



FOCUS ON FAIRNESS

2022 – A Year in Review
Office of the Carleton University Ombudsperson

Message from the Ombudsperson

I am pleased to present our annual report for 2022, which covers the period of December 1, 2021, through November 30, 2022.

This last year has been a difficult one for many students who continued to grapple with the challenges of online learning, slow thaw of pandemic restrictions, as well as an eventual return to in-person studies. The full return to campus this past fall was unprecedented, as the University welcomed three cohorts of students, many of whom had never set foot on University grounds, been in a lecture hall, or written an exam in a packed auditorium. Though the University planned and provided extensive orientation and increased supports, this most recent shift continued to test students' resilience and adaptability.

Our small team of two managed and addressed a growing number of complaints and concerns. This year we contended with a high but declining number of academic integrity cases (ex: cheating and plagiarism), as well as a rise in files related to student mental health and wellness. While a series of cascading global events have surely contributed to the latter increase, several students we spoke to attribute their struggles to the ongoing impact of prolonged isolation and a life lived primarily online for the past two-and-a-half years.

We also noted a lack of flexibility and understanding on the part of some faculty members relating to requests for accommodation from students dealing with short-term illness (ex: COVID, the flu, etc.). This, despite clear and public-facing requests from the University that those experiencing flu symptoms not attend campus. Generally, these cases were quickly resolved following our intervention but were frustrating for students, nonetheless. As necessary, we engaged with faculties to ensure consistent and clear messaging to faculty.

Overall, we enjoyed a high level of cooperation and collaboration on the part of the faculty, staff, and student leaders we contacted in the course of our work. To a large extent, our communications were met with openness and a willingness to support students. We took meaningful steps to increase awareness and understanding of the significant role Ombuds Services plays at the University, for the resolution of individual student concerns, but also as a source of information, conflict coaching, and as a general arbiter of fairness. Much like a canary in a coal mine, we can (and do) identify issues and trends before they become problematic or widespread.

On a more granular level, we have been developing deeper subject matter expertise relating to academic integrity and associated University policies. In addition to providing support and guidance to students facing an allegation, we have increased our ability to proactively educate students and hopefully deter problematic academic behaviour. You can find further information about our efforts in the body of this report.

In closing, we would like to thank the students who entrusted us with their struggles as well as those in the Carleton Community who helped us to achieve meaningful and fair outcomes. I would also like to personally thank my colleague John Szczygiel, for his tireless work supporting students through the academic integrity process. He continues to do an outstanding job and I am so grateful for his dedication.

Melanie Chapman
University Ombudsperson



Background and Mandate

Ombuds Services is an independent office whose primary role is to ensure fairness for students at Carleton University. We provide support, information, and guidance for students facing challenges, such as academic integrity violations (cheating, plagiarism, etc.), misconduct, harassment, sexual violence, issues with housing/landlords, problems with courses or faculty or staff, University administration, student accounts, scholarships and awards, etc. We attempt to resolve issues informally, at the lowest possible level, and encourage students to do the same.

Our work can take a few forms. If a student has a complaint or concern, they can contact us to discuss the issue and we can provide advice about the most appropriate steps to take to resolve the matter. If a student needs additional support, we can assist them in navigating University policies and processes, through a lens of fairness and fair treatment. When a student has attempted to address their concern but has not achieved a fair resolution, Ombuds Services can intervene and communicate with staff/faculty in an attempt to resolve the concern.

In cases where we determine that a student has not been treated fairly or that a situation is not equitable, we can issue recommendations to the appropriate authority to correct the issue. It is important to note, however, that Ombuds Services does not have the power to unilaterally change or overturn a decision taken in the administration of University affairs. Instead, we leverage our impartial role and credible work to influence fair outcomes.

Further, we can identify and track trends that may impact students from a fairness perspective. We can investigate and report on systemic matters of fairness and can make recommendations to mitigate or correct situations that are unfair.

*"I can't overstate the value of being able to talk to someone within the institution who understood and cared about my situation."
- Carleton University Student*

The work of Ombuds Services is deeply rooted in four key principles:

Confidentiality

Ombuds Services conducts their business with tact and confidentiality. Students contacting the office for assistance can be confident their matter will be handled discreetly and that we will not undertake any action or discussions regarding their case without their consent.

Impartiality

The work of Ombuds Services is – and must always be – impartial. We have no vested interest in outcomes beyond their being fair. This approach ensures that our work is objective, balanced, and equitable.

