

Student Ombuds Office

Annual Report

July 2021 – June 2022

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Student Ombuds
University of Calgary
December 2022

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1. Message from the Student Ombuds

The 2021-2022 academic year in the Student Ombuds Office was dominated by issues that were influenced, directly or indirectly, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Cases pertaining to unfairness and conflict increased (28% of identified issues), and a high rate of academic misconduct cases persisted (20% of identified issues). Both were likely exacerbated by the continuation of online course delivery. Regardless of the situation, though, the Student Ombuds Office provided a place for students to voice their concerns, feel heard, and receive guidance on their options to pursue next steps.

Uncertainty is expected in the year ahead but the Student Ombuds' strong partnerships and open communication across campus help assure that students are supported, that university policy is adhered to consistently, and that outcomes are fair and satisfactory to all involved. The Student Ombuds Office is proud to be a part of that effort.

Reporting by the Student Ombuds Office occurs on an annual basis. In recent years, findings have been presented to the Vice-Provost (Student Experience), the University of Calgary Academic Planning and Priorities Committee, and the Student Enrolment Services Council. Following a 6-year absence, this more formal document represents a return to a published annual report which will be presented to the University of Calgary General Faculties Council and will be publicly available through the Student Ombuds Office website.

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Student Ombuds

December 2022

2. Overview of the Student Ombuds Office

The Student Ombuds Office is staffed by one person, the Student Ombuds, and serves over 35,000 current University of Calgary students on multiple campuses – Main Campus, Foothills, Downtown, Spy Hill, Edmonton, and the Faculty of Nursing in Qatar. The office also supports Continuing Education students and, as capacity permits, former students and alumni, prospective students, and other individuals outside of the university community.

3. Role of the Student Ombuds Office

The Student Ombuds Office is a confidential, independent, and impartial resource for all members of the university community. The office primarily addresses inquiries from students, and does so in the following ways:

- Discussing concerns or complaints
- Explaining the decision-making process to students confronted with a difficult situation
- Reviewing and assisting in the assessment of relevant available options so that the students can make informed decisions on how best to proceed
- Coaching students on achieving resolutions in a respectful and professional way
- Clarifying policies and procedures that impact students
- Monitoring for common trends or patterns among concerns and complaints received
- Where appropriate, promoting discussion of university-wide student related concerns

The Student Ombuds also commonly refers students to other campus resources. Students may access the support of the Student Ombuds Office at any stage in the process of a problem or dispute.

The Student Ombuds adheres to the Standards of Practice produced by the Association of Canadian Colleges and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO), which can be viewed at <https://accuo.ca/resources/publications/standards-of-practice/>. The Student Ombuds is a full-voting member of ACCUO.

The Student Ombuds advocates for fairness and reasonable outcomes. The Student Ombuds does not defend or advocate for the student seeking assistance, nor do they defend the university.

4. Event Participation and Professional Development

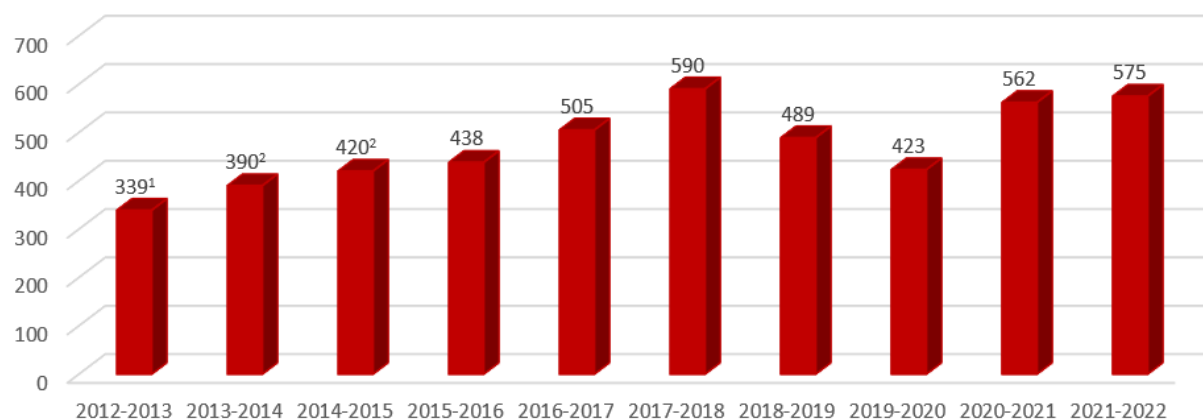
The Student Ombuds participates in professional development to maintain current knowledge and skills pertaining to Ombuds work. The Student Ombuds engaged in the following opportunities in 2021-2022:

- Completed *Certificate in Human Rights Law for Education Professionals* through Osgoode/York University
- Webinar facilitator, *Academic Integrity: The Role of an Ombuds in Academic Integrity* (Taylor Institute Academic Integrity: Urgent and Emerging Topics Series)
- Member, Faculty of Graduate Studies EDI Working Group
- Member, December 6 Event Advisory Committee, *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women*
- Attended virtual Western regional ACCUO meetings, and hosted the spring meeting of the Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education
- Completed Alberta Human Rights Commission Workshop, *Human Rights in the Workplace*
- Attended EDI professional development events:
 - *Ombuds and EDI*
 - *Black Minority Ethnic Experiences in Higher Education*
 - *Indigenous Awareness and Education*
 - *Indigenous 101: The Stories We Are Told*
- Participant, Alberta Council on Academic Integrity, including ACAI Provincial Meeting and Academic Integrity Week
 - *The Intersection of Academic Integrity and Mental Health*
 - *Contract Cheating in Alberta and Beyond*
 - *FOIP Training for Academic Integrity*

5. The Year in Review

For the annual reporting period of July 1, 2021, to June 20, 2022, new case files were opened for 575 individuals.

Figure 1. Annual number of students served, 2012-2022



¹Based on 10 months of data only.

²For the 2012-2015 period, a data discrepancy exists in the 2015-2016 annual report. The numbers reported here are believed to be correct.

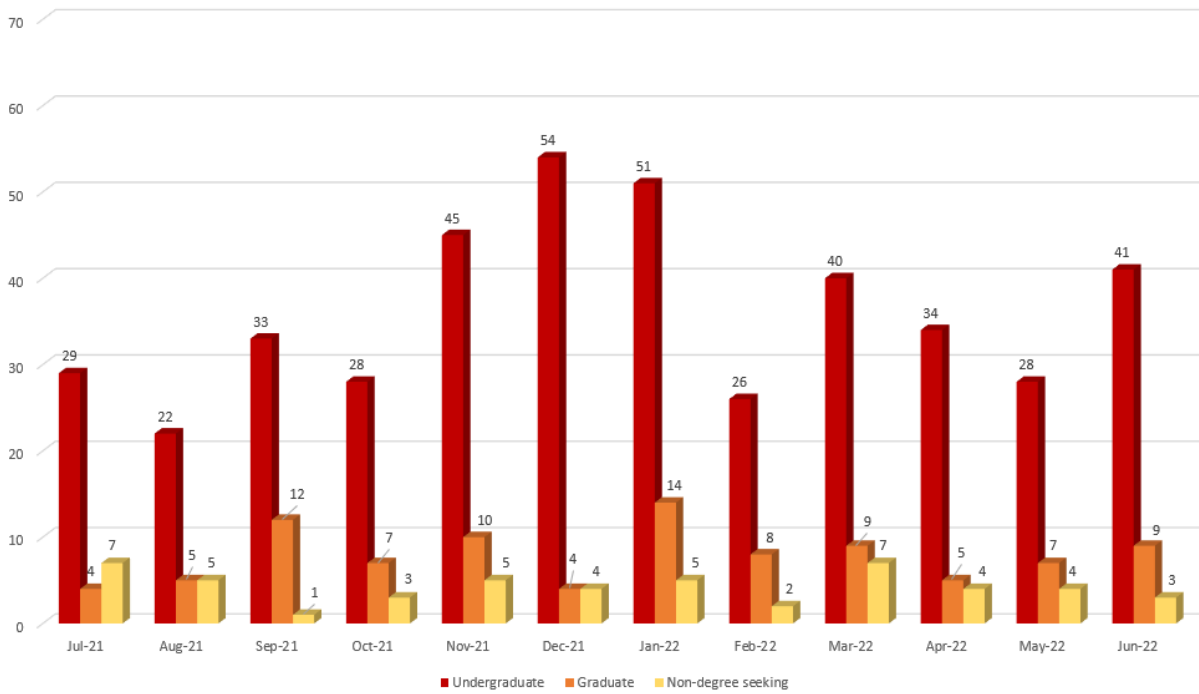
Table 1. Annual number of students served, 2017-2022

	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Undergraduate	462	361	320	434	431
Graduate	76	79	52	81	94
Non-degree seeking ¹	52	49	51	47	50²
Total	590	489	423	562	575

¹Includes Open Studies and Visiting students, Continuing Education students, Alumni, previously registered students, prospective students, and any other community inquiries.

