



ACCUO

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN
COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY
OMBUDSPERSONS

January 2021

Website: accuo.ca

We continue virtual well wishes for all ombuds colleagues as we bravely ride through the waves of this pandemic. We hope you have been able to connect with colleagues through various online webinars. We welcome suggestions and offers for an ACCUO webinar in spring of 2021.

Still Waiting for Submissions: Reflections on Ombuds Work During Covid-19. The journey continues. Maybe you started a journal or poem during the holiday break. Perhaps you escaped to a treasured park or some other retreat, solo or with family or a close friend. Or you watched a movie, read a novel or listened to a speech that gives new meaning to your work. Capture these memories so we can collectively share our challenges and strengths during this moment of history. Emma Thacker is waiting for your unique experience with a new deadline of February 1st. If you have any questions, contact Emma at em.thacker@utoronto.ca

ACCUO Exploring New Payment Method to Catch up with your ACCUO Membership Renewal

Thanks to those who have connected with Treasurer Alexia Wright for ACCUO membership renewal. We are working on a PayPal option for you to catch up with membership fees. To renew your membership, please contact Alexia at alexia@nait.ca.

International Events - Martine Conway (ENOHE Board) and Julie Boncompain (Chair, ACCUO International Relations Committee)

Martine Conway (U Ottawa) serves on the Board of the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) and has just reported that there will not be an onsite conference in Athens in 2021. There will be webinars and ACCUO may offer to co-host one of these. We know that ACCUO members will more likely attend these events when we are co-hosting.

Many of our members seek more insight into ombuds practices in other regions of the world. The University of Kwazulu-Natal and the African Ombudsman Research Centre continues to offer training and facilitated discussions for those who contact them directly for an invite. Residents of Canada attend these sessions in the wee hours of the night because of the time difference. However, it is a privilege to attend these gatherings and hear from ombuds who serve the most marginalized and severely affected populations during this pandemic.

Communications - Remonia Stoddart-Morrison, Co-Lead, ACCUO Communications Team

Remonia Stoddart-Morrison (U Alberta) met with the ACCUO Executive in January, and Emma Thacker offered to join the team. After a long discussion, it was decided that the management of the website would be tied to the Communications team to ensure that Annette Fraser receives assistance. Emma Thacker will provide backup to Annette on managing the ACCUO website. The communications team is reviewing the objectives of the ACCUO Communication Plan (2014) to broaden the scope of their activities this year. They are hoping to explore new forms of social media to promote the role of the higher education ombuds, and to assist in the ACCUO bulletin, as well as further development of the website. Remonia noted that Thomas Brown has joined the communications team. They are also hoping to capture themes of issues that are common in our ombuds practices discussed among members. The team wishes to have more members, so if you want to join, please contact Rob at thompsonr@camosun.bc.ca or Remonia at remonia@ualberta.ca

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Ad hoc Committee - Annette Fraser, Co-Chair

Annette Fraser (U Victoria) and Lavonne Hood (Queen's U) co-chair the EDI Committee. Julie Boncompain has completed translation so that the survey is bilingual. Their next action will be distributing the survey, and with the findings, to determine their activities over the 2021 year.

Cal Caucus Conference - It has not been determined yet if the 48th California Caucus of College and University Ombudspersons conference will be on-site, virtual or a combination of the two.

Ombuds Training – The “Essentials for Ombuds” course, a collaboration of the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman and Osgoode Professional Development, is being offered remotely from March 22nd to 26th. The program is full, but you can still register to be placed on the waiting list at https://www.osgoodepd.ca/upcoming_programs/osgoode-fco-certificate-essentials-for-ombuds/

Ombuds Appointments



Brent Epperson (University of Alberta) will be the first ombudsman at the newly created Office of the Ombudsman / Bureau du conciliateur at the **University of Luxembourg**. Brent has served as the Graduate Ombudsperson for nearly seven years, while completing his PhD and postdoctoral studies. He has collaboratively developed a new strategic plan for the Office of the Student Ombuds. He has presented on behalf of ACCUO internationally in El Salvador and at Cal Caucus in Asilomar, California twice. He also served as a co-editor of the Cal Caucus Ombuds Journal and played an active role on the ACCUO International Committee. After working for years in health policy research (issue framing in public policy reform), he published articles in that area as well as higher education policy and is currently co-writing two papers on ombudsman practice. Brent's research background in issue framing with training in mediation and restorative practices will be assets to the new ombuds role. Brent holds a Bachelor of Arts, Master of Public Administration, and a PhD in Political Science. He further completed certificates in mediation and best practices for ombuds.