Informality

Conflict and complaints are very costly to an institution, in terms of the time and resources they consume through formal processes and methods of adjudication, not to mention the turmoil they can cause for the parties involved. Where matters of concern can be addressed early and informally, outcomes are usually more equitable and less disruptive. It is for these reasons that Ombuds Services attempts to resolve issues at the lowest possible level and without unnecessary escalation.

Independence

The independence of Ombuds Services is closely linked to our impartiality. To be – and remain – objective in our work, we must not be encumbered by the organizations whose decisions and policies we are tasked to review. Consequently, the Carleton University Ombudsperson reports to a Coordinating Committee comprised of two individuals chosen by the Carleton University Students' Association, one person appointed by the President of Carleton University, and one individual appointed by the Senate of Carleton University.

*Thank you for everything. Without your support,
I would have not overcome this situation
- Carleton University Student*

The Year in Review

Despite a heavy workload, we achieved a high level of responsiveness, with most students waiting less than one business day for a response from our office.

Generally, students contact us because they are experiencing some level of frustration or distress. This was even more evident this year, with many students identifying a heightened level of anxiety or other mental health concerns in concert with their core complaint. In response, and in addition to lending a compassionate listening ear, we ensured students were made aware of the numerous mental health and wellness resources available on campus. We facilitated warm transfers as required and made urgent referrals when necessary. We have developed close, positive working relationships with the Care and Support team, which benefits students in need of support.

“Institutional bureaucracy is immensely frustrating, but we are all better off for having you and your office around.”

- Carleton University Student

Outreach

We continued to engage with the Carleton Community through a variety of outreach activities. More specifically, we logged 121 efforts and initiatives aimed at connecting with individuals across campus.

The following are some examples of our work in this vein:

I attended an “Ask Me Anything” event in September, along with the Manager of Student Conduct and Harm Reduction from Student Affairs. Our attendance was well-received and resulted in new contacts as well as positive feedback from students.

We amplified our presence on Reddit, as a means to monitor student concerns and connect with our core constituency. Comments from students and staff have been very supportive and we are pleased to see the Carleton Community engaging with us in new ways.

While our constituents are primarily students, it is also important for Ombuds Services to act as a resource for staff and faculty, providing advice and guidance to ensure fairness considerations are front-of-mind in their work and decision-making. I heard from dozens of staff and faculty members over the year, with questions related to best-practices for handling student concerns, referral to appropriate resources/processes, collaboration with our office, and equitable decision-making.

*This is most helpful and I'm so glad I asked you about it.
You've articulated what I was thinking but unable to put into words.*

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

- Associate Dean

As a final example, we tailored our efforts related to academic integrity by prioritizing individual support while also conducting proactive workshops and presentations specifically targeting international students, who are disproportionately represented in the academic misconduct process. These

information sessions are designed to educate students about the University’s academic integrity policy, explain the associated administrative process, and to warn them about what we have termed “the dark side” of academic integrity. For example, some struggling students hire faceless, online tutors who then exploit or extort them for money and/or provide them with recycled answers, resulting in cheating allegations when students submit identical work.

The impact of academic misconduct sanctions can also be far greater for international students, especially in cases of course failure or suspension. For those reasons, we hope our earnest efforts to educate and inform will result in fewer international students finding themselves facing allegations and more knowing where to turn if they need guidance and support. This past year, we held virtual workshops and, in cooperation with the International Student Services Office, presented at orientation sessions tailored to international students joining the Carleton Community for the first time.

I want to thank you again for everything you have done and helped me with over the last few months. From meetings, advice and preparing letters and appeals, I am truly grateful.
- Carleton University Student

Our efforts have resulted in increased awareness of - and demand for – our services which, while predictable, is a double-edged sword. We strive to balance this growth with our ability to provide a high level of responsiveness and timely interventions over the longer term.

Operations and Service Excellence

In addition to our ongoing efforts to streamline both our services and the students’ experience, Ombuds Services made some specific improvements to our operations.

In the summer and fall of 2022, we began the process of refreshing our website and related pages. Much of the information contained therein was outdated or repetitive, so we have been, over the past few months, streamlining our online content, grouping resources and information in a more user-friendly and logical fashion, and embedding shortcuts to enable students to connect with us easily and quickly. This continues to be a work in progress.

As much as I’d love to speak with you again, I hope I won’t have to.
I think I speak for many people when I say I’m very happy you and your department exist.
- Carleton University Student

Although it is a small change, we added an optional pronouns field to our online intake form, inviting students to share their pronouns which, in turn, allows us to create a more personalized, respectful, and inclusive space.

