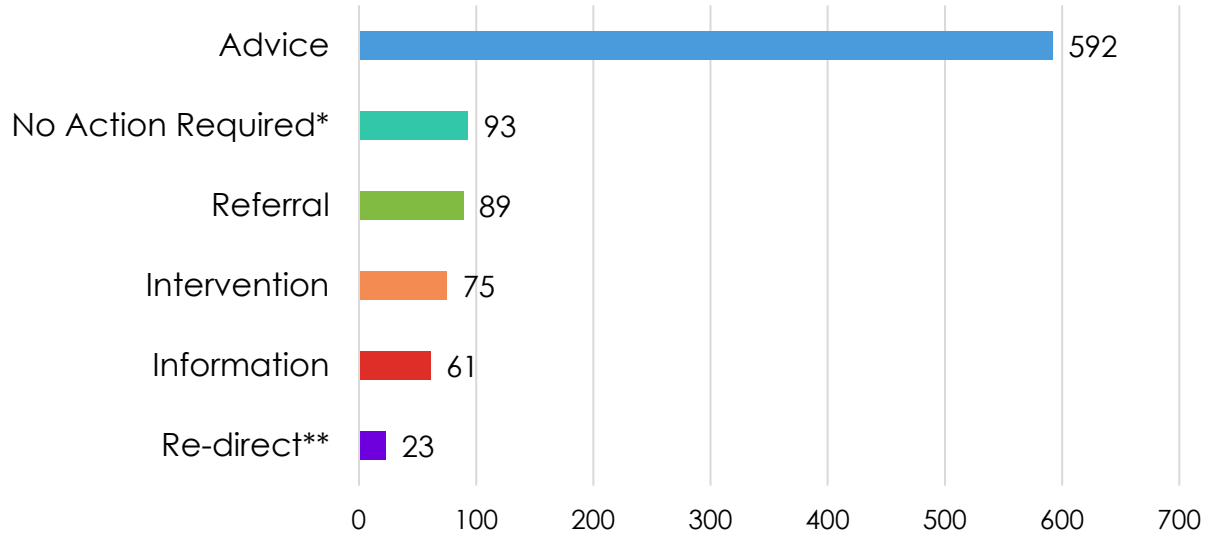
External to the University

RFAs from external visitors to the university were primarily received from parents of current students. The Ontario Ombudsman's Office also contacted the Office.



How we Helped

The chart below illustrates the actions taken by the Office in response to the 933 issues identified across all RFAs.



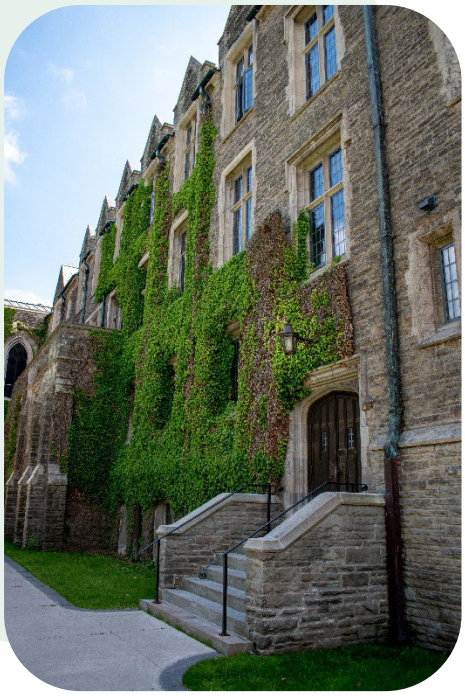
** The category, "no action required," refers to situations where the matter is withdrawn, outside the mandate or jurisdiction, or there is another more appropriate office to address the matter.*

*** The category, "re-direct," refers to instances where we provide information about resources outside the university.*

Information, Referrals, and Advice

In many cases, the Office provides Information about university policies and practices and refers individuals to the appropriate university office, administrator, or instructor for further assistance.

