

**Report of the University Ombudsperson
To the Governing Council
For the period July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. What is an Ombudsperson?

“An ombudsman is an independent, objective investigator of people’s complaints against government agencies and other organizations, both public and private sectors. After a fair, thorough review, the ombudsman decides if the complaint is justified and makes recommendations to the organization in order to resolve the problem.”

(Forum of Canadian Ombudsman’s website, www.ombudsmanforum.ca, 2003)

2. The Canadian Context – Legislative and “Executive” Ombudspersons

The Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO) is a network of “ombudsman agencies interested in sharing views and information” and of individuals interested in “promoting and supporting the ombudsman concept.” FCO describes the “two most common kinds of ombudsman in Canada and in other countries” as the “legislative or classical ombudsman,” who is established by statute and reports “to ministers of the Crown, to the provincial legislature or to Parliament”, and the “executive” ombudsman, who “reports to the head of the organization s/he investigates, such as government departments or Crown corporations, universities/colleges or businesses.” (www.ombudsmanforum.ca, 2003).

For the most succinct description of the role and function of an ombudsperson, I offer that provided by Ontario’s Ombudsman, Clare Lewis, Q.C., at the 2001 Canadian Ombudsman Association Conference, as follows: “a credibly disengaged person dedicated to complaint review and comment.” (www.ombudsmanforum.ca, 2003, Lewis, “Reaffirming the Ombudsman’s Powers and Adapting its Actions”). Mr. Lewis is the fifth individual to be appointed Ombudsman of Ontario. Ontario established its Office of the Ombudsman in 1975, and was preceded in this by a few other provinces including Alberta, the first province to establish an ombudsman office in the late 1960’s.

3. The Academic Ombudsperson Context

The Ombudsman at Northern Illinois University, Tim Griffin, in his article, “The Evolution of the Role of Ombudsperson on University and College Campuses”, indicates that the first college and university “ombuds” offices in the United States were established in the mid-sixties, coinciding “with the onset of student demonstrations protesting national policies relating to civil rights and to the conflict in Vietnam.” (www.campus-adr.org/Main_Library/Articles, 2003, Griffin, page 1). Griffin explores the evolution of the position’s contribution to campus conflict management up to the more current timeframe when more than two hundred ombuds offices exist at U.S. colleges and universities. He comments on its combination of reactive and proactive or preventive roles, as “ombudspersons now deal increasingly with the issues and concerns of individuals instead of focusing mostly on matters relating to identifiable campus groups,” and as ombudspersons respond “to the unique needs and environments of each institution of higher education providing such a service.” (www.campus-adr.org/Main_Library/Articles, 2003, Griffin, page 1)

The first Canadian university to establish an ombudsperson's office was British Columbia's Simon Fraser University in 1965. Ontario's Carleton University was the next academic institution to do so in 1971, followed closely by a number of other institutions, including the University of Toronto in 1975. There are now about forty ombuds offices at colleges and universities across Canada.

4. The University of Toronto Ombudsperson

The Terms of Reference of the University Ombudsperson (See Appendix A) give the Ombudsperson the responsibility to investigate, in an impartial fashion, complaints made by students or members of the teaching or administrative staffs against the University or against anyone in the University exercising authority, and to bring to the University's attention any gaps and inadequacies in existing policies and procedures. The University provides the operating budget for the office, and the Ombudsperson reports directly to the Governing Council. The Terms of Reference require that the Ombudsperson "make an annual report to the University community through the Governing Council", and the Governing Council requires a formal administrative response to that report. This is designed to promote openness and accountability in dealing with issues and in taking a collective responsibility for their resolution.

II. THE STORY IN NUMBERS – YEAR-END AND MID-TERM REVIEWS

I was the fourth individual to be appointed Ombudsperson (including one Acting Ombudsperson) at the University of Toronto when I began my three-year term on July 1, 1998. In 2001, as required by the Terms of Reference, the Committee on the Office of the Ombudsperson ("the Committee") completed an operational review on behalf of the Governing Council. As the result of that review, the Terms of Reference, mandate and office operations were revised, which I describe in further detail throughout this report, the position of Ombudsperson was restored to full-time, and I was appointed to a new five-year term.

