



Report of the Office of the Student Ombudsperson Summer & Autumn 2021

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 as a place to advocate for equity and fairness on campus. The office serves all students on campus and has a mandate to look into a wide array of issues that are too broad to be summarized by any metric. Rather than seeing our office as issue-specific (all the student-facing offices on the campus tend to be issue-specific), students should see us a place to go to when existing channels of conflict resolution has fallen through or has proved to be unsatisfactory or unfair. We uphold equity and fairness in all avenues of student life on the campus.

Breaking away from the tradition followed in the last few years, our office has decided to publish quarterly reports instead of annual reports. This initiative will allow us to appraise the campus community of both the problems that students bring to us and our broad policy recommendations in a timely manner, so that we can generate conversations about important issues during the school year. For one, we are acutely aware that the existence of our office is still not widely known among the students. We believe that publishing and publicizing these quarterly reports will be good way to address that problem. In addition to these quarterly reports, we will also be offering information sessions for any programs or departments who are interested in having a member of our office come talk to their students about our services. We hope that these initiatives will make our office more approachable and useful to students across the campus

In the summer and autumn quarters of 2021-22 academic year, we received 28 cases. More than half of the cases came from undergraduates and the rest from Master's and PhD students. Some of the problems brought to us include grading conflict, concerns about academic work being assigned during final week, plagiarism, conflict between research assistant and academic staff, concerns about COVID protocols on campus, travails of estranged students caught between parents and university, problems athletes face with course registrations, concerns about the therapist-on-call program at the Student Wellness, parking and housing woes, biased behavior of the instructors in class, and conflicts between PhD students and advisors. As the range of these issues suggests, students on campus continue to face challenges that they are often unable to resolve through locally available mechanisms in their academic unit. Often, students find local mechanism lacking in trust for they are run by people who have an immediate relationship with the complainant.

In this report, we discuss five main issues that we think warrant campus-wide discussion and action.

1. Academic conflicts arising from instructional policies

We saw several instances of anxious undergraduate students expressing concerns about the grades awarded to them, or about the mismatch between the expectations of faculty and student about course policies. The intense competition that now marks admissions to the college, and later to well-paying jobs and graduate programs, has made grades all the more important to students. This is a development that we can only see from the sides. But we do recognize that teachers have a responsibility in conveying course expectations to their students' and in ensuring that what they convey reaches every student. This may involve using multiple mediums of communication (such as the syllabus, Canvas, classroom, or email). Grades are often the summation of teacher's estimation of student's overall achievement. Teachers and students together can recognize that grading is a fraught and subjective exercise that is constrained by several factors, which neither the instructor nor the student can control. We hope that rather than seeing courses only through the optic of grades, students should find the learning process enjoyable and realize the value of cultivating relationship with faculty. In this endeavor, both students and faculty have an equal role to play.

We also want to highlight the increasing concern among students that they would like the reading period and final week to be set aside for study and revision rather than for engaging with any new material or work. We acknowledge that our office has an important role in ensuring that violations of instructional guidelines are called out. This was reiterated by the [Report of the 2019 Committee to Review Academic Calendar](#). While we did not find any instance of a faculty violating the reading period policy, we received numerous cases from students anxious about having to juggle between exams and course paper deadlines in the final week. There is not a policy violation *per se* in an instructor deciding to have their course paper due on a day when a student might have to sit for exam for another course. Instructors are not obligated to set their course paper deadline in consultation with exam dates of their students. However, we think that instructors should advertise and convey their course paper deadlines well in advance, at least 4 weeks before, so that students can manage the final week deadlines better. Instructors early on should tell their students that they might likely have overlapping deadlines in the final week and that they should work toward honoring the deadlines. In turn, students who foresee having difficulties meeting these deadlines should communicate their circumstances well in advance of the deadline whenever possible. Our experience tells us that resolving these issues before rather than after deadlines leads to better outcomes that are acceptable to both the student and instructor. We see this as a problem of faculty-student relationship and it can be best addressed by open channels of communication between both and by building trust in each other.

2. *Laboratory conflicts and faculty-student conflicts*

We received cases from both undergraduates and PhD students about the absence of guidelines as to what is proper conduct in laboratories, and what kind of reasonable expectations might a faculty have on their student, and vice versa. Undergraduates who work in labs and are authoring research papers often run into conflict with their teammates on work allocation and on fair ways to credit each person's work in the research output. We recognize that there are no guidelines that are available to students before they get involved with collaborative work and any kind of conflict resolution available to them are purely ad-hoc. It would be ideal if labs and scientific establishments that thrive on collaborative work put in place expectations and guidelines for collaborative work sooner than later.

