

Advocacy Centre Annual Report 2013-2014



**Advocacy
Centre**

Mission

The Advocacy Center's mission is to inform, empower and support students in the Concordia community and society at large. The Advocacy Center is dedicated to educating the University community concerning student rights and responsibilities and assisting students in the resolution of conflicts arising from actions or decisions taken by the University.

Vision

The Advocacy Centre is a service that is centered on students' needs. We strive to support students in their academic endeavors and exercising their rights on campus and in their everyday lives.

Values

The Advocacy Centre is guided by the following core values:

1. We respect the dignity and rights of all users of the Advocacy Centre's services.
2. We recognize that students have unique needs with respect to achieving success in their academic careers.
3. We believe that students should be informed, empowered and supported in exercising their rights both in and beyond their academic environments.
4. We believe that a knowledgeable staff and personalized strategies are the backbone of our work and are necessary in order to achieve our objectives.
5. We believe that the transparent exchange of information, ideas, knowledge and values is essential to the achievement of our mission.
6. We believe in managing the Advocacy Centre with transparency, integrity and accountability to the undergraduate students of Concordia University.
7. We protect the right to confidentiality and privacy with respect to information provided to us by and about students.

Who We Are

The Concordia Student Union

The CSU is the associative body that represents all undergraduate students at Concordia University. Its primary goals are to promote the educational, political, social, recreational and cultural interests of its members. It is also responsible for providing students with representation on various boards, councils, and committees of Concordia University.

The Advocacy Center

The CSU Advocacy Centre believes that students should be informed, empowered and supported in exercising their rights both in and beyond their academic environments. We are here to provide assistance to students who feel that they have been treated unfairly on campus or to help students by informing them of University policies that impact both their academic and non-academic pursuits on campus.

In addition, the Centre provides representation services to students as defined under the Academic Code of Conduct or the Code of Rights and Responsibilities. Advocates are here to listen to students and to address their concerns in a proactive manner. We also advocate a student-centered perspective on issues that impact undergraduate students both within and outside the University.

Other services include a free Commissioner for Oaths for undergraduate students, academic information sessions and consultations, referrals and mediation services. The Centre also conducts research projects on issues pertinent to its constituents.

While the Centre is there to provide support when difficult situations arise, we also place emphasis on prevention as an important component in safeguarding student rights. Advocates are available to answer students' questions and to brainstorm solutions before a given situation escalates. If you are unsure about the Code or how to approach your schoolwork, we urge you to come and see an advocate. Services provided at the Centre are confidential and it is our mission to provide relevant and timely solutions in a non-judgmental and supportive environment.



What We Do

Academic Misconduct

This category refers to charges of plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, personation and other offences listed in the Academic Code of Conduct. Advocates evaluate the alleged charges and develop case strategies with the student. They provide information and guidance throughout the process, as well as representation at interviews and hearings for cases falling under the Code. As second offence cases can result in expulsion, we devote significant resources and time to them. The Centre also helps students with the appeals process for decisions rendered under the Academic Code of Conduct.

The bulk of the center's work revolves around this type of case. It is the *raison d'être* of the Centre. It remains the most complex and demanding aspect of our mandate. As such, extended training is required before an Advocate is able to handle such cases.

Student Requests

This category refers to deferrals, transcript notations such as MED and DISC, retroactive DNEs, late registration, transfer credits and re-evaluation requests. Such requests often have a significant impact on students' GPAs and/or tuition costs. Other student requests are primarily concerned with academic standing. These cases generally involve readmission applications, re-evaluation requests, remedial steps, referrals and GPA assessments. Failed standing cases can result in a student being removed from his or her program for a minimum of a year, delay graduation and impact future employment and academic prospects. The Centre informs students about the various regulations dealing with such cases, helps with the construction of student requests, evaluates options available in various cases and advocates on behalf of the student.

While student requests may not be the center's main area of focus, we spend a significantly large amount of time on this type of cases. The reasoning for this is mostly due to the degree of complexity involved in student requests. Typically a student advocates work with a student involves one, if not all of the following: meeting with the student; corresponding with the student by email or phone; researching procedures or policies pertinent to the student's case; contacting relevant administrative or faculty groups on the student's behalf; preparing for and attending meeting and/or hearing with the student; and following up with the student to ensure the desired outcome. The complexity of the case may in some cases be due to the serious impacts of the decision (e.g. failing grade or expulsion). Other times it may be a case that requires contact with several offices at the university.

