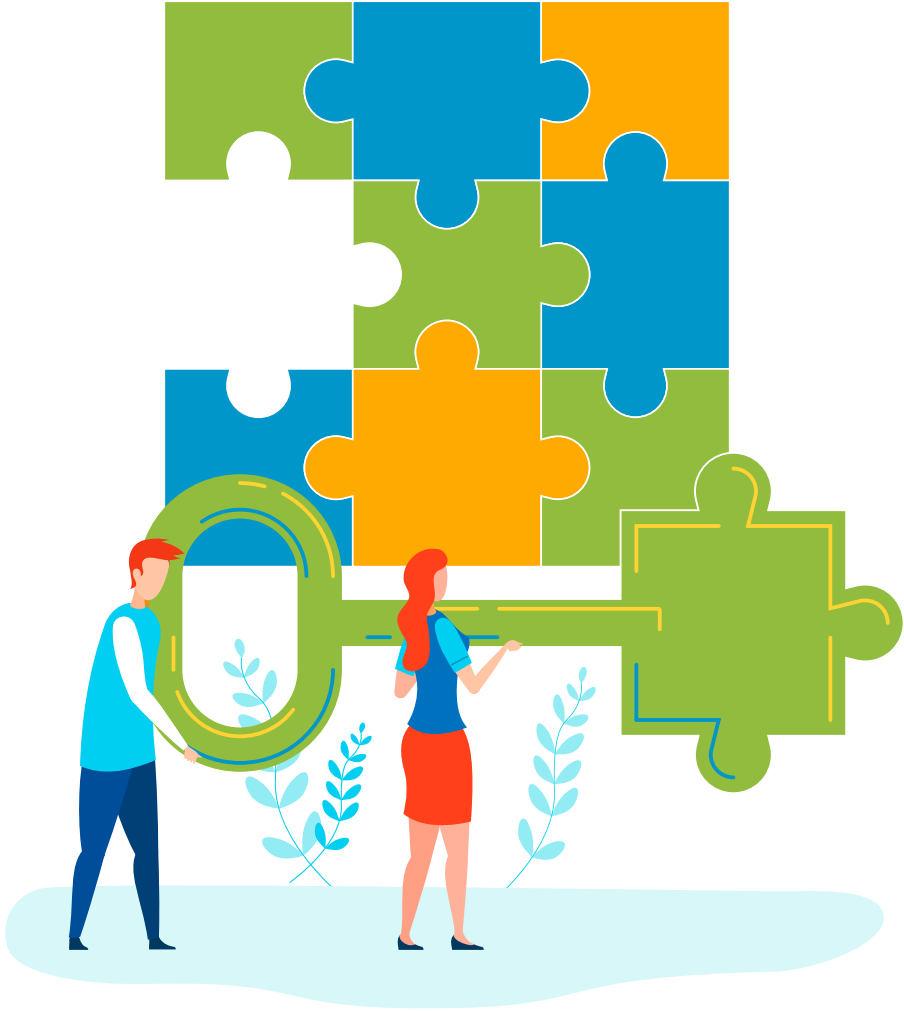


ANNUAL REPORT

September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2021

Office of the Ombudsperson Camosun College



**Rob Thompson, Ombudsperson
Victoria, BC**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Camosun College is committed to the just and fair treatment of students. To this end, since 1992 the College and the Camosun College Student Society have together supported the operation of the Office of the Ombudsperson. The role of the Ombudsperson is to deal with inquiries, concerns, complaints, and grievances on any College matter affecting students. The Ombudsperson serves as an independent, impartial and confidential third party in support of fairness and natural justice to provide all possible assistance to students so that they may advocate effectively on their own behalf.

COVID-19 was a present and dominant factor throughout this entire reporting period. During these twelve months from 1 September – 31 August 2021, the Office was involved in 188 new cases and consultations, in addition to three ongoing cases from the previous academic year, for a total of 191 active visitor cases & consultations. Through 561+ substantial contact meetings, the Ombudsperson met with 174 student visitors who raised questions and concerns about virtually every College-related school and service: academic marks and decisions, finances and tuition, course management, records, interpersonal conflicts, personal issues, placements and clinicals, and accommodations. This is roughly 1% of the total registered college student population of 16,000 (*Institutional Accountability Plan and Report 2020/21*).

Students accounted for the vast majority of the 188 visitors: 174 students (92%); with faculty, parents, community members, and own motion concerns making up the other 14 cases (8%). Issues were raised more often by women (62%) than men (32%); other/unknown (6%). Considering the student visitors, at least 19% were international students, the remainder domestic. While 90% were current students, 3% were applying, 4% had graduated, and 3% had dropped. Regarding the overall subject of concerns, 75% were academic-related; 20% were non-academic, and 5% were both. Although questions and concerns were heard about almost every sector of the College, the schools of Arts & Science and Health & Human Services were the two most frequently discussed, with 31% and 26% of visitors respectively. It is important to note that visitors use the Office services for a variety of reasons, including questions, requests, seeking clarity, concerns, and complaints, and many issues are resolved promptly.

To meet, the Office uses whatever mode visitors prefer: MS Teams video (41% of initial meetings), email (30%), phone (27%), and Zoom video (2%). Because COVID-19 restrictions began in mid-March 2020, in-person meetings were not possible during this reporting period.

The outcome categories of consultations and cases include: resolved (55% or 105 cases); no contact after 1 month / outcome unknown (35% or 67 cases); partially resolved (7% or 13 cases); ongoing/pending (1.5% or 3 cases); not resolved (1.5% or 3 cases). The categories of the Office's actions taken to resolve the concern are numerous and often a single case or consultation involves multiple actions including listening / providing info and advice / exploring options (184 times), clarifying – info gathering and fact-finding (60), and internal referral (24), shuttle diplomacy (23), meeting facilitation or observation (23), among numerous others. A complete list of actions taken and other reporting categories are presented in the data section.