Managing the expectations from faculty is a great concern for PhD students. In a lab setting, where faculty and students interact closely and frequently, there is a greater probability of conflict and misunderstanding snowballing into larger worries about the academic future of students. We have seen students fearing the consequences of falling out with faculty in all graduate departments. These often range from fear of outright hostility from faculty to fears about their job market and publication prospects. There is no magical solution to this problem as most of the time these conflicts are personal in nature, albeit taking place in professional settings. Open channels of communication between students and faculty, and mutual understanding and forbearance can go a long way. A more stable solution to these conflicts would be to institute more structures of redressal in the programs/departments. For instance, in BSD and especially in the Department of Organismal Biology and Anatomy, we found that there is no structure available for students to redress conflicts that arise in their workplace. We strongly recommend that all academic departments in the university have a Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC) led by a panel of faculty members who might be the first point of contact for department related matters to all students. It is also a great practice, as seen in some departments, to have a faculty outside one's thesis committee to be assigned as a GSAC advisor so that students find it easy to talk about the academic conflicts they face with their advisor/committee. Strengthening the non-academic staff led by the Dean of Students in each division and making these staff easily accessible to students will greatly enhance the conflict resolution at local levels as well. Students often do not know how the powers and authority of their advisor, department chair, and the area Dean of Students differ. More clarity on these institutional structures should be imparted at the departmental levels, so that students feel confident in approaching these individuals.

3. *Concern about funding and teaching among PhD students*

We saw PhD students from fields as diverse as Applied Math, Classics, and Social Work approach us with concerns about the funding model and teaching expectations. One basic concern that students with external funding articulated is that they wanted to be let off the departmental expectations that normally came attached with university funding. If a student is funded by an external agency, and

they have to work toward meeting certain standard to be in good standing for that agency, then is it fair to have those students also follow certain expectations, such as teaching, that come with the university funding? We gathered that some students in Physical Sciences Division have no understanding of what constituted “good academic standing” and who determined it. There is also anxiety among students in that division about their “inability” to decline university funding and accept external funding in light of recent changes in that division. These concerns also exist in Social Work. The Dean of Students office in each (every) division has a major role to play in communicating funding and teaching policies to the students at least on an annual basis. We realize that the best way to solve these issues is by having discussions with students and faculty and we might have to think about more localized, or academic unit specific, solutions rather than applying a university-wide metric to these concerns.

4. Academic problems faced by athletes

Athletes in the university often run into academic problems because of the hours they must devote to training and practice. The college accepts freshman athletes every year and they have to bid for courses the same way as the rest of the students. But this can often lead freshman athletes into difficult situations where their ability to practice every week might be compromised. For example, consider this scenario: the college has recruited a freshman athlete, but they are not able to train a single day with their teammates because they could not get into sections of the first-year mandatory courses they wanted to. For our office this is primarily a fairness issue. How could you have a situation where you recruit an athlete and they are not able to run a single day? We recognize that the college or the division is not able to accommodate all the requests received from students regarding changes to course sections of first-year students. But we do think that that should not be a ground for treating a student unfairly by depriving them of their opportunity to practice every week. While the university does not give any special treatment to the athletes, we do think that it is a good practice for course changes to be granted to athletes in consultation with their academic advisor and coach, in situations where a student is not able to practice at least 2 or 3 days a week.

5. Plagiarism and conflict between faculty and research assistants

The cases we received about plagiarism this quarter involved complex issues. A case involving plagiarism committed by a student in their coursework is a straightforward case and the university has a well-established mechanism to deal with that. However, unlike peer universities like Yale, Northwestern, or Harvard, our university does not have guidelines on student-teacher research collaborations and co-authorship agreements. We need a policy to set out how these agreements might be entered into, and, when disputes arise, how might they be resolved. It is imperative that these guidelines be put in place soon to avoid future conflicts between faculty and students who enter into collaborative research and writing.

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We have chosen to highlight these issues because not only were they numerous, but they were also indicative of broader problems and the need for action. Academic conflicts constitute the bulk of the cases that come to our office, and we anticipate that that trend will continue. The sovereignty that instructors enjoy in instruction often leave students with no option but to approach us. We also had to turn down some cases because *prima facie* there is no merit in the demands made by a student. For instance, if there are two sections for a course and if both sections have the same exam conducted hours apart, that does not constitute unfairness *per se*. This is especially common in professional schools where students are bound by an internal code of conduct (honor code). While we seriously and thoughtfully consider all academic concerns brought to us by students, we maintain a spirit of neutrality and respect the academic freedom and prerogative of the instructors as well. Accordingly, our office does not serve as a method for students to circumvent their instructors. Our office respects academic freedom and the prerogative of the instructors to teach and grade the way they like. We come into question only when an avoidable injustice has crept into the student-faculty relationship.

We will continue to remain open to resolving all kinds of conflicts that students face on campus. We were impressed by the willingness, cooperation, and enthusiasm that the university leadership, staff, faculty, and various offices showed us in the process of resolving disputes. As Ombudspersons our main task is “to call attention to any injustices and abuses of power or discretion.” We are fully committed to this goal and we look forward to working with the campus community for the rest of the year.



Sarath Pillai
Student Ombudsperson
The University of Chicago



Min Lee
Associate Student Ombudsperson
The University of Chicago