Complaints

This category refers to complaints about professors, other students, University staff and administrators, University policies, environment, and contract workers on campus. The Centre can process a complaint in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances. If appropriate, the Centre can help resolve the complaint through mediation and conflict resolution. In other circumstances, Advocates will help students construct, document and file formal complaints. For instance, the Code of Rights and Responsibilities (CORR) can be invoked along with other University policies in order to effectively deal with complaints.

The majorities of these cases deal with complaints made against professors or teaching assistants and often stem from a lack of communication. In such cases the Advocate acts as a bridge, either directly or indirectly and aid in bridging the gap between the two parties.

Code of Rights and Responsibilities

This category refers to cases in which a student has been alleged to violate the Code of Rights and Responsibilities (CORR). This Code outlines the processes for dealing with case of harassment, discrimination, violence, and sexual assault. Given the seriousness of the infractions the possible sanctions as stated in the CORR can include suspension and expulsion. The Centre has provided input about the CORR to the University, is well-versed in its application, and provides advice and representation for students charged under CORR in informal and formal processes.

While the center receives very minimal amount of cases from this category, it is by far the most strenuous and complex of all the cases. It often involves numerous meetings between the student, the Advocate and the university administrators with a time span of 4 to 6 months per case.

Information

The Advocacy Centre is a significant resource for students who are confused about how to maneuver within the bureaucracy of Concordia University or students who would simply like to inform themselves about their rights and responsibilities as a member of the Concordia community. Essentially, the clientele at the Centre is diverse and often approach us with a varying array of questions and concerns.

Policy Analysis

Students sometimes request that the Centre analyze and recommend changes to University policies dealing with academic misconduct, student requests and other policies. When required, the Advocacy Center also plays a role in representing student interests on several university committees.

Strategic Program Development

Outreach Campaign

This past academic year the Advocacy Centre has launched a new outreach campaign with the aim of reaching out to the larger student body. The specific goals of the campaign were to both market the Advocacy Centers services to a larger audience and educate students about their rights and obligations. In collaboration with the Dean of Students, the Center targeted 200 level classrooms and student advocates delivered a short presentation therein.

Also, as part of the Centre's outreach campaign, we have made it a habit to be physically present across the campus. We have booked table spaces in every major building with a high degree of student traffic giving out information booklets and the Center's contact information to students.

5S Project

5S is what can be described as a workplace organization methodology. It is a system that describes how to organize a work space for efficiency and effectiveness by identifying and storing the items used, maintaining the area and items and sustaining the new order. The five primary 5S phases are: Sort, Sort (systematize), Shine, Standardize and sustain.

A clear and documented organizational methodology is something that the Advocacy Center greatly lacked. In the past, the center operated on a non-systematized methodology which developed over time and greatly burdened the coordinator as it relied solely on his/her experience and constant oversight. This project aims to resolve that problem by incorporating a detailed framework that will outline office procedures and structure the centers workflow.

The improvements that 5S delivers are primarily focused on the working environment. By reducing or eliminating impediments within the work environment, the work flows become more efficient. Three of the five 5S activities – Set, Sort and Shine, target work environment improvements. Whereas Standardization and Sustenance complements the Center's quality control and governance objectives.

CRM System Implementation (Salesforce)

Client Relationship Management (CRM) software is a tool used for managing an organization's current and future clients. It involves using technology to organize, automate and synchronize workflows of an organization.

In coordination with the General Manager, the Advocacy Center has, over the summer, begun the implementation of a CRM into the center's operating procedures. This system is expected to be gradually incorporated into the routine workflow of the Center. The CRM will be designed to improved client management, enhanced oversight and governance, establish a data collection system and institute controls for record keeping and archiving.

Future Plans

Communication Strategy

A communications plan is an important part of any organization's daily operations. As a living document, it outlines outreach activities, internal and external communications, clarifies the organization's priorities, target audiences, resources and staff assignments.

This is an area that is clearly lacking at the Advocacy Centre, as no specific plan currently exists. Therefore the development and implementation of a strategic communication strategy will be of the utmost priority in the new academic year.