In recommending that the position be increased from part-time to full-time in 2001, the Committee acknowledged the importance of a number of factors, including: "accessibility to the ombudsperson, encompassing availability (time in the office), awareness of the office (across the three campuses), and responsiveness (after the initial contact is made); the complexity of some cases; and the significant enrollment increases expected." Consequently, I introduced a number of service delivery measures in July 2001 related to case management, accessibility and responsiveness, the results of which I first reported in last year's annual report, and that I am now able to compare with this past year's statistics. I refer to this comparative information in the following several sections.

The revised Terms of Reference require a mid-term operational review of the office that I would therefore expect to be scheduled in early 2004. To facilitate that review process, I am providing in this report both a year-end review, covering the period from July 1, 2002

to June 30, 2003, and a five-year 'retrospective' including statistical summaries dating back to 1998 and updates on the status of recommendations discussed in previous annual reports.

1. Profile of the Office at UTM and UTSC

My caseload for the University of Toronto at Mississauga (UTM) and the University of Toronto at Scarborough (UTSC) doubled this past year to a total of 59 queries and complaints, representing close to 20% of my total caseload (See Appendix B: "Accessibility Measures"). I would attribute this increase to a combination of factors, including: increased awareness of the office, increased referrals amongst community members to our services, and increased student enrollment. During the past year, we scheduled appointments on Mondays and Thursdays at the Mississauga and Scarborough campuses, respectively. We distributed 2800 bookmarks and numerous posters with information about the office at the two campuses. Print materials such as bookmarks and posters are frequently used as resources by academic ombuds offices, based on their cost effectiveness, ease of distribution and efficiency in terms of providing succinct information to the community about the existence, role and function of the ombudsperson's office (See Appendix C: "Text for Print Resources"). In addition, there were more than 280 visits to our website from UTM and UTSC community members, representing 20% of the total visits to our website from U of T members.

We will continue to increase awareness of and accessibility to our services at the UTM and UTSC campuses through our scheduling there on Mondays and Thursdays, through ongoing distribution of our print materials and through listserv announcements. Also, after consultation with the UTM and UTSC Vice-Presidents and Principals, we plan to change our office locations at both campuses during the 2003/04 academic year in order to better serve their needs in terms of confidentiality and accessibility.

2. Caseload and Case Management

We handled 324 complaints and queries from July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003, a 13% increase over the previous year (See Appendix D: "Number of Cases by Year"). Our undergraduate caseload of 180 students was the highest number of undergraduate/professional faculty students who have approached us for assistance in the last five years (See Appendix E: "Analysis of Caseload By Constituency"). Further to my comments in the previous section related to the increase in UTM and UTSC visitors to the office, I would add that we printed and distributed a total of 10,000 bookmarks to undergraduate community members across the three campuses in the Fall 2002 session. We would like to thank the Students' Administrative Council (SAC), Students' Council Scarborough Campus (SCSU) and UTM Residence Services' Staff for their assistance with this outreach initiative that we are repeating in the Fall 2003 session. In addition, we have distributed more than 400 posters that we had printed in January of 2003 for display in administrative offices and student group spaces across the three campuses.

Last year, I described in my report the results of a survey conducted by The Ombudsman Association which indicated that the average caseload for participating Canadian academic institutions was 410 cases (median of 371), and that for U.S. academic institutions, it was 355 cases (median of 300 cases). For an institution the size and complexity of the University of Toronto, I would expect the caseload to be closer to the 400-plus range of cases per year. I am requesting that, as part of the upcoming mid-term review of the office, the reviewers examine our ‘accountability statistics’ related to availability, responsiveness and outreach in their consideration of ways to ensure the office’s accessibility across the three campuses. Another feature of the office’s accessibility relates to the availability of ‘in-person responsiveness’. Currently, Linda Collins provides administrative support at our St. George campus office on a half-time basis (.5 f.t.e.). Thus, when I am at the other campuses or in meetings, there is often no one available to respond, in-person, to visitors and callers to the office. Consequently, individuals may well be disinclined to repeat their efforts at contacting us. Related to this, I would draw your attention to the number of cases categorized as “No Action Required” each year which has ranged from 32 to 53 cases, or from 11% to 15% percent of the caseload (See Appendix F: “Analysis of Caseload By Action Taken & Staff Resources”). In a number of these cases, individuals did not respond to our telephone follow-up to their initial telephone messages. In other situations, after a number of ‘telephone tag’ attempts to connect, they stated that they no longer wished to pursue their issues through our office. I note also that the number of ‘walk-in’ visitors per year has declined significantly from 50-plus in the mid-1990’s to 29 last year (See Appendix B: “Accessibility Measures”).

