

OFFICE OF OMBUDSPERSON

ANNUAL REPORT 2023 - 2024

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SAIT

Southern Alberta
Institute
of Technology

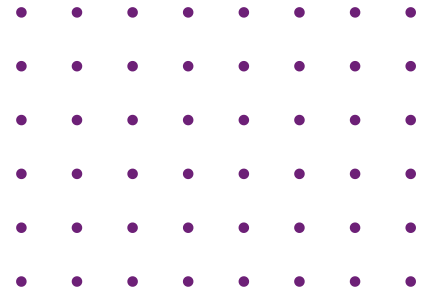
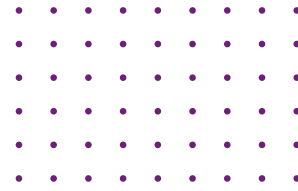


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A Word from the Ombudsperson



I am pleased to present the 2023-2024 Annual Report for the Office of the Ombudsperson at SAIT, the third such report in the history of this department.

This academic year, the Office of the Ombudsperson continued to experience significant increase in demand for support as the Office gained momentum and expanded its profile and reputation as a resource within the SAIT community. More noteworthy, though, was the July 2024 departure of Kamini Bernard, the Office's inaugural Ombudsperson. Combining her wisdom and experience with her thoughtfulness and pragmatism, Kamini created a department from scratch, and in so doing left an impressive legacy for the institution. Kamini handed me the Ombuds reins, and the task of trying to follow in her footsteps, in September 2024.

In addition to creating a service that didn't previously exist, Kamini established a network of positive relationships between Schools, academic departments, and a variety of support units. This has enabled a highly collaborative approach when folks encounter difficult situations, complex regulations and procedures, and conflict. As early as my second day on the job, I was being contacted by staff seeking assistance with managing their situation fairly and achieving a reasonable conclusion. Reacting to concerns from students still constitutes the vast majority of Ombudsperson inquiries, however supporting staff and faculty proactively improves outcomes and reduces the incidence of students feeling unfairly treated. It's an admirable approach, often with a win-win outcome, and so this will be a preferred approach for SAIT's Ombudsperson in years to come.

Jeff Stransky



What is an Ombudsperson

The Ombudsperson serves an important role at SAIT, acting as an impartial and independent resource for students, faculty and staff, and others with a connection to the institution. The Ombudsperson provides a confidential and accessible avenue through which individuals can seek assistance on how to resolve their concerns.

SAIT's Ombudsperson works with individuals to explore options and strategies for addressing disputes, whether they involve academic concerns, interpersonal conflict, or other challenges encountered in the learning environment. By offering guidance and facilitating constructive dialogue, the Ombudsperson helps members of the SAIT community find solutions that align with the institution's values and policies.



Broadly, the Ombudsperson:

- Creates a culture of fairness, inclusivity, and respect
- Raises awareness of institutional policies and procedures
- Supports individuals in their path to self-advocacy
- Ensures individuals understand their rights and responsibilities
- Assists with dispute resolution where possible
- Investigates concerns
- Identifies systemic issues and provides recommendations for change
- Refers to other external resources when they are not able to assist

The Five Pillars

Five foundational pillars underpin the role of the Ombudsperson at SAIT. Collectively, they serve as a framework to provide a fair and equitable approach to addressing concerns and issues encountered by students and the broader SAIT community.

