

**UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO  
OFFICE OF THE  
OMBUDSPERSON**

**ANNUAL  
REPORT** **2025**

# TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Office of the Ombudsperson at the University of Waterloo acknowledges that our work takes place on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. Our office is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land granted to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

As an office committed to fairness in practice, policy, and procedure, we recognize that fairness also requires reflection on the histories and ongoing impacts of colonization. We honour the relationships that Indigenous peoples have with this land and acknowledge our responsibility to contribute to reconciliation through respectful dialogue, learning, and action.

We are grateful to the Office of Indigenous Relations for guiding the University's efforts in reconciliation, and we commit to engaging with these efforts in ways that uphold relational, procedural, and substantive fairness.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Visitor Feedback .....	1
From the Ombudsperson .....	2
About the Office .....	3
How We Work .....	4
Community and Connection .....	6
At A Glance .....	7
Stories from the Threshold .....	8
Observations .....	9
Considerations .....	12
Looking Ahead .....	13
Statistics .....	15
Moving Forward .....	19
A Note of Thanks .....	20



# VISITOR FEEDBACK

"Our conversation was one of the most meaningful experiences I've had as a student navigating difficult academic circumstances."

"I appreciate the service that the Ombuds Office provides in building a more fair University of Waterloo for tomorrow."

"Having an ombudsperson as an undergraduate student feels like one of the best resources on campus one could ask for."

"I appreciated [their] advice tremendously and was immensely satisfied."

# FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

To the University of Waterloo Community:

I am pleased to share the inaugural annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson for the period January 1 to August 31, 2025. This report fulfills the commitment outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding between the University, WUSA, and GSA-UW, and reflects our shared dedication to fairness.

This year marked the opening of a new door at Waterloo -- a door to enhanced clarity and fairness. The creation of the Office was not a procedural decision, but a principled one, shaped by student advocacy and a recognition that navigating university systems can be complex and overwhelming.

I joined the University shortly before the Office officially launched, bringing with me over 15 years of experience in academia through various roles at Western University, culminating in my position as Acting Ombudsperson. That experience deepened my understanding of how fairness is practiced in higher education and the systemic challenges students face. At Waterloo, I have built on that foundation to establish an impartial, independent, and confidential resource for students, one that empowers them to navigate processes with confidence and clarity.

From building services and resources to fostering trust across campus, this first year was about laying a strong foundation to support fairness in practice, policy, and procedure. Through consultations, case reviews, and systemic observations, we learned that fairness depends on more than policies; it depends on clarity, communication, and respect. These insights will guide our work in the year ahead.

The Ombuds Office isn't the right or wrong door; it's simply a door to understanding. Behind that door is a commitment to impartiality, independence, and confidentiality. Our role is to listen without judgment, clarify policies and procedures, and help students explore options so they can make informed decisions. We do not advocate for individuals or the institution; we advocate for fairness as part of our collective practice, and through policy and procedure.

**The door is open. Let's walk through it together.**

*Whitney Barrett*

**Whitney Barrett**  
Ombudsperson

# ABOUT THE OFFICE

The Office of the Ombudsperson at the University of Waterloo was formally launched in January 2025, following years of sustained advocacy by student leaders from the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA), the Graduate Student Association (GSA-UW), and the Committee on Student Mental Health (CoSMH). These groups identified the absence of an ombudsperson as a significant gap in the University's fairness infrastructure and worked collaboratively to establish a resource that would be impartial, independent, and student-centered.

The Office was created through a Memorandum of Understanding between the University, WUSA, and GSA-UW. Administratively, the Office sits within the portfolio of the University Secretary, who reports to the Chair of the Board of Governors. The Office is jointly funded by the University and the student associations. This shared funding model supports the Office's operational and financial independence from all signatories. Located on the third floor of the Student Life Centre, the Office serves all students, undergraduate and graduate, by promoting fairness across academic and non academic areas.



The Office is led by **Whitney Barrett**, the inaugural **Ombudsperson**. Whitney joined the University of Waterloo in late 2024 to establish the Office and bring its mandate to life. With a background in higher education, conflict resolution, and policy analysis, Whitney brings a systems-focused lens to fairness and is committed to empowering students to navigate university processes with confidence and clarity.

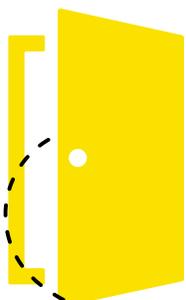


In July 2025, the Office expanded to include **Sam Vandekerckhove**, **Assistant Ombudsperson**. Sam supports the day-to-day operations of the Office, including intake, case management, and student consultations. He also contributes to outreach, education, and data tracking—key functions that enable the Office to identify systemic trends and support institutional improvement.

Together, the Ombudsperson and Assistant Ombudsperson provide confidential, impartial guidance to students seeking to understand their rights, responsibilities, and options. The Office does not advocate for individuals or the institution, but rather advocates for fairness in practice, policy, and procedure.

# HOW WE WORK

Every student who visits the Office of the Ombudsperson begins with a simple step: opening the door. What happens next is a process designed to provide clarity, empower decision-making, and uphold fairness.



## Step 1

### **Intake – Opening the Door**

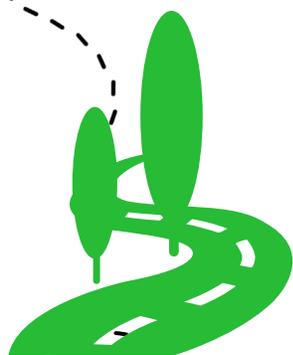
When a student reaches out, whether in person, virtually, or by email, the first priority is creating a confidential and impartial space. This is where we listen, without judgment, and begin to understand the concern.



## Step 2

### **Consultation – Clarifying the Issue**

Through conversation, we help students articulate their concern and identify the policies, procedures, or practices that may apply. This step is about understanding, not just what happened, but what matters most to the student.



