



UNIVERSITY  
OF ALBERTA

2023–24

# Office of the Student Ombuds Annual Report

Ombuds as Agents of Change  
through Active Listening

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# Introduction

## Ombuds as Agents of Change through Active Listening

What is “the Ombuds Way of Listening”? Unlike a complaint-management approach focused on efficiency through formula questions and answers, ombuds use a softer, slower-paced style of active listening. Ombuds offer patience and presence, waiting for the story to unfold, to gain a better understanding of what the person needs and why those needs are important to that person. Frequently, we hear: “You are the first person who really listened to me. Others have told me they do not have the time, or they tell me what they think is the best solution even though it does not meet my needs”.

Ombuds may refer to their work as both an art and a skilled practice, as they take time to build trust and garner the “whole” story from the student. They want to learn about the student’s background or social location, so that they can better understand the multiple ways a student may be impacted by their situation. What may appear to be one issue on the surface often unravels to multiple issues in their storytelling. There may be invisible barriers that the person has to explain to the ombuds, especially if the ombuds lack awareness due to their own privilege. While ombuds are engaged in active listening, they are mindful of checking their own assumptions and withholding judgements (unconscious biases) that may lead to a decision or resolution that does not meet that person’s needs. Still a student’s desires may not be a viable option. Ombuds must then provide a holistic perspective to help them understand why a particular policy is in place that may seem to be unfair. Acknowledging the person may be affected adversely, the ombuds must explain in a way that preserves a person’s dignity and respect. This mitigates the negative impact on the person’s emotions and can help them manage their expectations in a complex bureaucracy with multiple rules and regulations.

The Office of the Student Ombuds (OSO) offers hybrid delivery of services for students, faculty and staff with erratic, often conflicting schedules. Students’ lives are hectic so a virtual meeting may be more convenient than an onsite appointment. Some desire onsite visits, but many worry about others seeing them enter an ombuds’ office. When students face a heavy academic workload or obligations such as family care, part-time jobs, and unforeseen circumstances, the virtual appointment with an ombuds can be scheduled quietly and conveniently.

After the pandemic, we took a deliberate and cautious approach in transitioning from a “secure” remote to hybrid model of service delivery. We found unexpected gains when working remotely with students. For instance, it was safer to attend evening hearings remotely rather than return to an empty, dark campus. We found more flexibility in scheduling appointments, investigations and hearings through virtual meetings. For ombuds and students, traversing across the large campus, and rushing from appointment to appointment, consumed valuable time. This year, most of our appointments, investigations, and hearings were held virtually. Committee meetings have been a mix of onsite and virtual.

Our case numbers remained steady. Even when there was a slight decline in the number of cases, our time allotment to cases or number of meetings increased because of their growing complexity. We focused on building awareness of our services so that students understand there is value in meeting with an ombuds before a problem becomes too big. Many faculties refer students to us for early intervention, and we rely a lot on word of mouth from clients with whom we have built trusting relationships. We work collaboratively with many student services, departments and faculties to promote fairness in all academic policies and procedures.

Ombuds use the soft power of education and moral suasion, as these are suited for restorative, healing resolutions. We reflect on the values of the University when helping to resolve conflicts and misunderstandings. Our fairness lens focuses on treating people with dignity and respect (relational fairness) and acknowledges the barriers that some students face (equitable fairness). We uncover systemic barriers created by the institution's hierarchies that divide and disempower the marginalized populations. Many of these unconscious barriers are tied to traditional privileges that were ignored and/or justified in the past. Ombuds' work is focused on removing barriers to promote necessary institutional change.

## **The OSO is accessible to all students, in part supported by the Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MNIF). The MNIF 2023–2024 report, highlights the value of our service:**

### **SUCSESSES:**

1. Visibility of service improved through tabling opportunities in various faculties, and campus awareness of an ombuds role through the joint Fairness Day offered by Ombuds Office and Alberta Ombudsman;
2. Faculty requests for tailored sessions for students and faculties to prepare for and improve communication and feedback in practicum settings have resulted in fewer practicum interventions in those faculties taking these proactive steps;
3. Full internship capacity restored for May through June high caseload period re: RTW appeals. Ombuds student internship program is robust and nearing a decade of operation (28 graduate and undergraduate students as interns);
4. Consistency in training and reviewing of ombuds practice standards.

### **CHALLENGES:**

1. Complexity of casework as concerns over equitable fairness are not always understood by decision makers (training modules for decision makers may help to alleviate this situation);
2. High caseloads during May through June require staff to come up with measures to encourage students to complete appeals on time;
3. Recognizing that EDID in practice is an ongoing process of dedication, collaboration, dialogue, reflective activities, and relationship building to restore trust and repair harm. This is a form of emotional labour that is often taken for granted and not understood. The ombuds are dedicated to using trauma-informed practices in their daily work.

## **The MNIF reports the OSO's evaluation measures of their work:**

### **QUANTITATIVE:**

Casework (1262) and issues (1364), meetings and investigations (643), formal appeal hearings (41), workshops and orientations (92);

### **QUALITATIVE:**

Ombuds fulfill requests for ...specialized workshops; Faculty referrals to ombuds for assistance with appeals; consultative role on GFC academic committees; provide faculties a fairness perspective on due process, relationship building, and equitable treatment in all university processes impacting student academic, social and personal life.

# Higher Education Ombuds Relationship Building and Reflective Ombuds Practices

Ombuds engage in relationship building and reflective practices regionally, nationally and internationally. The Higher Education Ombuds Communities of Practice are regional (Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education), national (Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons, ACCUO/AOUCC) and international (North, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, Australia (various Higher Education Ombuds networks)). Within our national network, ACCUO/AOUCC, we adhere to the Professional Standards of Practice: Confidentiality, Independence, Impartiality and Accessibility. We have active Communications, EDI, International and Professional Development Committees. We meet with our national colleagues in ACCUO/AOUCC for monthly webinars (referred to as Water Cooler Chats) where we discuss issues such as: systemic inequities for international students in higher education from a relational and equitable fairness lens; the support and pushback for a move from punitive to restorative practices in academic and non-academic misconduct; trauma-informed approaches to SGBV in Higher Education; the ombuds role in EDI and Decolonization of campuses; and increasing the visibility of the ombuds role on campus.