Independent

Impartial

Accessible

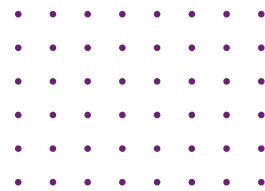
Confidential

Informal

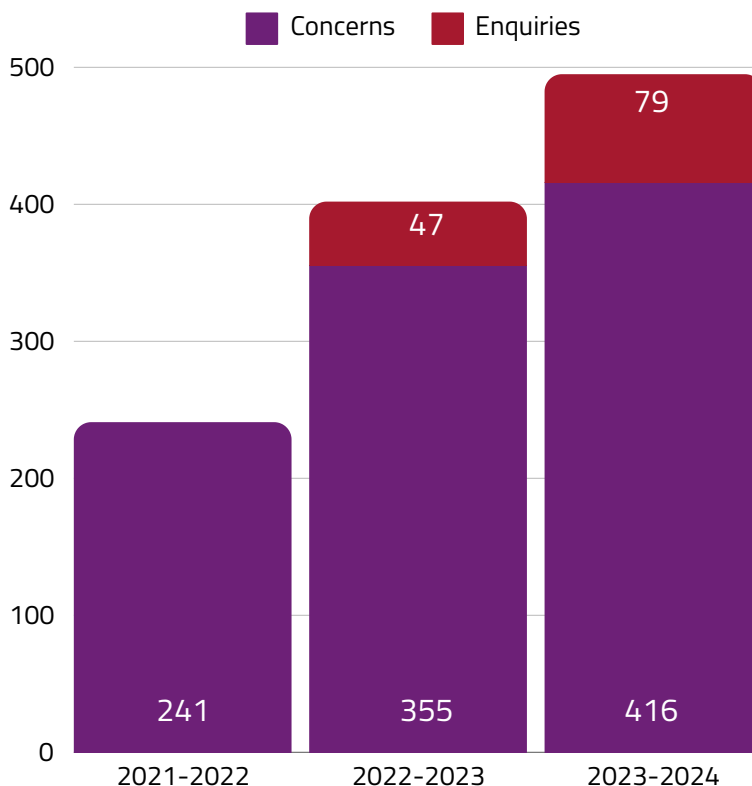


ANNUAL REPORT OVERVIEW





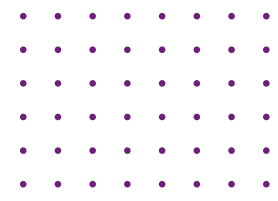
Overview of Enquiries and Concerns



