

# CONCORDIA

## OMBUDS OFFICE

Promoting Fairness at Concordia

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24



INFORMATION

RELATIONS DIPLOMACY

PROCEDURAL COMMUNITY

PROMOTE INDEPENDENT IMPARTIAL

OMBUDSMAN SUPPORT ADVICE

FAIRNESS SEEK INVESTIGATION

ACT DEFENDER SENSITIVITY

RECOMMENDATION CONCERNS

TACT REASONABLE COACHING

December 5, 2024

Members of the Board of  
Governors Concordia  
University  
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd.  
West Montreal, QC  
H3G 1M8

To the Board of Governors;

As per article 29 of the Terms of Reference of the Ombuds Office, I am pleased to submit the **2023-2024 Annual Report of the Ombuds Office: Promoting Fairness at Concordia University**.

We have provided an overview of the year's activities from May 1, 2023 to April 30, 2024, with several examples of our files. This year the report includes some minor recommendations.

This report has been presented to you in person.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Amy Fish in black ink.

**Amy Fish, MHSc.**

Ombudsperson

Concordia University / Université Concordia

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## Ombuds Office Overview

The Ombuds Office at Concordia University was one of the first in Canada. Since 1978, the Ombudsperson has been charged with assisting community members with concerns relating to policies and procedures, promoting fairness in the University by looking at systemic issues and offering recommendations when appropriate.

The Ombuds Office reports directly to the Board of Governors and is supervised by the University Secretariat.

The day-to-day role of the Ombuds Office is to:

- Meet with undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff and listen to their concerns;
- Offer coaching, advice and referral on policy matters where needed;
- Investigate incidents of alleged unfairness;
- Following investigation and when appropriate, recommend changes to policies, rules and procedures;
- Coach community members regarding improved communication; and
- Offer skill-building workshops in conjunction with other departments such as the Office of Rights and Responsibilities (ORR), The Equity Office and the Provost's Office.

The core values of the Ombuds Office are independence, impartiality, accessibility, and confidentiality,

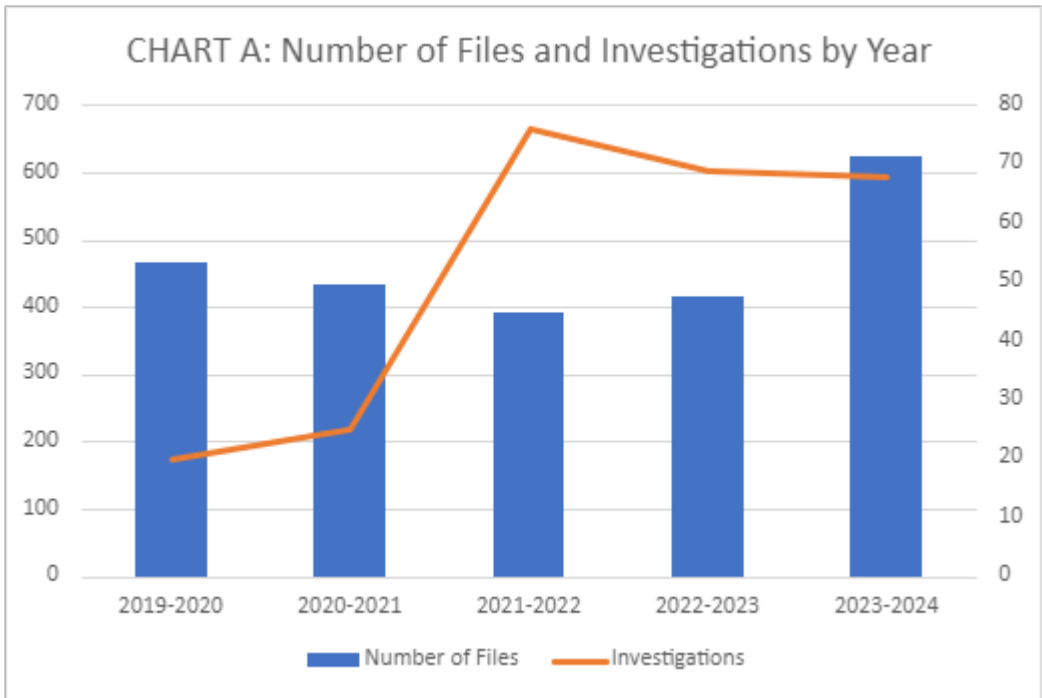
## Ombuds Files 2023-2024

The Ombuds Office has seen an overall increase in files this year, from 416 to 625. Of those, 97 were judged to be outside of our jurisdiction for one of the following reasons:

- Brought forward by non-community members (such as alumni, parents or general community members);
- Outside Ombuds Office jurisdiction (e.g, relates to a union issue, matter may be before a court of law or administrative tribunal, legal claim or notice of claim may have been received by the University, relates to student group); and/or
- Delay has been exceeded (needs to be brought forward within three months)

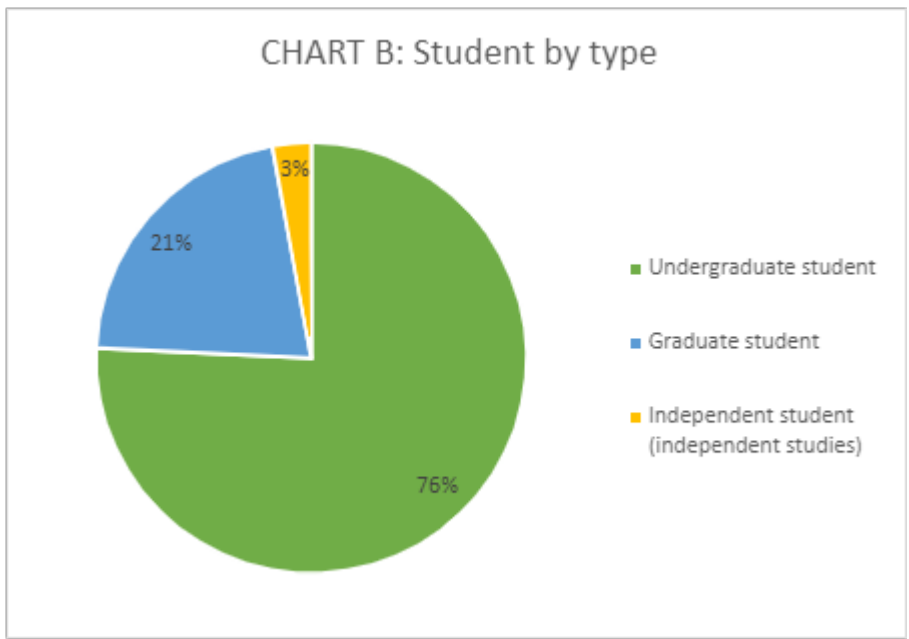
When removing the non-jurisdiction files from the total, there still remains an upward trend. This can be explained mainly by the increase in consultations at the Ombuds Office, which is when we are called upon to offer advice to a faculty member or a student. As well, we have increased our outreach by doing panels and presentations, which has led to greater visibility and therefore a higher number of files.

The number of investigations is almost the same as last year (68 compared to 69). This indicates that the number of complex files is holding steady.