In May 2023, three ombuds organizations (Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons - ACCUO/AOUCC, European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education - ENOHE, and the International Ombuds Association - IOA,) hosted the first international showcasing of higher education ombuds with the African Ombuds Research Centre. This 2-hour webinar received the widest international audience of ombudspersons from 40 countries with over 400 participants, providing simultaneous translation in multiple languages. Four higher education ombudsperson from Canada, United States, the UK, and South Africa, talked about the role of the higher education ombudsperson and the value their offices bring to their institutions.

Another professional practice initiated by our European colleagues in ENOHE has engaged colleagues from ACCUO/AOUCC in Canada. This professional reflective practice known as intervisioning is conducted every second month with a group of higher education ombuds colleagues from North America and Europe. At these sessions, a complex case is presented by one ombuds, and a reflective question period follows before offering solutions to the case. This is a creative process that helps ombuds to learn from each other, sharing their knowledge, skills, experiences, and insights in resolving difficult casework. The intervisioning work can be used in training and mentoring of new ombuds, as well as developing special webinars and conference sessions on higher education ombuds casework.

Through these regional, national and international ties, higher education ombuds are constantly honing their professional skills and sharing their perspectives on current worldwide higher education issues. This healthy community of practice among higher education ombuds thrives through these global connections, thereby ensuring that we do not become isolated and insular in the work we do with our institutions.



# Building Relationships with Students

## Notes of Appreciation

“Thank you very much for your feedback. I truly believe your insights are greatly appreciated and supportive. I will keep you updated about my case. Once again, thank you!”

“I just wanted to say thanks so much for all of your help. I want to thank you for all your support. No matter how things turn out, you really made me feel supported and valued. And so I thank you for that.”

“Just wanted to say how appreciative I am of you being able to relieve my stress time and time again. You’re the best!”

“Thank you so much for all your help throughout this semester. I can’t express how much your feedback and support means to me.”

“Thank you for the excellent presentation and informative presentation on self-advocacy. We appreciate you taking the time to inform us about this important topic.”

“Thank you so much for your effort and help in supporting me.”

“THANK YOU for coming out yesterday and lugging gear in the freezing temperatures to be part of our 2024 GSA Winter Welcome! We truly appreciate your support in welcoming our new Graduate Students.”

“I’m still incredibly thankful for your help in my preparation for my appeal.”

“I would just like to thank you again for all of your help through this process, you were so kind and understanding and I greatly appreciated that.”



# Ombuds Staff 2023–2024

## Natalie Sharpe, Director of the OSO

In 2023, after serving ten years on the ACCUO executive (six years as President), Natalie was awarded ACCUO/AOUCC's most Distinguished Service Award, the Lars Mannerheim (first modern-state ombudsman) pin.

**She attends international higher education ombuds "intervisioning" (reflective practices) sessions "to provide support to and share expertise with ombuds colleagues."**

Ombuds often speak about the fragility of our services because they tend to be misunderstood. Our Annual Reports explain our role and highlight the activities we engage in, and provide statistics on our daily casework. As our services are confidential, we cannot boast or make great claims about success; we therefore attribute the success to our student's voices, and to the faculties and administrators with whom we collaborate to ensure a fair campus. Our daily work remains hidden because our focus is helping those with less power to voice their concerns. We work behind the scenes to use our soft power/moral suasion when necessary, to encourage university decision makers to examine each student's case as unique, and to implement policy in a flexible way so that equitable fairness is the goal. We strive to promote the removal of invisible barriers to ensure student success in their academic programs. The ombuds' perspective on these matters is given even if it may not be the popular one, or goes against the grain, as the goal is to ensure fairness. Everything the ombuds does is through a multipartial perspective, in the name of due process, relational and equitable fairness.

It is important to speak to the work of our permanent ombuds team. For professional faculties, we increased our education sessions to help students and faculty resolve conflicts earlier before they escalate into formal grievances. As Director, I wrote "appreciative inquiries" to encourage better practices within the faculties. Senior staff sit at the table of many important University committees in a consultative role to influence fair practices in all policies and procedures.



Natalie Sharpe, BA Hon, MA (she, her) is the longest-serving higher education ombudsperson in Canada. She currently serves on ACCUO's Professional Development, and International Relations committees. She participates and delivers webinars in ombudsing and mediation through ACCUO/AOUCC, mediation.com, the American Bar Association ombuds sector, the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education, Cal Caucus College and University Ombudspersons, the Australian Complaints Management Network, and others.

## Remonia Stoddart-Morrison, Graduate Ombudsperson

For the 2023–2024 reporting year, as the Graduate Ombudsperson, an important focus was on the ongoing work to ensure fairness and equity in not only individual cases but also where it concerns systemic issues that are identified from the casework that comes to the OSO. A part of my role as Graduate Ombudsperson is to sit on committees (FGSR (FGPS) Council, Programs Committee etc.) where departmental, faculty and university policies and procedures are reviewed, revised and approved. This gave me the opportunity to provide an ombuds lens of fairness as well as provide recommendations on proposed policies and procedures. I particularly appreciate sitting on the Graduate Program Support Team as this allowed for thorough discussion and questioning before policies are submitted for further approval in the governance process.

Additionally, participating on the Academic Integrity Working group was also significant as this led to the development of the soon to be approved Academic Integrity Policy, a policy that addresses many of the gaps and inconsistencies in the academic misconduct policies/procedures of the current Code of Student Behaviour allowing for a more restorative and learning approach to handling issues of academic integrity. To further address systemic issues, the continuation of orientation and presentation sessions especially on EDI topics for both students and faculty was ongoing this reporting year. I continue to have consultation and independent partnership with various units that are also involved in the ongoing work of promoting and holding the university accountable to equity and fairness.

**“I continue to encourage graduate departments and associations to reach out to request one of these sessions or to discuss how we can create a session that is suited to the needs of their department.”**

Remonia Stoddart-Morrison



Remonia Stoddart-Morrison (she/her), Education doctoral candidate, was a former principal in Jamaica, and has taught courses in the Faculty of Education. She has served as a Graduate Ombuds Intern, an interim Undergraduate Ombudsperson and Graduate Ombudsperson before being appointed as the permanent Graduate Ombudsperson for the University of Alberta. In addition to her role on many University committees, she is the Co-Chair of the Communications Committee for the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons.



## Laurel Wilkie, Undergraduate Ombudsperson

Some of the frequent situations our office helps students navigate are academic standing concerns, allegations under the Code of Student Behaviour, grade appeals, as well as interpersonal/intrapersonal conflicts on campus. As an advocate for fairness, I strive to help students better understand their rights and responsibilities within the various structures at the University of Alberta so that they may best advocate for their unique situation.

