

LISTENING & LEARNING

OMBUDSPERSON FOR RYERSON UNIVERSITY
ANNUAL REPORT FOR JULY 1, 2006 TO JUNE 30, 2007

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I am required by the terms of reference that delineate the responsibilities of the Ombudsperson and the Ombudsperson Committee (www.ryerson.ca/ombuds/moreaboutouroffice/terms.html) to report annually to the Ryerson community on the activities of my Office. I do so with great enthusiasm as the circulation of the annual report has proven to be an excellent means for:

- PROVIDING STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON THE TYPE AND VOLUME OF CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS THAT ARE BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION SO THAT ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY OF 'LISTENING AND LEARNING' ABOUT THESE ISSUES (SEE P. 2-4);
- PROVIDING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION OF SYSTEM-WIDE IMPROVEMENTS (SEE P. 6-11).
- ENGAGING COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT 'OMBUDSING' OR VARIOUS FORMS OF EFFECTIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION PRINCIPLES. IN THIS REPORT I HAVE PROVIDED A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON THE 'ETHICS OF OMBUDSING'. (P. 16)

Statistical Information

Types of Concerns	06/07	05/06	04/05	03/04	02/03
Academic Advice ¹	106	71	59	61	60
Academic Appeals ²	165	137	168	152	136
Academic Misconduct	57	37	34	23	19
Accessibility	5	8	5	6	6
Advancement & Development	1	1	3	0	1
Admissions ³ (Undergraduate)	35	28	34	31	27
Admissions (Graduate)	4	–	–	–	–
Ancillary Services	1	2	0	2	8
Campus Planning & Facilities	2	2	1	2	1
Conduct – Instructor	45	60	82	57	59
Conduct – Staff	12	21	15	16	16
Conduct – Student	11	15	12	4	8
Confidentiality	3	1	1	2	2
Curriculum Advising ⁴	17	23	10	9	15
Enrollment Services ⁵	44	55	28	25	29
Exchange Programs	0	0	2	0	1
Fees	18	30	10	18	17
Financial Assistance	14	11	10	8	11
Information Requests – no complaint	7	10	20	17	29
Library	1	1	0	3	2
Outside Jurisdiction	7	10	7	7	14
Practicum/Placement	11	5	4	5	7
Reinstatement/ Re-admission	25	25	13	16	26
Residence	2	3	3	3	1
Safety & Security	5	3	4	4	3
Sports & Recreation	1	0	0	0	2
Student Media	0	0	1	0	1
Student Services	2	3	1	2	3
Student Unions/Associations	4	9	7	3	5
Team work	1	2	1	4	4

¹ This category includes concerns regarding not being able to easily access academic advice from a knowledgeable person (advice & procedural error). It includes Course Requirements, Prerequisites and Transfer Credits.

² Including Academic Standing.

³ Including Advanced Standing.

⁴ Including Transfer Credits and Challenge Credits.

⁵ Including Late Withdrawals.

Action Taken	06/07	05/06	04/05	03/04	02/03
Information	9	23	51	114	159
Advice	434	386	364	262	228
Intervention	163	164	120	104	126
Total	606	573	535	480	513

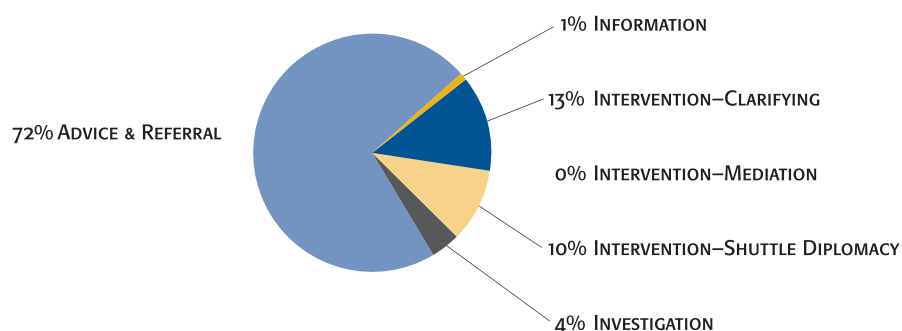
Information: Providing information on policies and procedures

Advice: Providing information and discussing possible options with students

Intervention: Taking action, with the students' permission, to assist in some way to resolve the concern, e.g. clarifying information, facilitating, mediating, conducting investigations etc.

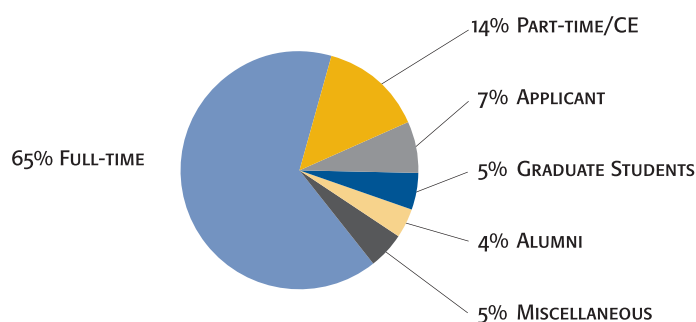
Action Taken	06/07	05/06	04/05	03/04	02/03
Advice & Referral	434	386	364	262	228
Information	9	23	51	114	159
Intervention – Clarifying	79	82	62	49	69
Intervention – Mediation	1	0	2	3	0
Intervention – Shuttle Diplomacy	61	62	45	40	50
Investigation	22	20	11	12	7
Total	606	573	535	480	513

Action Taken: 2006–2007



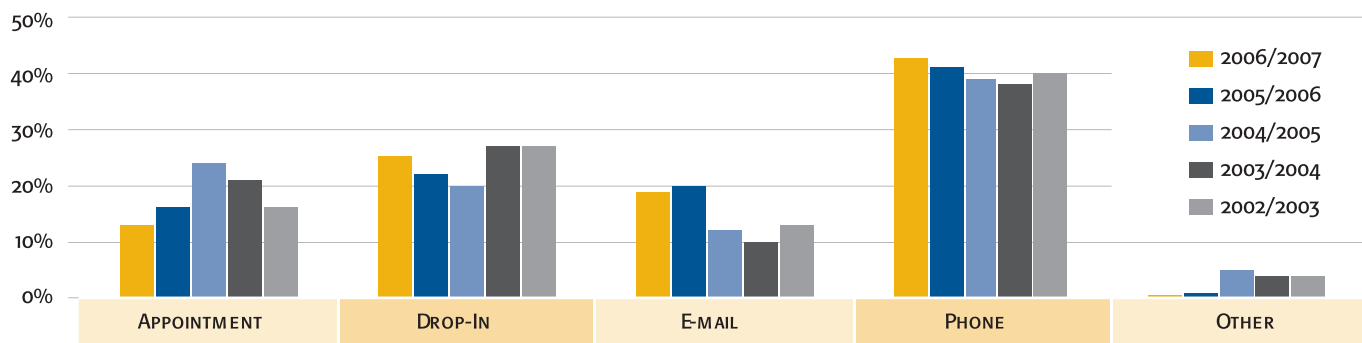
Constituency	06/07	05/06	04/05	03/04	02/03
Full-time degree	394	372	375	334	358
Applicant	40	29	15	29	21
Graduate students	31	14	10	4	3
Continuing Education/Part Time Degree	87	92	85	79	84
Alumni	22	27	10	7	7
Miscellaneous ⁶	32	39	40	27	40
Total	606	573	535	480	513

