

CSU Advocacy Centre Annual Report 2018-2019

Mission

The Advocacy Centre's Mission is to make sure that students are aware of Concordia University's policies, regulations and procedures and are informed on what options they have if they encounter any obstacles regarding these. The Advocacy Center is dedicated to assisting students in the resolution of conflicts arising from actions or decisions taken by the University.

Vision

The Advocacy Centre aims to be an easy-to-access, professional and knowledgeable drop-in and consultation resource for all matters related to the university and its procedure *as they pertain to students*. We seek to continuously expand our reach and how we can assist students and equip them with the information and options they need to best serve them.

Values

- Professionalism and respect
- Accessibility
- Representing and assisting students from all spectrums and backgrounds
- Being informed

WHO WE ARE

The CSU

‘The CSU’s mission is to serve students, defend their rights, and act as their highest representative body at Concordia. Two things are essential: that we are beholden to our membership, and that our funds are used responsibly.’

<https://www.csu.qc.ca/about-us/our-mission/>

The Advocacy Centre

The Advocacy Centre is a service provided by the Concordia Student Union (CSU) to support students through obstacles encountered to their academic endeavours.

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 (a very affordable for non-undergraduate students), academic information sessions and consultations, referrals and mediation services. The Centre, in collaboration with the CSU, also conducts research projects on issues pertinent to its constituents.

The Advocacy Centre team is comprised of the Advocacy Centre Manager, the Advocacy Administrative Assistant and the Advocacy Services Assistants (student advocates). The administrative assistant and the students advocates are full-time students trained by the Advocacy Centre Manager in the services that the Advocacy Centre offers.

WHAT WE DO

If a student is experiencing a problem as a result of the universities policies, regulations and procedures and come see us, we assist and where applicable accompany them in resolving the issue within the most relevant and suitable means available.

The majority of students who take advantage of the Advocacy Centre's services are assigned a student advocate to follow them and assist them in their case. Student advocates first listen to the issues that a particular student presents them with, checks in with the student to make sure that there are no other potentially significant variables that could be impacting the issue brought forward. Then, present possible options of how the student might proceed to resolve their issue. If the student then wishes to proceed with an option presented to them, the student advocate then helps them compile the work for their case within the whatever necessary deadlines are noted. A case is closed when the issue is deemed resolved, terminated (in that the student exhausted all the options they were willing to) or if a student ceases to reach out or respond to their student advocate.

This is a very basic structure of how student advocates interact with students. The level and duration of interactions and cases is determined by the nature, urgency and magnitude of a student's case.

The Advocacy Centre categorises its registered cases into six fields: 1) Academic Misconduct, 2) Code of Rights and Responsibilities, 3) Tribunal Hearings, 4) Student Requests, 5) Readmission and 6) Complaints and General Consultations. The Advocacy Centre registers a case and opens an official case file for a student when a student completes an intake form and their case requires follow-up. Much follow-up is case work that is done without the student needing to be present, but whose results will inform the next steps and decisions in their case. For this reason, Commissioner for Oaths clients and some Walk-In clients are not counted in our registered cases.

Academic Misconduct

This category refers to charges relating to 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.

The bulk of the Centre's work revolves around this type of case. It remains one of the most complex and demanding aspects of our mandate. As such, extended training is required before a student advocate is able to handle such cases.

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 (CRR) or cases in which a student would like to charge a member of the university for violating the CRR. This Code outlines the processes for dealing with cases of harassment, discrimination, violence, and sexual assault. Given the seriousness of the infractions, the possible sanctions as stated in the CRR can include suspension and expulsion. Furthermore, only student advocates with experience in handling long and serious cases can take on these cases alone.

Hearings

We assist and represent students facing disciplinary action by the university for serious academic misconduct or involved in high-level complaints against members of the Concordia community. Though these cases are few compared to the other types of cases, they are the most demanding and intricate cases our office sees. Hearings require very lengthy and require thorough preparation.

Student Requests

This category refers to official requests to the university by students for special cases and needs. 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.

The complexity of the case may in some cases be due to the serious impacts of the decision (e.g. failing grade, loss of visa or expulsion). Other times it may be a case that requires contact with several offices at the university.

Complaints and General Consultations

This category refers to all forms of complaints involving students and other members of the Concordia community. Advocates help students file complaints or defend themselves against accusations.