3. Focus of the Office on More Complex Cases

The majority of cases remain those categorized as “Information/Referral”, totaling 53% of our caseload (See Appendix F: “Analysis of Caseload by Action Taken & Staff Resources”). Over the past several years, this ‘category of interaction’ has decreased considerably as a percentage of our caseload. In 1994/95, for example, 71% of the cases were classified under “information” and, in 1996, they accounted for 83% of the caseload. During the first four years of my appointment, this category of involvement decreased steadily from 63% of the caseload in 1998-99, to a low of 46% in 2001-02. This can be viewed as one indicator of our successful communication to the University campuses about the role and function of the University of Toronto Ombudsperson through our website introduced in 1999, and through our print resources (bookmarks and posters) introduced during the past two years. These initiatives were designed both to increase awareness of the existence of the Office while, at the same time, emphasizing our focus on those situations in which we represented the final avenue of recourse. In this context, I would also point out the considerable increase in cases categorized as “expedited” and “resolved” over the past several years. In 1996/97, for example, these cases represented a total of 12% of the caseload (48 cases, combining expedited and resolved outcomes) and, in 1997/98, they represented 9% of the caseload (30 cases, combining expedited and resolved outcomes). During the first five years of my appointment, these cases have grown from 15% of the caseload in 1998/99 (45 cases,

combining expedited and resolved outcomes) to 24% of the caseload this past year (a combined 79 cases).

I would like to add, however, a comment about the importance of the “triage” role of our services to some community members. In 27 (16%) of the 173 “information/referral” cases last year, our involvement was that of “referral” only, including to other on-campus resources such as registrars’ offices, academic or financial aid counsellors, equity officers, undergraduate coordinators, graduate coordinators et cetera, where the issues raised by these visitors to our Office would be most appropriately addressed in order to achieve resolution. We routinely advised these individuals to return to our office in the event that their concerns were not satisfactorily addressed. These situations, together with approximately 40 other “information” cases in which our role would not be considered extensive accounted, in large part, for the more than 20% of our caseload last year in which we were able to close the file within one day of the visitors’ initial contact.

Many other “information” cases, however, required a significant investment of time on our part because the issues involved were complicated and/or ongoing. In still other “information” situations, our efforts were directed at identifying options and providing suggestions, from a neutral perspective, to facilitate our visitors’ resolution of their own issues, and often at earlier points in the process prior to more formal and lengthy petitions, appeals or other complaint resolution avenues. I provide additional information related to issues, interventions and “time to resolution” in the following sections of this report.

III. ISSUES AND INTERVENTIONS

In July 2001, as mentioned previously, we introduced a number of caseload measurements designed to provide a better indication of the demand for and performance of this office. I have presented some of these numbers in the previous three sections. These new caseload measurements also related to the nature of the issues brought to our attention, the number of issues per case, the nature of the assistance provided by us and the number of ‘interventions’ (different types of assistance) involved per case (See Appendix G, Table 1, “Student Caseload By Issue” and Table 2, “Caseload By Assistance Provided”). Additional comparative information about the past two years is presented in several of the following sections.

1. Undergraduate Students

The issues raised by undergraduate/professional faculty students related most frequently to “Academic Concerns” (including teaching methods and/or instructor’s behaviour et cetera), “Grading Disputes/Concerns”, “Petition Denials”, and queries related to “Policy Interpretation/Advice” and/or “Administrative Policy/Procedure” (including timeliness of response concerns). While complaints related to petition denials (39 cases both years) and to academic and non-academic misconduct (15 cases both years) remained at similar levels to the previous year, we have noticed increases in the following areas: academic concerns (60 cases compared with last year’s 26), grading disputes (24 cases this year

and 19 last year), administrative responsiveness/timeliness issues (37 cases compared with 25 cases previously), concerns about harassment or discrimination (13 versus 8 cases), admissions (10 versus 4 the previous year) and residence/housing issues (7 last year and 2 the previous year).