We have also been taking steps to review our medium and long-term records-keeping practices in collaboration with the Corporate Archivist for Carleton and in line with the University’s retention and disposition schedule. This is also a work in progress.

Training, Conferences, and Communities of Practice

As Ombudsperson, I am a member of the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO), as well as the International Ombuds Association (IOA).

The ACCUO is an "... independent association dedicated to promoting and fostering an understanding and appreciation of the role of an Ombudsperson within universities and colleges across Canada and to support its members through networking, education and professional development opportunities."¹ The IOA is a "...member-led, professional association committed to supporting organizational ombuds worldwide."²

These communities of practice are very important to the role and function of an Ombudsperson. They provide valuable support and insight, as well as opportunities to consult other Ombuds practitioners about matters of fairness, challenges in our work, best practices, and important publications (ex: discussion papers, precedent-setting court decisions, etc.).

Occasionally, these associations will hold conferences, allowing their members to meet, learn, and connect in important ways. The global pandemic put a stop to in-person events for just about every industry but I was thrilled to attend the biennial Forum of Canadian Ombudsman conference, jointly-hosted by the ACCUO and held in Ottawa this past October. The theme for the two-day session was "Together Again: Strengthening Ombuds Practice through Connectedness and Inclusion." Highlights included meaningful steps we can take toward reconciliation with indigenous communities, administrative law updates, best practices for procedural fairness, and strategies to encourage the implementation of recommendations. It was an excellent opportunity to meet new peers, reconnect with longtime colleagues, and discuss our collective work.

Elections

In the spring of 2022, I assisted the Carleton University Students' Association (CUSA) with their annual student executive election as the non-voting Chair of the Electoral Board. Ombuds Services has served in this capacity for many years, from a perspective of both independence and impartiality. A lot of work was done by CUSA over the preceding year to review and revise the Electoral Code, which strove to streamline and improve the process. Later in 2022, CUSA's internal judicial policy review removed the need for future involvement from this office, in terms of elections. It will be paramount for CUSA to embed procedural fairness protections in related judicial committee processes and decisions. Of course, Ombuds Services remains available to consult and engage further, if and as necessary.

I also assisted The Charlatan with its annual election of editors. Ombuds Services has historically been the keeper of ballots when voting was in-person, but with the process moving online and being done electronically, I sent out ballots by e-mail, received all votes, and tallied results. I am a staunch supporter of fair process and pleased to know that Ombuds Services is trusted with these democratic activities that rely on integrity and objectivity to remain credible.

*You were instrumental in our conducting a successful election this year,
and we're incredibly grateful for all of your hard work and dedication.*
- Chair of the Charlatan Election

¹ <https://accuo.ca/about/a-word-about-the-association/>

² <https://www.ombudsassociation.org/>

Data and Statistics

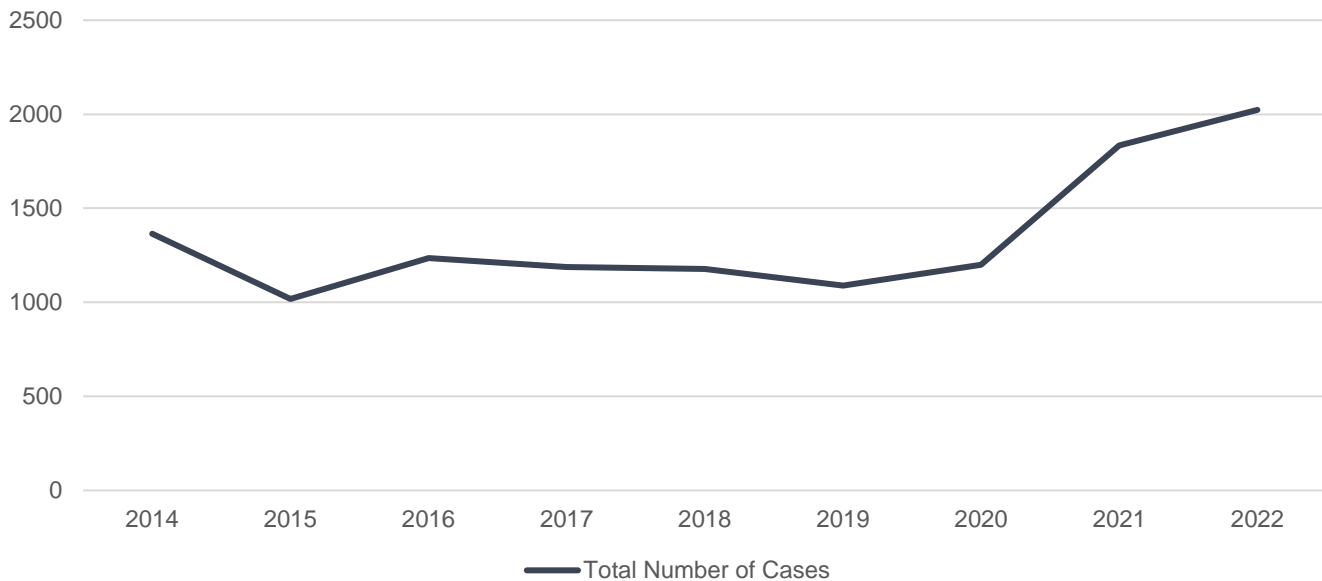
Our annual reporting cycle runs from December 1 through November 30 of the following year. Below, you will find information, statistics, and an analysis of the cases received over the past year. For the purposes of our data collection and reporting, we consider a case to be a singular issue, complaint, or concern. When someone contacts Ombuds Services regarding multiple, separate issues, we count each as a single case. We have also included year-over-year comparisons, to help us track growth and trends. One such trend was the significant increase in academic integrity cases when classes moved online in 2020, due to the pandemic.