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. Some students also have truly exceptional cases/complications that even the Advocacy Centre *and* the University have not encountered before. These types of General Consultations end up requiring a lot of research, inquiring and follow-up on all sides to reach a definitive conclusion.

Before-the-Fact vs. After-the-Fact Cases

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. Student advocates are available to answer students' questions and to brainstorm solutions before a given situation escalates. If students are unsure about the Code or how to approach their schoolwork, we urge them 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.

After-the-Fact Cases – cases in which students have taken all of the measures they are aware of and have had decisions made by the university regarding their situation all before ever meeting with a student advocate. They are the trickiest cases to handle because some university decisions cannot be appealed. This is why we strongly recommend students come see us – even for an informal consultation if they do not want to register their case with us – before submitting student requests they have high stakes in.

Policy Analysis

Students sometimes request that the Advocacy 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. The Academic

Code of Conduct is expected to go under review in 2020 and the Advocacy Centre will be preparing for this alongside the CSU Academic and Advocacy Coordinator.

Task Force on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence (2018)

As mentioned, the Advocacy Centre will sometimes analyze certain University policies. Last year, a senior advocate attended weekly meetings for three months as part of Concordia's Task Force on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence. In Summer 2018, the Report of the Task Force on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence was published and included the Task Force's findings and recommendations to amend procedures and regulations regarding Concordia's procedural handling of sexual misconduct/violence complaints.

See link below for that report:

<http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/president/Task-Force-Report-En.pdf>

Essential Career Skills Workshop (2018)

Early in the 2018-2019 academic year, Maria Stawnichy, who used to be an Administrative Assistant at the CSU Advocacy Centre at the time, planned an Essential Career Skills seminars while working at the CSU Advocacy Centre. The Advocacy Centre assisted Maria in planning the seminars in Summer 2018 and the seminar was finally held on October 5th, 2018, in the Fall 2018 semester. The seminars were targeted at final year students in the Faculty of Arts and Science who intended to enter the workforce after earning their BA.

See the links below for the workshop what inspired its conception:

<http://www.concordia.ca/cuevents/artsci/2018/10/05/essential-career-skills.html>

<http://www.concordia.ca/cunews/main/stories/2019/01/15/how-can-social-science-and-humanities-skills-lead-to-success-in-the-job-market.html>

BIG CHANGES THAT AFFECTED THE RUNNING OF THE ADVOCACY CENTRE:

- 1) The Advocacy Centre Manager was on leave 2 months in Summer 2018. Student advocates could therefore not be hired and trained in the Summer. New advocates were only hired in the Fall and this meant that they could not be trained full-time over a short intensive period in the Summer before Fall courses began. Furthermore, because students all have different course schedules, this also meant that the new advocates this year could not be trained together all at once. As a result, since the new advocates were only hired in October, and were being trained until mid-end November – they really only truly got started in Winter 2019. This was the case with the GSA student advocate as well. And since all the new advocates were being trained in the Fall and not always together, this made up a lot of the workload for the CSU Advocacy Manager that semester and all special projects were put on hold.
- 2) The Advocacy Centre Manager had to go on leave again for 12 months this time in Winter 2019. An Interim Manager was only hired at the end of the Winter Semester which meant that special projects had to be put on hold again.
- 3) The Advocacy Centre also had a very high turnover this year because of employees graduating, doing internships and/or moving on to jobs related to their field. The most senior advocates of the Advocacy Centre – with the most institutional knowledge and experience – all graduated and moved on to other jobs. This has meant that overall this year, there has been a somewhat constant air of training and catching-up.

That being said, Winter 2019 showed our number of registered cases climbing back to previous levels since all the advocates at that point were available and trained. Summer 2019 is also showing our usual number of registered cases so far, too.

The Interim Advocacy Centre Manager will be hiring and training new advocates in August to avoid the complications that happened in Fall 2018.

Commissioner for Oaths appointments continue to thrive and we get 100+ every year, especially since other nearby departments that used to offer the service no

longer do. We currently have two commissioner of oaths at the CSU Advocacy Centre.

FUTURE PLANS

Social Media and Visibility Push

Our social media has been on the back burner for the past year, especially due to the turn-over and changes the CSU Advocacy Centre was going through.