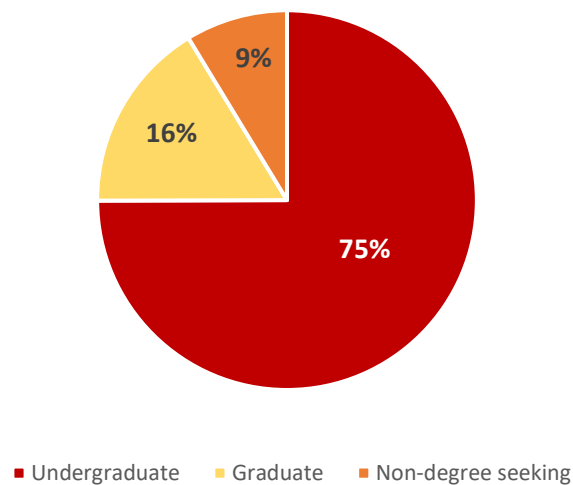
²Open Studies/Visiting (24); Continuing Education (4); Alumni (3); Prospective Students (12); all other non-registered individuals (7).

Figure 2. Number of files opened per month (n=575)



- The three highest-traffic months of the year, based on total new files opened, were January (70), December (62), November (60).
- The three lowest-traffic months of the year were October (38), February (36), August (32). These numbers are commonly impacted by vacation days when the Student Ombuds is unavailable, and no new files are opened.

Figure 3. Categories of students seeking support (n=575)



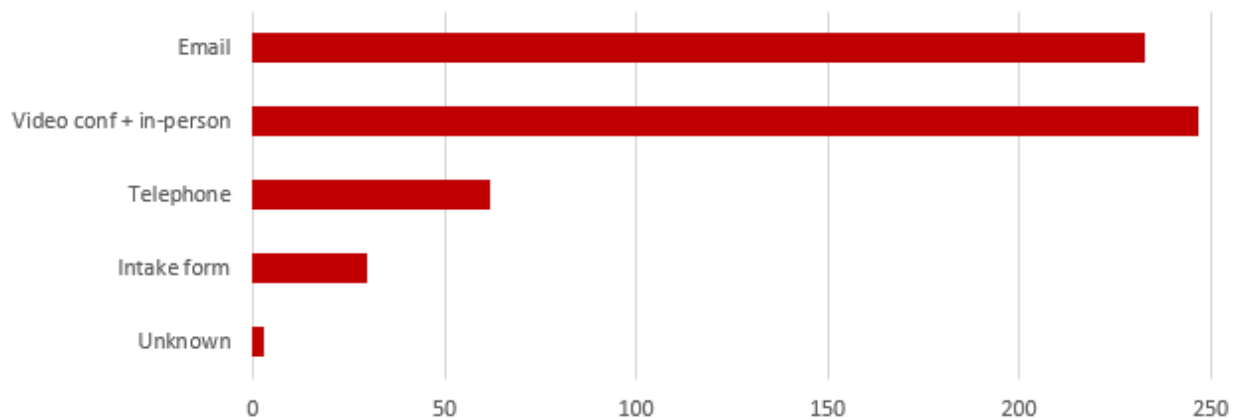
- Of 93 total graduate students, 59 were enrolled in master’s programs, 32 in doctoral programs, and 2 in professional certificate programs.

Table 2. Referrals to Student Ombuds Office (n=164)

Referred by	
Associate Dean/Dean	42
Faculty Advisor	22
Student/friend	22
SU, GSA, or other student association	16
Website	13
Student Success Centre	11
Registrar’s Office/Enrolment Services	10
Student Wellness Services	10
Professor/instructor	9
Student Accessibility Services	6
All other	3

- Students are invited to identify, on an Advising Intake Form, how they learned about the Student Ombuds Office. Because not all students submit these forms, and because this information is provided on a voluntary basis only, sample size (164) is significantly smaller than the total number of case files opened annually.