Note: the academic integrity numbers presented in the second table represent the cases where Ombuds Services assisted students before, during, and/or after the alleged academic misconduct. The actual number of academic integrity cases at the University is higher than what we have presented below.

Number of Cases Handled by Ombuds Services – Year Over Year

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1364	1018	1235	1188	1178	1089	1200	1835	2023

Total Number of Cases - Year Over Year



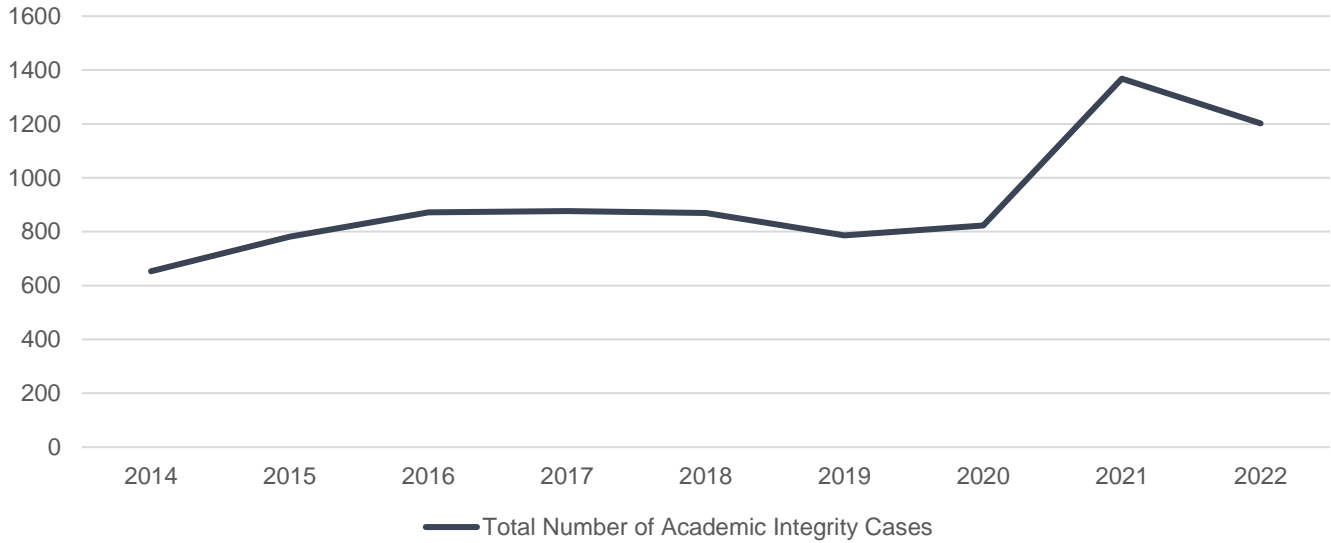
In 2022, we handled 2023 cases, which represents a 10% increase over last year and an 85% increase from pre-pandemic numbers in 2019. This exponential growth can be mostly attributed to the spike in academic integrity allegations when classes (and exams) moved online.