In terms of the complexity of these cases, more than half (55%) of these students raised more than one issue when they approached us for assistance, and nine percent raised three or more issues. The assistance we provided to 57 (32%) of the undergraduate students involved three or more “Types of Intervention”, representing an increase over last year’s 36 students (29%). This assistance most frequently reflected a combination of: “Individual Consultation” (often involving more than one meeting per individual depending on the complexity of the issues and/or their ongoing nature), “Ombuds contacted Persons/Offices” (in order to gather information/facts related to complaints), and/or “Mediation/Facilitation”, together with “Information/Referral” (the latter often related to “Policy Interpretation/Advice”).

Last year, we experienced a significant increase in the issue categorized as “Policy Interpretation/Advice” (29% compared with the previous 5% of the cases), reflecting not only the ongoing role of this office in ensuring that visitors are aware of relevant university policy/process, and in considering fair implementation as it applies to their situations, but also the fact that visitors seem to be increasingly aware of the relevant policy/regulations at the time they approach us for assistance. This most likely relates to the administration’s increased communication of this information, through print and website resources across the three campuses, and to the fact that more visitors are approaching us after having discussed their concerns with the appropriate university representatives including registrars, academic and financial aid counsellors, student affairs and student services personnel, equity officers and/or undergraduate coordinators et cetera.

(a) “Policy on Student Financial Support”

I would point out that the number of students approaching my office with queries related to fees/financial aid (note: tuition fee schedules, approved by the Governing Council, do not fall within the mandate of this office) has declined as a percentage of my caseload over the past several years (10% of the issues raised last year, compared with 14% the previous year, for example). This is most likely a result of the administration’s increased resource allocation to financial aid counselling and bursary support. In relation to this, I would note that the Governing Council approved, in 1998, the “Policy on Student Financial Support” which states, in part, that: “No student admitted to a program at the University should be unable to enter or complete the program due to lack of financial means.”

(b) Other New Initiatives Related to Undergraduate/Professional Faculty Students

During the past five-year period, the administration has introduced a number of policy and organizational initiatives related to undergraduate/professional faculty students that have served to address and/or alleviate issues raised in previous annual reports (mine as well as my predecessors'), including:

- the review and revision of the "Code of Student Conduct" (2002);
- the production, distribution, review and revision of what is now entitled the "Student Rights & Responsibilities" publications (in brochure and website formats) related to academic honesty, student conduct and grade appeals/petitions (2000/ongoing);
- increased resources directed to the recruitment and training of academic, financial and personal counselling personnel across the three campuses;
- the review and revision of the "Guidelines for the Use of Information Technology" (2003), and
- last year, the Administration's Response to my Annual Report indicated that the Provost and the Vice-President, Human Resources, had jointly created a position for a Senior Employment Legal Advisor, to "provide support centrally and to the Divisions" to improve practices as they related to fair and consistent implementation of the University's "Guidelines for Academic Appeals Within Divisions" and the "Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters". The Deputy Provost has also advised me that the recruitment of an additional legal counsel has now occurred, and that, during the 2003/04 academic year, increased attention will be directed to these two important areas in terms of policy/procedural review, and the development and implementation of support materials and workshops.

2. Graduate Students

Sixty-five graduate students approached us for assistance last year, representing 20% of our caseload (See Appendix E: "Analysis of Caseload by Constituency"). Over the past five years, graduate student issues have represented between 20% to 24% of the office's caseload (ranging from 59 to 79 files). As in previous years, the most frequent areas of concern have related to interpersonal/supervision disputes, petition denials, academic issues (related to classes/teaching), grading concerns and issues of termination or withdrawal.

