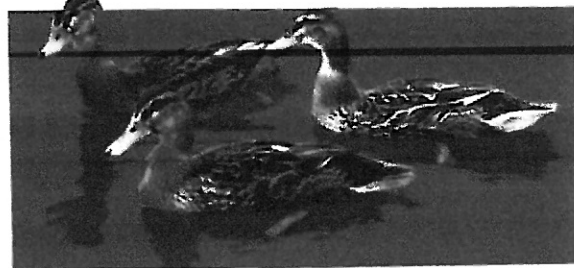


The Fountain

UVIC'S ONLINE NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS



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UVic ombuds office celebrates 30 years of behind-the-scenes advocacy

DEENA KINARTHY

The University of Victoria's 30-year-old Office of the Ombudsperson is the first place students should seek out academic advice according to UVic student and archivist Tina Argue.

"I think it should be a place where students go first instead of last ... if students went there before they got to their last straw, [the Ombudsperson] could guide them through which areas could really help them. She's very knowledgeable [about] the campus rules and regulations," says Argue.

Knowing how and when to use the office can help students to avoid common academic pitfalls and conflicts, information especially valuable for new and younger students making the transition from high school to university.

UVic Ombudsperson Martine Conway advises and coaches students and administration at all stages, making use of her background in conflict resolution. According to Argue, the campus ombudsperson has been an instrument for fairness, equality, and justice in terms of campus policy for decades and was the one of the only resources of its kind in Canada in the 1970s before the concept was adopted more widely in colleges and universities in Canada in the 80s and 90s.

Since May 1978, the Office of the Ombudsperson has been mandated to deal with student-related issues and complaints. Although Martine Conway is not actually a student advocate on campus, one her main roles as the tenth ombudsperson at UVic is to help students become self-advocates by explaining their rights and responsibilities.

Conway points out that the Office of the Ombudsperson is there to maintain a fairness and balance and justice within the system. "An ombuds office offers an independent perspective and a focus on fairness and equity," Conway says. Ombudspersons often act as mediators, using the power of influence in various department and administrative levels.

Once a grassroots operation run part-time by students with funding from the UVic Students' Society, recent administrative buy-in from UVic has increased the level of professionalism and influence the Office has on university regulations.

"When the UVic ombudsperson office first started [in 1978]," says Argue, "UVic graded on a curve. The ombudsperson's main focus was to change that curve grading...and she did."

According to Argue, the former grading system at UVic was unjust and unfair to students. Due to a lack of seating availability, professors could only pass 30 per cent of students in their classes.

Past ombudspersons have also played a role in setting up both International and Exchange Students Services and the Equity and Human Rights office on campus, working to improve relations between all members of the university.

Conway's work has focused largely on improving life for students with disabilities and advocating for university regulations regarding students with special needs. The current ombud's work has played a large role in helping to bridge the gap between UVic's administration and its students, but Argue believes that more professors and administrators could be utilizing the Office's services.

According to Conway, parents can be a source of support for new or first year students by reading up on the Office of the Ombudsperson as well as familiarizing themselves with campus policies.

"But let your student make the choices in his or her studies, as she or he is treated like an adult by the system and is expected to take responsibility for his or her decisions," says Conway.

Please visit <http://www.uvss.uvic.ca/ombudsperson/> for more information.

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Student Transition Services

Phone: (250) 472-4512 | **Email:** stcentre@uvic.ca

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