A large portion of my work is directly with students but I also get to engage in various orientation sessions, tabling, or other projects in collaboration with other departments or faculties. The mentorship we do with our clients is also an important facet to our role as we seek to equip students with information on ways to approach challenging situations. With the support that clients receive through our office they often are able to carry those learning moments through their time at the institution and beyond. Mentoring plays an integral role in empowering both student clients as well as our student interns.

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**“I primarily work with undergraduate students who are engaging in various academic and non-academic processes on campus. I have also worked very closely with students experiencing different types of conflict and provide conflict coaching to help students navigate their situations.”**

Laurel Wilkie



Laurel Wilkie, BA, MEd (she/her) became the Undergraduate Ombudsperson in January of 2023, and had previously completed an internship with the OSO as the Graduate Ombuds Intern.

## OSO Ombuds Interns 2023–2024

**This internship program, in its ninth year, helps senior year students gain confidence in leadership and develop strong communication, writing and presentation skills. We update our intern training manual and learning modules annually to ensure consistency in information and practice. Interns learn hands-on skills by observing the skills and techniques used by senior ombuds in their interviews with clients. The interns discuss what techniques they observed and how to handle the emotional tensions of their clients. When interns are ready, the process reverses, and they take the lead in the case, with senior staff observing and providing feedback.**

**Natalie Sharpe conducts the interns' mid-term and final evaluations. The internship program is designed collaboratively with faculty internship coordinators, providing guidance and structure to match the interns' learning skills with their goals for improvements; this helps interns to build strength in critical areas.**

As the OSO Director, I monitor the steady, incremental growth of the interns' skills as they advance from straight-forward to more complex casework. The interns become skilled at asking deeper professional questions to the senior staff. The interns' work is monitored while building their confidence in their work with their student clients. This is achieved step-by-step; it cannot be rushed. The work experience is necessary to build these strengths. The insights from the younger student staff is rewarding for the senior staff as well. It allows us to question our own work, and recognize that professional development never stops. A dialogue between the interns and senior staff is established through regular debriefing about casework during the training period and continuing at our twice weekly staff meetings.

**Remonia Stoddart-Morrison reflects on her role as a mentor, and in particular her close work with two of the OSO interns.**

For this reporting year, in addition to mentoring interns on casework, through formal training and informal discussions, our interns were mentored in participating as members on committees and also in co-presenting at presentation and orientation sessions. Rebeca Avila, one of our interns, served on the ACCUO Communications committee helping with the design and production of the 40th Anniversary Bulletin and others. Eric Awuah, Graduate Ombuds Intern co-presented at various graduate student and faculty presentations and workshops. Mentorship and coaching helps the interns to improve their collaborative and presentation skills and heightens their confidence for a vibrant outcome.

**Laurel Wilkie, Undergraduate Ombudsperson provides these observations.**

The student interns support our work with the campus community. I enjoy this special opportunity to mentor them as they develop various skills and policy knowledge. We work closely with the interns to help them identify their individual goals so that they can experience a robust internship. Since each intern comes with specific goals and desires to engage in an ombuds role professionally, the exchange of knowledge is incredibly rich. We create space for students to learn about institutional processes while learning how to advocate for themselves. Professional work experiences throughout a student's program can enrich their learning; as a previous graduate ombuds intern, I can attest to the practical application of the skills gained through the internship in a professional setting. I am fortunate and excited to be able to give back to a program that has been so impactful to my own professional growth.



## Eric Awuah, Graduate Ombuds Intern (Second Term)

**Eric Awuah (he, him, Yaman), who has a Master of Arts in Dance and Heritage Studies through a European Erasmus-Mundus scholarship, was a lecturer at the University of Ghana-Legon and the University of Education-Winneba. Currently Eric is a dance maker, choreographer, researcher, and a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology.**

Eric served a second year as our Graduate Ombuds Intern. During this internship and his doctoral studies, Eric was inspired through the EDI office's Pan-African Symposium in February 2024 and created "Paper Ship", a choreographic odyssey of struggle and liberation, exploring the struggles of African peoples sold into slavery. Eric's empathic approach in his work with graduate students is a testimony of his commitment to ensuring just and fair processes for students at the University of Alberta. Eric speaks to the value of his internship with the OSO:

The mentorship of Natalie Sharpe, Remonia Stoddart-Morrison, and later Laura Wilkie, was invaluable and something I could never repay. I left the role with fond memories of these people who not only guided me in my role, but allowed me to be effective in my duties outside my ombuds' role.

Through this internship, I developed crucial skills such as active listening, being present, using appropriate language, and maintaining objectivity in all job-related situations. I became well-versed in the most important university policies concerning student life and development. Supporting students to understand their rights and transition from fear of retribution to self-advocacy is not just fulfilling, but a fundamental ombuds' duty that enriches everyday student life. Most importantly, I learned that we are all human, and laws exist to help us be productive. If I were in a position of authority at the University of Alberta, I would expand the reach of the ombuds' office, increase their funding, and support their integration from the first day a student sets foot on campus until they graduate.

**"Reminiscing about my time as an ombuds intern fills me with immense joy. The experience was profoundly transformative, enhancing my understanding of perception and empathy."**

Eric Awuah





## Rebeca Avila Garcia, Undergraduate Ombuds Intern

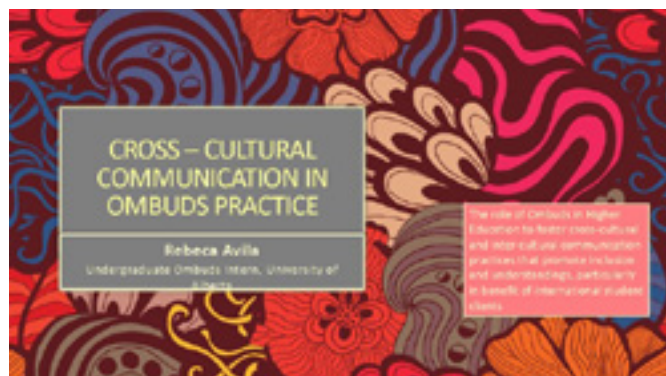
**Rebeca Ávila (she/her) is an international student from Mexico, majoring in Philosophy and Political Science. Rebeca is passionate about research and activism, with an interest in social, environmental and animal justice. She is enthusiastic about storytelling and the power of narratives to motivate collective action and empower communities to share their perspectives.**