## Step 3

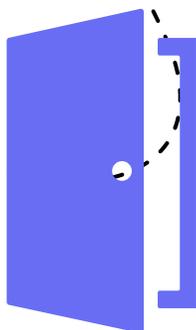
### **Exploring Options – Finding the Path Forward**

Once the issue is clear, we outline possible pathways. These may include informal resolution strategies, referrals to other campus resources, or guidance on formal processes. Our role is not to decide for students, but to equip them with the information and confidence to act.

## Step 4

### **Closure or Referral – Moving Forward**

Every interaction concludes with clarity. Whether the concern is resolved, referred, or escalated through formal channels, students leave knowing their options and next steps.



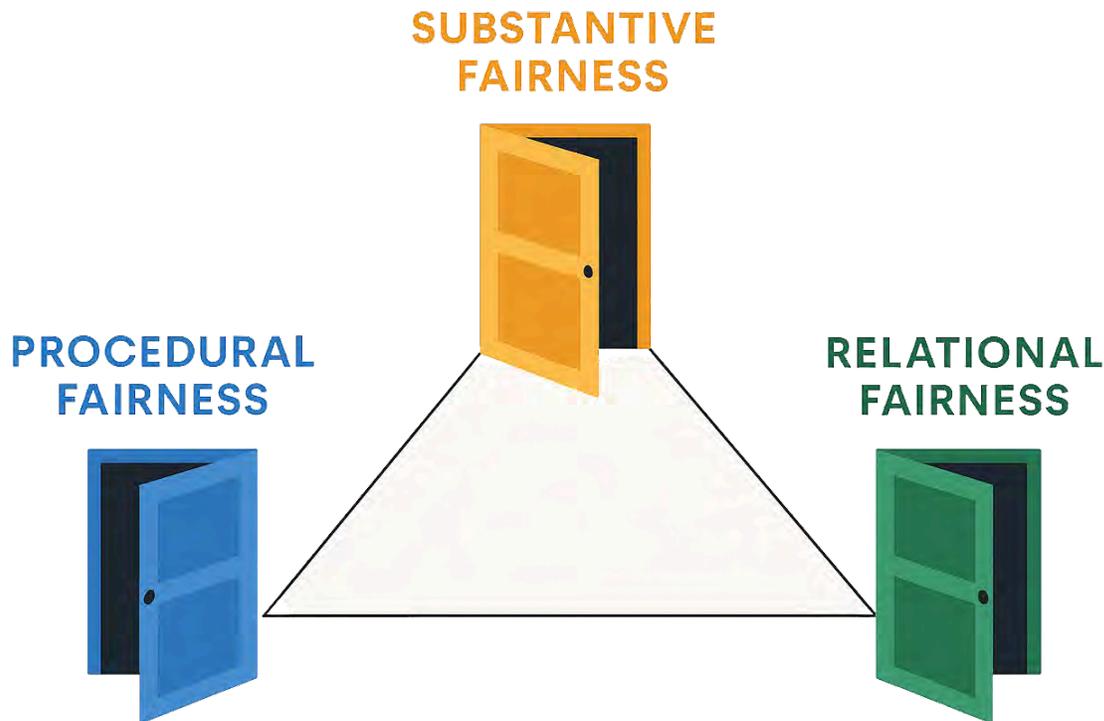
## Looking Beyond the Door

While each case is unique, patterns matter. We track themes and trends to identify systemic issues where fairness may be faltering.

These insights inform recommendations for institutional improvement.

# FAIRNESS: THREE DIMENSIONS, ONE TRIANGLE

Fairness is at the heart of every interaction and every recommendation we make. Ombuds practice across Canada is grounded in the Fairness Triangle, a framework that helps us assess whether decisions and processes meet three essential dimensions of fairness:



## **Procedural Fairness**

How the decision was made. Were the steps clear, consistent, and transparent? Did the student have a meaningful opportunity to be heard?

## **Substantive Fairness**

What decision was made. Was the outcome reasonable and based on relevant information? Does it align with policy and context?

## **Relational Fairness**

How people were treated. Was the student treated with respect and dignity throughout the process? Was communication honest and timely?

These dimensions are interconnected, like the sides of a triangle, and together they form the foundation of fairness in university decision-making. When one side is missing, fairness falters.

The Fairness Triangle framework was developed by Ombudsman Saskatchewan (see *What is Fairness?*, January 2019) and is based on the concept of the Satisfaction Triangle in Moore, Christopher (2003). *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

# COMMUNITY AND CONNECTIONS

Building trust and awareness was a priority in the first year. The Ombuds Office is most effective when students know it exists and understand its role. To that end, I focused on outreach that meets students where they are, both physically and virtually.



## Campus Connections

The Office increased visibility through monthly visits to Stratford and Cambridge campuses, ensuring students at satellite locations had direct access to services. These visits were more than symbolic. They provided opportunities to understand unique challenges and build trust in person.

Early in the year, I conducted a leadership roadshow, meeting with senior academic and administrative leaders to introduce the Ombuds Office, clarify its mandate, and explain how it complements, not replaces, existing services. These conversations were essential for building institutional understanding and reinforcing the Office's impartial role.

The Office also connected with student-facing staff across campus through presentations and service guides, creating a shared understanding of the Ombuds role and ensuring students receive accurate information no matter where they seek help.

## Collaborative Relationships

Collaboration is at the heart of building a fairness infrastructure. While the Ombuds Office does not participate in committees or working groups, I actively connect with offices across campus to strengthen clarity and coordination for students. These relationships include EDI-R, SVPRO, AccessAbility Services, WUSA Advocacy, and the Graduate Student Association. Connections ranged from supporting complex cases to sharing knowledge about mandates and exploring opportunities for outreach and education, all while maintaining impartiality.

These engagements were intentional and relationship-driven. For example, connecting with AccessAbility Services provided insight into accommodation processes, while discussions with SVPRO clarified pathways for students navigating sensitive concerns. Regular touchpoints with WUSA and GSA ensured student priorities remained visible and informed systemic observations.



## Policy Consultation

Fairness is shaped not only by how policies are applied but by how they are written. Throughout the year, parties preparing updates to existing policies, guidelines, and recommendations invited me to review proposed changes. These consultations were an opportunity to bring an impartial lens to policy development, ensuring clarity, accessibility, and fairness were considered from the outset.