Ombuds Services has also placed an emphasis upon outreach and engagement, which means more students are aware of our office as well as the services we provide.

Number of Academic Integrity Cases Handled by Ombuds Services – Year Over Year

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
653	781	872	876	869	786	823	1368	1202

**Total Number of Academic Integrity Cases Handled by Ombuds Services -
Year Over Year**

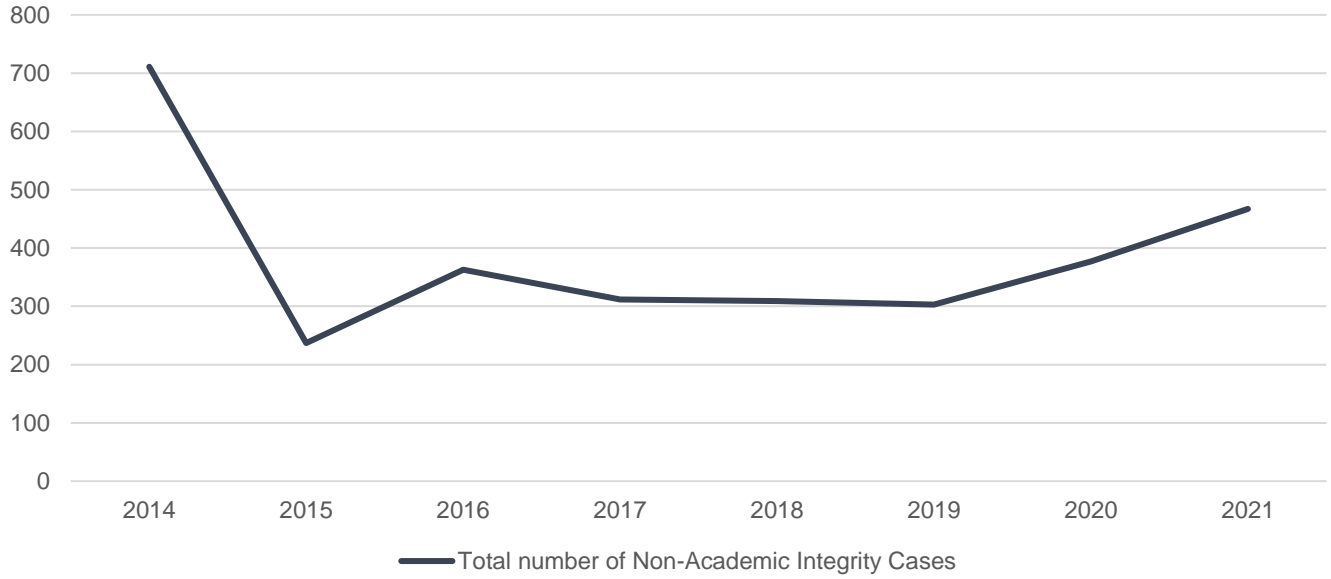


Although the number of allegations remains high, we are pleased to see a decline in the number of academic integrity cases overall.

Number of Non-Academic Integrity Cases Handled by Ombuds Services – Year Over Year

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
711	237	363	312	309	303	377	467	821

Total number of Non-Academic Integrity Cases



Caseload and Categories (December 2021 – November 2022)

Academic Accommodation	54
Academic Advising	17
Academic Integrity	1202
Academics (Grading/Grade Appeal)	97
Campus Security	0
Carleton University Students' Association	16
Discrimination	5
Exams (Design/Administration/Technological Issues)	65
Faculty Conduct	48
Faculty Performance	124
Financial (Assistance/Ontario Student Assistance Program)	12
Financial (Scholarship/Awards)	7
Financial (Student Fees/Accounts)	25
Housing (Off-Campus)	20
Housing (On-Campus)	10
Miscellaneous/Other (Off-Campus)	12
Miscellaneous/Other (On-Campus)	22
Parking / Parking Tickets	1
Registration/Records	68
Sexual Violence	8
Staff (Conduct/Performance)	17
Student (Conduct)	20
Student (Health/Wellness)	117
Undetermined	6
University Administration	50
Total Cases	2023