Finally, while the Office did not conduct formal investigations on systemic issues during the last year and is not making formal recommendations in this report, it has made a number of informal, confidential inquiries and recommendations at the department level, several which are included in the statistical section of this report as 'own motion' cases.

INTRODUCTION

What a year this has been for everyone at Camosun, with the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacting the daily lives of students and staff!

I began my role as Ombudsperson in March 2020 and am now pleased to report on my first full academic year at Camosun College. An important responsibility of a post-secondary ombudsperson, underlining transparency, is to report back to the community regarding the Office's activities during the previous year. I am very pleased to present this report covering the period of the academic year, September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2021. As Office records are not available from recent years, this is my first full annual report. For these reasons, this report does not include past data and cannot detail long-term trends.

I am thankful to be able to support fairness at Camosun College, located in beautiful Victoria, British Columbia. As a visitor, originally from southern Ontario, I feel grateful to live and work on the Traditional Territories of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples. I acknowledge their welcome and graciousness to the students who seek knowledge here.

The Office was established in 1992 and we will therefore soon celebrate its 30th anniversary. While most Canadian universities have Ombuds offices, many colleges do not, and I am heartened by Camosun's commitment to fairness.

Conflict is natural. It's not a negative thing in itself. Conflict is part of being human, growing and developing, and so it's crucial that we see it this way as it will be with us our entire lives. How we deal with conflict is key. When conflict escalates, and especially when it becomes protracted or aggressive, it can become harmful and also costly. Escalated conflict can consume enormous resources, both personal and institutional, in the form of time, money and stress. This is the area which concerns the Office: supporting the College community to resolve conflicts before they escalate to the point where they cause damage, harm or wasted resources.

Despite COVID restrictions, I have been extremely impressed with the manner by which students, faculty and staff have negotiated the COVID-19 crisis together. I have enjoyed working with you, and am sincerely grateful for your support and patience as I find my bearings. I very much appreciate the warm Camosun welcome. I enthusiastically look forward to continued collaboration with the Camosun community to ensure fairness and equity on campus.

Submitted respectfully,

Rob Thompson, Ombudsperson

WHAT THE OMBUDSPERSON DOES: MISSION, STRUCTURE AND MANDATE

There is usually a story behind what happened, and I think that's part of the ombudsman role... to try to unearth that story, to find the nuance, and [see if it] has relevance to the problem or not. I have always maintained an interest in the need for complex organizations to have a human face.

Carol Hubberstey, Former Ombudsman, University of Victoria, BC

Ombudsman, a word of Swedish origin, is an official appointed to investigate individuals' complaints against a company or organization, especially a public authority ([dictionary.com/browse/ombudsman](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ombudsman)). Synonyms include: defender, preserver, minder, guardian, watchdog. The first post-secondary Ombuds in North America was established in 1965 at Simon Fraser University.

MISSION

The mission of the Office of the Ombudsperson is to ensure that students are treated fairly at the College. The Office is a safe place to voice and clarify concerns and complaints. By advocating for fairness and natural justice, the Ombudsperson helps to achieve equitable resolutions.

STRUCTURE AND MANDATE

As Camosun College and the Camosun College Student Society are committed to the just and fair treatment of every member of the College community, they collaborate in supporting the operation of the Office of the Ombudsperson. This service is independent, confidential, impartial, informal, free of cost, and highly accessible. It serves all Camosun campuses. To support its independence, the Student Society and the College fund the Office equally. The Ombudsperson is advised by the VP Student Experience, Heather Cummings, and CCSS Executive Director, Michel Turcotte, normally bi-weekly. While it is understood that College students (members of CCSS) comprise the vast majority of visitors, the Ombudsperson consults confidentially as well with College and CCSS staff and faculty.

The mandate of the Office is twofold in nature. Firstly, the Office provides an independent, impartial and confidential process through which students may find assistance and advice toward a fair and equitable resolution of any College-related concern. The Ombudsperson acts as a support and resource, providing all possible assistance to visitors so that visitors may advocate and act on their own behalf. In order to do this, the Ombudsperson makes every effort to expeditiously obtain the necessary materials to inform visitors on matters of policy, procedure, and individual rights, as well as available services.

Secondly, when trends, patterns, policies, procedures, or practices of the College generate systemic concerns or conflicts, the Office can initiate reviews or investigations and make corresponding recommendations when appropriate. Some recommendations may be initiated to promote discussion or draw attention to institution-wide concerns. However, the Office cannot make binding decisions on any case. Monitoring for potential systemic concerns is the vital

reason that the Office collects aggregate data on cases and consultations – to become aware of trends, such as an increasing number of complaints or conflicts in a certain area, to be able to offer support for conflict prevention and de-escalation.

The Ombudsperson acts in accordance with the principles of natural justice and fairness, within the existing policies of Camosun College, and in compliance with the Standards of Practice of the Association of Canadian College and College Ombudspersons (ACCUO). Within a Canadian post-secondary context, ACCUO Standards of Practice state that an ombudsperson:

- fosters respectful, fair and equitable policies, practices and treatment of individuals
- functions independently of the administrative structures of the institution and of the staff, faculty and student associations
- operates in an impartial and objective manner
- respects confidentiality
- provides information, advice and intervention
- investigates and/or informally resolves complaints through access to persons, records, files and information
- recommends on individual and systemic issues without decision-making authority to implement the recommendation
- reports publicly and/or issues an annual report to the authority designated in the terms of reference of the office.