My feedback focused on identifying areas where language or structure could create confusion for students, as well as highlighting potential limitations or unintended consequences. In some cases, I suggested actionable revisions to strengthen transparency and reduce ambiguity. In others, I raised questions about how proposed changes might intersect with existing processes or affect students navigating complex circumstances.

These engagements were collaborative and constructive. Feedback was welcomed and often incorporated, reinforcing the shared commitment to fairness across the institution. By contributing to these conversations, the Ombuds Office helped shape policies that not only meet procedural requirements but also support a student experience grounded in clarity and respect.



## Digital Engagement

Digital engagement was a cornerstone of building awareness. The Office expanded its website with plain-language resources, including guides that break down complex policies into clear, actionable steps. A monthly blog series launched to share insights on fairness, systemic trends, and practical tips for navigating university processes.

To support staff and faculty, the Office developed digital resources guides and presentation materials, ensuring consistent messaging about the Ombuds role across campus.

These resources were complemented by targeted outreach through email to relevant stakeholders, reinforcing the message that fairness is accessible and impartial.

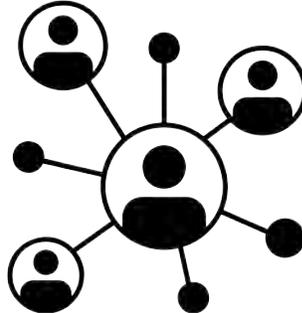
# AT A GLANCE

The data presented reflects activities during the inaugural reporting year (September 1 – August 31). As the Office opened in January, case-related data covers January through August 31.



**55**  
**CASES RECEIVED**

From January to August, the Office handled **55 cases**, providing impartial guidance and support to students navigating complex challenges.



**96%**  
**STUDENT VISITORS**

The vast majority of visitors were students, reflecting the Office's primary role in supporting the student experience.



**8.28**  
**AVERAGE CONNECTIONS PER CASE**

On average, each case involved **8.28 interactions**, showing the level of engagement needed to address concerns.

## MILESTONES

**January**



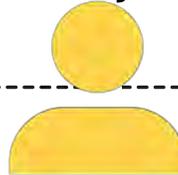
Office opened

**February - March**



Connected with Senior Leadership across campus

**July**



Welcomed Assistant Ombudsperson

**August**



Website expansion and Monthly Blog launched

## HOW WE CONNECTED

Email

**80%**

Virtual

**13%**

In Person

**7%**



## TOP 3 CONCERNS

1. Supervision
2. Academic Progression
3. Accommodations

# STORIES FROM THE THRESHOLD

Every student who walks through the Ombuds Office door brings a unique story, but beneath those individual experiences, common threads emerge. Over the past year, the Ombuds Office observed a recurring pattern in student concerns: fairness challenges often arise not from the absence of policy, but from the complexity of navigating it. These stories show what happens when processes intersect, expectations diverge, and communication falters and what we can learn from those moments.

## Complexity Without Coordination

Fairness becomes hardest to achieve when complexity clouds the path. Some students arrive with concerns that span multiple academic terms, policies, and processes. Health challenges intersect with grading disputes, petitions collide with appeals, and informal agreements replace formal procedures. In these situations, fairness falters not because policies are absent, but because navigating them feels overwhelming.

One student's experience illustrates this vividly: after multiple health-related absences, they submitted documentation directly to instructors rather than through formal channels. Without an academic consideration plan or accommodations in place, decisions became fragmented and inconsistent. Informal agreements with senior administrators added further ambiguity. While the University acted within policy, the absence of coordinated procedures left the student feeling exhausted and uncertain.

This case reminds us that complex situations need structured navigation support. Informal pathways increase risk and erode trust.



## Expectations vs. Reality

Fairness can feel distant when expectations and processes collide. Students sometimes expect advocacy or outcome changes, but the Ombuds role is different: it is about clarity, not intervention. When this distinction is not well understood, frustration may be directed at the process, even when the concern is really with the result.



For example, a student who failed a required course pursued multiple levels of appeal, alleging bias and a lack of transparency in academic decision-making. Each stage of the appeal followed established procedures, and the decision makers provided reasons that met procedural fairness standards. Despite this, the academic decision was upheld.

Several elements of the process were experienced by the student as unsatisfactory, including the use of virtual hearings, which the student felt limited their ability to communicate their perspective effectively. These concerns were raised as further evidence of unfairness. However, a review of the process confirmed that the procedures themselves were applied consistently and as intended.

As the matter progressed, it became apparent that the student's primary expectation was for the decision to be overturned. The student also believed the Ombudsperson could intervene to change the outcome. Clarifying the Ombuds mandate, particularly the Office's lack of authority to reverse academic decisions, was a key part of the engagement.

In this case, the student's frustration was rooted largely in disappointment with the outcome rather than procedural deficiencies. The student's perception of unfairness reflected a mismatch between expectations of advocacy and the Ombuds role of explaining process, scope, and available options.

Fairness is not a guarantee of agreement; it is a commitment to process, respect, and reasonableness. Helping students understand this distinction, particularly when outcomes are unfavorable, is a central part of the Office's work.



## Shared Accountability

Challenges brought to the Ombuds Office are rarely one-sided. Students and institutions share responsibility for engaging academic processes in ways that support fair resolution. When timing, understanding, or access break down, the sense of fairness can be strained even when policies are applied appropriately.

In one case, a student petitioned to amend their academic record after graduation, citing cultural stigma as a barrier to seeking accommodations earlier in their program.

Although the University applied its policies correctly, the delayed engagement significantly limited the options available for remedy. By the time the concern was raised, institutional flexibility was constrained.

This case underscores the shared accountability at the heart of fairness. Students must engage formal processes in a timely way, and institutions must ensure those processes are clear and accessible. Fairness depends not only on policy compliance, but on raising concerns before options for resolution are exhausted.

## Systemic Signals

These stories point to opportunities for improvement across the University's fairness infrastructure:

### Navigation Support

Students managing multiple, overlapping challenges often struggle to identify the right process or resource. A coordinated approach for highly complex cases could reduce fragmentation and improve clarity.