European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) Webinar: “A new year, a new (ab)normal: adapting to Covid in the new academic year.



ACCUO thanks **Carolyn Brendon (McMaster U)** for her presentation in an ENOHE international webinar on ombudsing in higher education in December 2020. Caroline describes events in Canada. Here is an edited version of her focus on the student perspective.

Last March, students were thrown into the online learning environment. Online learning places additional resource expectations on students -- the constituency that has the least resources to begin with and so is least able to handle the additional burden. To succeed, students need to have a fairly reliable internet connection and a well-functioning computer complete with camera and microphone. In the first months of the pandemic, there was a shortage of webcams -- a lot of students had trouble ordering them. Furthermore, students needed a quiet study place in their home. Some students live in a family home where there's a lot of activity as many family members are working at home because of the pandemic. Some students faced additional burdens such as increased caregiving or other family responsibilities. Adding to the already stress-inducing university expectations, students faced increased pressures and challenges.

Online examinations and tests are one of the biggest university adaptations that has affected students. Not only do they have to master course material; some students are expected to be competent in the coding requirements of the software program being used to record the answers. Further, in some math tests and exams, students cannot show the steps they took to arrive at their answer and lose the ability to earn part-marks for their solutions.

As many have observed, this online testing environment correlates with higher incidences of cheating being reported. Media in Canada reported over a hundred students in one course to have cheated. In response to the increased potential for cheating, universities have implemented a range of online proctoring tools which are downloaded onto the student's own computer. These programs, however, create problems for students who are not comfortable with being videotaped or having their computer interfered with. Many students are concerned and anxious about the privacy implications of online proctoring. Some instructors

have modified the format of tests and exams as a result, but students complain these are more difficult than pre-pandemic ones.

The third issue, tuition, has not been resolved; it has not been reduced, despite student groups calling for the university to provide some relief. Students argue for lower tuition because they believe less content is being covered, the quality of instruction is poor and there are reduced opportunities to participate in non-academic activities. Furthermore, students can't get jobs because of the pandemic so they don't have enough money to pay for their tuition. In Canada the government has instituted some programs to suspend interest on their student loans and create additional scholarships and bursaries. Despite some relief, tuition has remained the same. Ombuds know that universities haven't really saved money during the pandemic, but students often feel that they are bearing a disproportionate burden of pandemic-related costs.

I also looked at the good news that has come from university adaptations. In the beginning of the pandemic, many universities offered pass or fail options for students if they didn't want to be graded in their courses. They also created a longer break between the Fall and Winter terms. While these adaptations are short term, others may stay around after the pandemic and this is positive. For example, we have moved to remote PhD dissertation defences. Feedback has been really positive because in some ways the remote environment can be a bit of a leveller and reduces anxiety for the student. It is easier for the university to reach external examiner remotely rather than arranging and paying for flight and accommodation costs to bring them to campus. Another adaptation is that student academic misconduct and appeal hearings have gone online. I have heard from students who have participated in these that they are less stressful than having to show up for a hearing. Another change is asynchronous content delivery that's much more accessible for students who have other responsibilities. Many accessibility features that have been built into remote learning provide individualised accommodations with options such as closed captioning for students whose first language isn't English.

An important change in Canada and probably internationally is the intensification of Anti-Racism work. This is despite and/or because of the pandemic. In early September across the country there was a two-day scholar strike where professors stopped work to protest the slow pace of progress on equity and inclusion work within universities. There has also been an increased awareness of, and resources dedicated to Student Mental Health. There has been more empathy shown towards students from administrators and instructors who realized that students are really struggling. Finally, there's a greater sense of camaraderie among all constituencies, students included, as we face this common challenge of the pandemic.

Next bulletin: March 2021

We are hoping for new members to send their biographies. If you have been a practicing higher education ombuds but have not been introduced to fellow members through the ACCUO Bulletin, please send your picture and a one to two paragraph biography. We also welcome short articles on the Higher Education ombuds role that you may have written or presented that you wish to share with ACCUO members, or reviews of any recent publications on the art and practice of ombudsing and ADR practices. Send to nsharpe@ualberta.ca