The observation I made in the previous section related to our assistance to undergraduates, in terms of "policy interpretation/advice", applies to graduate students as well, in terms of their overall increased awareness of relevant policy/procedure by the time they approach our office. This can be attributed both to increased communication by the administration (through academic counselling resources and website information), and increased consultation initiated by these graduate students with other resources such as their graduate co-ordinators, departmental chairs, School of Graduate Studies (SGS) associate deans and the Graduate Student Union (GSU)

The three issues that increased in frequency from the previous year were "admissions" (7 cases this year and 4 the previous year), "residence/housing" (4 cases compared with 1 case last year), and "employment/workplace concerns" (with 2 cases last year and none

the previous year), while the other areas of concern remained similar in number (“grading disputes” with 9 cases one year and 8 the other; “concerns re: harassment” with 6 cases both years; “interpersonal/supervision” with 16 cases each year; “academic and behavioural misconduct” cases with 4 cases each year, and “library issues” with 1 case both years), or decreased in number (“academic concerns” at 10 cases compared with 16 previously; “petition denials” at 13 cases compared with 17 previously; “access/bureaucracy” issues at 6 cases last year and 11 previously, and “fees/financial aid” with 9 cases last year and 16 previously).

In terms of complexity of the cases (See Appendix G: Tables 1 and 2), 67% of the graduate students (42 individuals) approached us for assistance with more than one issue, including 13 students (20%) who raised three or more issues. The assistance we provided to fifteen graduate students (24%) involved 3 or more types of intervention. As with undergraduates, this typically involved a combination of the following ‘interventions’: “Individual Consultations” and/or “Ombuds Contacted Persons/Offices” and/or “Mediation/Facilitation”, together with “Information/Referral”.

(a) New Initiatives Related to Graduate Students

In the past five years, the administration has introduced a number of new/revised policies and process/procedural reviews that have served to address and/or alleviate graduate student issues that have been raised in previous annual reports, including the following:

- a guaranteed level of financial support for doctoral-stream graduate students (2001);
- “Intellectual Property Guidelines for Graduate Students and Supervisors” (1999);
- “Graduate Supervision Guidelines” (2002/03);
- “Graduate Department Academic Appeals Committee Guidelines” (2002/03);
- “Policy for Post-Doctoral Fellows” (2002);
- the appointment in 2003 of a Post-Doctoral Coordinating Office/r at the School of Graduate Studies (SGS);
- graduate student surveys designed to help address the issues of graduate student attrition, time-to-completion and satisfaction with their academic experience (2001/02 and ongoing);
- proactive monitoring by SGS of supervisory data and satisfactory graduate student progress in terms of graduate students’ supervisory committee meetings and supervisory committee annual reports.

(b) English Language and Writing Support

A significant initiative introduced three years ago by the Provost’s Office and SGS, and provided with three years of funding, is the Office of English Language and Writing Support. This program offers “consultations, single-session workshops, and non-credit courses” for “native and non-native speakers of English” who are registered graduate students. I understand that the number of graduate students interested in the Office of English Language and Writing Support course registration significantly exceeds the spaces available, and that this supply/demand issue will most certainly continue to be a

problem in the short and medium terms. I note as well that there are about fourteen other writing centres at the University of Toronto including those at health sciences, engineering, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), UTM, UTSC and various colleges serving largely the undergraduate community, as well as numerous language courses designed for undergraduate/professional faculty students whose first language is not English.

Recommendation 1: That, pending the upcoming operational review of the Office of English Language and Writing Support, the Administration provide an ongoing and expanded resource allocation for this important program, designed specifically for those graduate students whose first language is not English.

(c) “Safety in Field Research” - Request for Update to 2001-02 Administration’s Response

In my annual report last year, I commented that the administration had recently recruited an individual, the “Study Abroad Advisor”, to be a resource for all Divisions, and the administration’s lead person in further developing coherent policy and practice regarding students’ need for advice, support and safety and emergency considerations when involved in international study and research programs.

In relation to this, I made the following recommendation: “That the Administration consider a model similar to the Study Abroad Advisor, in terms of helping to ensure consistent University-wide practice in the implementation of the Policy for Safety in Field Research, as it applies to the University’s graduate programs in which field research activities could involve serious health, safety and/or emergency concerns.”