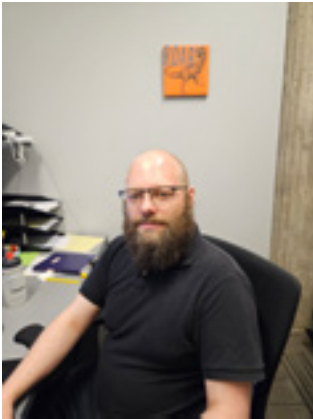
My time as an Undergraduate Ombuds Intern has been one of the highlights of my degree. I treasure the valuable learnings and experiences, but most importantly, the great connections and friendships I have built while in this role. My studies in ethics and my interest in justice motivated me to get involved in the field of Ombuds work in higher education. This role has been valuable to me as a humanities and international student. I was able to apply the theory of ethics and policy that I have learned in my classes, and expand this learning with the practical knowledge I have gained in this role. In this position, I also learned about the expectations and culture of professional work in Canada. I had the opportunity to interact with, and learn from, a diverse group of undergraduate student clients. In these daily interactions, I developed valuable skills such as active and empathetic listening, multicultural communication, presentation, and copy-editing skills. As an Ombuds Intern, I gained practical knowledge on the U of A's policies and procedures, faculty-specific policies and programs, and The Code of Student Behavior. I learned about dispute mediation and conflict resolution practices, knowledge that will become key in building fair environments and relationships in my professional and personal life.

**“I am deeply grateful for this valuable learning and development experience. I feel very fortunate to have embarked on this journey with an amazing and supportive team at the Ombuds office.”**

Rebeca Avila Garcia

My role as Ombuds Intern endowed me with opportunities for personal and professional development. One example is my participation in Fairness Day, where I engaged with students and university members in explaining the role of the Ombuds Office and the different types of fairness. I also got the opportunity to write an article about fairness and my experience as an Ombuds Intern. I served on the Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO) Communications Committee, and attended the ACCUO regional meeting. Presenting in the 2024 Annual Symposium of the Centre for Informal Dispute Resolution (CIDR) allowed me to elaborate on the importance of multicultural communication in Ombuds practice, with a focus on how this transcultural communication improves interactions with international students.





## Bryan Campbell, Undergraduate Ombuds Intern

**Bryan Campbell (he/him) is a Metis undergraduate student, with a Bachelor's degree from U of Calgary, who is currently pursuing an after degree at the University of Alberta. He lived in Kamikawa, Hokkaido, Japan for 5 years and was an Assistant Language Teacher in the JET Programme.**

Coming back to Canada, I wanted to learn more about special education and psychology to continue working in education and supporting students. Unfortunately, after my return I was diagnosed with a nervous system disorder. This made me realize that teaching may no longer be the best fit, so I am exploring other career options. My time with the OSO helped me to explore a wider variety of career options, including future ombuds work. I searched for ways to connect my previous work experience and studies with what I was learning about ombuds work. You always hear about 'transferable skills,' but I really felt things coming together for the first time in this job, so I highly recommend students to use opportunities such as internships.

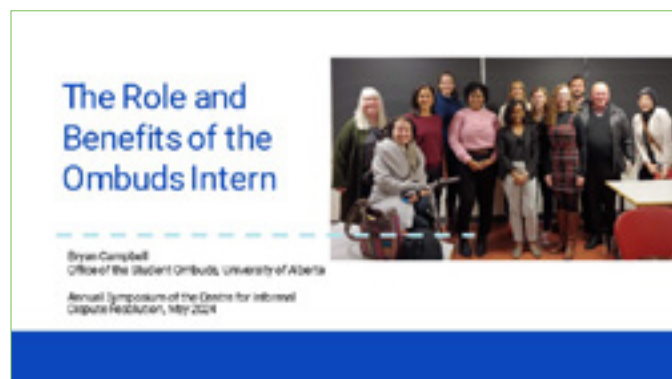
In addition to my casework, I participated in an ACCUO conference and webinars where I shared my perspectives and learned more about ombuds work. I sat on ACCUO's International Relations Committee, proposing a future interview project of ombudspersons from around the world. I served on the University of Alberta's Coalition Against High-Risk Drinking. At the St. Paul's University Symposium on Informal Conflict Resolution, I spoke about the role of internships in ombuds work, the internship program at the U of A, and how interns benefit from the internship.

As an intern I was able to support our office by bringing a diverse range of experiences and perspectives for all levels of our work, increased representation of student voices in decision making, a heightened sense of learning and understanding for the students we assist, in addition to and a greater focus on EDI within university processes. I was able to gain meaningful and professional work experience in a very rewarding and lesser-known occupation.

It was a huge honour to play a role in this office's history, and I am grateful for everything I've been able to do and learn.

**"As I near the end of my degree, I have greater confidence in my skills, a more positive outlook on my capacity in re-entering the workforce, and the knowledge that this is the kind of work I want to do. I will bring the practices and compassion of ombuds work into every new opportunity and workplace."**

Bryan Campbell





# OSO Staff and Activities

## 2023-2024

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**Come meet your ombuds team!**  
**SUB, Main Floor**  
**Fairness Day 2023**





# Ombuds Activity Summary 2023–2024

Wellness Street Fair tabling for Campus and Community Recreation **April 2023**

2 X Unwind Your Mind **April 2023, December 2023**

Faculty of Education EDI Panel Discussion – Speaking Truth to Power **May 2023**

3 X KSR practicum Practicum Seminar for Managing Difficult Conversations **May 2023, August 2023, January 2024**

Role of the OSO with Transitions Year Program Augustana Campus (virtual) **August 2023**

GSA Executive Workshop on Conflict Management **August 2023**

2 X UAI Info Mart **August 2023, January 2024**

Role of the OSO with Counselling and Clinical Services Interns **August 2023**

Faculty of Nursing Graduate Students' Orientation **August 2023**

Role of the OSO with Transition Year Program **August 2023**

Univ 101 with Transition Year Program (2 sessions) **September 2023**

Graduate Student Association Orientation Tabling **August 2023, January 2024**

Residence Wellness Fair **September 2023**

Faculty of Rehab Med Graduate Students Presentation on Managing Supervisor Relationships **September 2023**

Department of History, Classics & Religion Graduate Students Presentation on Managing Supervisory Relationships **September 2023**