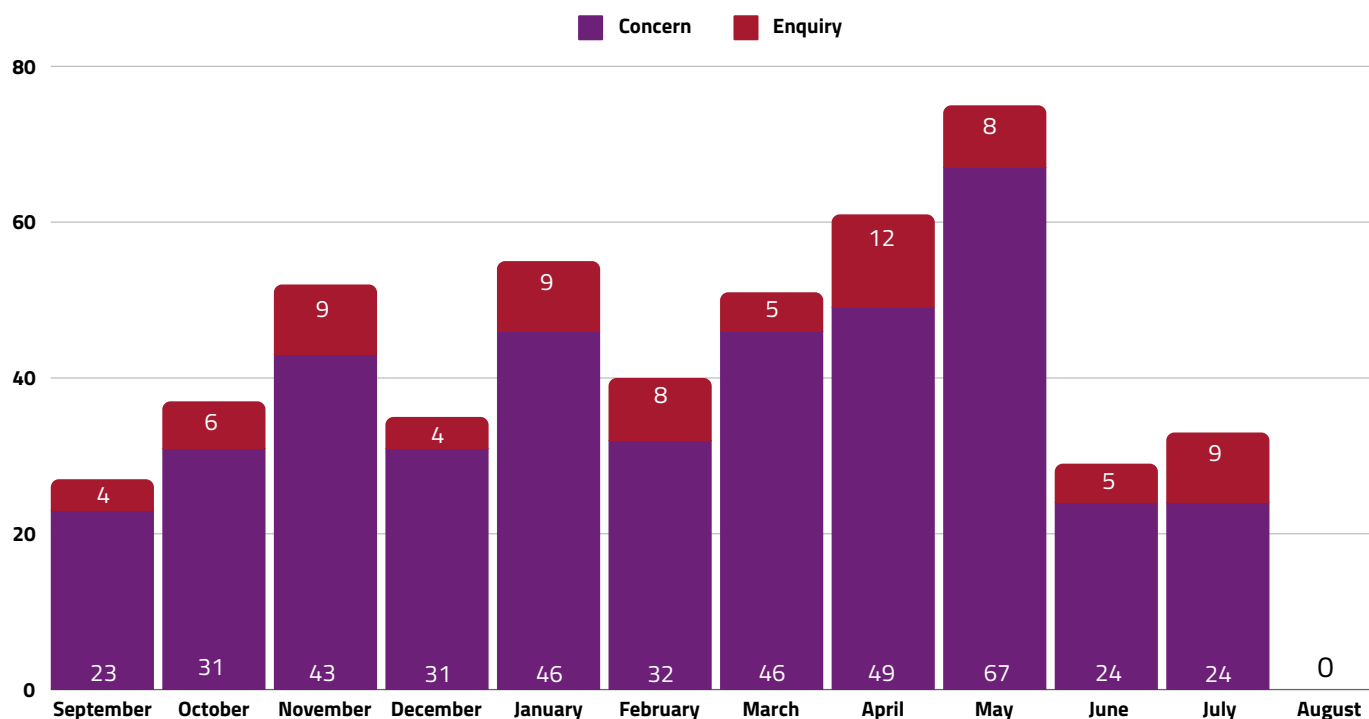
In 2023-2024, the number of cases opened at the Office of the Ombudsperson increased from 402 to 495, a 23% increase over the previous year and the second consecutive year of double-digit growth since the department's inception in 2021.