This is a partial list of the ACCUO Standards of Practice. For the complete list, see:

accuo.ca

accuo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SoP.pdf

Visitor Statistical Data

THE YEAR IN NUMBERS

Visitor cases & consultations

Visitor cases & consultations 2020-21	188
	➤ average ~15 new/month
Cases ongoing from 2019-20	3
Total active visitor cases & consultations 2020-21	191
Total student visitors	174
Faculty, staff and community visitors	14
% of student visitors accessing the Office	~1%

Meetings

Number of meetings	561+
average # meetings / visitor	2.9
maximum # meetings / visitor	17
	➤ 34 visitors had 5+ meetings
	➤ 4 visitors had 10+ meetings

Length of involvement / visitor [n = 191]

average # days / visitor	8.8
maximum # days / visitor	98
	➤ 33 cases were open for 2 weeks+
	➤ 17 cases were open for 1 month+

Recommendations

Recommendations made	7
	➤ 2 based on visitor complaint inquiries
	➤ 5 based on own motion inquiries

Additional office activity and actions

Faculty/staff consult on student or policy	20
Student didn't pursue initial inquiry or complaint	6
Presentations & other meetings	50+
⇒ includes academic program introductions, networking, training, workshops, student orientation fairs, etc.	

Webpage

Main Ombudsperson webpage unique pageviews	2093
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Overview of Aggregate Visitor Data

During 2020-2021, the Office welcomed a wide range of visitors and their concerns. Some were short consultations for information, guidance and referrals, while others involved numerous and lengthy meetings, further research, external clarification, meeting facilitation and observation, and shuttle diplomacy. Normally, the Ombudsperson could arrange meetings promptly and meet with visitors virtually or by phone within a day or two.

The Ombudsperson met with visitors who raised concerns about virtually every College-related faculty and service. Examples of concerns addressed include:

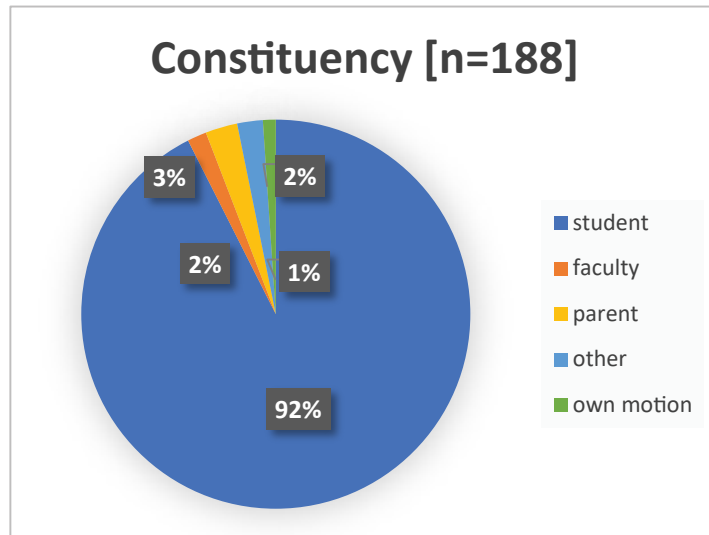
- academic issues such as grades, exams and appeals, academic advising, academic status
- academic misconduct / plagiarism
- interpersonal disputes between students, faculty and staff
- tuition and financial issues
- disability accommodations
- campus services
- personal matters

The 174 student visitors to the Office over the academic year, represent roughly 1% of the total College population of 16,000 students [*Institutional Accountability Plan and Report 2020/21*]. This percentage can indicate the current climate, transparency, and amount of student supports available at a post-secondary institution. The Ombudsperson has realized after eighteen months on campus that some students are either unaware of the Office or unclear of the Office's role. Therefore, it will be necessary to continually educate and create awareness about the Office so that students can take advantage of the service.

As this was the Ombudsperson's first full academic year at Camosun in this role, and little detailed Office data from recent years exists, the Office is unable to properly compare this year to prior years. In coming years, however, this aggregate data may help the college identify themes for discussion.

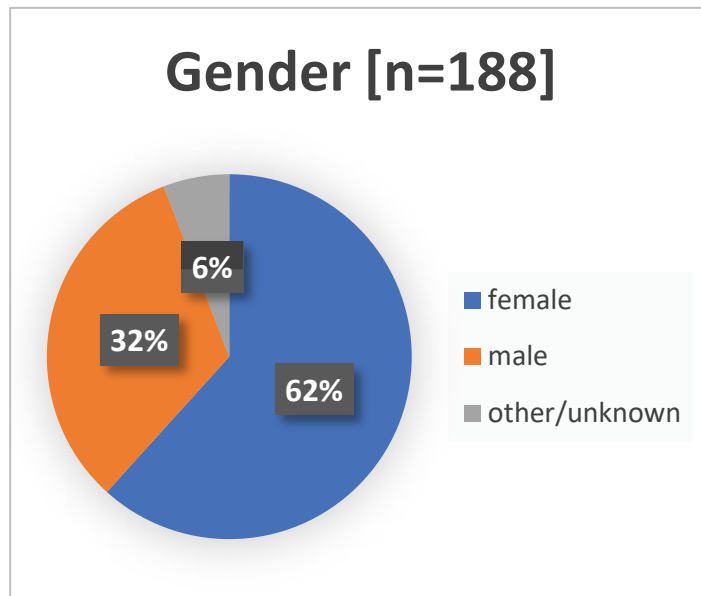
Considering the visitor data from the past year, we can see that students accounted for the vast majority of visitors (92%); parents 3%; and faculty 2% (please see Fig. 1 below). 'Own motion' cases are those where the Ombudsperson has learned about a concern, though not through a student, and has consequently conducted a review and made subsequent recommendations.