ACCUO (Ombuds) Regional Conference, SAIT, Calgary **September 2024**

FGSR Council Presentation **January 2024**

Ombuds Day Tabling with Alberta Ombudsman **October 2023**

Faculty of Nursing Thursday Graduate Session **October 2023**

Dean of Students symposium – Facing Academic Leaders **October 2023**

Student Facing Academic Leaders' Symposium Case Study **October 2023**

Faculty of Arts Student Services Tabling **November 2023**

Dean of Students Augustana Service Visit **December 2023**

Residence BIPOC Wellness Event **January 2024**

Dean of Students Service Walk **January 2024**

FGSR Council Presentation **January 2024**

GSA All Candidates Meeting **February 2024**

Residence Alternative to Reading Week – Self-Advocacy Workshop **February 2024**

Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies Graduate Appreciation **March 2024**

Graduate Program Administrators Council (GPAC) Meeting **March 2024**

# Demographics of OSO from 2021–2024

## Demographics of OSO from 2021–2024

Reporting Years Comparison (Apr 1 – Mar 31)	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
<b>Clients</b>	1438	1466	1262
Undergraduate	1236	1259	1070
Graduate (includes Med Residents and Postdoctoral fellows)	198	187	163
Others (parents, admin, outside inquiry)	4	20	29
International*	466	520	451
Domestic	938	876	787
Residence Status Unknown	34	79	24
Contacts and Visits	14274****	16348	15497
Average Number of Visits per Client	2.0	2.0	2.0
<b>Issues***</b>	1600	1643	1364
Academic	820	957	872
Conflict	121	104	132
Academic Offence	496	440	229
Non-Academic Offence	25	14	21
Discrimination/Harassment Allegations	50	52	35
Miscellaneous	88	76	75
<b>Activities</b>			
Investigative Meetings	421	303	643
Committee Meetings, Staff consults, Orientations, Presentations	974	836	973
Formal Hearings	32	49	41
Informal Resolution/Appreciative Inquiries	11	10	6

\*Proportionately, international students visit the ombuds more frequently than domestic students.

\*\*Contact hours are typically scheduled for 1 hour but may vary from ½ hour (RTW) to 2 hours.

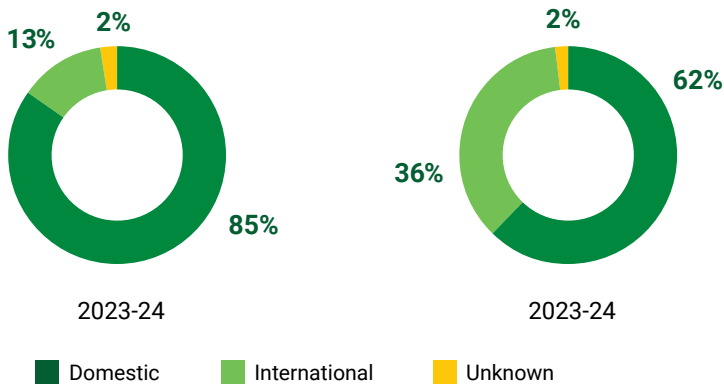
\*\*\*Clients often present more than 1 issue.

\*\*\*\*While working remotely, we tracked meetings, emails scheduling and responses.

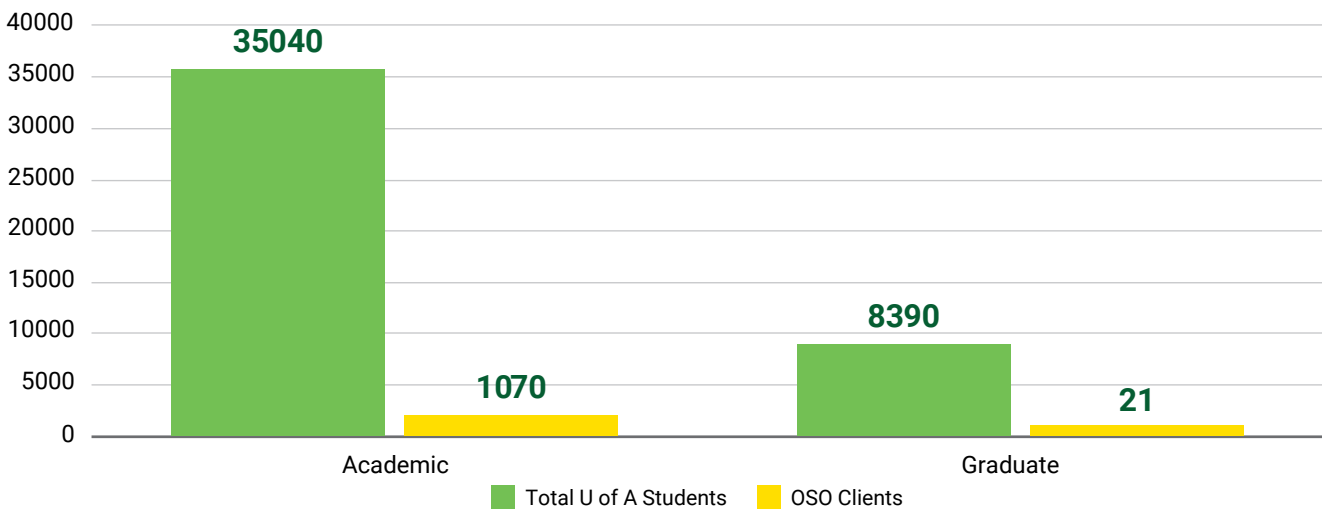
**Glossary:** Academic includes required to withdraw (academic standing), grade appeals, exam deferrals and re-examinations. Conflict may involve interpersonal, supervisory, student-professor. conflicts. Academic Offence includes plagiarism, cheating, misrepresentation of facts. Non-Academic Offences include online bullying, discrimination, different forms of harassment and inappropriate behaviours. Discrimination/Harassment Allegations related to sex, gender, racial, disability, family status discrimination, duty-to-accommodate violations. Miscellaneous includes residence conflicts, etc. Investigative Meetings include Instructor, Chair, Associate Dean, Discipline Officer, Protective Services; Formal Hearings are Formal University Tribunal hearings; Informal Resolution, e.g., Conflict Management Coaching, Mediation, Appreciative Inquiry