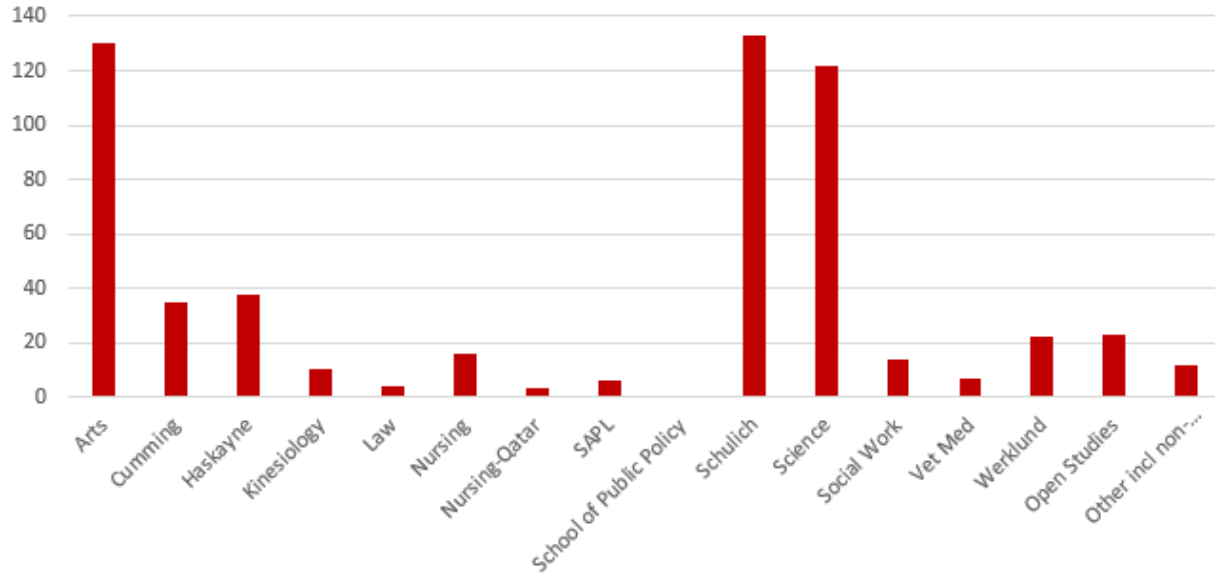
Figure 4. Method of Initial Meaningful Contact (n=575)



- “Initial Meaningful Contact” refers to the first substantial exchange of information. A very brief email exchange followed closely by a scheduled Zoom meeting is not counted as ‘Email’, but rather as ‘Video conference’

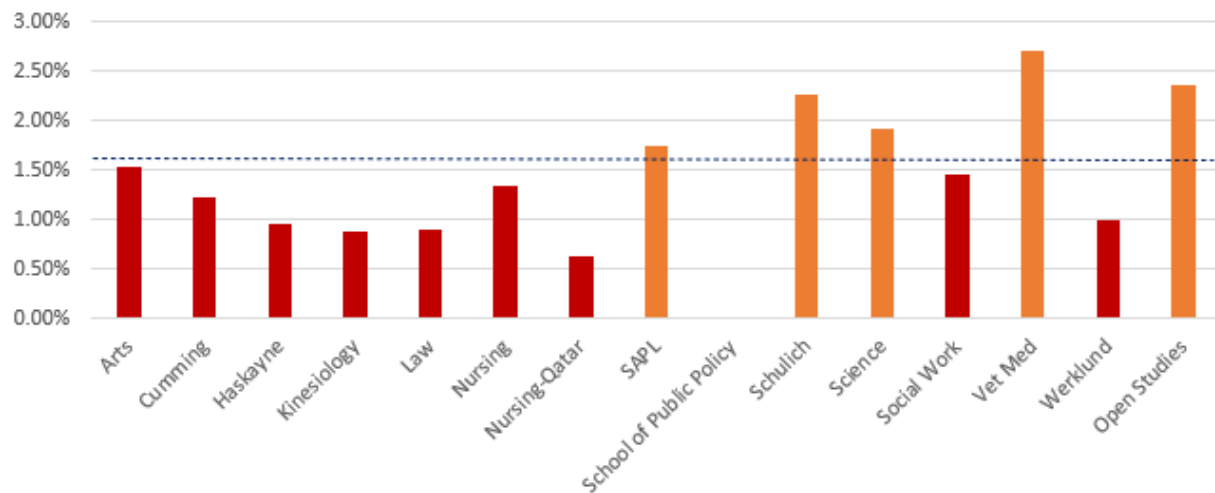
- In the collection of student traffic data, no differentiation was made between video conferences and in-person meetings. The total number of in-person meetings that occurred in 2021-2022 is estimated at less than 20.