Fig. 1 Constituency



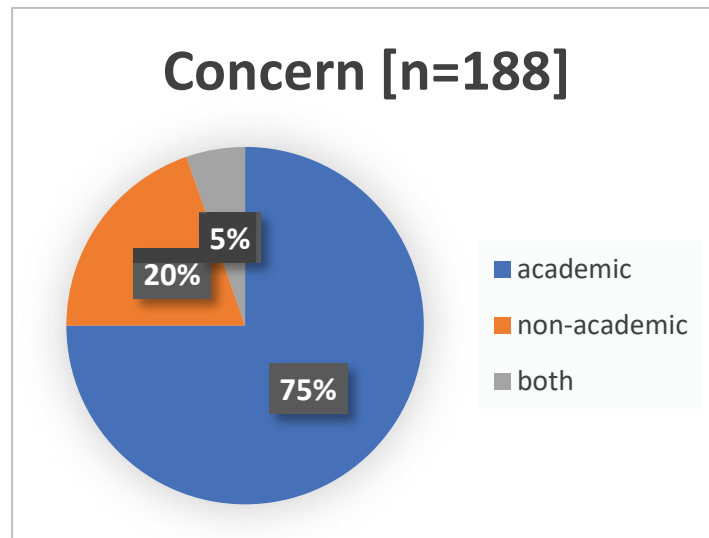
Concerns were raised more often by women (62%) than men (32%); other/unknown 6% (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Gender



Regarding the subject of visitors' concerns, 75% were academic-related, 20% were non-academic, and 5% were both (Fig. 3). Data for more detailed categories of academic and non-academic concerns is found below in Fig. 7 and Fig. 8.

Fig. 3 Concern

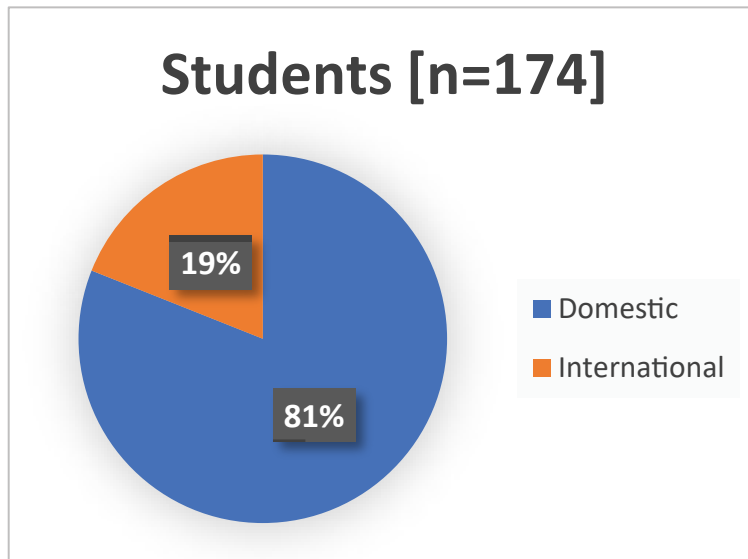


Of the student visitors, 81% were domestic students while 19% were international students (Fig. 4). This figure is slightly more than the general ratio of domestic to international students at the College [2,000 of the College's total student population of 16,000 are international, or 12.5%, *Institutional Accountability Plan and Report 2020/21*].

CASE STUDIES

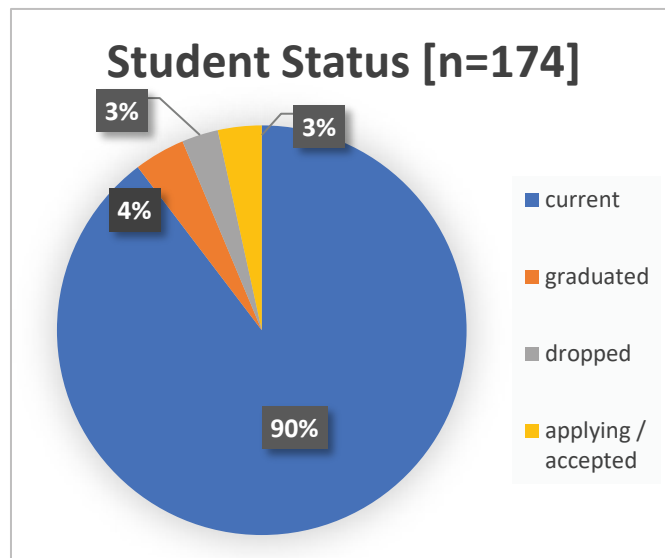
Many international students request assistance navigating challenging circumstances. They are of course well supported by Camosun International as well. For example, one student asked for support in navigating a request to register late for a course. The Associate Dean reviewed it and granted the exception. Several others were stressed about getting transcripts, as they were required for work permits. Occasionally, a student contacted the Office with a concern that they were being treated differently in the class than domestic students or that domestic students were favoured. One student questioned the fairness of the refund policy for international students after she withdrew completely from her program several months before the program started; even after appeal, she was refunded \$6500 from the approximately \$14,000 total.