The Administration’s Response to my recommendation stated that: “The Provost’s Office will convene a group of relevant stakeholders, to include members from Research and International Relations, the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students, the School of Graduate Studies, Environmental Health and Safety, and Risk Management and Insurance. The group will discuss ways in which our obligations can be met.”

I would request that, as part of the Administration’s Response to this year’s annual report, the Administration provide an update as to the outcome of this group’s consultation in terms of this important area of policy/ procedural review and development, campus-wide, as it relates to graduate students.

3. Academic Staff

Over the past five years, the number of academic staff members who have approached us for assistance each year has ranged from 8 to 18 individuals, representing between 2% and 6% of my caseload. Last year, 13 academic staff members consulted our office for assistance (4% of our caseload). These individuals consulted us for input, from a confidential and neutral perspective, related to University policy/procedural information and interpretation (e.g. related to academic or disciplinary misconduct, grading practices,

and other student-related concerns), as well as about issues related to their Chairs and/or Directors and to program or research funding. In two of these cases, I provided informal mediation/facilitation, and in one other case, I contacted divisional representatives with respect to resolution of the issues.

(a) “Assessment of Teaching Effectiveness in Promotion and Tenure Decisions”

In my 1999/00 and 2000/01 annual reports, I raised the issue of graduate students’ evaluations of their teaching and supervision within the context of proposed changes to the “Guidelines for the Assessment of Teaching Effectiveness in Promotion and Tenure Decisions.” The Administration’s Response indicated that the Provost’s Office was continuing to work with Divisions in reviewing and updating Divisional Guidelines, and added that: “Graduate student input is one important aspect in the determination of teaching effectiveness. Divisions are expected to have processes in place for eliciting and considering such input.” I note that since then, in May 2003, the Provostial “Guidelines for Developing Written Assessments of Effectiveness of Teaching in Promotion and Tenure Decisions” have been updated to reflect best practices, including “a recommendation that each faculty member maintain a teaching portfolio; description of specific criteria for teaching competence and excellence; greater emphasis on graduate supervision; reference to the use of technology and clearer description of the data to be used for evaluation.”

4. Administrative Staff

The number of administrative staff members who have approached us for assistance over the past five years has varied from 14 to 28 individuals annually, representing from 5% to 8% of our caseload. Last year, 17 administrative staff members contacted our office regarding their concerns, totaling 5% of our caseload. These individuals requested assistance related to employment and workplace concerns and/or disputes; interpersonal disputes, and/or concerns about harassment. We provided them with the opportunity for confidential consultation and, most frequently, we provided options and suggestions, including information and referrals, to help these individuals with the resolution of their own concerns. In a number of these cases, we were involved in informal mediation and/or contacting other offices/individuals to facilitate dispute resolution. Given the collective agreements in place across the campuses with respect to their ‘step processes’ for grievance resolution, and given the “Policies for Confidentials” and “Policies for Professionals/Managers” in place since July 2001 with respect to their dispute resolution processes, I expect that the overall caseload represented by this constituency in terms of my office will remain substantially the same.

(a) Research Associates

In my 2001/02 report, I commented on the fact that I had received more complaints and queries from Research Associates than in previous years. In connection with this, I note that the administration considered this matter and brought forward a number of initiatives, and that the Governing Council has since approved the revised “Policy,

Procedures and Terms and Conditions of Appointment for Research Associates (Limited Term) and Senior Research Associates” (March 2003).

IV. OTHER ISSUES

1. Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response

In June 2002, the administration struck the Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response which included amongst its nine-point Terms of Reference a comprehensive assessment of the University’s protocols for emergency response and crisis management, and its orientation and training initiatives for key participants. The Vice- Provost, Students, has advised me recently that the administration anticipates bringing forward for approval in the 2003/04 academic year a new draft policy arising from the activities of this Task Force. Furthermore, I understand that the “Coping with Crisis” manual of protocols related to emergency response and crisis management across the three campuses is undergoing substantive revision and expansion, with a proposed publication date of Fall 2003. The comprehensiveness of this initiative is underscored by the nature of its membership and its extensive consultation process including the Senior Administration, Campus Police, Community Safety, Human Resources, Utilities and Property Management, Occupational Health and Safety, Crisis Management and the membership of various response teams depending on the nature of the emergency or crisis issue involved.