Constituency: 2006–2007



Method of Initial Contact (%)	06/07	05/06	04/05	03/04	02/03
Appointment	13%	16%	24%	21%	16%
Drop-In	25%	22%	20%	27%	27%
E-mail	19%	20%	12%	10%	13%
Phone	43%	41%	39%	38%	40%
Other	1%	1%	5%	4%	4%
Total Contacts	606	573	535	480	513

Method of Initial Contact: 2006–2007



⁶ Includes Special Students.

Selected Highlights of Statistical Information: Decreases and Increases Observed:⁷

Decreases

There are three notable decreases in categories of complaint:

Student Fees and Cashier's Office *This Office is identified as 'Fees' in the accompanying chart.* **-40% decrease**

A number of improvements related to how service is provided as well as the quality and quantity of information available with respect to fees have been made in the past year. A detailed explanation is available on page 10 & 11 as part of the follow-up to recommendations made in the 2005/2006 annual report. I suspect that the reduction in complaints is a result of these initiatives.

I believe it is worthy of note that the University, through the Office of the Registrar, will now establish and publish a deadline that students can rely on as being the date when they can be assured that the amount of their indebtedness will not change unless the student adds or drops a course(s). The Registrar has indicated that the date will be October 1, 2007 for this year and that efforts are being made to post an earlier deadline for subsequent years. Therefore, from this year forward, the only changes to fees after this date will be those initiated by a student's action, e.g. adding or dropping a course(s).

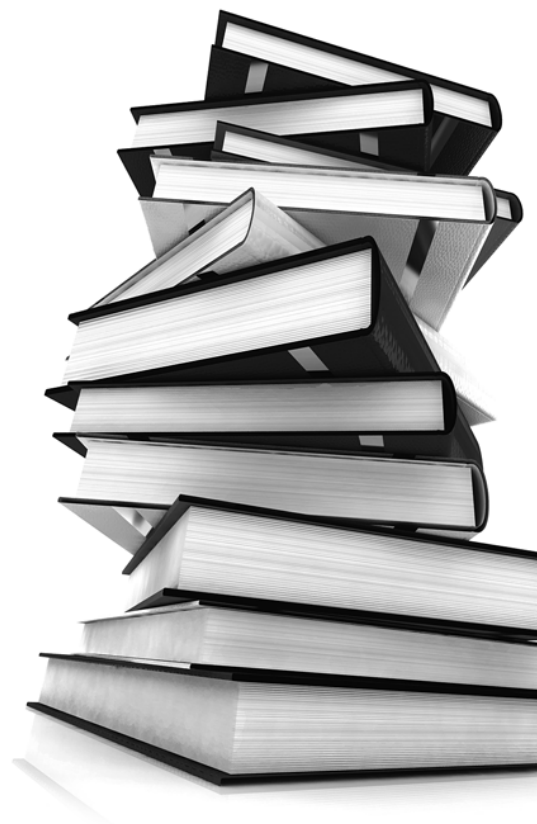
A general notice will be posted on the Ryerson Administrative Management Self Service (RAMSS) portal indicating that all fees assessments are not final until the posted date. In addition, my understanding is that the University has approved a new position dedicated to ensuring the production of accurate and timely student fee assessment information. The person who occupies this position will be responsible for conducting an ongoing review of program structure, components and billing units to ensure the information provided to students is accurate as early as possible in the term. This change in policy and practice will be very much appreciated by many members of the University community.

Instructor Conduct—25% decrease

This is a continuing downward trend and is a positive indicator of instructors and students working together to resolve issues that in the past may have been brought to the attention of the Ombudsperson.

Enrollment Services—20% decrease

I suspect that due to University personnel and students' greater familiarity with the RAMSS since its implementation in 2005, and due to improvements to various processes, complaints in this area have been reduced accordingly.



Increases

Academic Advice *finding an academic advisor and/or ability to acquire timely and accurate academic advice within a program/department* **-49% increase**

It is particularly unfortunate that this category of complaint has increased so dramatically as this area has been a subject of concern for some time and the inability to easily obtain academic advice can have a negative impact on student engagement. In fact specific undertakings were made last year by the University in response to recommendations made in my 2005/2006 report to support the provision of accurate and timely academic advice throughout a student's progression within an academic program. A recent example is the initiative taken by the Vice-Provost, Students who established a task force in the spring of this



⁷The numbers of complaints under scrutiny in some categories are not large so movement in the data will result in a large percentage increase or decrease.

year to develop recommendations for provision of advice of a generic nature. The type of analysis and planning that is being done is laudable and portends well for the future for the provision of University-wide advice. However, it is readily apparent to me from the type of complaints brought to my attention that generic advice will not sufficiently address the bulk of these issues. Therefore, I would like to highlight the importance of each Faculty working with its schools and departments to ensure that all students have access to the type of specific academic advice they need in order to make the best use of their own program offerings and all of the University's resources.

Students often approach this Office for advice on very complicated academic matters that arise from the idiosyncratic nature of highly specialized programs, the tri-partite approach to curriculum, students' unique academic backgrounds including pursuit of previous post-secondary education at a wide variety of other institutions, as well as the importance of complying with overarching University-wide policies. As a result, I am fully aware of how difficult it is to organize a simple system for the provision of the type of advice that is needed. Due to extensive exposure

to Ryerson programs, its organizational structure and relevant policies and procedures, we are able to quickly assist students to sort out to whom they should be speaking about next steps when an important decision has to be made involving many academic variables. In addition, as a result of being well versed in University policy generally we are able to advise students on how to address related anomalous administrative issues as well.