However, the Interim Advocacy Centre Manager has made increasing the Advocacy Centre's visibility a priority and this Summer 2019 has been solely focused on reviving our social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We are on schedule for an end-of-summer launch that will coincide with Orientation as planned. We are also setting a schedule and guidelines for how these platforms will be updated and maintained. Furthermore, we are creating videos briefly describing our services and what we do which will be shared across our website and our social media platforms. We have organised and are coordinating with Communications at the Student Services department at the university to have are content shared on their websites and social media platforms, too.

We are also resuming classroom presentations in the Fall.

We are very fortunate to still have a couple of employees with 3+ years seniority who have maintained good relations with the various departments that we collaborate most with and so those departments continue to refer students to our services. We are committed to nurturing this going forward and direct referrals still seem to be the main reason that students tell us that they come to see us.

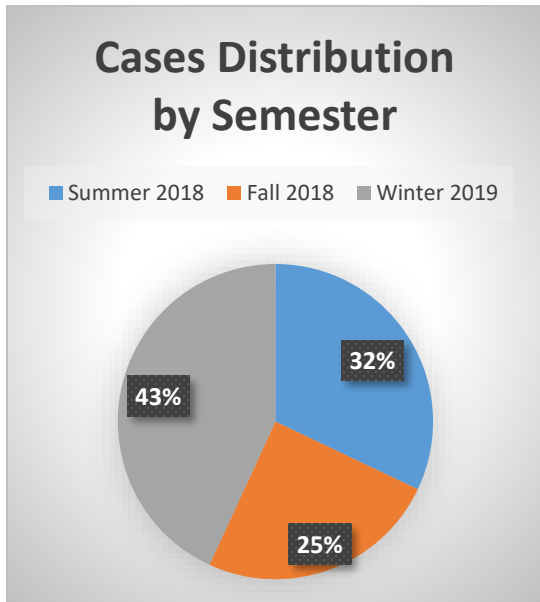
STATS AND REFLECTIONS

Based on a client's intake form and the workflow form, the CSU Advocacy Centre is able to track the numbers of the types of cases that are registered. A student advocate will have a student complete and sign an intake form if the situation brought to them requires a follow-up or multiple scheduled meetings to address the case brought forward. These are the cases that are registered at the CSU Advocacy Centre. Because of the research and follow-up required, these cases constitute the majority of the student advocates' work the CSU Advocacy Centre. Roughly 1 in 2 students who come to the CSU Advocacy Centre for assistance will register their case with us and become a client.

Cases are then handled based on priority, mostly determined by the time or nature sensitivity of the case. **The time and resources required to resolve any particular file varies widely, from cases requiring a few hours of work with limited follow up, to cases requiring dozens of meetings and hundreds of personnel hours.** A complaint case, as a very basic example, may never be registered as on the first meeting, the student realises that they wanted to be heard and know what their options are in case their situation worsens, but ultimately may not feel that their situation warrants immediate action – they just want to be ready if they need to be. However, should the student determine they want to take action, a complaint case could end up being spread over two semesters if the case goes to investigation or tribunal.

The following is a statistical breakdown of the registered cases from the last annual academic year, contrasted with the 2017-2018 academic year.