In the vast majority of RFAs, the Office provides advice. This category encompasses a broad range of activities, including:



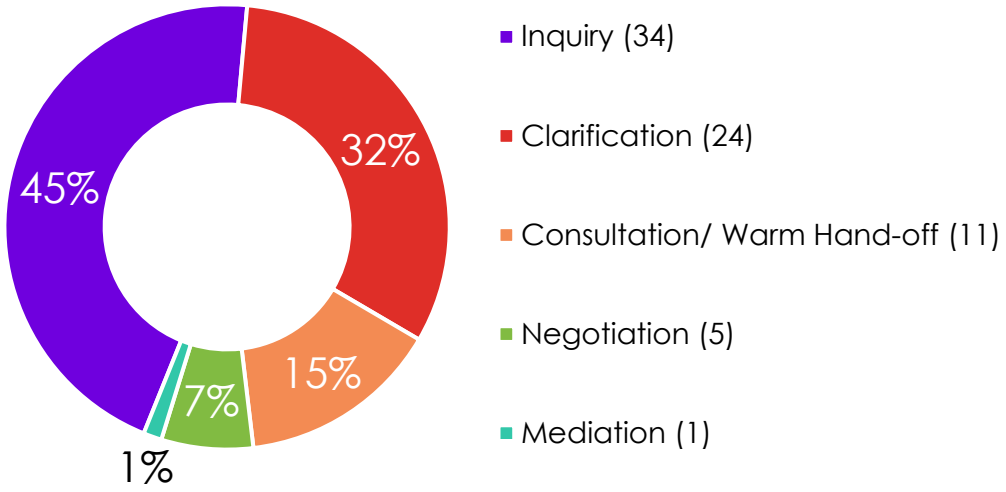
- Listening to visitors in a respectful, impartial, and non-judgmental way;
- Assessing how visitors are coping with their situations and referring them to support services when appropriate;
- Identifying and analyzing possible fairness issues, as well as determining the applicability of relevant policies and procedures to a visitor's circumstances;
- Assisting visitors in generating, evaluating, and selecting options for resolving a matter;
- Identifying and explaining both informal pathways and formal procedures for addressing concerns;
- Coaching visitors on how to communicate effectively with instructors, supervisors, administrators, or other decision-maker, and reviewing communications as appropriate.

In complex cases, particularly those involving disciplinary matters, appeal processes, or supervisory-relationship concerns, assistance may require multiple meetings and on-going communications, sometimes over a period of several months.

> "I wanted to sincerely thank you for taking the time to meet with me… I really appreciated the opportunity to share my perspective, and it meant a lot that you were willing to listen and engage thoughtfully with my concerns. I am grateful for your time, understanding, and the supportive space you provided during our conversation. Thank you again, and I truly appreciate your help."
>
> - Undergraduate Student

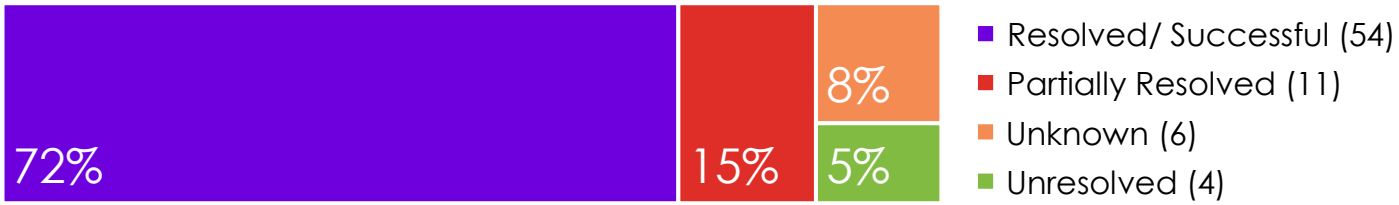
Interventions

Intervention entails the Office reaching out to a university official to discuss a matter. The Office intervened in relation to 75 issues. Such interventions may include gathering information related to a concern, seeking clarification about a decision or action, supporting collaborative decision-making, identifying alternative approaches that better align with principes of administrative fairness and good governance, and facilitating the resolution of a concern including, where appropriate, requesting the reconsideration of a decision. The two charts below present the various types of interventions for the reporting period and the outcomes associated with these actions, respectively.