Examples of situations that have resulted from lack of advising or incorrect advising include scenarios whereby students are not able to graduate with their class because they have taken the wrong course(s) in their final year and are not aware of their folly and the unintended consequences until their application for graduation is rejected in the middle of what they had understood would be their final term in their undergraduate program. These kinds of incidents have meant that students were not able to pursue professional or graduate programs from which they had conditional acceptance or were required to stay in Toronto for another semester instead of returning to their home country or province. All of the foregoing situations could have been prevented if an error had not been made in their course selection in their third or fourth years. Students who have not been able to easily access academic advice have demonstrated a low level of engagement with the University as a result of their own experience and those of their colleagues.

At the risk of being seen to be repetitive, I would like to reinforce that as I am the frequent recipient of queries that require extensive knowledge and/or additional investigation in order to respond properly, I appreciate the difficulty of providing high quality, accurate academic information and advice in a time-sensitive fashion. This experience has contributed to my firm conviction of the pressing need for more resources to be dedicated to responding to students' need for personalized advising throughout their academic career.

Recommendation 1: That a plan be developed for establishing Faculty and/or Department/School specific advising roles

that are well equipped with up to date information and sufficient time to consult with and provide in-depth, timely and accurate academic advice to students as soon as is reasonably possible.

Recommendation 2: As initiating a request for 'an academic progress report' via RAMSS at the end of third year would have prevented the development of situations that have significant, short and long term negative effects on students' date of graduation, I am recommending that the University increase its efforts to demonstrate to all full-time undergraduate students via increased publicity and personalized contact that it is in their best interest to do a self-initiated electronic graduation audit at the end of their third year of study. In addition, as part-time undergraduate degree students are prevented from requesting 'an academic progress report' via RAMSS due to technical reasons, I am proposing that the University contact these students via a personalized email at the end of their third year to advise them that they should request a manual graduation audit prior to enrolling for fourth year courses.

An issue related to academic advising that is raised with increasing frequency with this Office spreads over a number of different domains, they being, Enrollment Services and Student Records (Enrollment Services), the Registrar's Appeals Committee, the Fees and Cashier's Office and, the students' academic departments/schools or Faculties. The most concise description of the issue is: Is it possible for a student to request a retroactive drop of a course(s), after the final deadline for dropping a course without financial or academic penalty has passed, and if it's possible, to whom should the request be directed? In my experience, academic personnel, administrative staff, student support staff and academic decision-makers have provided different responses to these queries depending on their individual experience or the advice provided to them. As a result I have observed considerable confusion across the University on what the correct answers should be to the aforementioned queries.



The specific problems raised with this Office arise from the following circumstances:

- Students indicate interest in pursuing particular course(s) through the course intentions process in the Spring or by registering in courses at various times throughout the calendar year. Subsequent to inputting their intentions or registering in specific courses, full-time and part-time undergraduate students decide to take a voluntary withdrawal from their program due to changed circumstances, e.g. financial hardship; change in family circumstances. They do not officially withdraw from the courses and do not attend classes; OR
- Continuing Education students do not attend the courses they registered in because they did not think they were actually 'enrolled' in the course until they paid for it or received some official communication from the University about being enrolled in a specific course(s).

Typically these students, whether they have input course intentions or registered for Continuing Education courses, do not check their RAMSS accounts as they are not active students at Ryerson. Students in these circumstances typically state that they did not receive any written communication from the University regarding outstanding fees. Eventually these students receive a call or letter from a Collections Agency indicating their account is in arrears.

In some situations, students approach Enrollment Services when they are contacted by a Collections Agency. If there are extenuating circumstances, they are usually told that they can appeal their registration and the fees levied to the Registrar's Appeal Committee. These students appeal to the Registrar's Appeal committee or to the Registrar directly and provide documentation that demonstrates why they believe they should not be held financially or academically responsible and ask that the F or 'Failure for Non-Attendance' (FNA) on their academic record be removed and that the fees be waived for the course(s) they did not attend.

When students approach my Office on this topic, they are advised of their financial

and academic responsibility for courses in which they registered. If there are extenuating circumstances, they are advised that they can appeal via the Registrar's Office for a retroactive drop and that documentation or corroboration of whatever is being stated as the reason for not being held academically and/or financially responsible is required.

In my experience when a retroactive drop is requested via the Registrar's Office or Registrar's Appeal Committee some students are granted relief and are retroactively dropped from their courses for the following reasons:

1. when they have demonstrated that they had medical/compassionate circumstances that impeded their ability to communicate with the University about their changed circumstances or
2. they have provided evidence of an administrative issue that lead them to believe they were not officially registered.

Some appeals are denied on the basis that the students were fully aware of the consequences of their registration in various courses; or, had no personal circumstances that interfered with their ability to drop the courses in a timely manner. Thus the University had advised these students that it had no basis for annotating their academic record or relieving them of their financial responsibilities.



Some students approach administrative or academic personnel in their schools or departments and are told there is no means for addressing their concerns about the F or FNA grades on their record for courses they did not attend as the final drop deadline has passed and there is no mechanism for requesting a retroactive drop. Other students are advised to appeal to the Registrar's Appeals Committee and others are told to appeal to the Director or Chair of their academic program.

Alternatively, some students assume or are advised that the academic appeals process is the appropriate vehicle for requesting a retroactive drop and they use this mechanism to address their concerns about the accuracy of their academic record. When students invoke the academic appeal

Fun Facts:

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ESTABLISHED ITS OMBUDSPERSON IN 1975 AND YORK UNIVERSITY DID SO MORE RECENTLY IN 2005. IT IS ALSO A POINT OF PARTICULAR CANADIAN PRIDE THAT THE FIRST UNIVERSITY OMBUDSPERSON OFFICE IN NORTH AMERICA WAS ESTABLISHED AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY IN VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA IN 1965.

process the rationale for requesting retroactive drops covers a larger territory than described earlier in that it includes situations where students are actively pursuing other courses at the University and they indicate that they only became aware that they were registered in a course that they did not attend until they see an F or an FNA on their record at the end of the term. In addition, students may state that they did not get feedback from the instructor before the final drop deadline; were then told that they couldn't drop the course as the final deadline had passed; continue with the course and eventually end up failing the final exam and the course overall as they had done poorly in their assignments prior to the final exam. Students also describe medical/compassionate circumstances that arose close to the end of the term that affected their ability to prepare for and/or write their final exams.