2018-2019



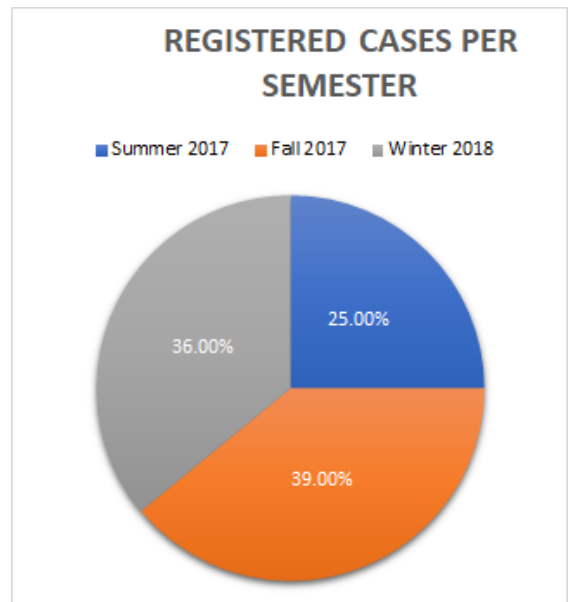
Total Cases: 262

Summer: 84

Fall: 65

Winter: 113

2017-2018

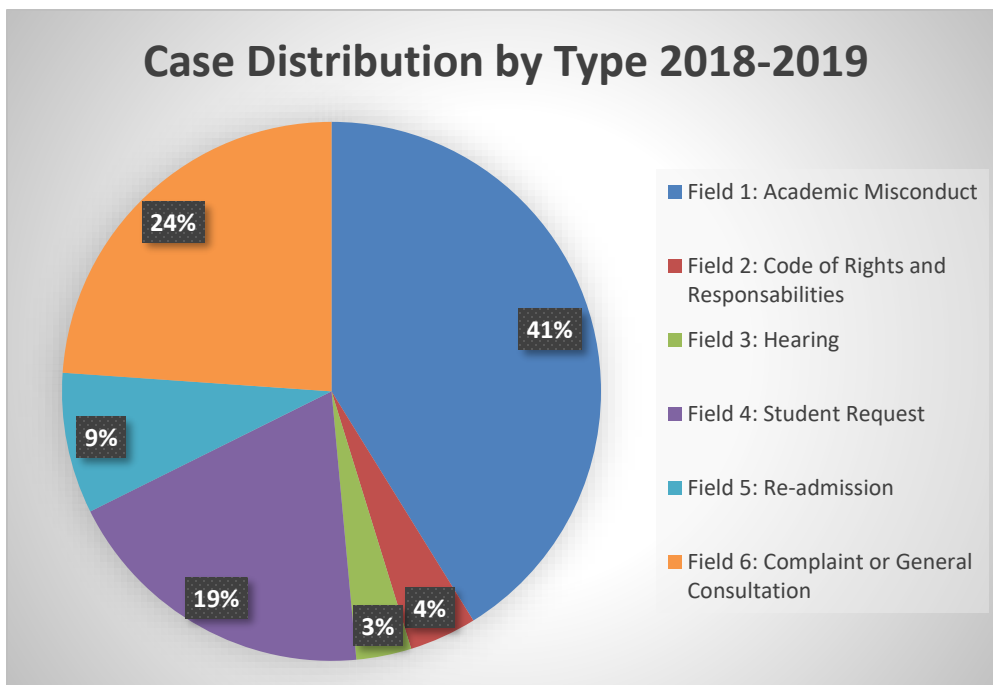


Total cases: 336

Summer: 85

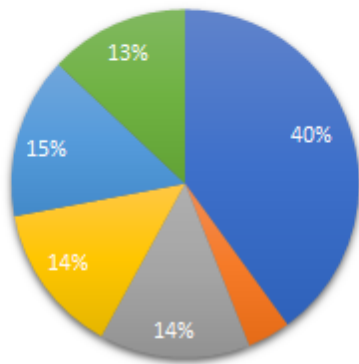
Fall: 130

Winter: 121



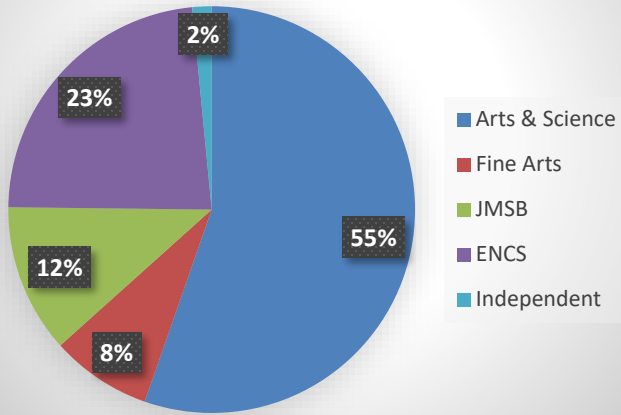
SERVICES DELIVERED 2017-2018

- Field 1: Academic Misconduct
- Field 2: Code of Rights and Responsibilities
- Field 3 : Student Request
- Field 4: Readmission
- Field 5: Complaint or General Consultation
- Field 6: Miscellaneous