### Student Overview

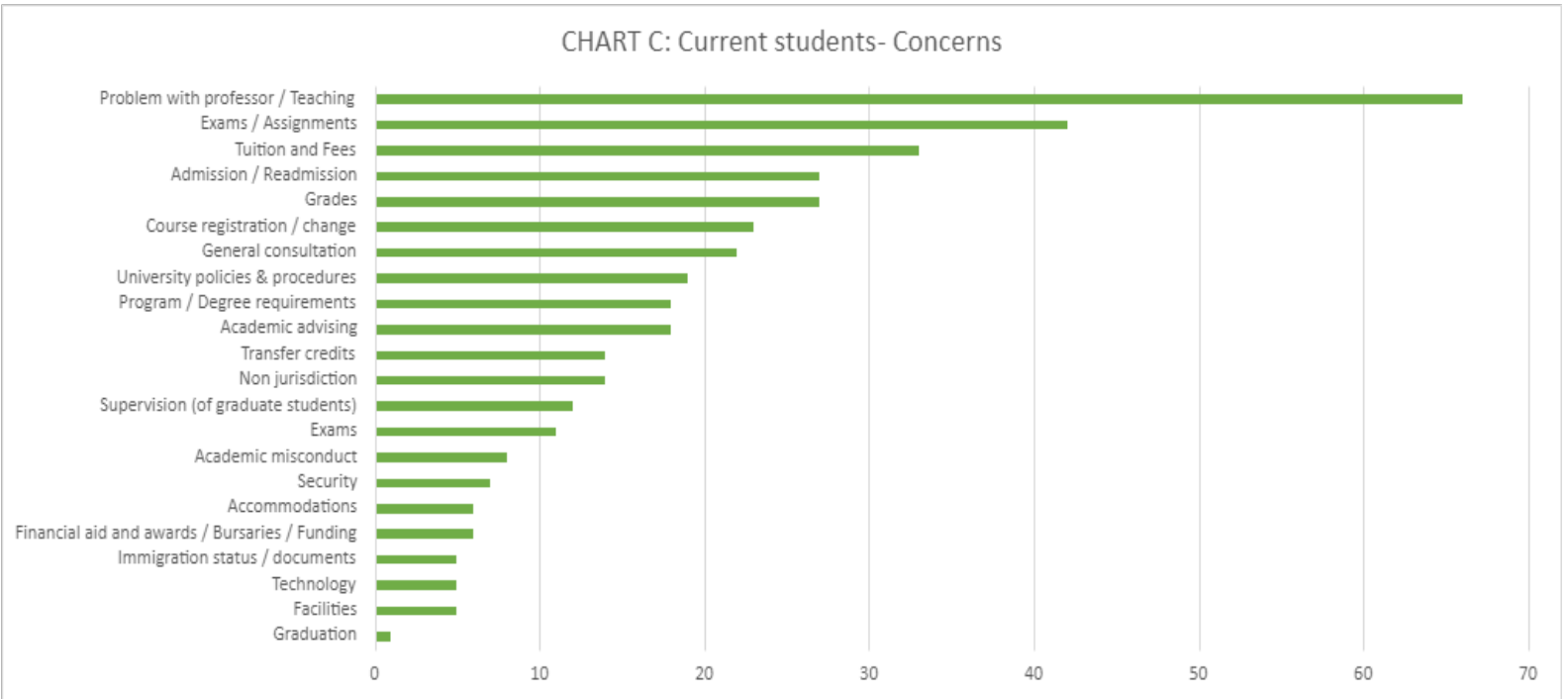
Please see Chart B below, for a breakdown of what type of students came to our office.



As in past years, the majority of our files are from Undergraduate students, followed by Graduate students. We had eleven Independent students as well.