I have seen a variety of responses to this type of academic appeal. Some Chairs/Directors or Deans indicate that:

1. they have no jurisdiction to authorize

or recommend a retroactive drop and the appeal is dismissed;

2. they support a retroactive drop and advise the student that they are recommending that the Registrar approve a retroactive drop due to the specific circumstances detailed by the student; or
3. they have determined that the student's circumstances do not warrant a recommendation for a retroactive drop and the appeal is denied.

If an academic advisor, Chair/Director/Dean or a student attempts to find University policy on retroactive drops they will not be successful as there is no information in any University online or paper publications describing the procedure for requesting a retroactive drop or the criteria that will be used to respond to such a request.

Some examples of how other post-secondary institutions address this kind of situation are:

Queen's University's (Faculty of Arts & Science) provides guidelines for retroactive drops without financial and academic penalties within their policies for academic appeals, and sets out the requirements for each request.

The University of Waterloo provides a form entitled "Petition for Exception to Academic Regulations" which contains the option of "Remove WD/WF grade(s) for late drop(s)" which would appear to be the same as a retroactive drop. All petitions must include a statement from a professional on health-related or compassionate grounds along with a signature of the Undergraduate Advisor that is then submitted to the Faculty Petitions Committee for a decision.

Carleton University provides the following means for requesting 'special consideration':

"Requests for Special Consideration: It is your responsibility to know and to comply with all regulations and deadlines. However, if you are unable to do so as a result of extenuating circumstances beyond your control, you can request special consideration.

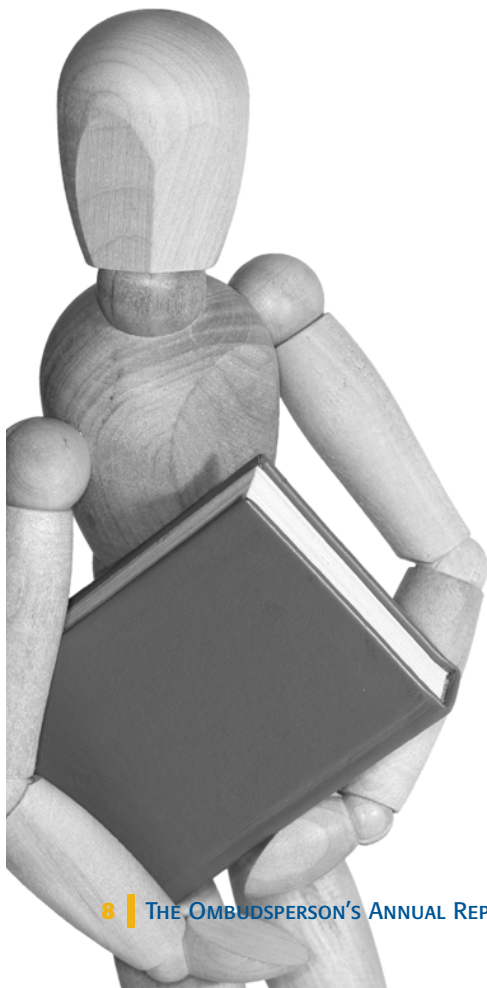
There are two types of circum-

stances that might warrant exceptions to published regulations and deadlines. The most frequent type concerns personal circumstances such as illness, family difficulties, or unanticipated occupational commitments. The second type concerns the fairness of the regulations. Because each student's academic record is different, a regulation might have an effect inconsistent with what was intended. Provisions for special consideration are not meant to compensate for ignorance of the regulations or deadlines, procrastination, poor judgment, or inconvenience."

Students are advised to provide their requests for special consideration in writing to the University Registrar for adjudication by a Registrarial Appeals Committee.

Concordia University gives permission to a student to retroactively drop one or more courses as a result of a student submitting a petition to the Registrar's Office for one of the following designations:

- 'Discontinued' (DISC) indicates that a student has withdrawn from a course. The notation appears permanently on academic records and official transcripts. It carries no grade point value and does not count in assess-



ments of academic standing, but does count towards a student's status (i.e. full- and part-time). The student must pay for course fee.

- 'Did Not Enter' (DNE) indicates that a student has officially withdrawn from a course with a tuition refund.

The course and DNE notation are subsequently removed from a student's record. My understanding is that DNE notations are used only for exceptional situations, where the situation that has compromised the student's ability to attend or complete a course is unforeseeable and beyond the student's control, e.g. students are seriously ill or severe injury has incapacitated the student.

York University provides the opportunity for students to submit a 'Financial Petition' to the 'Financial Petitions Committee' when they experience extremely difficult personal circumstances which lead them to drop courses after the refund deadline. Situations which may be considered as valid grounds for petition are the death of an immediate family or serious documented medical problems. Financial petitions will be considered for a period of one year after the occurrence of the special events which have caused the student to file the petition.

Recommendation 3: As it is profoundly unfair that students who have very similar circumstances become eligible for the benefits of a retroactive drop whereas others do not simply because of whom they sought advice from, I am recommending that the University review the various processes that are currently in place for students to request retroactive drops. Once it is determined how this process should be organized, information should be posted in University publications describing the correct process for requesting a retroactive drop and the criteria that will be used to evaluate the request that can be easily accessed by faculty, staff and students.

Probationary Contracts

I am becoming increasingly concerned about the number of issues that are being raised in relation to Probationary Contracts. In some

instances I have been told by students that their Academic Advisors have indicated that the Probationary Contract is 'etched in stone' and no adjustments can be made regardless of the students' circumstances. I find this dismaying as virtually any contract can be amended by the mutual agreement of the parties given proper consultation and amendment processes are undertaken. In addition, the standard template for a Probationary Contract provided by the University has an inclusion which reads:

"...ensure that any request to change this plan (adding, dropping, changing courses, etc.) is made in writing to the Chair/Director as I become aware of a potential problem. If the request is granted, an amended plan will be prepared by my department;..."

In addition, I am aware from discussions with academic and administrative personnel and by viewing many probationary contracts provided by students that these contracts are indeed routinely amended. For example, when a student falls ill or has personal commitments that become unmanageable it is a routine practice for students' probationary contracts to be amended in order that the number of courses pursued is reduced so that they are able to attend to the unanticipated extraordinary family commitments, or ill health, or whatever unforeseen situations have arisen and still attend to their academic obligations. In some instances I have seen a handwritten annotation that alerts the

student to the fact that they have until a particular date to request permission to drop a course and hence amend the contract.

