



# University of Toronto

OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT AND PROVOST

## Memorandum

**TO:** Ray Cummins, Chair, Academic Board

**FROM:** Vivek Goel, Vice-President and Provost

**DATE:** November 18, 2005

**RE:** Response to Academic Board questions, June 2, 2005 as related to appeals

A number of concerns were raised concerning the Reports of the Academic Appeals Committee at the June 2, 2005 meeting of Academic Board (Report Number 136), including the following questions.

- Were appropriate accommodations being made for students concerning work/family and mental health issues?
- Were policies concerning equity and the Ontarians with Disabilities Act being followed?
- Was best practice being followed by the University with respect to support for students with mental health issues?
- Was sufficient information provided to students to assist them in navigating the resources available to them at the University?
- Was there any follow-up to recommendations concerning practices at the divisional level?

The questions were specific to a particular appeals case before the Board and are also important questions relevant to the broader University context in terms of support provided to and communication with our students.

At the September 27, 2005 Agenda Committee, it was agreed that a response to these questions would be brought forward with the report of the Subcommittee.

### ***Currently within the broader university context***

#### **Subcommittee review of the Guidelines**

The Subcommittee review of the Guidelines and the subsequent report demonstrate the effort to review the current appeal practices and standards by undertaking broad and extensive consultations throughout the University. The Subcommittee point out that overall, the processes "can be said to be working well because the majority of petitions appeals are still resolved locally" (p. 8). As an example of volume, the Report cites that in 2002-2003 the Academic Appeals Committee heard 14 cases. When comparing this amount to the volume

of appeals reported within each division (in the thousands for the Faculty of Arts and Science), it is indeed true that the majority of cases are resolved locally by the attention and care provided the divisional offices. The Subcommittee points out that “the large divisions were to be commended for the care they take in responding to student appeals and the effort they make to communicate with student leadership despite the enormous volume of petitions” (p. 10).

The Report notes that the University Ombudsperson provided the Subcommittee “with statistical information indicating that within her office, the percentage of her caseload relating to grading disputes and academic appeals has declined each year over the past three years. This improvement is credited to increased communication by the administration to the community about the appeals process; increased communication between students and instructors/decision-makers regarding grading practices and academic standards; and workshops and support material for staff involved in the administration of appeals at the divisional level.” (p. 9)

As per current best practices, the Subcommittee noted “the attempts by many faculty officers, such as college registrars, to craft clear, well-publicized guidelines and to notify students in academic distress of their rights and options” (p. 10). In addition,

“We heard from several divisions about key divisional officers and offices charged with the responsibility of advising students at different stages throughout the process. The range of innovative services to assist students include mid-year reviews and opportunities to mediate and settle disputes prior to and during the formal appeal process. Some divisions have taken the initiative to revise their procedures to add flexibility and transparency. Several divisions have created a set of comprehensive timelines that cover both administrative and student action throughout the process. Different divisions have composed appeals committees that are more representative of the student body. The large divisions particularly impressed us with the care they take in responding to student appeals and the effort they make to communicate with student leadership despite the enormous volume of petitions.” (p. 10)

## **Services and Resources for Students**

The Subcommittee Report notes that there are many services and resources available to students and a number of efforts made to communicate the range of services available (p. 9).

In the majority of cases, students with specific needs self-identify and request assistance and accommodation from academic advisors, accessibility services staff, and from a variety of other offices (including those which provide health and wellness services and counseling). There are a small number of students who do not seek assistance and proceed through University processes with a suspected or apparent, yet unnamed, mental health disability. Except in unusual circumstances, the University cannot compel a student to disclose a mental health disability, register with one of the accessibility services, or seek assistance from any of the other services available.

Highlighted below is a list of the relevant and wide-ranging services provided to students at the University with the goal of ensuring that an environment conducive to learning

flourishes. Information regarding University services is available on the Students portion of the U of T web site (available at <http://www.students.utoronto.ca>), in *Getting There: A Student Guide to the University of Toronto*, as well as in many divisional information sources.