# OSO Client Demographics from 2023–2024

## OSO Client Population 2023–2024; Residence Status of Clients 2023–2024

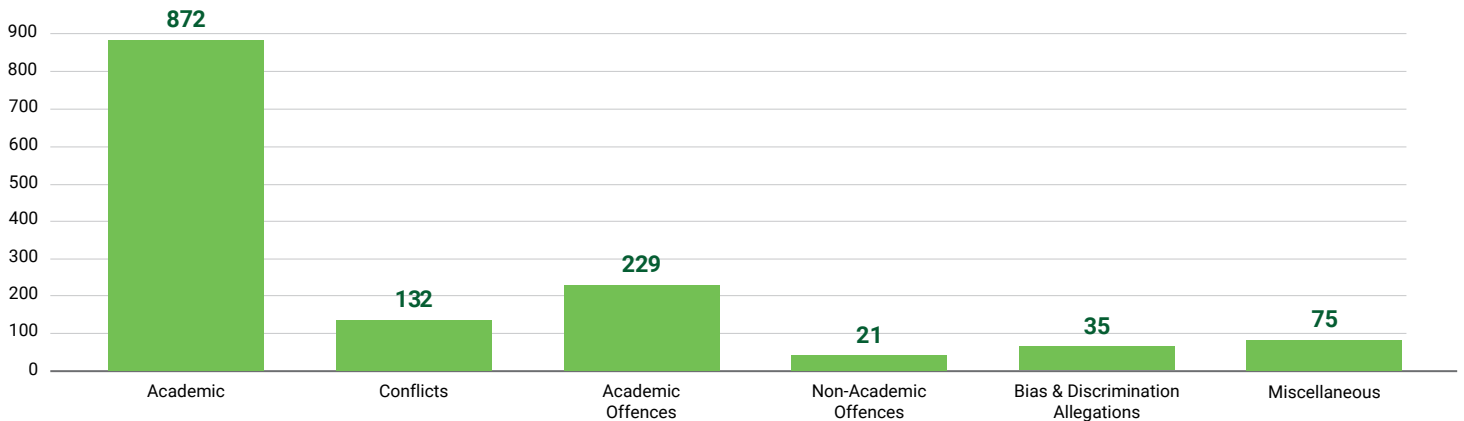


## OSO Clients 2023–2024



[2023–2024 Undergraduate and Graduate Enrolment Report, in EM Annual Report, January 2024](#)

## OSO Cases/Issues 2023–2024



# OSO Recommendations for 2023–2024

## **RECOMMENDATION ONE:**

That the OSO Director in consultation with the VP, EDI team develop a Declaration of Best Ombuds Practices Document implementing the OSO strategic plan to meet the ACCUO Standards of Practice of Independence and Impartiality. As of April 1, 2023, OSO's reporting structure has changed to an independent structure – reporting to the Vice Provost (VP, EDI). This meets the ACCUO Standards of Practice of Independence and Impartiality. One of the main goals of our strategic plan was to have more independence in our structure and with that the perception of impartiality. We are hoping that the other goals outlined in the strategic plan are also implemented, for example, working on establishing the ability to investigate as a part of our mandate. Although we do not have an investigative role, the Director engages in appreciative inquiries/letters of concerns with faculties when problems/inconsistencies related to policy and practices in casework arise. For example, the Director may write a letter to an Associate Dean of a faculty related to unclear/misleading messaging related to academic misconduct faculty procedures.

## **RESPONSE:**

As the OSO transitions to this new working relationship, we are drafting a Declaration of Best Ombuds Practices. This will solidify the relationship with our University and provide a better understanding of the purpose, value and importance of maintaining an independent ombuds structure on the U of Alberta campus. The ombuds role on the University campus still lacks a clear mandate (which the majority of Canadian and American Higher Education ombuds offices have); hence, we continue to work on the OSO Strategic Plan in this Declaration of Best Ombuds Practices to provide more independence within our office structure. In our new reporting relationship with the Vice-Provost of EDI, we are hopeful that many of the goals of the plan will be implemented, such as the ability to investigate, and adding a faculty and administrative staff ombuds role to assist the entire University community. It is important to note that the first University of Alberta ombudsman (1971–75) appointed by the Board of Governors, served the entire University community.

## **RECOMMENDATION TWO:**

The OSO recommends that faculties introduce a policy on Undergraduate Leave of Absence similar to that under FGSR for graduate students.

### **RESPONSE:**

Discussions are ongoing. Undergraduate students currently can take a year off their program; however, this year off is counted toward the maximum allotted time to complete their program. Some faculties have indicated that students may reach out to them to discuss their reason for requesting time away from their studies. It is the Faculty Dean's discretion to make a decision to extend their program completion time. It is the view of the OSO that an undergraduate should have the same rights for a leave such as that extended to graduate students under extenuating circumstances. Having a policy in place would inform all students of this right. Additionally, the OSO has suggested that the Calendar language allow up to 12 months leave where, under extenuating medical reasons and personal circumstances, exceptions can be made to exclude the time away from the program completion time.

## **RECOMMENDATION THREE:**

The OSO recommends that faculties review and revise academic policies older than 5 years, and encourages faculties to invite feedback from the OSO on these revisions. The OSO acknowledges that some faculties practice regular updates of their academic policies and often request feedback from the OSO for revisions. We consider this a good practice for appeal policies such as those related to grades, practicum interventions, as well as faculty appeal board procedures.

### **RESPONSE:**

The OSO offers feedback from a procedural, substantive, relational and equitable fairness perspective for proposed updates and revisions on faculty regulations. The Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, for example, asked us to comment on areas where they could improve their academic appeals policies. The OSO worked closely with staff members and faculty partners to provide detailed feedback and recommendations on their academic appeals policies. Even when cases arise where we see an impediment in policy, the Director of the OSO can provide faculties constructive feedback with an "appreciative inquiry" about their processes and make recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATION FOUR:**

The OSO encourages instructors, investigators and decision makers to embrace the language of restorative measures and learning opportunities when questioning students at investigations, at appeal board hearings, as well as when framing their decision letters. One method is by refraining from language that labels individuals; this may occur through privilege and unconscious bias (making assumptions or speculating about a person's motivation) rather than focusing on the actual incident, issues and concerns. It is important to understand that negative labels can further stigmatize, marginalize and oppress those who have faced and continue to face additional barriers in life.

### **RESPONSE:**

With restorative practices underway, new policies and procedures are being developed as well as a training plan for decision makers to become fully understanding and comfortable using a common language. This in turn creates a paradigm shift that embraces a learning process focused on relationship-building, restoring and repairing relational harm to students. The OSO encourages decision makers to consider equity and fairness as they engage with students during the administrative process of The Code of Student Behaviour. This shift is supportive of the learning experience and provides support for instructors to help them navigate options and engage with students in a relationally fair approach. Training opportunities are available to faculties as they look to incorporate more restorative practices in their approach to academic misconduct. The new academic integrity policy has embedded several restorative practices within its processes.