Please be aware that I recognize and respect the authority and responsibility vested in Department and School personnel for providing the best possible advice to a student on what should be included on a probationary contract in order to contribute to greater academic success. My intent in raising this issue is not to question that authority and responsibility but to demonstrate that there should always be an opportunity to put forward and discuss an amendment to a probationary contract if it is in the student's best academic interest to do so.

Another aspect of the standard Probationary Contract which is posted on one location on the University's website which is confusing to me reads:

"...maintain a Term Grade Point Average of no less than 2.0 with no

Incompletes (INC) and no failed grades (F, F-S, and FNA) (If the cumulative GPA is raised to a 2.0 or higher, with no failures or **incompletes**, a student will normally receive a CLEAR standing.)"...(bolding is my emphasis)

I have observed a number of occasions where a petition for an INC has been granted due to circumstances which are beyond the control of the student. However, without manual intervention, the appearance of an INC on the record of a student who



is on academic probation will result in an academic suspension. In some instances, the situation has only been resolved through submitting an academic appeal. This seems to be an unnecessary expenditure of time and energy for all concerned and is counter-intuitive, given the reason for why an INC is normally assigned.

Interestingly enough, on the RAMSS system, the Probationary Contract shown does not include a prohibition on INC. Rather, it reads:

“...maintain a Term Grade Point Average of no less than 2.0 with and no failed grades (F, F-S, FNA).”

However, to date, I have not seen this version of the Probationary Contract in use.

While I have been advised that the intent behind the introduction of a ‘Plan of Study’ and/or a ‘Probationary Contract’ was to provide a convenient, developmental tool for increasing students’ academic success, an unintended consequence is that probationary contracts can be or they are seen to be punitive in nature. This sentiment

is particularly evident when a student’s circumstances change dramatically and there is no perceived ability to amend the contract, or when circumstances are such that a student cannot avoid an INC appearing on his or her academic record.

I have been told by students, staff and faculty that they find it difficult to read the standard one page Probationary Contract as it contains a great deal of ‘fine print’. My understanding is that, due to time constraints when the contract is being drawn up, typically the bulk of attention is paid to filling in the names of the courses for which the student is allowed to register. In some instances, the completion of the contract is done in a perfunctory manner via a brief conversation. If the intent is that the Probationary Contract be used for developmental purposes it would seem reasonable that there would be some advisory conversation during the contract signing stage about what is expected and how best to achieve it. It has also been observed that some advisors and probationary students see the completion and signing of a probationary contract as more of an administrative process than an educational one. As my understanding is that the original catalyst for the implementation of the Probationary Contract included loftier goals, it appears to me that it is now appropriate to review the manner in which this tool is being used to determine how to best meet those original aspirations.

An additional aspect of the use of Probationary contracts that I have observed that is cause for considerable concern is the fact that a student who is placed on Probation at the end of the Winter term and takes one or more courses during the Spring/Summer term and does not achieve a Term Grade Point Average of 2.0 or fails a course is automatically given an Academic Standing of Suspension regardless of whether a probationary contract was established with the student for the Spring/Summer term. My experience is that some schools and departments are advising students of the ramifications of enrolling in courses during the Spring/Summer term while on Probationary standing while others are not communicating with students on this subject. In my view it is profoundly unfair to



hold a student to terms of a contract which has not been articulated in verbal or written form and which results in an Academic standing of Suspension or Withdrawn.

Recommendation 4: I am recommending that the process used for determining the terms of students’ probationary contracts and the Probationary Contract template be reviewed from the perspective of greatest positive impact on student success and fair and effective administrative process.

Academic Appeals includes appeals of grades and academic standings
–20% increase

It’s difficult to understand why this category of complaint has increased when it would seem that a great number of appeals for first year students would not have been initiated due to the implementation of a pilot project for selected first year students [i.e. all first year students in the Faculties of Arts and Business and all first year students in Engineering departments within the Faculty of Engineering, Architecture and Science] which resulted in automatic probation for Suspended students at the end of the Fall 2006 term. It will require further study of the nature of the complaints received in the coming year to determine if this increase is a natural evolution commensurate



with the increase in the student population or if there is another trend developing.

Within the concerns raised regarding academic appeals, I have observed a double standard over a number of years that I believe is unacceptable. The undergraduate Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy states that decision-makers are required to provide a decision within ten working days of receiving a student's appeal. It is also stated that students are expected to contact the decision-maker if the decision in response to an appeal is not issued within the ten-day time frame. In a previous iteration of the Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy students were able to submit their appeals to the next level if the decision they were expecting was not delivered within the ten working day time frame. However, this is no longer an option.

In some cases that I have been consulted on, decision-makers have responded to these kinds of queries by indicating that they are very busy; have had to be away from the office unexpectedly, etc. and the decision is forthcoming in a specific number of days. In some instances, email responses from decision-makers have indicated that due to the schedule of the decision-maker no time frame can be provided and the student is advised to simply wait for the decision to be issued. I find this kind of response disheartening for a number of reasons:

1. It is expected via University policy, general fairness standards and courtesy that if decision-makers can not meet the ten day time frame for providing a response due to circumstances beyond their control, that the decision-maker or designate would contact the intended recipient to advise them of their inability to meet the deadline. Unfortunately, in my experience, it is rare for decision-makers who are delayed to contact the student and indicate that the time frame cannot be met and indicate that a longer time frame is needed.
2. I have seen many situations where students who have missed the academic appeals deadline due to extenuating circumstances and who then request that the appeal deadline be extended

for even one or two days are routinely denied an extension based on the rationale that the deadline for submitting appeals must be respected regardless of the circumstances presented. Ironically, simultaneously, some decision-makers are not meeting the ten-day response time and are not indicating that an extension is needed or even acknowledging their obligation for providing the response within a prescribed time frame.

This is an example of a double standard that is untenable. In a previous report I observed the same problem and recommended that this situation be reviewed to attempt to eliminate this dissonance.

Recommendation 5: As the Academic Consideration and Appeals Policy is scheduled to be reviewed in 2008 I am recommending that the expectation for timely responses from decision-makers be included in the review so as to ensure such dramatically different standards for performance do not continue.

Academic Misconduct—54% increase

It is not surprising that the number of complaints in this category brought to my Office would increase as I have been advised

by the Academic Integrity Office that the number of suspicions raised and charges laid has increased substantially on a university-wide basis over the past few years. However, it is troubling that thirty percent of the complaints lodged this year were solely because of a procedural error with respect to how the charge was laid or the matter was adjudicated. As all of the procedural errors I have seen could have easily been prevented as the manner in which they should have been handled is described in detail in the University's Academic Integrity website and 'procedures' documents, it is difficult to determine how these procedural errors continue to arise.