Fig. 4 Students



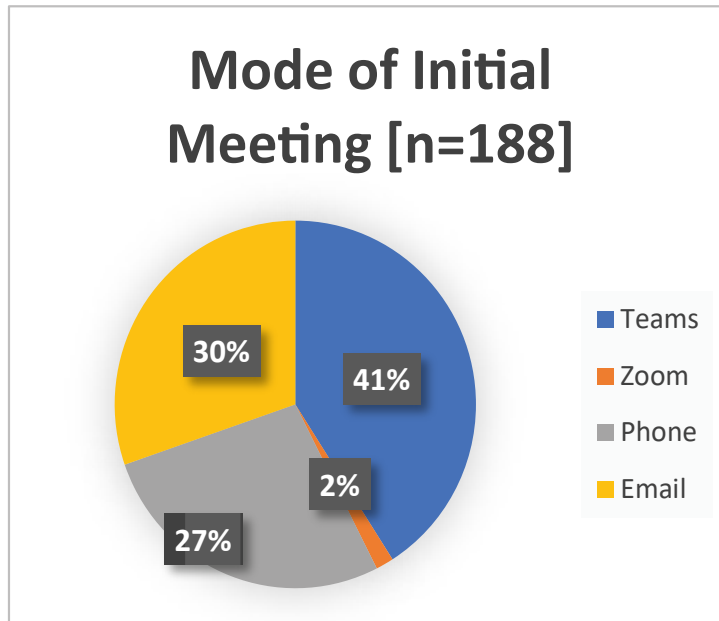
Most student visitors were current students (90%), while others were graduated (4%), dropped (3%), or applying / accepted (3%) (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 Student Status



To meet with visitors, the Ombudsperson uses whatever mode is most suitable for visitors: Microsoft Teams video (41%), email (30%), and phone (27%) being most common (Fig. 6). Sadly, not one meeting in this period was in person due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Fig. 6 Mode of Initial Meeting



The broad range of academic concerns raised by visitors is presented here, and often visitors raised more than one concern. 'Course/program management and improvement' (67 visitors) was the concern most often raised, followed by 'grades' (46 visitors), 'academic misconduct' (14 visitors), and 'accommodations' (10 visitors). (Fig. 7)

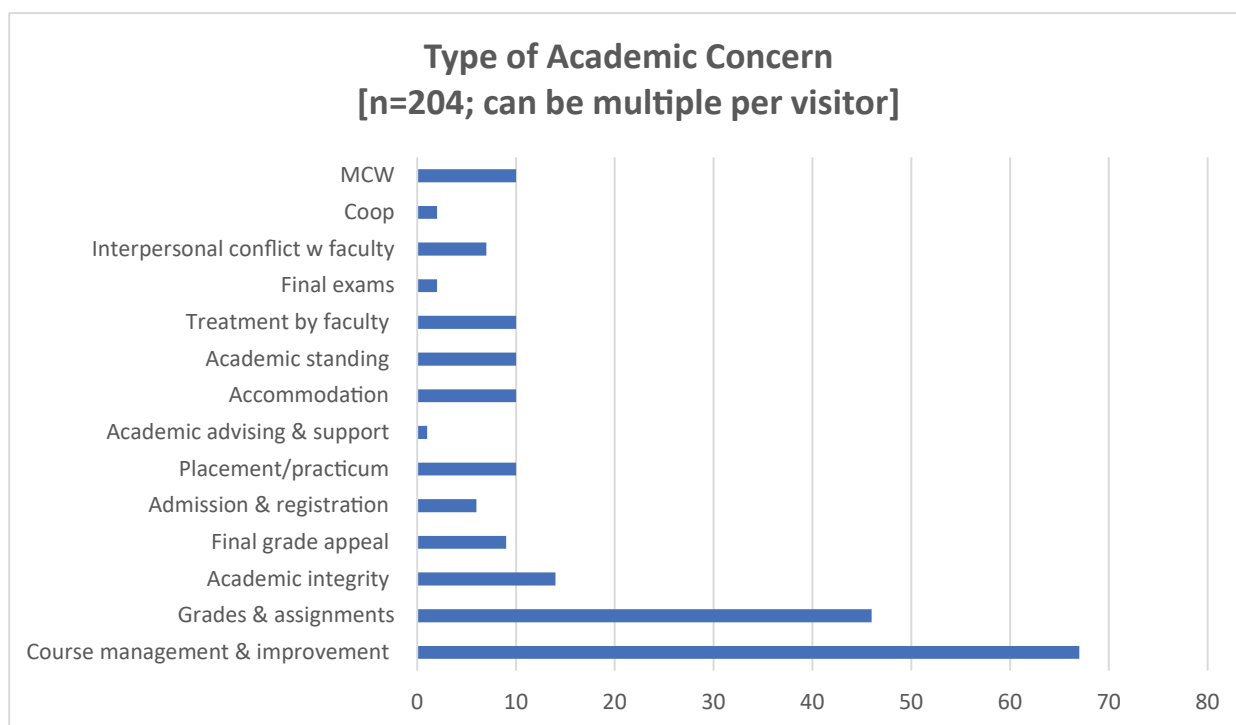
CASE STUDY

Several concerns in the 'course/program management and improvement' category are worth highlighting. Not surprisingly, the significant increase in concerns in this category was very likely exacerbated by COVID-19 and the rapid move to online learning for the majority of courses. With great time and effort, most instructors skillfully transitioned their courses to distance learning so that students could successfully meet their program requirements. Very few complaints were received about these transitioned courses, and from what the Ombudsperson heard from students, students were very understanding and forgiving when instructors had clearly made a sincere effort, as in the vast majority of courses. Rather, complaints regarding course management surrounded courses which were not properly transitioned and were "taught by email," where a handful of instructors in two departments managed their courses by offering no live or recorded instruction, lectures, tutoring, and in some cases no office hours. In these isolated situations, the only regular communication with students was by email, and in one case, the only resource provided to students was handwritten lecture notes. It is worth noting that these practices continued throughout both the fall and winter semesters in a small minority of courses, and numerous students raised concerns with the Office about these courses. The Ombudsperson spoke with the School's Dean after the concerns were not resolved with the instructors and chairs, and coached students in advocating for themselves through the Student Complaint Process.