### Proactive Communication

Clear, timely updates about decisions and processes can prevent misunderstandings and reduce stress. Strengthening communication practices is key to relational fairness.

### Cross-Unit Coordination

When health concerns, academic decisions, and policy requirements intersect, gaps in coordination can compound complexity. Building stronger connections between units can make processes more seamless for students.

Fairness is not about bending rules. It's about making them work for real people in real situations. These systemic signals remind us that behind every policy is a person, and behind every decision is a process that must be clear, consistent, and respectful.

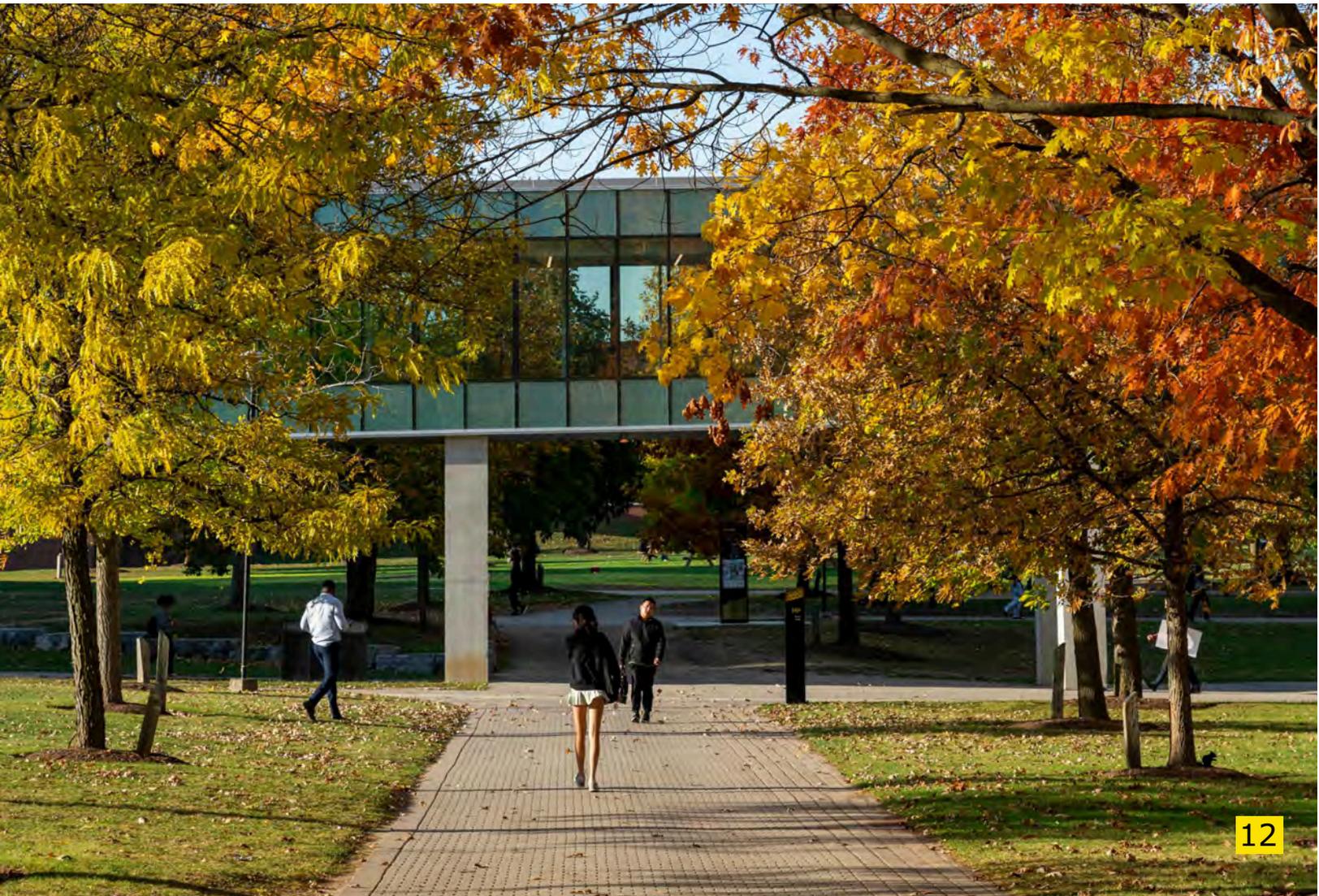


# OBSERVATIONS

Fairness rarely turns on a single decision. More often, it emerges from how students experience outcomes, timing, and the clarity of the processes surrounding them. In many cases this year, concerns arose not because procedures were flawed, but because outcomes did not change in the way students expected.

A recurring theme was misalignment between student expectations and institutional roles. Some students approached appeal or review processes (and the Ombuds Office) anticipating advocacy or intervention to overturn decisions. When outcomes were upheld despite procedurally sound processes, frustration was sometimes directed at the system itself. These cases highlighted how perceptions of unfairness are often shaped by expectations of outcome, rather than by deficiencies in process.

Timing also emerged as a critical fairness factor. Students who engaged formal processes late, whether due to uncertainty, stigma, or fear of disclosure, often encountered limited options for resolution. While students share responsibility for engaging processes in a timely way, institutions have a role in ensuring those processes are visible, understandable, and accessible early on. Across cases, fairness was most strained when expectations, timing, and clarity were out of alignment.

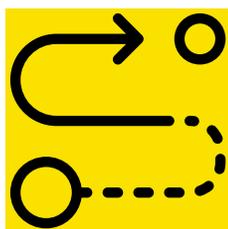


# CONSIDERATIONS

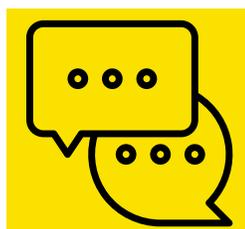
While this inaugural report does not include formal recommendations, several considerations emerged from the cases reviewed and the patterns observed. These considerations are shared to support ongoing conversations about clarity, coordination, and fairness across the University:



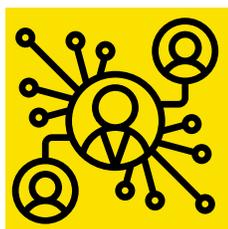
**Navigating Complexity:** Students navigating formal academic processes often encounter multiple steps, timelines, and decision makers. When concerns evolve over time or span more than one process, identifying the appropriate pathway can be challenging. Several cases reflected how complexity itself, rather than the absence of policy, can shape perceptions of fairness and contribute to delayed or fragmented engagement.