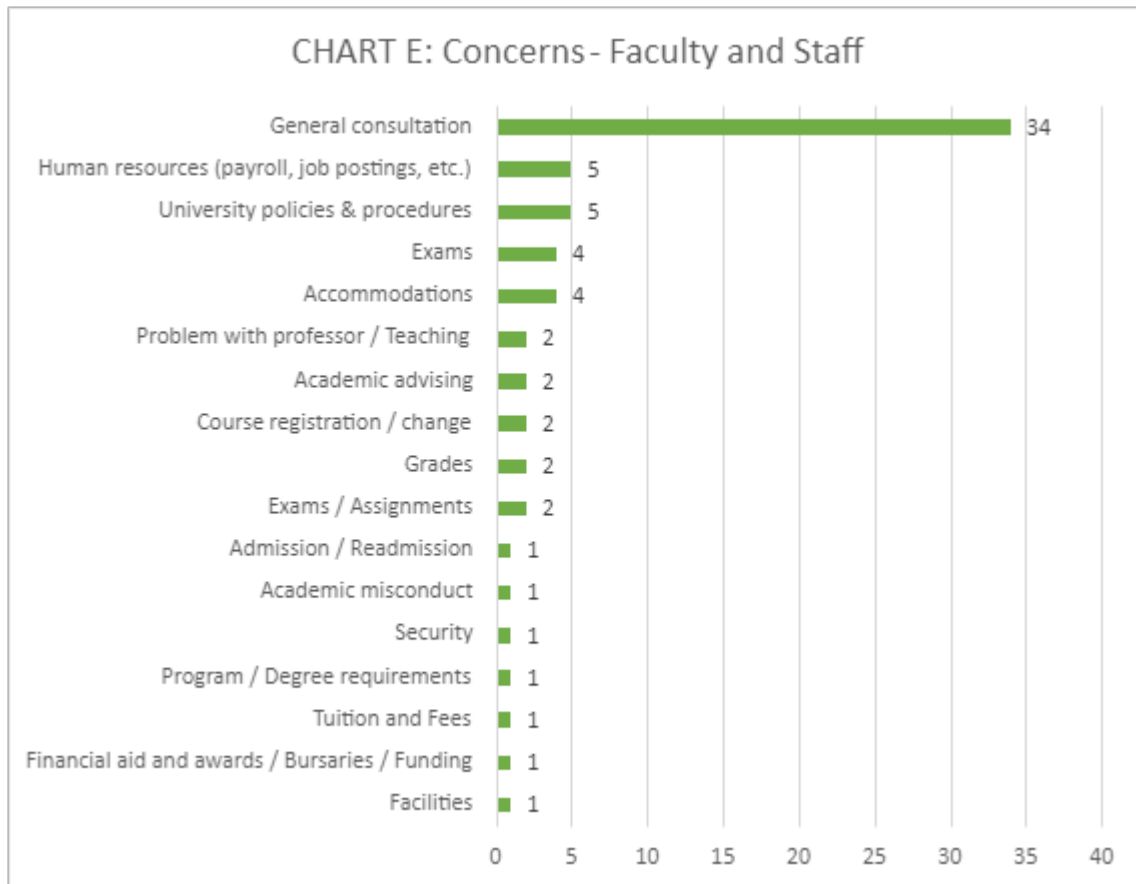
## Student Concerns

This year's concerns are similar in type to what the Ombuds Office has seen in past years. Undergraduate and Graduate files are presented, in Chart C, below.



This year, students were primarily concerned with Professors and Teaching which includes a range of requests for assistance mostly relating to communication. Specifically, e-mail response time continues to be a challenge in some areas as does clarity of course outlines, and specificity of feedback on assessments. The next biggest concerns related to Exams and Assignments, which can include what is on the exam, how the exam is delivered, or personal challenges regarding completing the exam or assignment on time. Tuition and Fees category includes questions relating to Quebec Residency, as well as assistance in understanding how and why billing has occurred. Of other major categories is Admission/Readmission, particularly for students who have been assessed in failed standing or conditional standing because of their low GPA, and would like to be re-admitted to their programs without waiting the recommended time period. And, finally, we see many concerns about Grades and how to navigate Academic Re-evaluation Requests.