As being suspected or charged with academic misconduct can be devastating for many students, and having to raise a suspicion or lay a charge can be a singularly distasteful experience for many instructors, it is imperative that efforts be continued to ensure faculty and staff have knowledge of and easy access to the tools they need to handle academic integrity issues in the most fair and effective manner, and students receive ongoing education on the importance of demonstrating academic integrity.



Provost and Vice President Academic's Response To Listening and Learning Ombudsperson's Report July 1, 2006–June 30, 2007

First, I would like to thank the Ombudsperson for her report to the Ryerson community on the activities of her office. I appreciate the service that she provides to Ryerson students and the thoughtful analysis she gives to the complaints that she receives on their behalf.

It is reassuring to know that, according to reports to the Ombudsperson, the University has improved its service to students in the Student Fees and Cashier's Office as a result of a recommendation made in last year's report, and that there are fewer issues with Enrollment Services as staff become more familiar with the new student system. The continuing downward trend in complaints about faculty conduct is also very reassuring.

The increase in complaints about student advice was worth some further discussion, and I invited the Ombudsperson to meet with the Academic Planning Group (APG) to provide further detail on her concerns. We found this discussion very helpful and informative. The recommendation she makes is that a plan be developed to establish advisors in each Faculty or department/school who are "equipped with up to date information and sufficient time to consult with and provide in depth, timely and accurate academic advice to students." In 2005–06 there were 71 complaints regarding academic advice to her office and in 2006–07 there were 106. The Ombudsperson's concern about this area is noted. It has been suggested that some of the increase is from students who are intending to go on to graduate programs, which



is a growing area at Ryerson. Further information is sought as to which Faculties and departments/schools are having the most complaints or if the problem is more across-the-board.

I have been assured that each department and school has an advisor in place, and a list of these advisors will be published on the Ryerson website in a place where students will be able to easily access the information. In addition, a student information and advising centre will be established in January, 2008. Planning for that was commenced about one year ago.

Recommendation 2 is closely tied to the first recommendation. It is agreed that the timely use of Academic Progress Reports is very important. The Registrar urges students via email to request these through RAMSS when Course Intentions are submitted in the Spring as well as when semester registration periods approach. Further efforts will be made to encourage students to carry out this important step



and alternate strategies for part-time students to obtain similar information will be published. It is also critical that first-year students are made aware of course restrictions and the need to run a Report every time they enroll, drop, add, swap courses.

The third recommendation is concerned with the consistency of the procedure around retroactive dropping of classes. Although circumstances warranting retroactive withdrawal from courses are rare, it is agreed that procedures should be more consistent. The issue will be reviewed and the procedures confirmed and communicated.

The concern in Recommendation 4 about the inconsistencies with the INC grade are understood. Plans are already underway to review the existing policy on grading and promotion. This will include a review of the policy and procedures concerning students on probation as well as students suspended from Ryerson programs. In the interim, there is a review of the “INC” to determine whether immediate action is possible and appropriate. The probationary contract will also be reviewed.

The Ombudsperson reports an increase of 20% in the number of complaints about academic appeals. The number of complaints increased from 137 in 2005–06 to 165 in 2006–07, and it is noted that the number of complaints in 2004–05 was 168. It is noted that the number of complaints in this area has hovered around this same number since 2002–03, despite the large increase in student population over that period.

Recommendation 5 concerns the timely response of academic decision makers to student appeals. It is agreed that this timeliness is essential, and decision makers are already being advised to communicate with students when responses are delayed for any reason. It is agreed that a statement to this effect will be incorporated in both the undergraduate

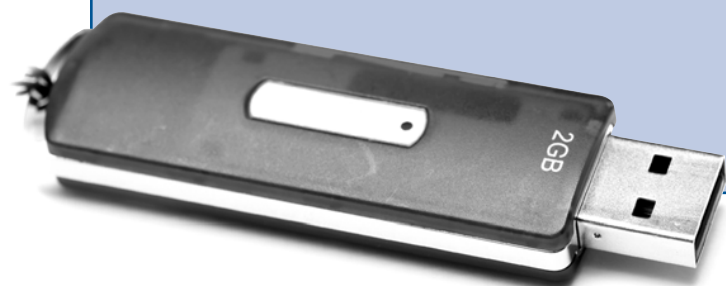
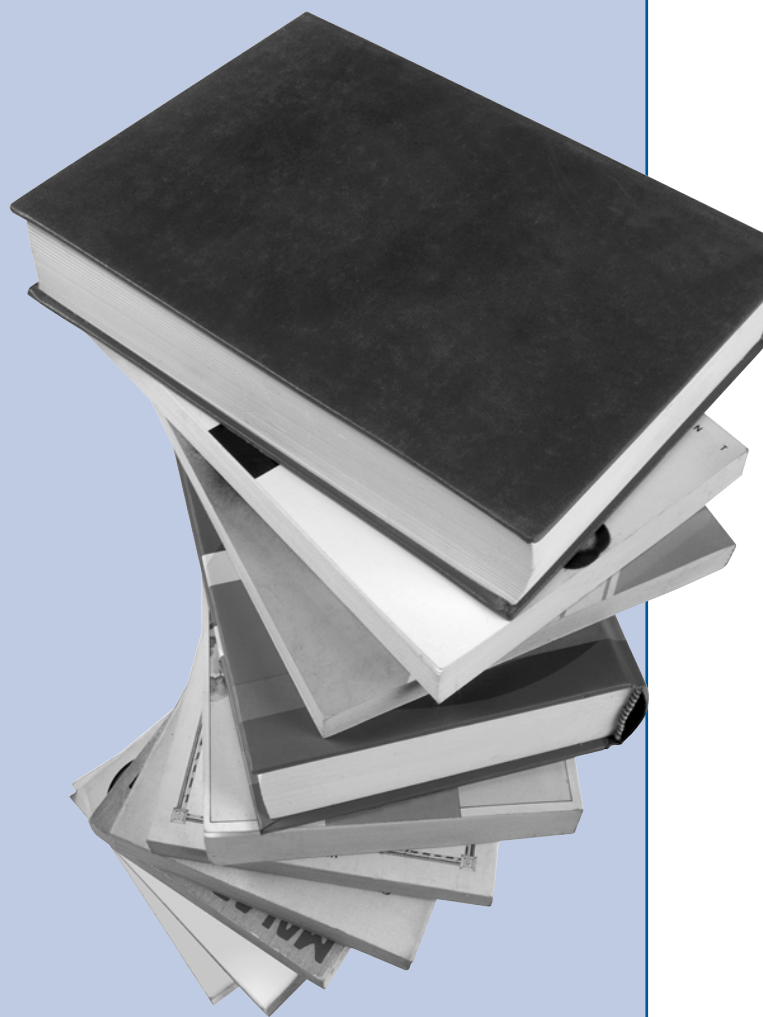
and graduate appeals policies when they are revised.