## **RECOMMENDATION FIVE:**

For many years the OSO has advocated for a complete review of The Code of Student Behaviour and the development of a new policy regarding academic misconducts that would incorporate a restorative and educative approach instead of a punitive one as is currently on The Code of Student Behaviour. The OSO has a representative on the Academic Integrity Working Group which has been tasked with the development of the new Academic Integrity Policy. Our continued work in this area ensures that the ombuds lens of fairness and equity is put forward so that the developed policy is fair and equitable. The OSO will also provide support to faculties and all university community members as this policy and procedures are implemented.

### **RESPONSE:**

As the University moves to implement a new student academic integrity policy, there is great care being taken to empower decision makers to facilitate the growth and learning of the student. Through the development of this policy, there was an intentional effort to focus on the Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity and the Braiding Past, Present and Future: University of Alberta Indigenous Strategic Plan, so that decision makers are considering equitable fairness in every step of the process.



## **RECOMMENDATION SIX:**

The OSO recommends that all professional faculties and graduate departments promote restorative practice sessions for students, student groups, faculty and administrators around the principles of EDI. The OSO provides facilitation and tailor-made sessions for parties who make a request.

### **RESPONSE:**

This continues as the University moves toward restorative practices in student conduct. Our statistics revealed that academic and professional misconduct cases brought to the ombuds were 50% lower than before. We believe this has occurred in part because of a prevention education focus of the OSO. We reach out to professional faculties and graduate departments to provide sessions on restorative practices, conflict management, unconscious bias and other EDI principles and issues. At every opportunity, especially at presentations and consultations with faculties, administrators are made aware of the availability of these sessions and the OSO's ability to tailor these sessions to address the concerns of the specific department. For this reporting year, we conducted 3 new sessions covering these areas (Faculty of Education EDI Panel Discussion, GSA Executive Conflict Management Workshop & Residence Alternative to Reading Week – Self-Advocacy Workshop).



# OSO Recommendations for 2024–2025

## RECOMMENDATION ONE:

**Continue updating and implementing the OSO Strategic Plan** — As the OSO lacks a clear mandate (which the majority of HE ombuds offices have), we continue to work on the OSO Strategic Plan to provide more independence within our office structure. In our new reporting relationship with the Vice-Provost of EDI, we are hopeful that many of the goals of the plan will be implemented, such as the ability to investigate, and adding a faculty and administrative staff ombuds role to assist the entire University community. This would reinstate the original plan of the University ombudsman serving the entire University (as from 1971–75).

### RATIONALE:

This plan will ensure that the role of the OSO has a clear mandate in its services. Without a clear mandate, many are confused about who the OSO serves, and question why it does not serve the entire University community. Often faculty and administrative staff seek our services where we believe we can play an important role in assisting with effective communication practices and early resolution. This would respect staff collective agreements where formal resolution processes are in place.

## RECOMMENDATION TWO:

**Working on a Declaration of Best Practices in Higher Education Ombudsing Document** — An Ombuds has been present on the University of Alberta campus since 1971. This happened after the creation of the Alberta Ombudsman (1967), yet there is no clear documentation of how the ombuds' role protects best practices in higher education and adheres to high professional standards such as the ACCUO/AOUCC Standards of Practice. The OSO is in the planning stages of writing a declaration of Best Practices document to highlight the value that an ombuds brings to its University community. Similar documents exist in the state of California and other American universities, and are focused on state and national ombuds standards and practices tied to improving higher education processes. Such declarations are also common in European HE ombuds offices where HE is centralized and HE ombuds are mandated by the State.

### RATIONALE:

A Declaration of Best Practices is important for showing how higher education ombuds offices are positioned to work collaboratively within their institution and their Community of Practice to make systemic improvements to higher education processes. As HE is decentralized in Canada, this helps to ensure that improvements in university processes are shared regionally and nationally. Simultaneously, this will help to build stronger communities of practice within the ombuds profession within Canada and internationally.

### RECOMMENDATION THREE:

**Ongoing Collaboration with Service Units Focused on EDI practices** – With major restructuring in the University as well as the addition of new portfolios such as EDI, the OSO itself is concerned about the creation of new silos. It is critical that in its new reporting relationship with EDI, the OSO ensures that its services and collaborative work with other service units is strengthened, not eroded.

#### RATIONALE:

When the OSO's reporting relationship changed, this was not announced to the University. We understand that with the shifting of units and reporting relationships, and the introduction of new areas, that some important connections may be lost, even when unintended. It is critical that the new changes are used to enhance the work we do, rather than erode our connections and trust that we have built with all student services and faculties over the years.

### RECOMMENDATION FOUR:

**Continuing the Promotion of Restorative Practice Sessions on Equity-Minded Practices** – Over the past few years, we have built a series of reflective education sessions on equitable practices around EDI issues. Our repertoire of sessions has been built through collaborative work with two faculties, Nursing and KSR. The sessions are focused on EDI issues such as unconscious biases. At the request of the faculties, these are presented two times per year, with separate sessions for students and faculty. When similar issues around EDI practices arise in other faculties, we remind them that we are available to provide tailor-made sessions for them, drawing on case situations that would be common in their profession.

#### RATIONALE:

The promotion of education sessions of this kind can curtail the number of difficult cases that arise in professional training (in particular in clinicals, practicums) by making students and staff better prepared for diversified work settings. We acknowledge that some faculties may be resistant or not ready to explore and engage in these sessions. Thus, we continue to reach out and consult with Colleges and faculties to encourage them to participate in these sessions, noting our ability to tailor these to the needs of the faculty/department as identified by students, instructors, and Associate Deans. Our best messengers are the faculties and students who recommend us to others.