Figure 5. Case Distribution by Faculty (n=575)



- 'Other' includes non-students, Continuing Education, and Unknown

Figure 6. Case Rate by Faculty (accounting for differences in enrolment; campus-wide average=1.61%)



- In 2021-2022, 1.61% of the student population (575 new files, of 35,667 total students¹) accessed Student Ombuds support. Orange columns indicate faculties whose students accessed support at a rate greater than the campus average.

Table 3. Case Distribution by Nature of Issue (n=702)

Rank 2021- 2022	Rank 2020- 2021	Nature of Issue	Total issues identified 2021-2022	2020- 2021
1	[2]	Unfairness and conflict	195	[170]
2	[1]	Academic misconduct	141	[198]
3	[4]	Required to withdraw	90	[74]
4	[3]	Grade reappraisals, faculty-level appeals	83	[92]
5	[5]	Registration appeals	36	[39]
6	[10]	Accommodations	29	[15]
7	[6]	Admissions	27	[37]
8	[8]	Extenuating circumstance withdrawals	24	[26]
9	[7]	Non-academic misconduct	23	[27]
10	[9]	Money-related	22	[20]
11	[11]	EDI	12	[9]
		All other	20	[4]

- Many students (104) identified and/or required assistance with more than one issue, hence the difference between the total number of student files opened (575) and the total number of issues identified (702).
- “Unfairness and conflict” refer to those issues categorized as Grievances, Student Rights, or Supervisor Issue. Supervisor Issue on its own increased to 26 in 2021-2022, up from 16 in 2020-2021 (*this will be isolated as its own category in 2022-2023*).
- “Money-related” refers to issues pertaining to fees appeals, financial assistance, awards, funding, etc.
- Inquiries pertaining to U of C’s COVID-19 vaccination mandate were most commonly classified as “Accommodations” issues, and they largely account for the significant growth in this category.

¹ University of Calgary Office of Institutional Analysis (2022). *Fact Book*. Retrieved 2022-09-12 from <https://www.ucalgary.ca/provost/oia/fact-book>

6. Trends and Patterns Observed

Academic misconduct

In a year characterized by high volume of academic misconduct allegations², investigations by departments and faculties were typically conducted in a timely fashion. This is consistent with what is required through the University of Calgary Student Academic Misconduct Procedure. Anecdotal reports from Ombuds offices at other U15 institutions indicate that misconduct investigations spanning several months have become common and are of great concern (not least of all, from a procedural fairness standpoint). U of C's policies and procedures regarding academic misconduct were applied effectively this year, and the diligence of faculties to follow them is commendable.

Compassionate consideration for international students

Many international students spent a large part of the 2021-2022 academic year trying to continue their studies remotely. Multiple faculties were particularly sensitive to this and were sympathetic when it appeared that a student's ability to progress academically was in jeopardy. It appears that great care was often taken, by Associate Deans in particular, to assess students' ability to succeed upon returning to a traditional in-person learning environment. The Student Ombuds noted many cases where faculties appeared to err on the side of giving students another chance, more so than they might have in the past.

The following are examples of issues identified by international students:

- Individual health concerns, especially COVID-19 outbreaks which impacted both the health of students and their families
- Technology limitations abroad, including inconsistent access to internet and multi-factor authentication issues with foreign mobile networks, creating barriers in access to myUofC and ucalgary email (including for time sensitive communications regarding student academic standing)
- Distant time zones and problematic scheduling of synchronous lectures and assessments (students commonly attended lectures or completed assessments in the middle of the night)
- Travel interruptions, and challenges securing or updating immigration documents

The University of Calgary is situated in an affluent city, province, and country. It was important for the institution to not lose sight of the fact that many students, in a year of remote learning, were not similarly situated. The Student Ombuds regularly observed examples that the institution considered this in its decision-making, and at multiple levels: teaching faculty, Department Heads, Associate Deans, and support staff.

² In 2021-2022, 754 incidents of alleged academic misconduct were reported campus-wide. (University of Calgary Office of the Vice-Provost (Student Experience). (2022). *Student Academic Misconduct Policy Annual Report July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022*)

7. Risks

Mental health concerns

When consulting with the Student Ombuds, students commonly identify mental health concerns³ as a contributing factor in their situation, regardless of the issue type. The Student Ombuds Office does not collect data on these concerns. Anecdotally, however, the most identified concerns include ADHD, anxiety, and depression.