With regard to the increase in complaints about charges of academic misconduct, it must be noted that the Academic Integrity Officer continues to provide timely advice to faculty and students on academic misconduct issues.

I again thank the Ombudsperson for her report and her efforts to improve the student experience at Ryerson.

Alan Shepard

Provost and Vice President Academic



Update on Implementation of Recommendations from Previous Reports

The 2005/2006 Recommendations are reproduced below and appear within double quotation marks.

“Recommendation 1: In an effort to reduce frustration and improve service, my recommendation is that the personnel within the Student Fees Office explore means for ensuring telephone calls and emails are responded to in a timely fashion. It also seems reasonable to determine and publicize guidelines for response times for emails, telephone messages, faxes and letters. If this kind of information is provided to students in advance it may build understanding of what is a reasonable time frame for the provision of a detailed response.”

“Recommendation 2: As the RAMSS implementation process concludes and experience with the system increases, it also seems reasonable for this unit to determine and publicize guidelines for response times for emails, telephone messages, faxes and letters.”

Update: I have been advised that as of July 1, 2007 the responsibility for Student Fee Payments, Fee Tables and student Fee Assessment was transferred to the Registrar. Financial Services has retained responsibility for outstanding past due accounts, internal collection efforts and placement and liaison with external collection agencies. The Registrar’s Office has very recently reorganized their operation to reflect this change in responsibilities.

In addition, a major review of the Student Administrative System (SAS) which is the data base on which RAMSS is built is being scrutinized in order to determine how SAS will be upgraded for future benefit. The analysis is being done now and if the upgrade occurs, which is dependent upon approval of funding, a new system will be in place by 2008. A list of milestones has been prepared and objectives for achieving these milestones have been set. This information will be publicized when final decisions on how best to proceed are concluded.

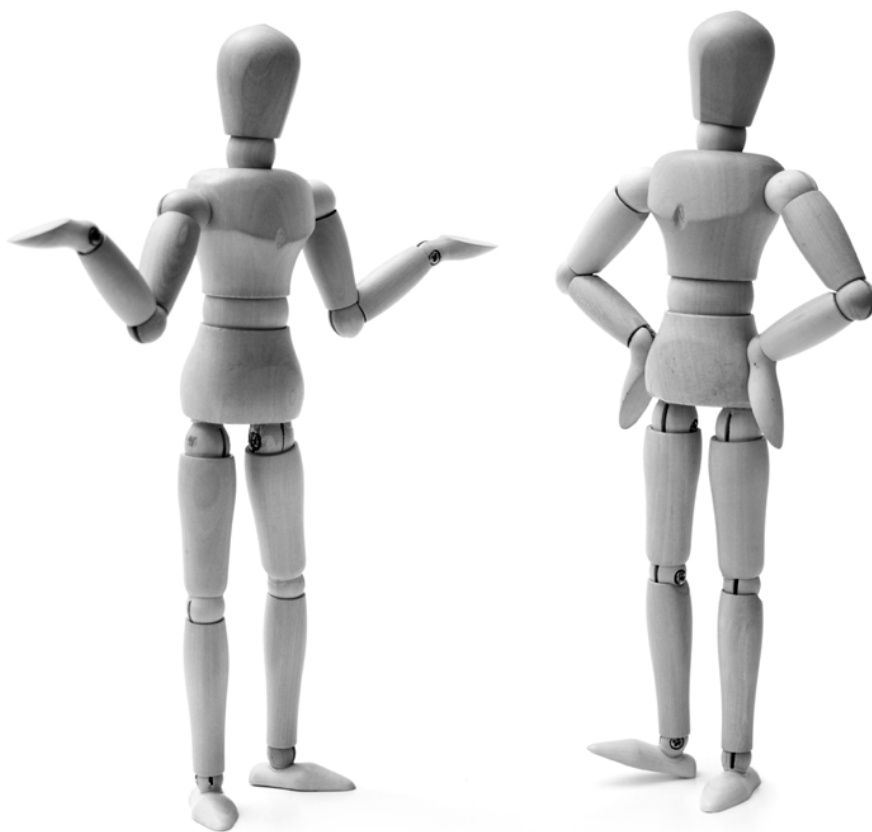
With respect to provision of information regarding student fee assessments and amounts paid and owing, I have been advised that it has been determined that hard copy fee statements will be eliminated and all fee assessments will be posted to students’ RAMSS accounts. In addition, all students will receive a monthly e-mail to their Ryerson e-mail account that will notify them of the outstanding balance in their RAMSS account.

I have also been advised that access to self service inquiry screens has been improved and students now have access to improved informational sources. Existing FAQs will be reviewed and adjusted as appropriate and new FAQs developed on various aspects of fees, academic progress units, fee units, etc. and made available to students by mid-September, 2007. Information on the different types of units—academic progression and billing units—will be posted to demonstrate the difference between these types of units and how their tuition fees are calculated.

“Recommendation 3: My recommendation is that the decision-making process for all reinstatement and readmission applications be made as transparent as possible by the relevant School/Department or Faculty providing the following information: how reinstatement and readmission applications will be evaluated; when decisions will be released; and when an application is declined, the rationale for doing so along with advice on how to proceed with their academic planning from that point forward.”

Update: My understanding is that the University is intending to undertake a review of the overall issue of how Academic Standings are assigned and that the process for reinstatement/readmission will be included in that analysis.

At the end of the Fall 2006 term, the University undertook a pilot project involving the Faculties of Arts and the Business as well as the Engineering departments within the Faculty of Engineering,



Architecture and Science whereby first year students who would normally have been suspended at the end of the Fall term due to poor academic performance were automatically put on a more restrictive form of 'Probation'. Based on the statistics provided it is now apparent that 23% of the students who were put on 'Restricted Probation' are now able to continue their studies without interruption in Fall 2008. If the pilot project had not been implemented these students would not be pursuing full-time studies at Ryerson University. If the current policy had not been overridden by the pilot project, students who had not launched successful grade and/or standing appeals, would have taken the following path:

The majority of suspended first-year students would have been left to their own devices for the Winter 2007 Term;

In some instances, suspended students would have been allowed to return to classes as a Special Student on a Letter of Understanding in the Fall 2007 Term; and required to apply for Reinstatement or Readmission for the Winter 2008 term;

If they were deemed to be likely to be academically successful based on their performance in one or two courses during the Fall term and there was space available in the program, they would be allowed to continue with their program again in Winter 2008.