# Professional Activities and Presentations

**European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE):** N Sharpe (member); Intervisioning Practices: N Sharpe (3 sessions) Intervisioning” Case Reflection meetings with international higher education ombuds members 2023–2024

**Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO/AOUCC) Sub-Committees:**  
**Communications:** Remonia Stoddart-Morrison (Co-Chair), Rebeca Avila – produced 3 issues of the ACCUO Bulletin;  
**International Relations:** Natalie Sharpe; Bryan Campbell; **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion:** Remonia Stoddart-Morrison, Laurel Wilkie; **Professional Development:** Natalie Sharpe, Laurel Wilkie

**Alberta Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ANOHE)** Virtual Regional Meeting Hosted by U Calgary Ombuds Jeff Stransky

**Western Association of Canadian College and University Ombudspersons (ACCUO)** regional meeting Hosted by SAIT Calgary Ombuds Kamini Bernard September 2023

**Natalie Sharpe, Presenter for American Bar Association** – Webinar on “Canadian Higher Education Ombudsing 1965–2024” January 2024

**[Natalie Sharpe, Showcasing Higher Education Ombudsman](#)**, African Ombudsman Research Centre, Webinar Natalie Sharpe, OSO, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Canadian Presenter May 2023

**Natalie Sharpe, Presenter, ENOHE Conference** Prague, Czech State, June 2023 “Reflections on Canadian HE Ombuds Reviews/Evaluations: A Call for Consistent External Review Practices & Peer Ombuds Reviewers”

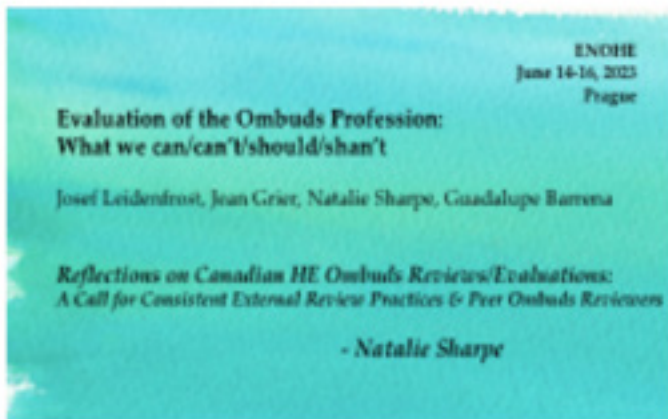
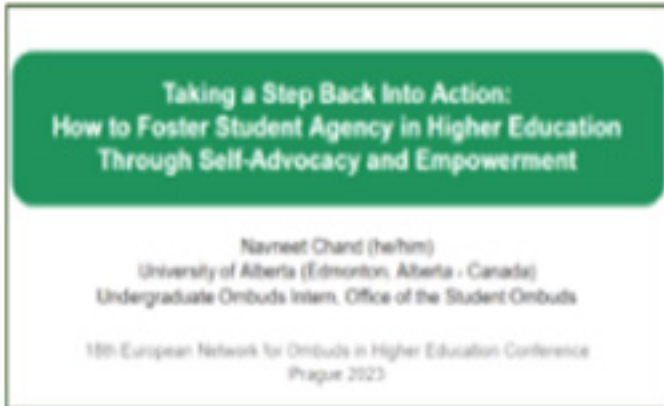
**Natalie Sharpe, Presenter at ENOHE**, Prague, June 2023 “The Value of the Ombuds’ Narrative in Program Evaluations (and) Revisiting Larry B Hill’s The Model Ombudsman”

**Navneet Chand, Presenter at ENOHE**, Prague, June 2023 “Taking a Step Back into Action: How to Foster Student Agency in Higher Education Through Self-Advocacy and Empowerment”

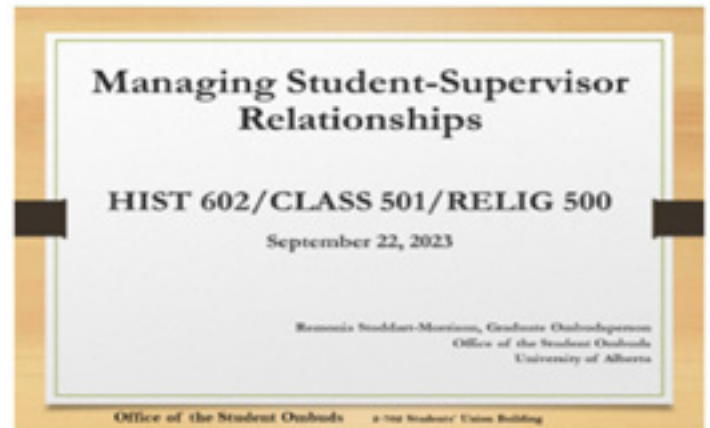
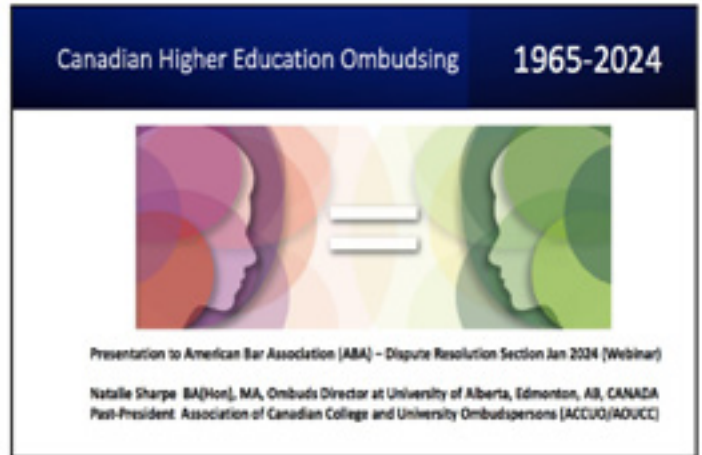
**Natalie Sharpe, Conference Planning Committee**, 50th Anniversary of the California Caucus of College and University Ombudspersons (CCCUO)

**Natalie Sharpe and Remonia Stoddart-Morrison**, “Diving Deeper into Fairness Practices: Canadian Perspectives on the Fairness Triangle” CCCUO 50 Conference November 2023

# Visuals of OSO Presentations

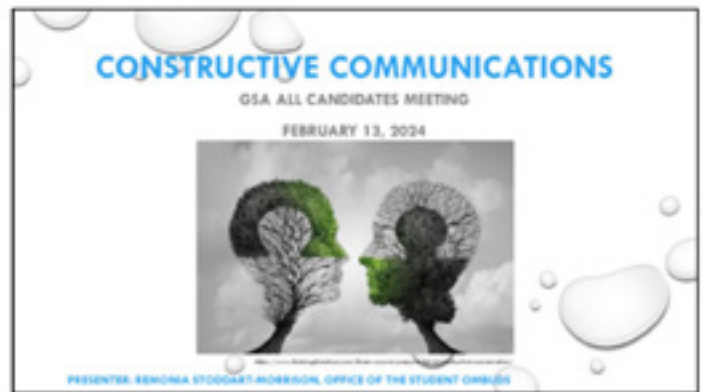


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