Less common, but nonetheless concerning, are situations in which students identify more serious mental health diagnoses or otherwise exhibit behaviors that require professional mental health support not available through the Student Ombuds Office. Affected students commonly describe their perception of limitations on support available through other student services departments.

Mental health concerns represent a threefold risk:

1. They can be serious enough that relatively innocuous conflicts with policies, regulations, or other individuals can quickly escalate to a point where non-academic misconduct eclipses the original concern (e.g., student disagrees with an assignment grade received, they broach the subject with the instructor, communications then deteriorate to a point where the student's behaviour may be considered non-academic misconduct, the student's ability to succeed in the course is then potentially impacted, and the behaviour also raises concerns for the well-being of the student, instructor, and/or the rest of the class).
2. Students identifying these concerns, especially more serious concerns, consume an inordinate amount of time resources, often across multiple departments. In the case of a limited-resource department like the Student Ombuds Office, an excess of time spent on any one student can have a detrimental impact on the Office's ability to respond quickly to other students' inquiries.
3. The provision of dedicated mental health support lies outside the Terms of Reference of the Student Ombuds Office and, more importantly, the Student Ombuds is not a trained mental health professional. Assisting students amid complex mental health situations is risky, it is psychologically taxing, and if other campus mental health supports are compromised, undue reliance on the Student Ombuds Office to support these students is both unsustainable and ill-advised.

Business continuity in the Student Ombuds Office

The Student Ombuds Office is comprised of one staff only. No administrative support currently exists within the office, and the Student Ombuds is solely responsible for all front-line student support and backstage operational requirements. Currently, when an anticipated short-term absence occurs (e.g., vacation), autoreply messages are deployed to guide students on how they can access allied support

³ 'Mental health concerns' are defined as *a spectrum of concerns that can range from distressing temporary symptoms to a wide range of mental health disorders and illness affecting one's mood, thinking, behaviour, or physiological responses*. (Mental Health Commission of Canada and Standards Council of Canada (2020). *Mental health and well-being for post-secondary students*. CSA Group. <https://www.csagroup.org/store/product/CSA%20Z2003:20/>)

resources on campus. The Student Ombuds Office email is monitored for emergency situations and to offer simple office referrals whenever possible.

In the case of an *unanticipated* short-term absence, informal rapid deployment of replacement Ombuds staff does not occur. This is, in part, due to confidentiality concerns relating to the nature of Ombuds work. For similar reasons, maintaining of business continuity is problematic if the Student Ombuds is unexpectedly absent for an extended period or otherwise vacates the position on short notice. This concern has become more urgent based on the recent increase in service demand.

Currently, the services of the Student Ombuds Office are almost completely interrupted when the Student Ombuds is absent. A more appropriate business continuity plan, including additional Ombuds advising support, is needed if a continuously available Student Ombuds Office is considered a priority.

8. Recommendations

In 2021-2022, the Student Ombuds Office interacted with less than 2% of the student population at the University of Calgary. Because of the often-sensitive nature of their difficulties, the information presented by these students can be incredibly vague, highly detailed, or somewhere in between. Additionally, the Student Ombuds may support a student with a single 15-minute phone conversation, or with many hours of detailed consultation through an evolving situation. As a result, drawing scientific conclusions and establishing detailed recommendations is challenging.

Nevertheless, based on this year's experience, the Student Ombuds offers the following recommendations:

1. Adherence to established policies, procedures, and regulations remains critically important to assure predictable and fair consideration when students encounter difficult situations. The U of C community is reasonably proficient at this and must continue to be so.
2. Patience and compassion should continue to be prioritized in all interactions. The challenges of the past three years have had universal impact, and we must presume that students' struggles are ongoing and may not yet be completely understood.
3. Because of the frequency of mental health concerns experienced by students, U of C must continue to prioritize initiatives to support student mental health.

9. The Year Ahead

If the unpredictability of the virus causing COVID-19 is any indication, an unpredictable year ahead for the Student Ombuds Office seems likely. Supporting and guiding students to fair outcomes quickly and consistently through such an uncertain time is, and will continue to be, a top priority.

The Student Ombuds Office welcomes formal and informal feedback on this annual report, as well as about the services provided, to ensure students are receiving the best support and service possible.

Please contact:

Student Ombuds Office

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