**Setting Clear Expectations:** In a number of cases, students entered formal processes expecting advocacy or outcome change, including from the Ombuds Office. When decisions were upheld following procedurally sound processes, frustration sometimes followed. These experiences underscore the importance of clear communication about roles, authority, and limits, particularly early in a process, to support shared understanding of what fairness does and does not entail.



**Improving Communication:** The experience of fairness is closely tied to how decisions are communicated. Even when policies are applied appropriately, unclear explanations, delayed updates, or limited context can make outcomes feel impersonal or rigid. Consistent, plain language communication about reasoning, timelines, and next steps supports both procedural and relational fairness.



**Coordinating Across Units:** Cases involving intersecting academic, health, and accommodation considerations highlighted the importance of coordination across units. When guidance or messaging is inconsistent, students may delay engaging formal steps or misunderstand the implications of timing. Clear alignment across related processes helps ensure students receive coherent information and understand their responsibilities within shared systems.

# LOOKING AHEAD

One consistent area of concern highlighted this year is the care and support for students navigating highly complex situations. These cases often involve multiple policies, decision-makers, and support units, creating a landscape that can feel fragmented and overwhelming. When coordination is unclear, students experience delays, inconsistent information, and added stress at a time when they are already vulnerable.

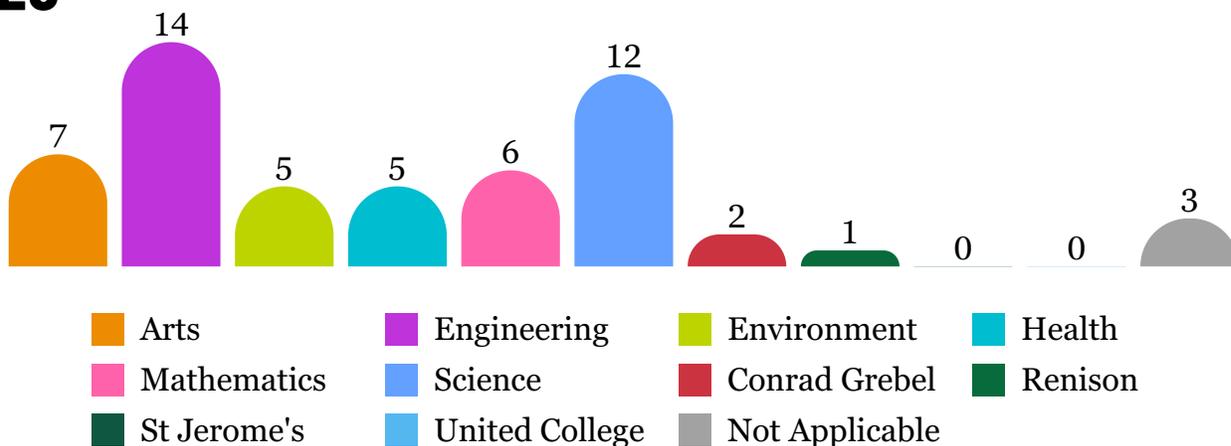
These cases reveal systemic gaps rather than isolated issues. They point to the need for stronger integration across academic and non-academic systems, clearer communication pathways, and proactive supports for students facing layered challenges.

In the coming year, I intend to explore this topic through a systemic review, with the goal of identifying structural improvements that enhance fairness and reduce barriers for students in the most challenging circumstances.

# STATISTICS

This section provides a closer look at the case data collected during the first reporting year. Because the Office opened in January, the analysis reflects activity from January through August 31. The data is organized to show patterns by faculty, degree level, and category of concern, along with visitor demographics such as residency, gender, and indicators of academic risk. These insights help illustrate the types of issues students brought forward and highlight trends that will guide future priorities.

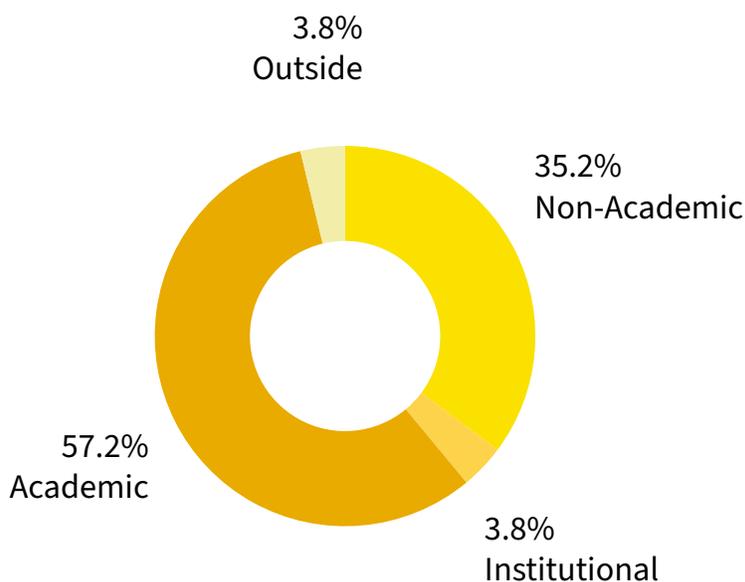
## CASES



Engineering, Science, and Arts accounted for the highest number of visitors. The chart on the below illustrates the types of concerns raised: academic issues made up 57.2% of cases, non-academic concerns accounted for 35.5%, and a small proportion (3.8%) involved both institutional and outside jurisdiction matters.

