Student Advocacy Project
Research Report

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Sponsored by the Associate Provost (Students) and the Graduate Student Association

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Graduate students at the University of Waterloo have difficulty resolving the serious problems they face due to a lack of effective support services. The most frequently reported issues are financial aid, supervision and committee conflicts, academic matters, and teaching assistant conflicts. Although Waterloo has protocols for conflict resolution, they are not always effective since students receive little or no assistance or education on how to follow them. In some cases, it is not clear to students what steps they should take to deal with serious issues. In other cases, conflicts of interest and the risk of adverse outcomes impede conflict resolution. In addition, existing support services do not meet all needs for effective resolution of their serious problems. Students require neutral representation, advocacy, and consistency across departments.

A student advocacy office would deliver the needed support. It would provide neutral, confidential centralized services, which would ensure that needs for advocacy, safety and security are met at a high standard. The student advocacy research project was initiated to determine the need for such a student advocacy service and, if there was a need, the form it should take at the University of Waterloo.

METHODS AND RESULTS

The two main methods of data collection were an online survey for graduate students and key informant interviews. The results of the two methods were consistent.

Survey
In total, 715 graduate students completed the online survey, which represents approximately 20% of the graduate student population. Of those, 50.6% were in a doctoral program.
Of the 715 respondents, 268 (43%) had experienced issues or problems they felt required guidance or support to resolve. The most frequently mentioned issues that required advocacy support were financial aid issues (14%); supervisor issues (12%); academic issues (10%); and teaching assistant difficulties (10%). In their efforts to resolve issues, respondents consulted most frequently with their departmental graduate officer/co-ordinator (30%). Some students (20%) did not seek consultation.

Of the 300 students who answered the question about issues being resolved, 43% stated some were resolved, while 24% claimed that none were resolved.

Of the respondents (546) to the question on policies that assist with resolving student issues, 59% claimed they were not aware of them. Given the policies, 42% of students have been or would be comfortable dealing with Waterloo on student advocacy issues, while 18% reported they would not be comfortable.

**Interviews**

Some of the key issues identified in the interviews were student/supervisor issues, intellectual property issues, TA issues, student-student conflicts, authorship conflicts, intimidation, financial issues and health and safety issues.

The first point of contact for students seems to be the graduate co-ordinator; the deans were usually directly involved only in escalated cases. Senior administrators see more complicated cases, such as academic integrity, intimidation or more serious cases of abuse. Both deans and senior administrators reported discomfort with the potential conflicts of interest, such as dealing with colleagues, which can occur with the current processes. A lack of consistency seems to exist across faculties and position levels in resolving advocacy-related issues.

All position levels across all faculties supported the idea of a student advocacy office, especially given its potential to eliminate concerns around conflicts of interest. Some key informants identified potential barriers to the overall success of a student advocacy office, such as students not using the service and the office taking on problems that could be dealt with at the departmental level and needlessly escalating them.

**CONCLUSION**

The results indicate both a need and overwhelming support for establishing a centralized office to address student advocacy concerns. They also showed overwhelming support for establishing a student advocacy office. The experience of the GSA in handling student issues indicates that having guidance and support go a long way toward resolving issues.
Although some informants expressed concern about the potential that such an office might suffer from lack of use, the results of the graduate online survey demonstrate a need for a student advocacy office and its services. According to the respondents, current services are ineffective in addressing the concerns this research has identified.

To overcome potential barriers towards the acceptance and success of the student advocacy office, it would be important for the office to collaborate with other services and all departments. The student advocacy office could assist students and refer them to other departments when that is the best option for resolving an issue. It would also be important to provide education around the process and information about the services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are based on the research results in combination with additional background research.

1. **Create a student advocacy office** to provide confidential assistance and representation for undergraduate and graduate students. It should collaborate with other campus services and offices as necessary.

2. **Locate the student advocacy office under the portfolio of the Associate Provost, Students**

3. **Create a position of senior authority** to initiate changes and facilitate appropriate faculty and university responses. This position would also deal appropriately and respectfully with the issues.

4. **Hire students as the first point of contact** to be confidential, neutral first points of contact. Train them to be well versed in the policies and procedures so they help direct students to the appropriate service and/or supports.

5. **Mandate graduate students to have a confidential meeting with the appropriate departmental representative at the beginning of their third term of graduate studies** to identify issues early.

6. **Provide support to graduate co-ordinators** because they tend to be students’ first point of contact when confronted with an issue.