CASE STUDY

One theme that was **not** raised with the Office this year was complaints regarding timely responses for academic processes such as academic appeal decisions. The Ombudsperson observed and was positively impressed that chairs and deans almost always promptly made time to meet students and then provided responses within process timelines (and often early – for example, within the required five business days for an appeal decision). This is unfortunately not the case at all post-secondary institutions; timeliness for decisions can be a significant issue at some institutions which can lead to additional stress and discord. Camosun deans seem very aware of the importance of timely decisions at their level, as students' own planning may hinge on an appeal decision. The chairs and deans are setting an excellent example by following these college timelines. Bravo and thank you!

Fig. 7 Type of Academic Concern

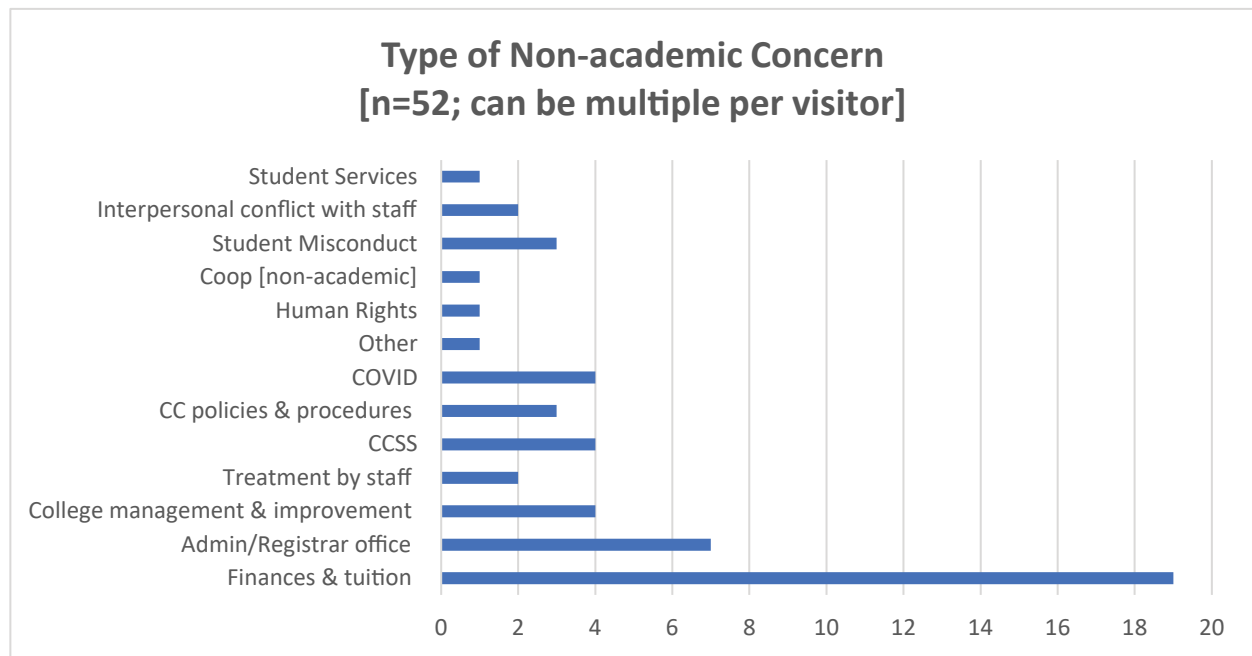


There were also a wide range of non-academic concerns raised by visitors. Again, some visitors communicated multiple concerns. The main concerns raised include 'finances and tuition' (19 visitors), College administration / Registrar's Office (7 visitors), 'College management & improvement' (4 visitors), and CCSS (4 visitors) (Fig. 8).

CASE STUDY

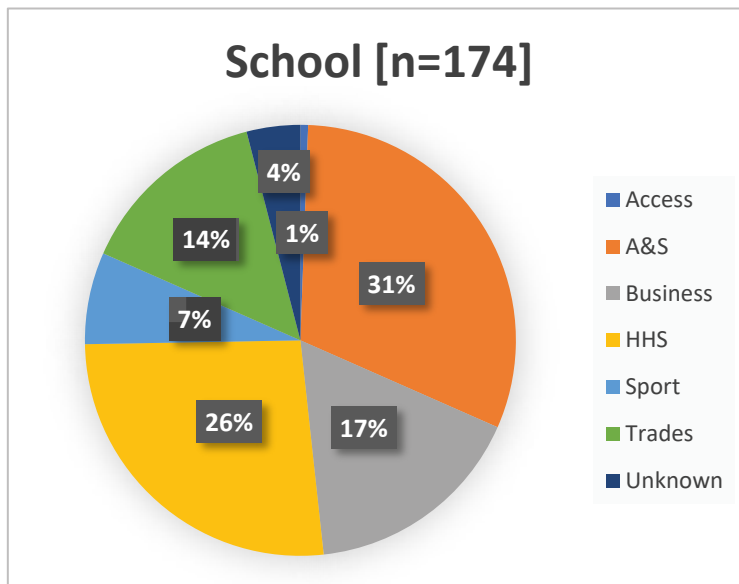
It might surprise some to know that very few complaints were received about COVID-specific policies and guidelines, and in fact only four. Rather than arguing against Provincial Health Office mask or physical distancing guidelines, these four students were mainly requesting that the College do even more for health and safety. In one case, a student was concerned for the health and safety of the residents living in her practicum placement facility.