When a new case is opened, it is placed in one of two categories. 'Concerns' are primarily raised by students, centering on issues most commonly related to academic misconduct, their instructors, grading, and other course-related issues. 'Enquiries' generally originate with faculty or staff and tend to be policy-related matters or proactive consultations regarding student situations.

Concerns comprise a large majority (84%) of incoming cases. However, growth of Enquiry cases (68%, from 47 to 79) outpaced the growth of Concerns (17%, from 355 to 416), compared to the previous year.

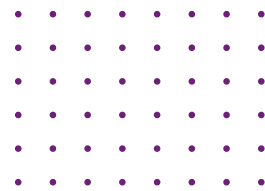


Monthly Breakdown of Enquiries and Concerns at SAIT: 2023-2024

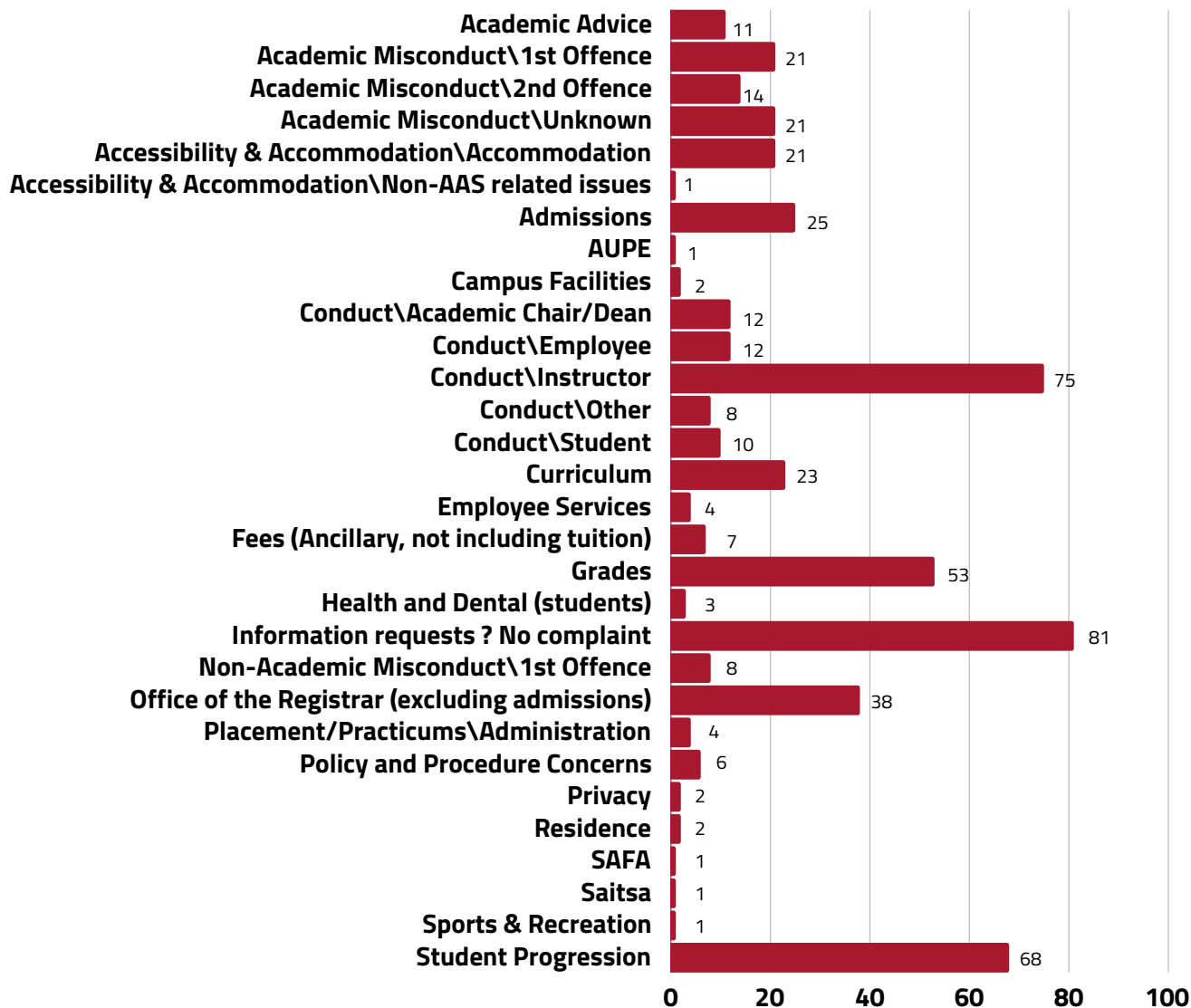


Monthly totals of incoming cases tend to start low in September and February, then build over the next 3-4 months as assessed course work accumulates toward the end of a semester. June and July typically see reduced numbers of incoming cases compared to other times of the year, reflecting the smaller population on campus during the summer months.

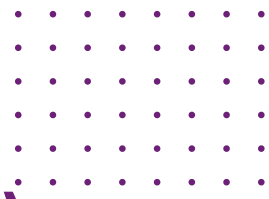
No new cases were logged for the month of August this year due to the Ombudsperson position being temporarily vacant.