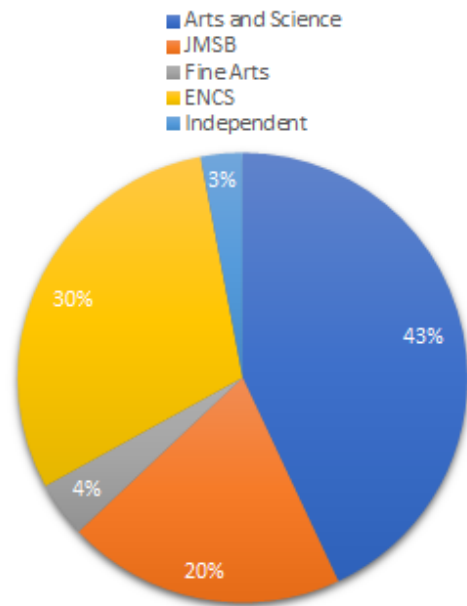


Note: that we have adjusted the labels of our six areas of services delivered to include Hearings and not include Miscellaneous (between this academic year and the last).

Case Distribution by Faculty 2018-2019

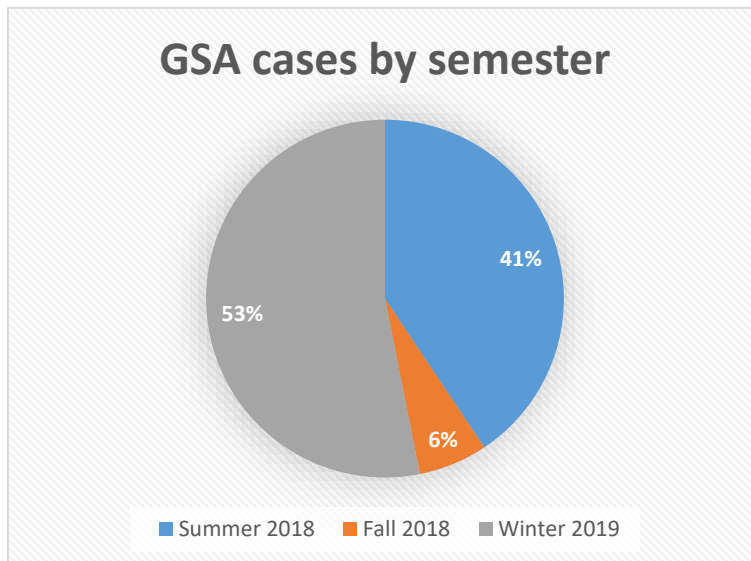


STUDENT'S FACULTY 2017-2018

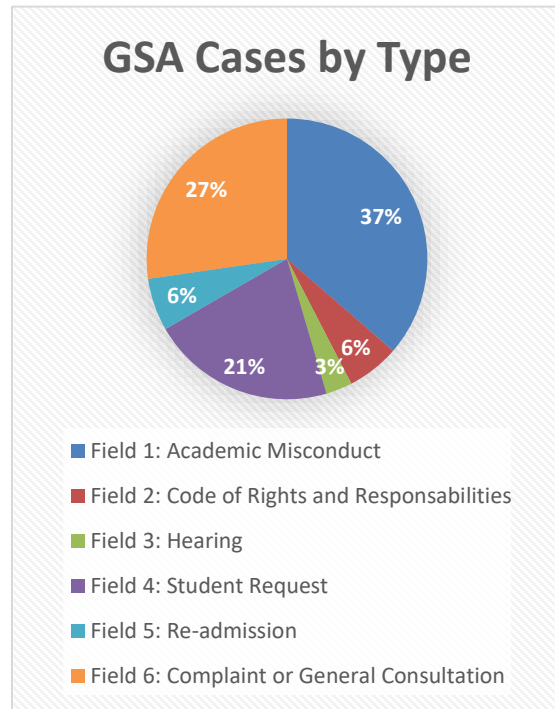
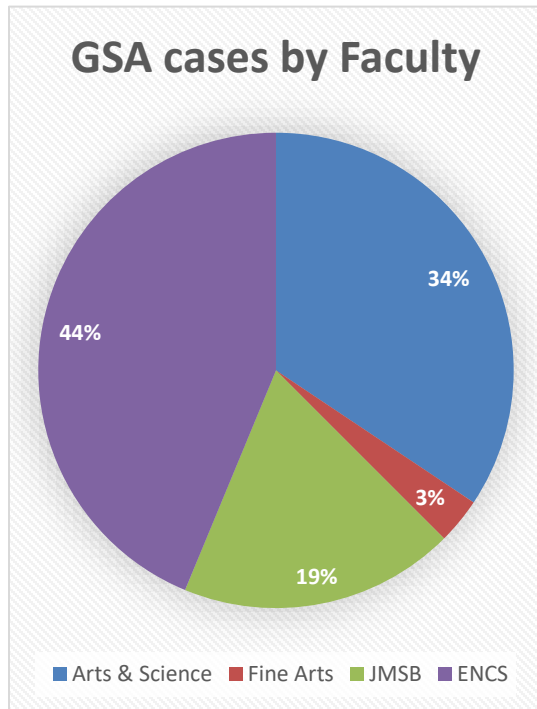