Intervention Outcomes

Where the intervention consists solely of seeking clarification of facts or obtaining information from a university authority, outcomes are classified as successful or unsuccessful. Where the intervention involves negotiating a resolution or conducting an inquiry into a matter, outcomes are classified as resolved, partially resolved, or unresolved.

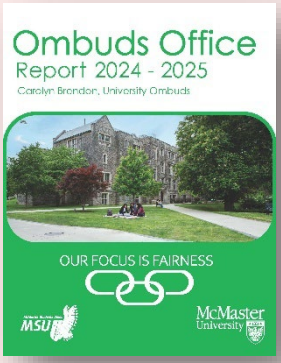


Activities of the Office

OUTREACH

I presented the Ombuds Report, 2024-25 to the following:

- Senate
- MSU Student Representative Assembly
- GSA Executive Committee
- Undergraduate Council
- Graduate Council
- Board of Governors' Audit and Risk Committee



We participated in various events to increase the visibility of the Office and enhance the understanding of the Ombuds' role:

- Carolyn was interviewed by *The Silhouette* about the release of the Annual Report
- MSU Clubs Fest in both Fall and Winter terms
- School of Graduate Studies Resource Fair
- Ombuds Office Information Booth
- Student Success Centre Welcome Week Session
- MSU Part-Time Managers Training Session

COLLABORATION

I continue to learn from and collaborate with others on campus to support initiatives that advance fairness and equity. To this end, I met one-on-one with student-facing administrators, participated on committees, engaged in policy reviews, and attended consultation sessions on matters of university-wide concern. Particularly, I participated in the following:

- University Senate (Observer)
- Curriculum and Admissions Committee (Consultant)
- Undergraduate Council (Consultant)
- Teaching and Learning Committee
- Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office Task Force
- The Generative AI and Academic & Research Integrity Session
- Strategic Planning Team Consultation
- *Policy on Student Groups* review

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT WITH OMBUDS ORGANIZATIONS

Ombuds:

- Board of Directors Member of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO)
- Member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombuds (ACCUO) and the ACCUO International Relations Committee
- Member of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE)
- Co-presented a session titled, "Higher Education, Administrative Fairness, and the Role of the Ombuds" at the June 2025 ENOHE *Building Bridges: Equity, Responsibility, and the Ombuds' Vision for the Future* Conference, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Attended *Advocating for Accessibility: The Role of the Ombuds in Promoting Equity and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities* webinar, delivered by ENOHE
- Attended various ENOHE Intervision Sessions/Coffee Chats and FCO Coffee Chats

Ombuds and Assistant Ombuds attended:

- *The Municipal Ombudsman – The Work of the Ombuds of Montreal and Toronto* webinar delivered by The York Collegium for Public Ethics
- *Principles and Practices: International Ombudsman Symposium*, delivered by the Ontario Ombudsman
- Association of Canadian College and University Ombuds (ACCUO) Day Conference
- Various Rubin Thomlinson LLP educational webinars pertaining to workplace investigations

Assistant Ombuds:

- Completed Conflict Management course delivered the School of Continuing Education, University of Toronto
- Completed Administrative Law course delivered by the Chang School of Continuing Education, Toronto Metropolitan University
- Completed *It Takes all of Us* course delivered by the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office (SVPRO)
- Attended *When Justice Calls* webinar delivered by SVPRO
- Attended *Power in Community – Celebrating National Indigenous History Month and Pride Month* McMaster Event
- Member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombuds

With gratitude

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Assistant Ombuds, Meghan Rego, for her many contributions to the Office and her unwavering dedication, compassion, and kindness toward McMaster students. I am also grateful to the many administrators and instructors who responded to my inquiries, engaged in meaningful discussions, and helped resolve student concerns. Finally, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all those who placed their trust in us and shared their challenges, experiences, and concerns.

If you have any questions or comments about the Report, please do not hesitate to contact the Ombuds Office.

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Ombuds Office

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McMaster Students Union MSU

McMaster University

GSA Graduate Students Association of McMaster University