7. **Create campus-wide awareness of the student advocacy office**

The results also showed a need for changes to give students and faculty greater awareness of Waterloo policies and of their rights and responsibilities in relation to student-faculty relationships. These recommendations are not specific to a student advocacy office but rather fall directly under the Associate Provost, Students portfolio and are provided following the main recommendations.
These recommendations on the development of a student advocacy office are based on the interview and survey results and additional background research. The working group reviewed and approved them.

1. **Create a student advocacy office**
   The student advocacy office would provide confidential assistance and representation for undergraduate and graduate students. This office should liaise and collaborate with other services and offices across campus as necessary.

2. **Locate the student advocacy office under the portfolio of the Associate Provost, Students**
   Although many student advocacy offices are structured within student union offices, at the University of Waterloo it should fall under the Associate Provost, Students.

3. **Create a position of senior authority**
   Within the student advocacy office, create a position of senior authority to initiate changes and facilitate appropriate faculty and university responses. This position would also deal appropriately and respectfully with the issues.

4. **Hire students as the first point of contact**
   Within the student advocacy office, hire graduate and undergraduate students as confidential, neutral first points of contact. Train them so they are well versed in the policies and procedures and can help direct students to the appropriate service and/or supports. This will help ensure student concerns are heard and students are treated fairly.

   » Training is to be provided by the student advocacy office in collaboration with other services.

   » These positions should be on a part-time basis and, for continuity, have a renewable term of one year.
5. Mandate graduate students to have a confidential meeting with the appropriate departmental representative at the beginning of their third term of graduate studies

Every graduate student should have a mandatory confidential meeting with their graduate co-ordinator, graduate officer, or associate dean (graduate studies) at the beginning of their third term of graduate studies. For some departments this is already standard practice.

The goal is to provide an opportunity for the graduate students to comment on their satisfaction with their graduate program and their student-supervisor relationship so as to identify real or potential issues early in their program.

» If a student-supervisor relationship deteriorates beyond repair, options for remedy are limited.
» Some students are reluctant to seek assistance (especially early on, when issues are more readily resolved informally).
» The third term would provide sufficient time to resolve outstanding issues or make changes before the student’s second year of study.

6. Provide support to graduate co-ordinators

Provide support to graduate co-ordinators because graduate students tend to contact them first when confronted with an issue. Give graduate co-ordinators additional educational tools and reference materials and, in particular, protocols to follow when services are closed.

7. Create campus-wide awareness of the student advocacy office

Create awareness of the student advocacy office. Educate students, staff and faculty about the services the office provides, appropriate contacts and the protocols and processes that must be followed.
The research findings also showed a need for changes that would give students and faculty greater awareness of Waterloo policies and of their rights and responsibilities in relation to student-faculty relationships. The resulting recommendations are presented here because they are not specific to a student advocacy office. They would fall under the remit of the Associate Provost, Students portfolio.

1. Offer a campus-wide graduate student orientation

Offer a campus-wide orientation for graduate students early in the semester to provide students with critical information when they are most receptive.

- Amalgamate orientation events where possible.
- Offer the main orientation in the fall; relevant student services (e.g., the GSA, GSO) should provide presentations once a term (winter and spring) for those students enrolling in those terms.
- The Graduate Student Association, Graduate Studies Office, Student Success Office and faculties should be involved in the development and delivery of the campus-wide orientation.
- Have the organizers collaborate with the departments to coordinate one day for department-specific events, one day for faculty events, and one day for GSA/GSO and campus-wide services presentations. This will ensure consistency and cohesion.

(Currently the GSA is working in consultation with the graduate co-ordinators to determine the feasibility of starting a campus-wide graduate student orientation.)
2. Develop a more comprehensive TA guidebook

Develop a more comprehensive Teaching Assistant Guidebook for all graduate students in consultation with the departments to ensure the department-specific content is included.

Provide the guidebook to every graduate student and discuss it during orientation. (A recently created TA Taskforce is working on developing a more comprehensive campus-wide Teaching Assistant Guidebook. Membership in the taskforce includes representatives from the Graduate Studies Office, faculty and graduate students.)

3. Provide additional training on work and safety protocols working in laboratories

Provide additional comprehensive training on work and safety protocols for students (graduate and undergraduate) working in laboratories. This would help increase awareness of and understanding of policy 33 and help reduce risk.

4. Provide mandatory training on the University of Waterloo policies and rights for students, staff and faculty members

Develop and provide comprehensive and mandatory training and education around the University of Waterloo policies and rights, for students, staff and faculty members. Provide this training and education at least twice a year, and provide additional training sessions during times of frequent hires or increased enrollment.

5. Make presentations to inform Deans about their legal rights and responsibilities

Provide annual workshops/presentations to inform deans about their legal rights and responsibilities. This would inform them of new policies and procedures and also help ensure consistent and clarity across departments and faculties.
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