2. “Statement on Human Rights” and “Statement of Institutional Purpose”

I have found that while the vast majority of divisional academic calendars include a number of important University policies such as the “Grading Practices Policy”, the “Code of Student Conduct” and the “Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters”, they do not include the University’s “Statement on Human Rights” (1992) and the “Statement of Institutional Purpose” (1992). In my opinion, the highly decentralized nature of the University of Toronto, with its numerous, annual divisional calendars and student handbooks, together with a variety of other faculty, staff and student manuals and guidebooks, provides an excellent opportunity to communicate, on a ‘reach’ and ‘frequency’ basis, these important policies to the University community. The members of the Equity Issues Advisory Group (EIAG) expressed their continuing intention to promote awareness of these important University policies through their annual reports and various educational initiatives, whenever appropriate, including both print and web-based formats. They also agreed to join me in making the following recommendations to the Provost for her consideration:

Recommendation 2(a): That academic units incorporate, as a matter of practice, the University’s “Statement of Institutional Purpose”(in part) and “Statement on Human Rights” (See Appendix H) in their academic calendars, as well as other important publications; and,

Recommendation 2 (b): That this information be prominently featured in such publications with reference, wherever appropriate, to the publications’ subsequent

listings of the University's equity and diversity representatives, including the members of the Equity Issues Advisory Group and the Office of the University Ombudsperson.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. How are We Doing?

In various sections of this annual report, I have described a number of initiatives we have introduced during the last several years at the Office of the University Ombudsperson to improve our service to the University community. This has been facilitated by my appointment on a full-time basis as of July 2001, as well as by increased resources allocated to us for outreach purposes. I have described our increased presence at the UTM and UTSC campuses; our improved data collection and database management; our increased accountability and service delivery measurements; our distribution of print materials across the three campuses to increase awareness of our office's role and function, and our focus on the more complex cases brought to our attention by community members as their final avenue of recourse. I describe a number of additional initiatives in the following, closing sections of this annual report.

2. Accessibility and Responsiveness

For the first time last year, I reported on statistics related to certain accessibility and responsiveness features of our office, including our initial response time to inquiries; our scheduling of appointments; time to resolution/closing of cases; the number of students who have identified themselves as part-time; and the method of contact with our office i.e. email, telephone, walk-in, letter (See Appendix B: "Accessibility Measures" and Appendix I: "Case Management: Accessibility & Responsiveness").

In comparison with last year's results, we have continued to respond to individuals' initial contacts with our office within the same day or next (working day) in 90% of the cases. Once again, we were able to set up appointments within the same day or next (working day) in about 40% of those cases in which appointments were required. However, as was the situation last year, about one-third of our cases involved a wait of 4 (working) days or more for an appointment. Similar to last year, one-half of our cases were closed/resolved within 7 days, and 82% were closed/resolved within a month. Our success in maintaining these standards of service, as reflected in our statistics, represents a significant effort on our part over the past year given the increased caseload, my reduced hours at the St. George campus where 80% of our caseload is based, and Linda Collins' part-time status. Another area of concern relates to the decrease in the number of part-time students who have accessed our services over the past two years, given the relatively stable percentage of the population represented by this constituency over the same time frame. Last year, 20 part-time students (8% of our student caseload) consulted us about their complaints and queries, whereas 28 part-time students had done so in the previous year (14% of the student caseload). We hope that our ongoing,

outreach efforts in terms of distribution of our print materials will help to alleviate this situation, to some degree.

3. Service Evaluation Forms

In March 2003, we began distributing evaluation surveys to users of our service (See Appendix J). These forms are completed on an anonymous basis, and we provide stamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return. To date, the return rate is 16%. We are unable to draw any meaningful conclusions given the limited response rate to this survey, to date. We plan to explore, in further detail, this format of service evaluation with our Ombuds colleagues at other academic institutions, to gain from their experience.

We note that the survey comments received, to date, have been ‘overwhelmingly’ positive in nature. This is also the case with numerous emails and letters we have received (unsolicited feedback) related to our involvement in helping visitors to achieve resolution of their complaints and concerns. Of course, we must also acknowledge the disappointment on the part of some complainants who have disagreed with our office’s assessment of their situations and/or who may have misunderstood the non-advocacy nature of the Office of the University Ombudsperson.

