

CSU Advocacy Centre Annual Report 2019-2020

(see separate excel sheet for stats)

UPDATES THIS YEAR

The Academic Code of Conduct was expected to go under review in 2020, however the Covid-19 pandemic and campus being shutdown in March 2020 has put this on hold for this academic year at least.

The Advocacy Centre resumed completing Hiring and Training during the Summer Semester. Summer 2019, student advocates were trained in person, ready for the Fall 2019 start. Case numbers remained stable and constant throughout 2019 and the beginning of 2020.

The Advocacy Centre also resumed doing class presentations in the first 2 weeks of Fall 2019 in large lecture courses to help make students aware of the Academic Code of Conduct and their right to prepare with a student advocate and have a student advocate present if ever they are charged with academic misconduct.

The Advocacy Centre also made a push on Social Media, via Instagram, Facebook and the CSU Newsletter to make people more aware of the Advocacy Centre, the services it offers, through posts, stories and a few videos.

Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Advocacy Centre Operations

As the campus was shut down on March 13th, 2020, the CSU and most of its services had to start operating remotely.

The CSU Advocacy Centre mainly operated on Microsoft Teams to allow students to meet with student advocates via video call. In order to continue being reached via phone, the CSU Advocacy Centre also operated on Concordia's Forticlient VPN and Cisco Jabber services to be able to answer our 7313 CSU office extension and check our voice messages and call back students who otherwise had not provided

their e-mail information. Intakes were processed and signed electronically during calls since most students and even staff do not have access to a printer and scanner.

It should be noted that both the Teams and the VPN/Jabber software use a lot of memory, so making sure staff had adequate computers to work on also sometimes became an issues, so some staff had to use CSU equipment from the CSU offices.

The pandemic also slowed down operations because the university was experiencing a high volume of inquiries, requests and concerns in most departments which meant that cases took longer to resolve simply because getting through was a challenge or because of delays.

The Advocacy Centre started separating inquiries from cases among all the consults during the pandemic. The Advocacy Centre would have liked to have been able to assist on every inquiry, but resources are limited to the number of hours and staff the Advocacy Centre offers. And since many students want same-day inquiries, like the Walk-Ins we would have in person before the pandemic. Unfortunately, as many of these requests are made via e-mail, with little insufficient information and often no phone number to reach the student on, the Advocacy Centre often cannot help in those cases, though the best is done to try. The work of following-up to get more information that might allow a student advocate to help, as mentioned, is the task of the admins so that student advocates can continue attending appointments or working on other cases that have deadlines and for which they already have sufficient information to actually be of help.

That being said, our case numbers still continued to increase during the beginning of the pandemic and the Advocacy Centre continued to assist students as best they could given the restrictions. Our case numbers for Winter 2020 (130) are the same Fall 2017, the semester that the Concordia University run Student Advocacy Office (SAO) was experiencing significant turn-over and were quite understaffed so the Advocacy Centre worked on a higher number of cases then.

There were 34 inquiries in Winter 2020, when we started separating them out.

CASE LOAD ANALYSIS

Case and Inquiries numbers increased since last year, especially because of the pandemic. **320** cases and **34** inquiries, for a total of **354** Consults.

CoRR cases, complaints and Hearings take longer to resolve during the pandemic because of delays and/or restrictions, so though it does not increase the case number it certainly increases the workload.

Operating remotely has at least meant that since student advocates are not working on site in the open-plan office, students feel a bit more comfortable discussing cases of a sensitive nature like most CoRR cases.

There was a high number of complaint cases, many of which were recorded during the pandemic.

PROJECT

It took most of the 2019-2020 academic year, but the CSU completed building the new Client Relationship Manager (CRM) for the CSU Services: LIC, HOJO and the Advocacy Centre.

The new CRM went live on June 15th, 2020.

Staff now have to be trained to use the new CRM correctly and to also report bugs and issues as given the very recent build, there is still a lot of troubleshooting.

GSA

The CSU and GSA renewed their agreement for graduate students to have access to the Advocacy Centre services for another 2 years until end of Summer 2022.

ABOUT THE ADVOCACY CENTRE

Mission

The Advocacy Centre's Mission is to help sure students understand 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 directly 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;
- Accessibility;
- Representing and assisting students from all spectrums, backgrounds;
- Being Informed: keeping up to date on university policies and regulations that affect students and researching less-known/typical ones when they are brought to our attention by students;
- Respect (The Advocacy Centre will never tolerate any form of verbal or physical abuse of its advocates by anyone) and ensures absolute professionalism when advocates interact with students

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.

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.

Other services include a free Commissioner for Oaths for undergraduate students (and very affordable for non-undergraduate students), academic information sessions, general consultations and referrals.

The Advocacy Centre team is comprised of the Advocacy Centre Manager, the Advocacy Administrative Assistants and the Student Advocacy Assistants (student advocates). The administrative assistants 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 not potentially other significant variables that could be impacting the issue brought forward and then present possible options of how the student might proceed to resolve their issue. Where necessary, the student advocate researches further options if the case is very particular on behalf of the student. If the student then wishes to proceed with an option presented to them by a student advocate, 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. Cases are reopened when necessary.

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 used to categorise 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.

As of the 2019-2020 academic, the Advocacy Centre categorises its registered cases into these following six (6) fields: 1) Academic Misconduct, 2) Code of Rights and Responsibilities, 3) Tribunal Hearings, 4) Student Requests, 5) Complaints and 6) General Consultations. This change was made because much fewer students request assistance from the Advocacy Centre in Re-Admission cases, so going forward we count those as part of Student Requests, whereas it felt more useful to separate Complaints from 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 – case work to be done without the student needing to be present, but whose results will inform their next steps and decisions taken 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.

About a quarter of the Centre's cases are related to Academic Misconduct.

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) or cases in which a student would like to charge a member of the university for violating the CoRR. This Code outlines the processes for dealing with cases of harassment, discrimination and sexual violence, among others. Given the seriousness of the infractions, the possible sanctions as stated in the CoRR can include suspension and expulsion. Furthermore, only student advocates with experience in handling long and serious cases can take on these cases alone. It is one of the more demanding aspects of our mandate and cases usually last many months.

Tribunal 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. Both Academic Code of Conduct and Code of Rights and Responsibilities cases can end up going to a hearing, but not all do and the preparation and work on a case is different based on whether it does or not. Typically a case goes to a Hearing if previous steps were not successful in resolving the issue. Hearings require very lengthy and 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. This case type varies the most in length, from as little as 2 weeks to as long as a year depending, for example, if a decision on a student request is being appealed or if other avenues are being initiated as a result of a rejection.

Complaints

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 that do not fall under the Academic Code of Conduct or Code of Rights and Responsibilities. A case is recorded as a complaint if during consultations with the Advocacy Centre and after being presented options, the student chooses to address their complaint with the university (i.e. a case is not recorded as a complaint if the student is complaining about something, but elects to do X to resolve the situation and move on).

General Consultations

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. Typically, these are Walk-Ins that become cases because of the amount of research the student advocate has to do and the amount of different departments the student advocate has to contact before getting a final and clear answer.

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 explore possible solutions before a given situation escalates. If one is unsure about the Code or about how to approach an issue within their department that is impeding their academic, we urge them to come and see a student 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 – 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 or requesting certain exceptions they have high stakes in.