The specific goals of the communication plan will be as follows:

- Standardizing internal & external communications
- Information Dispersal
- Pinpoint potential communication methods and mechanisms

Research and Data Management

RDM is term generally used to denote how to organize, structure, store and care for the information used or generated during the academic year. The Advocacy Centre collects a large amount of confidential and non-confidential data from students that the Centre services during the year. However there is no real plan of action for how to best organize this incoming stream of data or how to best tabulate the data to guide the future direction of the Centre.

Given the importance of data management, the aim is to establish a well-defined action plan for managing the Centre's data to ensure maximization of benefit to both the students and the wider Concordia community. The goals of this project would be the following:

- Plan of action for how data will be looked after
- How to deal with information on a day-to-day basis over the academic term
- What happens to data in the longer term

CRM

The Client Relationship Management software that the Centre is currently working on implementing into our workflow still requires a lot of effort to perfect. Furthermore it became apparent that the current software (Salesforce) may not particularly meet all the requirements of the Centre; however it presents a great opportunity to test and examine our overall need.

Moving forward with this project, we will be collaborating with the IT coordinator and providing training for him so as to assist the Centre with both current and future development of the system.

Training & Development Program

Advocates are individuals that are tasked with performing a variety of tasks each with varying degrees of complexity. It is therefore important that the advocate is given the proper training, not only procedure, but also in the necessary skill set that would enable them to perform effectively. Currently training is provided as an orientation program in which the advocate goes through at the beginning of employment. This method of training however is not conducive or adequate to meeting the challenges that the advocate is expected to endure.

A comprehensive training program, on the other hand, will be directly related to the skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary for the advocate to fulfill their duties. It will include teaching advocates new skills, exposing them to unfamiliar ideas, giving them the chance to practice and get feedback on particular techniques or styles of working with people. It will also encourage them to discuss their work with one another and it will be an ongoing process throughout an advocate's employment.

Workflow restructuring & Digitization

The advocacy Centre has currently embarked on a goal to have the entire workflow process digitized. This presents a great challenge, as many obstacles need to be overcome, however it also presents a great opportunity as digitized data can easily be extrapolated and analyzed. This assessment of data will allow the Advocacy Center to better predict where to best focus our resources as well as plan the future direction of the Center.

Relocation of the Center

Under the advisement and collaboration with the VP Academic of the CSU, the Advocacy Centre will be moving its office from its current location on the 7th floor of the Hall building to the 2nd floor of the same building. This relocation is expected to enhance the visibility of the Centre allowing for an increase in services to the student population. It will also provide a much-needed space increase so as to allow the Centre to service more students at the same time.

Conclusion

Empowering students and supporting their academic pursuits is more than a motto. It is the prime directive for all staff, projects, services, policies, and procedures within the Advocacy Centre. We will continue to assess how well we meet that motto, fulfill our mission, and move toward seeing our vision become a consistent reality.

This past year the Advocacy Centre has gone through many changes with its staffing. In particular there has been a change over in the leadership of the Centre along with the hiring of two new advocates. This has presented a challenge given that the change in leadership occurred in the middle of the academic term. As such, the main focus of the coordinator has been in maintaining essential services and ensuring continued support to the student population. The training of new advocates has also presented a challenge as it highlighted the lack of any sort of comprehensive training plan. The development of a training program will thus be an area of focus in the upcoming academic year.

While most of the energy of the Advocacy Centre was focused on maintaining essential services, we have also been able to initiate several new programs on a pilot project basis. The implementation of these programs, in particular the outreach campaign, has enabled us to determine their usefulness and assess the future needs of the Centre. In addition, the recent expansion to the Loyola campus means that the Centre is now extending its services to an even larger audience. This presents a logistical challenge that will need to be addressed in the coming year.

All in all, it has been a great year for the Advocacy Center. The Advocacy team has injected tremendous energy and commitment into getting the annual Service up and running. We are thankful for the feedback and assistance we have received from the CSU. Our mission would not be possible without the continuous support from the VP Academic and other CSU executives and staff. We look forward to meeting the challenges of the upcoming year and continuing our efforts to support students in their academic pursuits.



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