I have been approached to participate as an external consultant in another academic institution’s operational review of its ombudsperson’s office. My role will include the analysis of complainant and respondent service assessments provided by that institution’s community members including students, faculty and staff. This analysis will comprise the core component of a more extensive service evaluation program and represents the type of evaluation program that I will be recommending to the Governing Council for its ‘end-of-term’ operational review of this office to be scheduled in early 2006.

4. Consulting Network

I have consulted on an individual, or small group basis, with more than fifty representatives of the University over the past year including, amongst others, representatives from the Office of the Vice-President and Provost, the Equity Officers, offices of student services/affairs, the SGS, SAC, members of UTM and UTSC’s senior administration, senior staff in other, specific academic divisions, the Office of Teaching Advancement, Robarts and other libraries, and Campus Police Services. This broad-based consultation has established a network that has assisted me in the accomplishment of three major initiatives. Firstly, it has facilitated my outreach efforts at UTM and UTSC. It has also provided considerable expertise, on a timely basis, related to my follow-up on issues raised in previous annual reports. Thirdly, this collective resource has played an important role in helping to achieve early resolution of a number of specific issues arising within my casework during the past year. For example, members of this ‘ad hoc’ consulting network are addressing the following: timeliness issues within the “resource sharing program” of the University’s libraries across the three campuses and various divisions; altered fee structures for a number of students involved in a particular academic program; the appointment of individuals with Notary Public/Commissioner for

Oaths status at all campuses, and appropriate communication about the availability of this service to the university community; serious graffiti concerns and issues at a campus; the issue of lease-terms for family housing at a campus, and improvements in the nature and 'formatting' of certain graduate department and SGS documents/ 'communications'.

I appreciate these individuals' very helpful input and advice, their considerable expertise, and their collaboration in expediting resolution to some of the more serious issues brought to my attention in the past year.

5. Professional Development

In November 2002, I attended an information session at Queen's Park related to the new "Ontarians with Disabilities Act". This provided helpful context in terms of the assistance I am able to provide to those individuals with disabilities who approach me with their concerns and queries related to academic accommodation. In this context and to further facilitate my consultation process, I attended the March 2003 conference entitled, "Excellence Through Equity: Confronting the Tension in Universities" held at this University, and coordinated by the Vice-President, Human Resources, together with her broad-based coordinating committee.

Early in the new year (January 2003), I attended the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons' (ACCUO) mid-year meeting at McGill University. The agenda was focused this year on ombuds service evaluation programs, individual case discussion, technology transfer/ownership of data issues and academic freedom case studies. In early April 2003, I attended the first annual conference of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman (FCO) held in Ottawa. The participants included about 200 Ombuds and Ombuds staff representing legislative/provincial, governmental organization, corporate and academic ombuds offices across Canada. The agenda included a one-day workshop offered by the Stitt Feld Handy Group on "strategies and hands-on techniques" for conflict resolution.

The membership of professional ombuds associations' useful exchange of information and expertise continues to provide valuable context for our central mandate of individual complaint resolution. Participation in these professional development opportunities is particularly important given the unique organizational role of an Ombudsperson in terms of neutrality, confidentiality and independence.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all members of the University community whom I have approached for assistance in resolving my visitors' complaints and concerns. In my follow-up to problems and queries brought to my attention, I continue to be very pleased with the responsiveness of those I approach with my inquiries in thoroughly explaining their perspective, in exploring possible alternative outcomes whenever feasible, and in sharing a commitment to fairness and to administrative fair process.

Once again, I would like to express my appreciation to the individuals comprising my consulting network, to the equity officers and to my Ombudsperson colleagues at other organizations and academic institutions, for their helpful input and advice related to my office's caseload management, service and outreach. I would like to express my appreciation, in particular, to Louis Charpentier, Secretary of the Governing Council, and to Linda Collins, my co-worker, for their counsel and assistance.

I look forward to continuing my efforts to address issues and problems brought to me by University of Toronto community members through early resolution, thorough investigation and timely recommendations.

Mary Ward
September, 2003