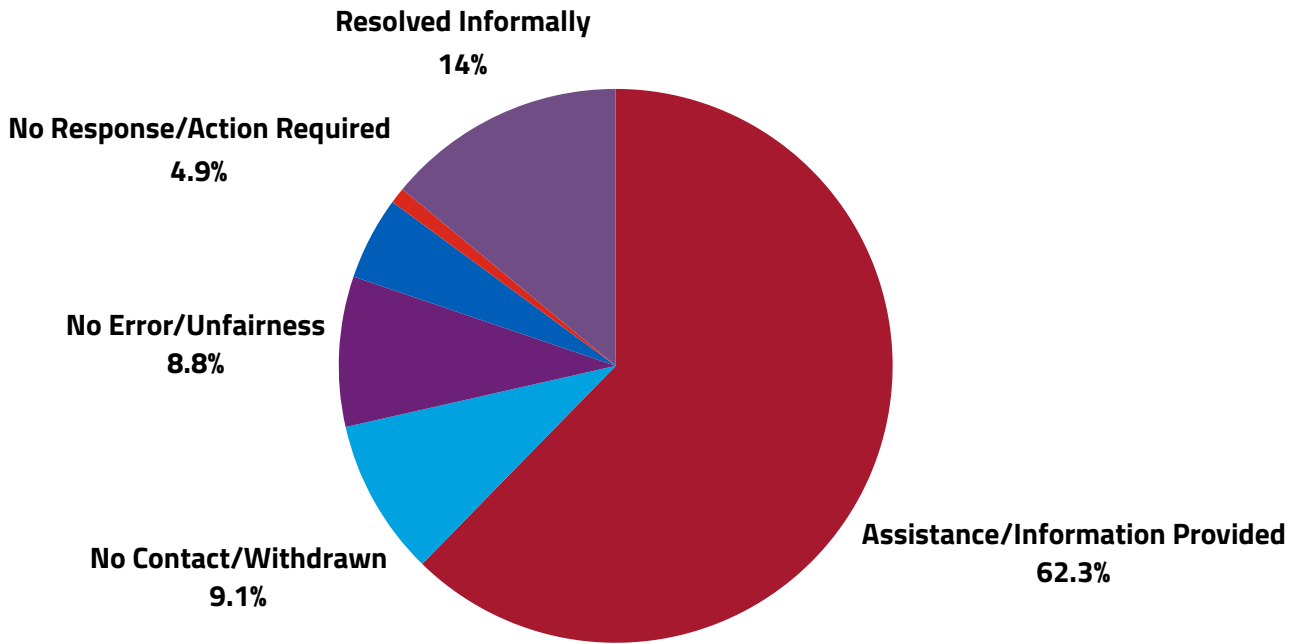
Issues on Closed Cases (2023-2024)



For cases that were closed during the 2023-2024 reporting period, this data provides an overview of concerns presented by visitors to the Office. The top five concerns were conduct of an instructor (75 cases), all categories of academic misconduct (56 cases), information requests (81 cases), grades (53 cases), and student progression (68 cases).



Outcomes of Closed Cases (2023-2024)



This chart showcases the outcomes of closed cases for the 2023-2024 academic year. The majority of cases, 62.3%, resulted in assistance or information being provided. A further 14% were resolved informally, while 9.1% of cases were closed due to no contact or withdrawal of the case by the visitor. Cases with no error or unfairness found made up 8.8%, and 4.9% required no further response or action. These outcomes reflect the Office's role in providing support and resolving issues through various means, with the majority of cases being addressed through information and assistance.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

I didn't personally experience the 2023-2024 academic year at SAIT, but my work as an Ombudsperson over this period at another Calgary institution highlighted trends and patterns occurring within the postsecondary sector. Based on this experience, my recommendations on how we can support our students, and each other, are as follows:

1. Be civil. As human beings, we reprioritized our life skills during many months of major pandemic disruptions. We distanced ourselves from each other in more ways than we realized. Especially across our younger student population, learning opportunities were missed, and problematic social habits and distorted expectations appeared. We will continue to experience lingering fallout of the early-2020's in the years ahead, especially as this generation of learners weaves its way through the school system and into postsecondary institutions. In the spirit of relational fairness, we need to remember, and humbly remind others, the importance of being respectful and civil to each other.

2. Be nimble. Recent years have taught us the value of being ready for anything. We have learned how much our world can change in the span of a few days and how, for example, we can be flexible enough to shift to remote work at a moment's notice. New challenges are upon us, from imminent changes in the composition of SAIT's student population to the quickly evolving landscape of generative artificial intelligence. By continuing to be nimble, we will be better able to respond to difficulties and challenges as they arise.

3. Be understanding. As much as ever, there's a whole lot underlying individuals' behaviours and decision-making, and it's important to remember that everyone's lives are generally more complicated than we realize. Sometimes there's an invisible mental or physical health issue. A person's fear and uncertainty, about world events or their future in Canada, can also be difficult to detect. Maybe they're having difficulty paying bills and putting food on the table. Postsecondary education cannot fix all of the world's problems, but a conscious effort to be patient and understanding is within everyone's reach. As individuals, and as an institution, we can have a profound impact.

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