## CONCERNS

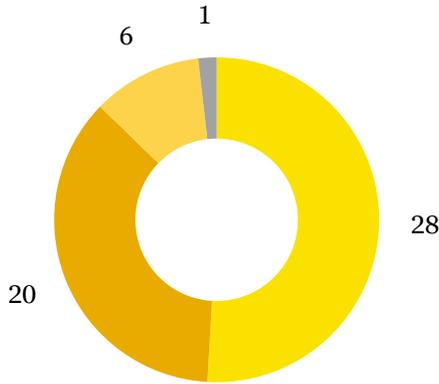
Academic concerns include issues such as supervision, progression, and accommodations; areas where students often navigate complex policies and decision-making processes. Non-academic concerns cover matters like ethical behavior, housing, and financial challenges, reflecting the broader student experience beyond academics. Cases involving both institutional and outside jurisdiction typically relate to situations where external factors intersect with university processes.



# VISITORS

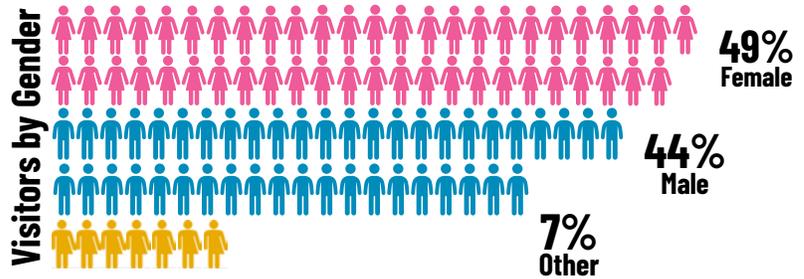
This page highlights who accessed the Office and how they connected. Most visitors were domestic students, with international students representing a smaller proportion. Gender distribution was balanced, and indicators of risk appeared in a subset of cases.

### Visitors by Visitor Type



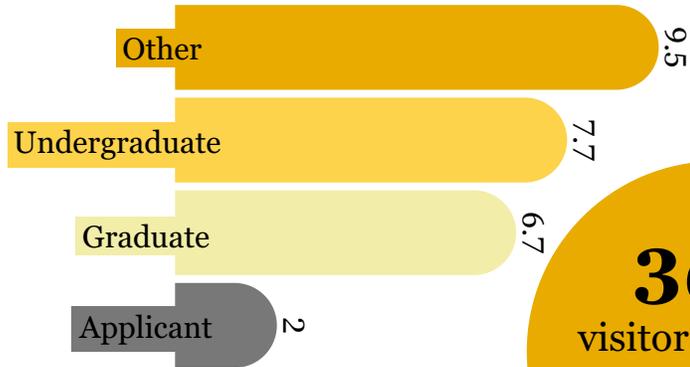
■ Undergraduate    ■ Graduate  
■ Other                ■ Applicant

**34%** of visitors shared they have a disability, experienced mental health concerns or trauma.



25% of visitors self-identified as being an international student.

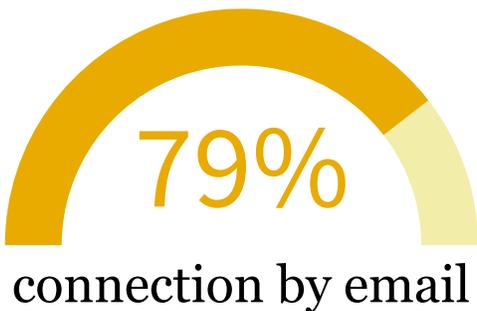
### Average Connections by Visitor Type



**36%** visitors referred by staff, faculty, or friends

# CONNECTIONS

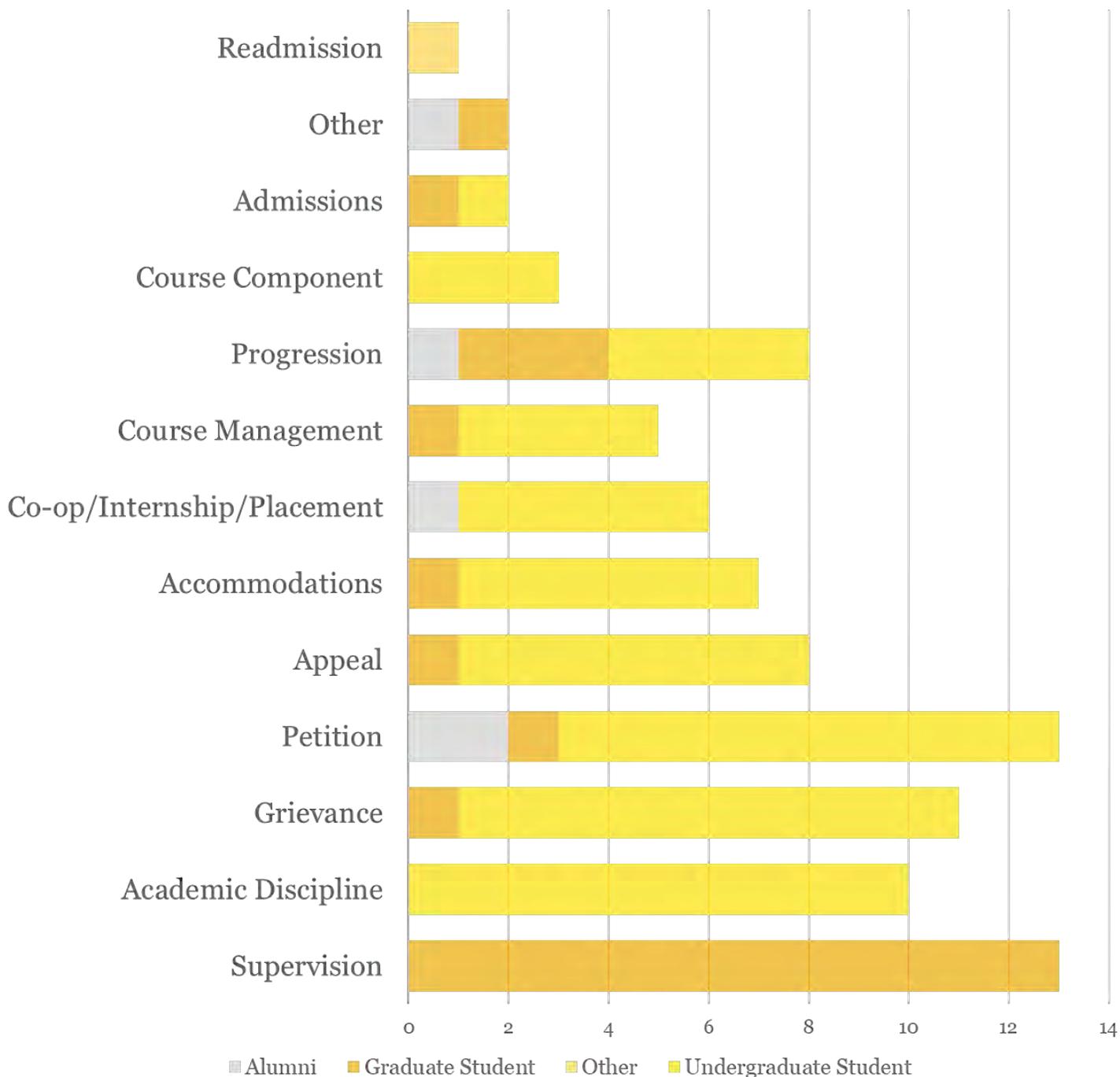
Communication patterns show email as the primary method of contact, followed by virtual and in-person meetings.



# ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Academic concerns accounted for the majority of cases. The most common issues were supervision, progression, and accommodations, reflecting challenges in navigating program requirements and support systems.

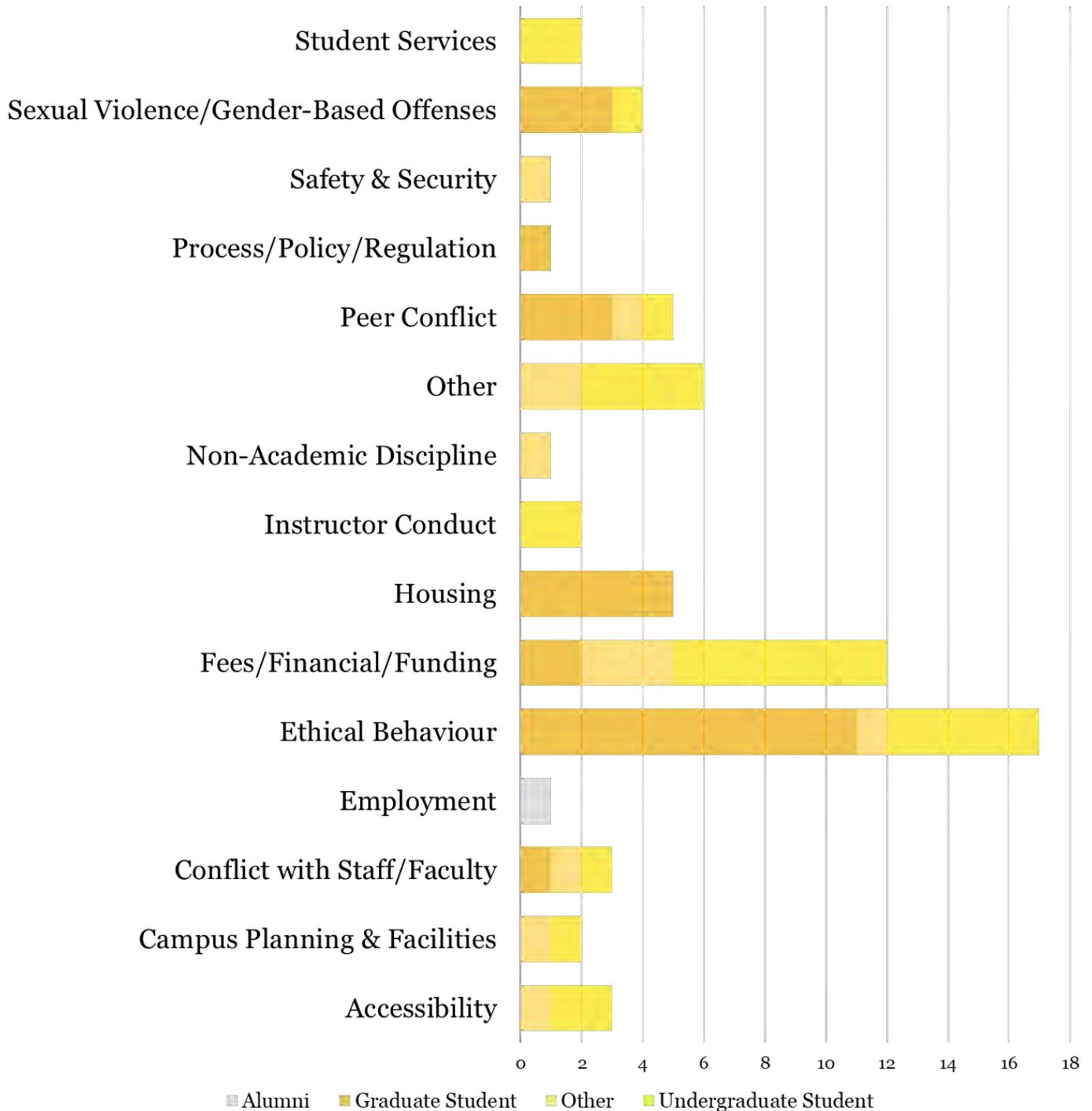
Supervision concerns often involve the student-supervisor relationship and expectations for research or thesis work. Progression refers to issues with advancing through program milestones. Accommodations include requests or disputes related to disability or health-related supports.



# NON-ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Non-academic concerns represented a significant portion of cases, focusing on ethical behavior, housing, and financial matters. These issues highlight the broader student experience beyond academics.

Ethical behavior concerns include allegations of misconduct, harassment, discrimination, or other concerns that fall under the scope of Policy 33. Housing issues relate to campus accommodations, roommate challenges, or landlord disputes. Financial concerns include tuition, fees, and related financial pressures.



# MOVING FORWARD



The first year was about building a foundation: creating a trusted, impartial resource and establishing systems that support fairness in practice, policy, and procedure. With that foundation in place, the next chapter focuses on deepening impact and strengthening the University's fairness infrastructure.