Graduate Cases 2018-2019

GSA cases by semester



Total Cases: 32 Summer: 13 Fall: 2 Winter: 17



Fall semester went from being the busiest semester in 2017 to the least busy in 2018, both for CSU and GSA. This, therefore, makes it hard to predict what traffic to expect in Fall 2019. Given that our social media platforms will be going live again during Orientation 2019, we expect this to have an impact. Winter and Summer remain consistently busy due in part we believe to Graduation following each of those semesters. Students with any concerns about factors that might prevent/delay/intervene with their graduation are eager to seek immediate assistance.

At the undergraduate level, most students with registered cases are registered in the Faculty of Arts and Science. At the graduate level, most of our cases are for students registered in the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science.

Our second summer project has also been to improve our case load analysis mechanisms to increase efficiency and have more checks and balances with our workflow between student advocate, admin and manager. We are implementing a two-stage archiving system that will drastically ease our summer archiving process and open up significant room for project planning in July and August when traffic

at the Advocacy Centre decreases and student advocates themselves typically tend to not be in class.

Case Load Analysis

Compared to 2017-2018 Academic Year, we are back to numbers we had in the past. In 2017-2018, we observed an unusual spike in the number of cases, GSA included, because the Concordia University Student Advocacy Office (SAO) was experiencing a significant turnover themselves as the time. At the point where they were still hiring and training, the CSU and GSA Advocacy Centre ended up with a lot more traffic – especially in terms of graduate cases.

Increase in ORR cases and Complaints

The combination of Hearings, Complaints and ORR cases are now a substantial portion of the type of cases that the CSU Advocacy Centre handles at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In general, with the CSU and other student associations encouraging students to seek assistance in cases of harassment and/or sexual violence, it makes sense that this could be having the added effect of mobilising students in general to seek assistance when they think a member of the Concordia University community is acting in a way that is concerning, upsetting and/or harmful.

Cases like these require a lot of personnel hours and advocates who are competent and confident in negotiating with university administration to try to achieve a result that feels just to the client.

This is why the rigorous training is crucial from the on-set of hiring new student advocates and why student advocates who work at the CSU Advocacy Centre for 2+ years are such an asset as it takes 8-12 months before an student advocate can work fully autonomously on a case.

CONCLUSION

This has been a big transition year for the Advocacy Centre. The change in management has meant a lot of re-organising. It is taking time, but four months in is proving beneficial. The office is becoming more streamlined and is implementing more control-loops that will assist the office through next periods of change and turn-over (which with student part-time employees is inevitable).

We look forward to seeing how effective our social media campaign will be and analysing what about it works best and improving on it throughout the year.

Given that we are also resuming classroom presentations, we are most interested in seeing how our Fall traffic is affected by all these measures and if traffic increases after the drop we experienced last year.

This academic year, 2018-2019, the CSU Advocacy Centre turned 15 years old. The CSU is a non-profit organisation and started the Advocacy Centre in response to needs students' had for help and assistance in difficult situations affecting their academic/university life. For fifteen years, students and managers from different faculties and work experiences have learned, grown and contributed from the ground up in building up and passing down knowledge and expertise on how to help students navigate university bureaucracy in these difficult situations. Each year, the Advocacy Centre adjusts to new circumstances and improves. Overall, its foundations grow stronger. It is a cumulative effort and we look forward to what each new team of student advocates, administrative administrators and manager will bring.