## Faculty and Staff Overview



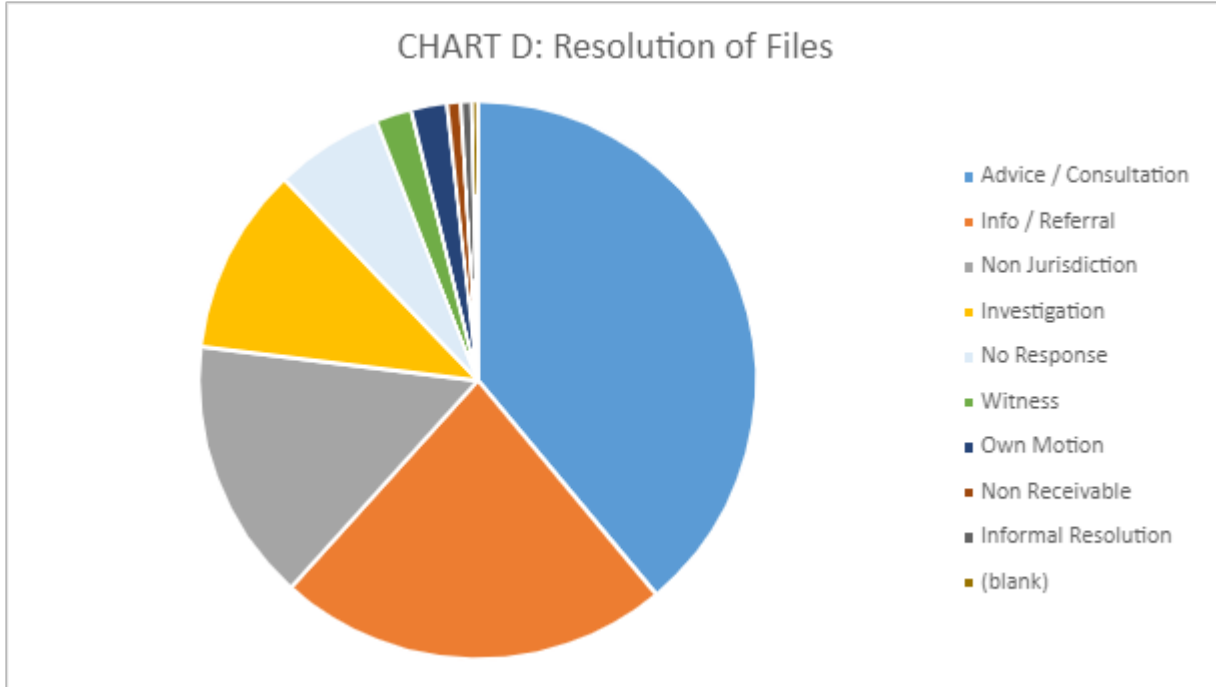
### Faculty and Staff Concerns

Last year there were 60 files from Faculty and Staff, this year there were 69. We believe that this increase is likely because of the outreach the office has been doing, in partnership with the Office of Rights and Responsibilities (ORR) and the Provost's Office, including the Equity Office. During our presentations, we have been encouraging faculty to consult with our office in the hopes that we may be able prevent escalation by being involved early. 34 of the 69 files were General Consultations which would fall into this category.

Five files related to Human Resources, which are mainly UNITY and/or payroll related. Five additional files related to University policy and procedures, normally this would be questions regarding what policies exist and whether they are being fairly applied. The rest of the files ranged widely from Accommodations to Facilities to advice regarding academic issues such as course registration and grading. Faculty members may come to us to understand what their obligations are in terms of allowing a late course registration or allocating a grade in a complex situation.

## Resolution of Files

The Ombuds Offices offers a variety of services to the Concordia University community, and each file was resolved by one of the categories below.



In 243 of the 625 cases, the Ombuds Office provided Advice and Consultation. This means that a community member came to our office for assistance in person or virtually, and we met with them to listen to their concerns and to offer advice. This could include suggestions for how to word a particular email or ideas for how to resolve a conflict. In 142 cases, we offered information and referral. For example, someone might come to our office for assistance regarding an immigration issue and we might send them to the International Students Office (ISO). We also regularly refer students to their department chairs, to the Access Centre for Students with Disabilities (ACSD), Office of Rights and Responsibilities (ORR) or to one of the existing processes on campus such as the Student Request Committee. In 95 instances, the issue was judged to be outside of our jurisdiction. 69 files were full investigations where we meet with key people and review all related documents before analysing our findings and offering written conclusions. 39 files closed because we did not receive a response after the initial approach or conversation. In 13 files, the Ombuds Office acted as a witness but did not get involved. Five files were non-receivable, meaning that the initial correspondence indicated that they were looking for a different office and we did not assist at all. Finally, in four cases we offered informal resolution for a conflict. Please note that two forms were incomplete and therefore fall into the category “(blank)”



## Select Recommendations 2023-24

The Ombuds Office had several minor recommendations this year, here are some examples:

When a student is not satisfied with their grade, they can apply for an academic re-evaluation. However, participation grades are excluded from the re-evaluation process because they are so difficult to verify. A Graduate Student came to us because their professor combined their weekly assignment grade with their participation grade for 30% of their overall mark, making it impossible for them to apply for a re-evaluation. After a detailed investigation, we concluded that it was unfair, and we recommended that this practice not be allowed in the future. The faculty has confirmed that they will implement this change. We appreciate that Faculties are open to working with our office in promoting fairness for students.

Another recommendation this year relates to clarity of communication for an undergraduate student looking to withdraw from a particular co-op program. The student believed they should have been able to re-apply to complete an internship after they had dropped it. We reviewed the policy and saw that the student had been notified of the withdrawal and consequences, and we concluded that they had been treated fairly. We did not believe the student should be reinstated. At the same time, though, we found that there was an opportunity to improve the clarity of communication with respect to the specific dates and deadlines. We recommended that this be revised and we have been told that the modifications have been made. It is important to note that sometimes even when a student has been treated fairly, there are opportunities for improvement.

Finally, two years ago we had concluded a file regarding an international student who enrolled in a single course at Concordia as an independent student and did not completely understand the tuition that she would have to pay. We investigated and determined that her lack of comprehension did not absolve her of fees owed and she was responsible for the full amount. The student struggled financially and following our conclusions, she appealed to the department and asked if they could retroactively offer her a student award, for compassionate reasons. They agreed. The award never materialized. The student then spent two years trying to get the funding she had been promised, and eventually came back to our office for assistance. We were able to contact the department on her behalf and assist her in eventually receiving the retroactive award. It is important to note that even though technically we only take files from current community members, in cases of extreme unfairness we can make exceptions and assist students.

In conclusion, there are no major problems to report. I thank you and all of our colleagues for your collaboration and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve this University.