Fig. 8 Type of Non-academic Concern



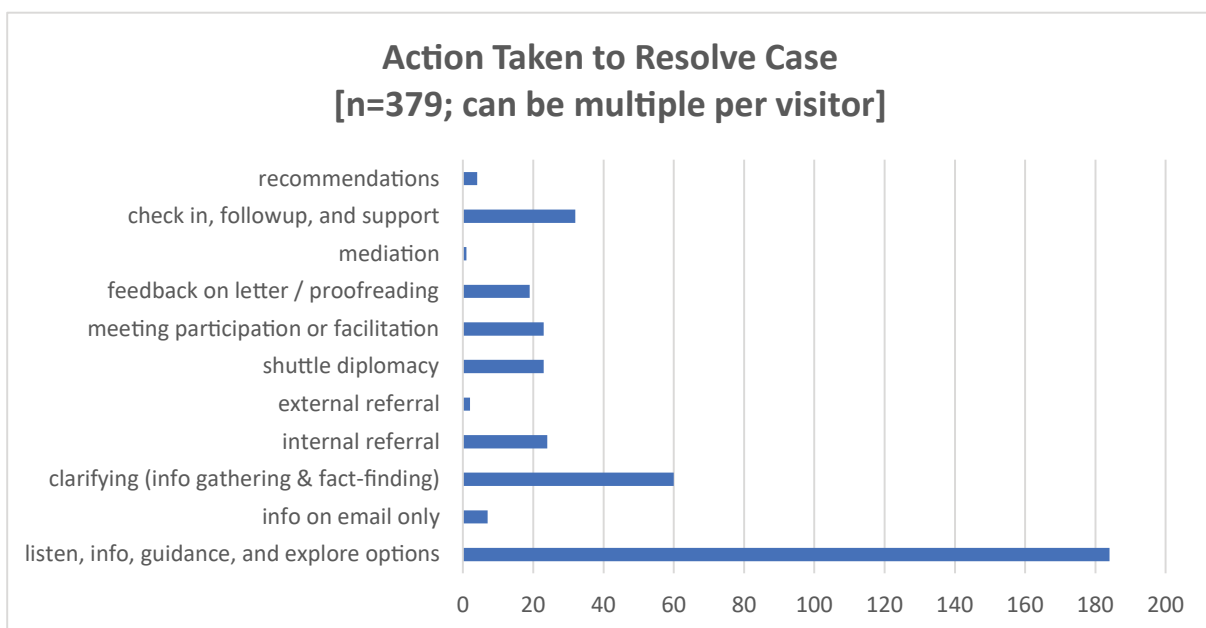
While concerns were heard regarding many sectors of the College, the schools of Arts and Science (31%) and Health and Human Services (26%) were the two most frequently discussed (Fig. 9). Again, it worth highlighting that not all visitors are raising complaints or problems, and not all visitors create a 'case.' Not infrequently, a question or misconception can be clarified with a brief consultation or two.

Fig. 9 School



The categories of ‘action taken’ are numerous and often a case or consultation involves multiple Ombudsperson actions. Normally a case or consultation includes ‘listening, offering information and guidance, and exploring options’ (184 times). Additional actions may include ‘clarifying – info gathering and fact-finding’ (60 times), ‘check in, follow up and support’ (32 times), and internal referral (24 times), among others. When referring visitors to other internal staff and services, I referred numerous students to faculty members [chairs, advisors and deans] and services including Centre for Accessible Learning, the Counselling Centre, Office of Student Support, Admissions and Registration, Eye? Sq̄’lewen, Academic Advising, and the International Office. A complete list of ‘action taken’ data is presented below (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 Action Taken to Resolve Case

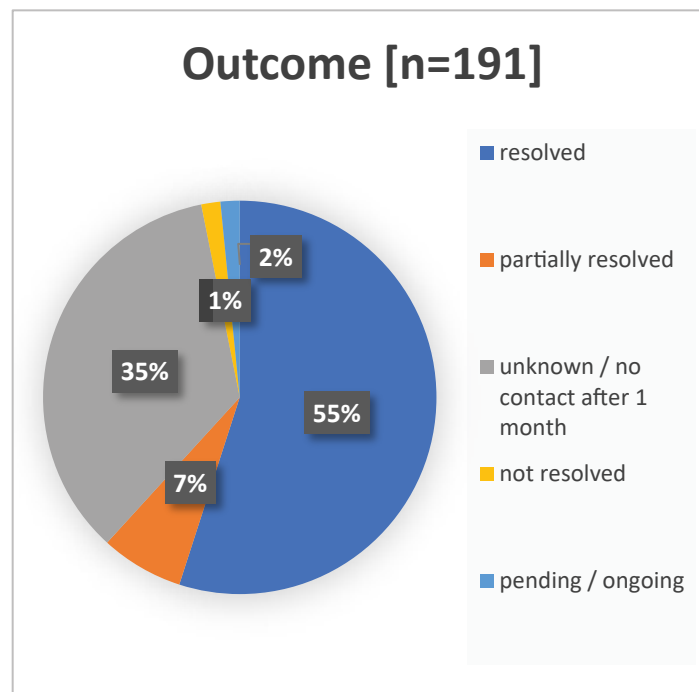


The 'outcome' categories of consultations and cases include 'resolved' (55%), 'unknown / no contact after one month' (35%), 'partially resolved' (7%), 'ongoing / pending' (2%), and not resolved (1%) (Fig. 11).

CASE STUDY

It is important for the Office to emphasize that 'resolved' indicates that the concern was reviewed fairly through the appropriate college process, and that a timely decision was made and communicated. It does not refer to whether a decision was in one group's perceived favour or another. Similarly, the Ombudsperson does not attempt to indicate an individual's level of satisfaction or happiness with a particular outcome. For example, a student submitted a Medical Compassionate Withdrawal request and the Registrar's Office provided a timely decision, with clear reasons, though not approving the request. From the standpoint of the Office of the Ombudsperson, this case is considered 'resolved,' regardless of whether the request was approved or not approved, as a fair process was followed. The Ombudsperson understands that a student in this case might feel disappointed and possibly frustrated. Therefore, the outcome indicated by 'resolved' or 'not resolved' is not equivalent to 'request granted / not granted' or 'happy / unhappy.'