The Students web site includes descriptions and links to:

Academic Advising: Academic advisors are available to assist “students with a wide range of issues, including: course and program selection, interpreting degree requirements, codes of behaviour and conduct, understanding University regulations, petitions and appeals processes, and with anything from lingering concerns to troublesome academic problems and other issues regarding the student experience at the University.”

Accessibility Services: The services available on each campus are dedicated to the protection of individual human rights and to the principles of equal opportunity. The accessibility services ensure equal access to all aspects of University life for students with disabilities.

Learning Services and Tutors: The University provides comprehensive support for students who wish to enhance their academic achievement.

Counselling & Learning Skills Service (CALSS): CALSS is the professional counselling service for students of the University of Toronto.

Family Care Office: The Office provides free confidential information, guidance, referrals and advocacy for students, staff, faculty and their families.

Health Service: The Service offers a wide range of services for students. The health team includes medical professionals with a variety of specialties.

Psychiatric Service: With expertise in a variety of therapeutic methods, the Psychiatric Service offers assessment and treatment of emotional and psychological concerns.

Office of Student Affairs: Student Affairs provides services related to campus organizations, sexual diversity, accessibility, student crisis response, child care, and community partnerships. The Office deals with a number of policies and guidelines relating to student services, student groups and societies and campus life issues. Student Affairs provides advice and assistance in pursuing a policy matter through the appropriate channels.

Student Crisis Response Programs: Student Crisis Response Programs enhance support and access to resources for students in difficulty or distress.

The Students web site also includes extensive information related to students' rights, University policies, rules and regulations, and complaints. As members of the University of Toronto community, students assume certain responsibilities and are guaranteed certain rights and freedoms. The web site documents how all of these are articulated in a series of policies which have been formulated by the decision-making structures of the University and serve ultimately to benefit all of the members of the community and to preserve the academic integrity of the institution. Students are advised that it is their

responsibility to understand these policies and to seek more information when it is needed.

The “Rights and Rules” page provides information about the following areas: student conduct; freedom of speech; disruption; discrimination; sexual harassment; cheating and plagiarism; grading; student records; access to services and facilities; alcohol; firearms; library conduct; use of technology; accommodations for religious observances; ways to address problems or conflicts; complaints; legal advice; policy advice; and other resources.

### **University Governance**

Governing Council recently approved the following with the aim of improving support and facilitating accommodation for individuals across the University:

*Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities*

(<http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/disabled.html>)

*Policy on Scheduling of Classes and Examinations and Other Accommodations for Religious Observances*

(<http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/religious.html>)

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The proposed Policy and Framework were created with the objective to incorporate the spirit and best practices indicated in the Report. We will work towards a clearer, more transparent and consistent communication of the appeals process in addition improving the consistency of the process across the University.

The proposed Policy includes specific reference to accommodation as the first guiding principle:

**Diversity, Equity, and Accommodation:** Consistent with the University’s commitment to diversity, equity and accommodation, and its accompanying institutional policies, every division should be sensitive to issues of diversity, equity, and accommodation in the academic appeals process.

The *Framework* includes best practices for the divisional appeals process that arose from consultations with the Subcommittee. For example,

The Divisional process documentation should set out reasonable timelines for initiating an appeal, and for student and administrative action and response required during the process. However, since individual cases vary in complexity and circumstances, the divisional process should also include sufficient flexibility and discretion to accommodate the particular circumstances of the appeal and to avoid inappropriate prejudice to the student or to the University.

As per the recommendation of the Subcommittee Report (p. 11), the Office of the Provost is committed to ensuring training is available to staff and faculty involved in

academic appeals regarding the proposed Policy, Framework and best practices regarding academic appeals.

The Office of the Provost is committed to communicating the appeals process and best practices both on the University level and on the divisional levels by working over the coming year to provide clear, accessible information regarding appeals via the University websites and communications. We will work with divisions to ensure that the divisional appeals policies are consistent with the proposed Policy, contain best practices, and are communicated to students in a transparent and accessible manner.