The outcome of this project suggests to me that the approach that has been piloted for this past year be considered a success not only for the students who were able to improve their academic performance by the end of the Winter term but also for the individuals who launched and administered the pilot project. My anecdotal experience is that many first year students that have been suspended at the end of the Fall term in previous years, and did not appeal their grades or standing successfully, chose not to undertake the reinstatement process described above due to the uncertainty of being reinstated even if they did very well on the courses pursued via a Letter of Understanding. As a result, they have chosen not to continue with post-second-

ary education or have elected to pursue further education via other institutions.

Given the results of the pilot project I would like to congratulate the University for taking this initiative and to encourage a continuing analysis of the benefits and detriments of this approach. It strikes me that the academic performance of a seventeen year old, first year student after four months of post secondary education may not be the best means of determining whether a student is enrolled in the program that is best suited to his or her academic abilities and aspirations. It also seems to be a reasonable approach given the academic promotion policies of comparable universities, the chronological age of many first year students and the low level of experience most first year students have in a demanding, rigorous academic program. A happy side effect of amending the promotion policy for first year students is the elimination of considerable amounts of time devoted to preparing and adjudicating appeals; preparing Letters of Understanding and preparing and adjudicating reinstatement requests.

“Recommendation 4: In addition to providing information on who the ‘resident’ academic advisors are, how to contact them and hosting orientations for first-year students, there is a continuing need for more proactive approaches for connecting with students as they move through their programs in order to ensure they are getting the information they need

in order to make best use of the University’s academic resources and expertise. As I raised this issue in my 2002/2003 report and the complaints in this area have continued to rise, I am recommending that the University take another look at developing additional ways and means to support this important function at all stages of the students’ progression.

Please see page seven for a description of the current situation regarding the availability of information and advising for academic purposes.”

“Recommendation 5: As I have observed situations where students have received different and sometimes conflicting advice from professors, Chairs/Directors, and Academic Advising staff, I would recommend that twice-yearly meetings be held with the relevant staff (e.g. academic staff who are providing advice and guidance) with their colleagues in ‘Academic Advising’ who are communicating with all students about pre-requisites, graduation requirements, and other related matters to ensure all concerned are on the ‘same page’.”

Please see page seven for a description of the current situation regarding the availability of information and advising for academic purposes.



The Ethics of 'Ombudsing'

In my opinion an Ombuds' ethical framework is built on an ethic of care and an ethic of rights. As one might expect, given the decreasing dependence on absolutism and increasing emphasis on relativism when thinking about what constitutes modern, ethical behaviour, Algretti (1996) notes that Jack and Jack (1996) accept that "[n]early everyone combines some degree of rights-and care-oriented moral thinking." Rights and care are seen as points on a spectrum... but in other cases the two orientations may overlap... Each incorporates elements of the other." (p. 175) The role of Ombuds seems to me to be an excellent example

of the confluence of the ethic of rights and the ethic of care into one person and one position. While Jack and Jack (1996) ask the following questions in relation to how lawyers are trained, they are the daily fare of an Ombuds: "How do we elevate the virtues of the morality of care while protecting individual rights and social equality? By what changes can we balance both the scales of justice and the ecology of relationships?" (p. 295). In attempting to determine which ethic should dominate in any given situation, Ombuds must ask: How do we fairly assess when our intervention should be founded largely on our desire to help

people demonstrate care for one another and the community by behaving in a collaborative manner without interfering with parties having rights respected and met and vice versa? How do we balance what may be competing priorities in day-to-day practice and what formulae or codes or standards can we use to assess the correctness of our choices with respect to the pursuit of 'care' or 'rights'?

I subscribe to the Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association.

References: Algretti, J. (1996). Rights, Roles, Relationships: The Wisdom of Solomon and the Ethics of Lawyers. In Buckingham, D.E., Bickenbach, J.E., Bronaugh, R., Wilson, B., (Eds.) *Legal Ethics in Canada: Theory and Practice*, (pp. 172–177), Toronto, ON: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada

In Appreciation

This annual report is being issued in the tenth year of operation of the Office of the Ombudsperson at Ryerson University. Thousands of concerns and complaints have been raised and fair resolutions achieved for all involved over the past decade. The establishment of an Ombudsperson or Ombudsman within a community is typically seen to be a proactive and progressive approach to fair and effective conflict resolution. I would like to commend the students, faculty and staff for their efforts on behalf of the people who have followed them and benefited through the founders' hard work. I would also like to acknowledge the commitment of one individual in particular, Keith Alnwick, the Registrar for the University, who was a member of the original task force that determined that an Ombudsperson should be included in the University's dispute resolution repertoire and who has served continuously as a member of the Ombudsperson Committee since its inception. I would also like to thank the current committee members who provide invaluable support and advice related to the administrative operation of the Office.

Some of the comments that were provided by users of this service are shown below as a testament to the prescience of the founding members of this service.

"very calm, professional, assisted with a difficult situation in a very helpful way"
"does a lot of positive things"
"fabulous, straight to the point, very objective"
"one of the best offices at the University"
"Ombudsperson is solely responsible for increasing respect for Ryerson and therefore for donations as an alumnus"
"Ombudsperson very professional, high level of commitment and integrity"
"very generous and empathetic—more useful than anyone—gives good information and direction"

It is inevitable that some individuals within the University community will encounter difficulty in their interactions with one another and the various means by which resources and services are provided. I would like to extend my appreciation to those who give one another the benefit of the doubt with respect to motive, and attempt to resolve problems respectfully and

expeditiously in good faith.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to students who take the time to bring their concerns forward for consideration when they know there will be no personal benefit for them given the timing or the circumstances simply because they are hoping that sharing their experience will assist members of the University community in the future.

Similarly, I would like to thank faculty and staff who endeavour to make their decisions fairly and expeditiously as they recognize that many of their decisions have life-changing effects on students and their family members. I would also like to express my appreciation to faculty, staff and students who consult with this Office in a proactive way in order to address conflict in a way that is fair for all concerned.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my gratitude for the work undertaken by the Ombudsperson Committee and express my appreciation for the hard work of the Acting Assistant Ombudsperson, Cerys McLellan and Heather McGhee Peggs who is currently on a one-year leave.