Fig. 11 Outcome



RECOMMENDATIONS

A key role of the Camosun Ombudsperson is to explore or investigate potential systemic issues – potential gaps or recurring problems – and if appropriate, make recommendations. Throughout the last academic year, a number of systemic complaints and concerns were raised through the Office. After making inquiries, the Ombudsperson made corresponding recommendations in seven situations through informal and confidential discussions. Several inquiries did not result in recommendations, as the Ombudsperson perceived that fairness and equity were not at risk. A case study follows highlighting one Office recommendation.

CASE STUDY

Key roles of the Ombudsperson include ensuring that college policies and procedures are fair and equitable, as well as supporting students in navigating these policies and procedures. Because the Office works closely with college policies, Camosun’s Education Policy & Planning department often consults with the Office when updating policies or developing new policies. Occasionally, when new policies are approved and become active, some review and fine-tuning is still required. An unintentional policy glitch can become apparent after a student visits the Ombudsperson. For example, the college posted the newly approved Student Misconduct policy in September 2020. Soon afterwards, a student contacted the Office with a concern involving the policy. The student was unsure what to do, as that policy’s corresponding procedures were missing! At Camosun, policies outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations while procedures are typically found in a separate supporting document and provide step-by-step instructions and timelines. It emerged that the new procedures did not yet exist and needed to be written as soon as possible. The Ombudsperson contacted Peter Moroney in Education Policy & Planning, as well as Heather Cummings, VP Student Experience. As an interim solution, the former Appeals policy was re-posted on the website and notes were added to it, directing staff and students to follow its procedures. Soon the new procedures were completed and posted, and finally, the former Appeals policy could be completely removed from the policy webpage. As with this example, the Office of the Ombudsperson provides an independent and impartial oversight of college policies and procedures, and can make recommendations if necessary.

OFFICE ACTIVITY

Outreach, Education and Networking

This year, the Ombudsperson got to know many more staff and faculty, and had regular meetings (virtually) with deans, chairs, VPs, managers, directors, and coordinators on both campuses. In addition, to better explain and increase awareness of the Office's services, the Ombudsperson had promotional materials created through Graphic Services and improved the Office webpages. Including academic program introductions, networking, training, workshops, student orientation fairs, the Ombudsperson conducted 50+ outreach and networking meetings. The reception at Camosun has invariably been very welcoming, open and collaborative in support of fairness. Please contact the Office to arrange an Ombudsperson introduction, presentation or discussion in your department or office.

Overview of Office Activity

- Bi-weekly meetings with the Office advisors, who are the VP Student Experience and CCSS Executive Director
- Presenting at Welcome Week and student academic program orientations
- Meeting regularly with faculty & staff to share current concerns and gather feedback
- Providing recommendations and other feedback on draft and current policies, procedures, plans, and college materials, including:
 - Evaluation of Student Learning
 - Indigenization Plan
 - EDI process
 - Academic Misconduct
 - Grade Review
 - Student Athlete Handbook
 - Camosun website
- Organizing the physical office spaces with college staff re: painting, furniture, equipment, etc.
- Participating in Association of Canadian College and College Ombudspersons (ACCUO) events and activities, such as the annual conference and AGM (online this year), as well as the ACCUO Communications Committee as the committee chair
- Participating in numerous online, mostly no-cost online workshops and trainings, including:
 - HM|HC Information Session on the National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students
 - Respect in the Workplace
 - Confronting Chegg With Open Pedagogy
 - Ramadan 101 – Customs, Practices and Community
 - The sober paradox: Exploring the role of alcohol in our culture, our campuses, and our lives
 - Standing Together to Stop Anti-Asian Racism
 - Canadian Symposium on Academic Integrity 2021

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Gathering student feedback about the work of ombudsperson offices is a perennial challenge, as my colleagues at other post-secondaries would agree. Word-of-mouth referrals between students are one possible indication. The sustained use of the service by students over several months regarding a particular concern might also indicate the service's apparent utility to students [see page 8], while considering the data in the 'outcome' category is another option [see pp 16-17]

Below are a handful of the more detailed comments received directly from student visitors during the reporting period:

I don't know how can I thank you for your kindness and support. I know that even though you have been very involved in your own work and you are so busy, but you have taken the time to solve my problem and have helped to solve my problem. I will always remember your kindness and I will always be grateful to you. I will try to prove to myself first and then to others that only one unexpected incident caused me such a problem and has nothing to do with my abilities. thank you again for helping me get back to my normal life. You never left me alone during this period and never withheld from me the necessary and useful instructions.

Just wanted to thank you again for making the time to help not only myself but also my classmates. Hopefully some positive changes will result! Again, thank you so much!

Thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I expanded my letter as you suggested and am sending it back to you for feedback. I really appreciate your help.

Just wanted to thank you again for making the time to help not only myself but also my classmates. Hopefully some positive changes will result! Again, thank you so much!

Touching base with you from our chat yesterday- Thank you so much for all of your help and for listening to my worries and woes. I received a very positive response from my teacher, and a new (correct) lab was posted with an extended due date. As well as that, there are now office hours on collaboration for any further concerns or questions. Yay!

There was a positive response from the Chair and they sent out a survey to students to gather feedback on ... Regardless of the outcome it was a good exercise. Thanks for checking in, and for your help with this.

Really appreciate all the information and all your time spent emailing back and forth. I have contacted [my instructor] and he said he will get back to me. Either way you were a big help.