## **Reaching More Students**

Fairness should be accessible no matter where a student studies. The Office will broaden its presence by visiting additional campuses, including Pharmacy and Optometry, and connecting with the Affiliated and Federated Institutions of Waterloo (AFIW). These visits are about more than visibility, they create opportunities to understand unique challenges and ensure every student knows where to turn for impartial guidance.

## **Making Fairness Easier to Understand**

Students have told me that clarity matters. The Office will continue building plain-language resources that break down complex policies into practical steps. The monthly blog will remain a space for sharing insights on fairness and systemic trends, helping students feel confident navigating university processes. Education isn't just about information, it's about empowerment.

## **Turning Data into Action**

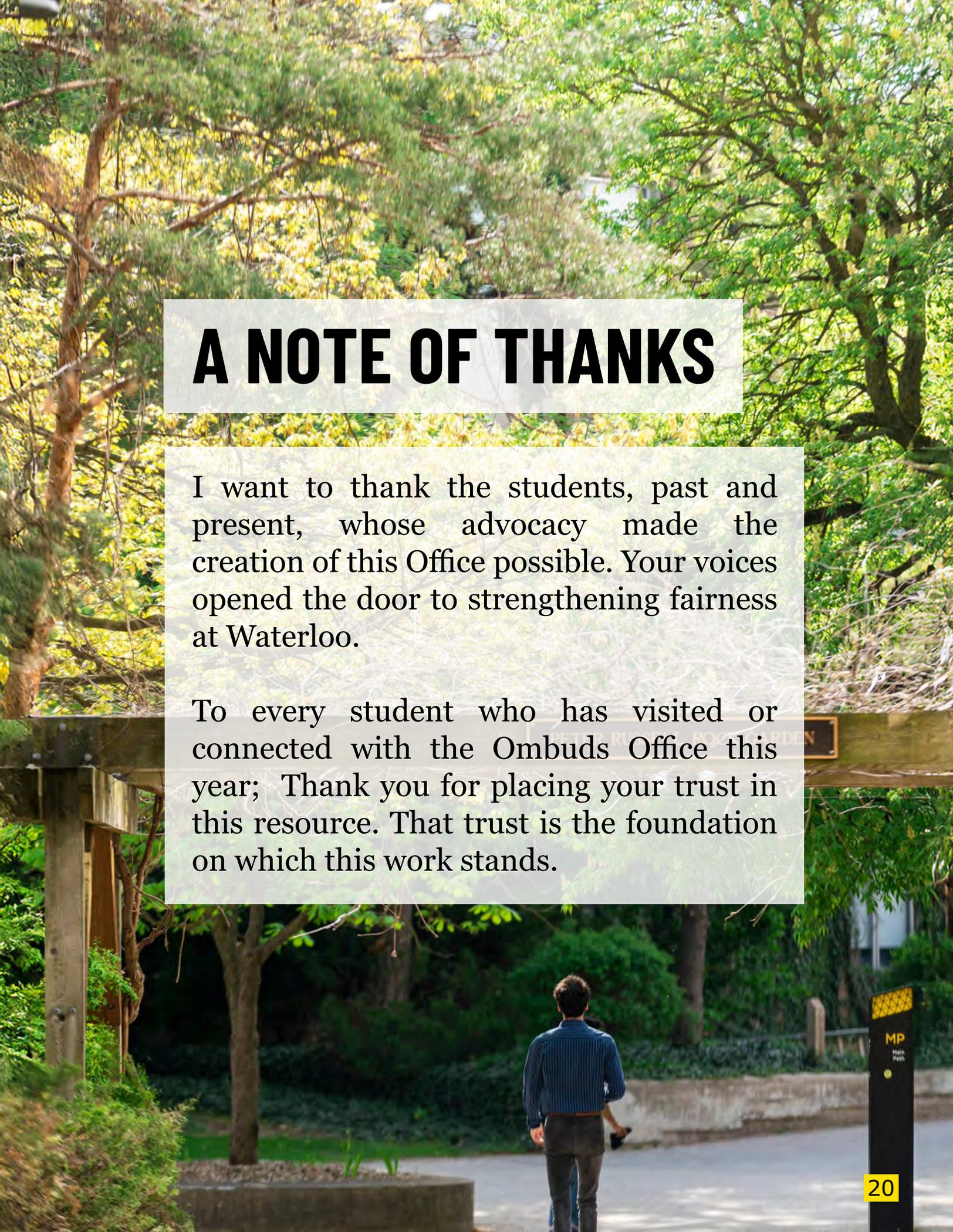
Behind every case is a story, and behind every story is a pattern. With case management and reporting systems now in place, the Office can move beyond counting cases to identifying themes. Reporting tools will support thematic reporting, helping uncover systemic issues and inform recommendations that strengthen fairness across the institution.

## **Building Stronger Connections**

The Office will maintain regular engagement with academic support units, student leadership, and academic units, sharing observations and faculty summaries that support continuous improvement. These conversations ensure fairness is not only practiced but embedded in decision-making.

Every door tells a story with a variety of questions asked, challenges faced, and paths discovered. As the University evolves, new doors will appear, and some will need to be rebuilt. The Ombuds Office will keep opening those doors, making sure what's behind them is clear, fair, and accessible. Because fairness is more than understanding. It's being treated with respect, following procedures that are transparent and consistent, and ensuring decisions are reasonable and grounded in context.

**This first year was just the beginning. The Ombuds Office will keep opening doors - doors to enhanced clarity, respect, and fairness for every student at Waterloo.**

A person in a blue shirt and dark pants is walking away from the camera on a paved path. The path is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage. In the background, there's a concrete wall and a signpost with 'MP Main Path' written on it. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a pleasant day on a university campus.

# A NOTE OF THANKS

I want to thank the students, past and present, whose advocacy made the creation of this Office possible. Your voices opened the door to strengthening fairness at Waterloo.

To every student who has visited or connected with the Ombuds Office this year; Thank you for placing your trust in this resource. That trust is the foundation on which this work stands.



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**

Office of the  
Ombudsperson