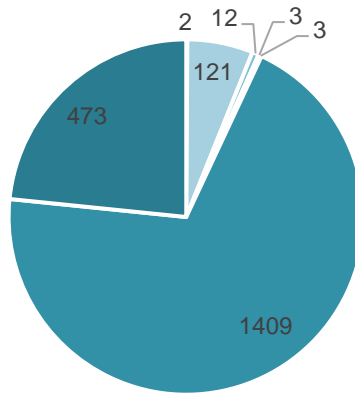
In 2022, we noted an increase in cases we categorized as “faculty performance.” These complaints and concerns related primarily to real or perceived inflexibility on the part of professors, relative to the challenges students had to navigate when classes returned to an in-person format (ex: self-declarations for missed attendance due to illness, etc.) as well as poor responsiveness on the part of some faculty. In some cases, students were sending multiple e-mails to their instructor over weeks (and sometimes months) without a response. The overwhelming majority of these complaints were resolved after the involvement of Ombuds Services. In some cases, escalation to the Chair/Director was also necessary.

Complaints by Constituency Group (December 2021 – November 2022)

Alum	Graduate Students	Outside of Carleton University	Special Students
2	121	12	3

Staff and Faculty	Undergraduate Students	Unknown or Not Captured
3	1409	473

Breakdown by Constituency Group



- Alumna
- Graduate Students
- Outside of Carleton University
- Special Students
- Staff and Faculty
- Undergraduate Students
- Unknown or Not Captured

Case Studies and Recommendations

*Just wanted to reach out and say thank you so much for all of your help today
and the motivation you have given me to hopefully make this situation so much better.*
- Carleton University Student

A Matter of Time

A student contacted Ombuds Services because their professor was going beyond the posted three-hour time allotment for lectures each week. The lectures were recorded and, in some cases, would exceed four to six hours. Several students had tried to address this with the professor, who suggested they watch the recordings at 1.5x or 2.0x speed. After meeting with the student, I recommended the matter be escalated to the Chair of the department. The Chair was very responsive and discussed the matter with the professor, who agreed to adhere to the posted time limit moving forward. The student shared with Ombuds Services that they were pleased with the outcome.

A Domino Effect

A student contacted Ombuds Services because they were withdrawn from Course B because they were missing the prerequisite (Course A). The student was missing the credit for Course A because they failed it. They failed Course A because there was a technical issue with their submission of some final course work. As it turns out, the professor of Course A ultimately agreed to accept and grade the student's course work, which would retroactively revise their grade, granting them the credit and, therefore, the prerequisite. Despite having been withdrawn, the student continued to attend Course B and complete the course work, in the hope the situation could be resolved. By the time they contacted Ombuds Services, the student's efforts to secure reinstatement into Course B had proven unsuccessful. Following my discussion with the student, as well as stakeholders at the Registrar's Office and departmental level, the student was permitted to reenroll in Course B, thereby remaining on track for graduation.

A Stressful Process

In many cases, the stress of facing an academic integrity allegation was compounded for students by the delays in the administration of the process, on the University's side. I had several conversations with faculty and staff (including departmental Chairs, Student Affairs, and Associate Deans) about the high number of students experiencing severe anxiety and, in some cases, expressing suicidal ideation related to pending academic integrity allegations and/or associated sanctions (ex: suspension, expulsion, etc.). Most of the time, Ombuds Services was able to deescalate the situation and connect the student with appropriate supports and resources. The timing of allegation letters, however, was not always conducive to students receiving timely information and support from Ombuds Services. For instance, letters sent on a Friday or before a university closure (ex: statutory holiday) could leave students waiting days to meet with us.

Consequently, in the summer of 2022, we recommended faculties take the following steps to facilitate student access to our services and to reduce some of the stress experienced by students:

1. Avoid sending allegation letters/associated emails to students on a Friday or the day before a statutory holiday or University closure, when it may be difficult for them to access our services, or other support resources.

From our perspective, preserving students' ability to access our office for advice and guidance in a timely manner reduces unnecessary stress and an overreliance on incorrect information found online or through misinformed peers.

This recommendation was accepted and adopted by all faculties.

2. Include a more detailed paragraph about Ombuds Services in allegation letters so that students better understand our role and can connect with us quickly.

The text we proposed included hyperlinks to our booking page, so students could request a meeting to discuss their case and seek support, as well as links to our e-mail and online contact form.

Though the chosen wording varied across faculties, the spirit of this recommendation was adopted across the board.

I am so grateful for all the effort you have put into my case. Thank you for always being there for me through this whole process. It has been a very long and stressful time. I am so thankful I had someone I could come to for help and support. I could not have done it without you. I truly appreciate all you have done for me.
- Carleton University Student
