

STUDENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AT UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA:

*A Study Into Awareness, Perception and
Experience among Undergraduates*

RESEARCH AND POLITICAL AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA STUDENTS' UNION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY	3
Data Collection Tool	3
Sample Size	4
Data Analysis	4
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS	4
FINDINGS	5
Awareness	5
Accessibility of Information	7
Likely Sources of Information	8
Experience with Discipline and Complaints Processes	11



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this first-ever and exploratory study was to examine the level of undergraduate awareness of University policies concerning student rights and responsibilities. We took a quantitative approach to data collection, using a web-based census survey with 1721 responses. The data collected was not weighted, had a female bias, and had an estimated margin of error of $\pm 2\%$, 19 times out of 20. The purpose is to assess the gaps in knowledge to better engage with the student body.

Following is an overview of **key findings**:

1. A majority of respondents (approximately 58%) indicated that they either “didn’t know much”, or “didn’t know anything at all” and very few were confident that they knew a lot about their rights and responsibilities.
2. Of the five policies¹ outlining students’ rights and responsibilities, students were most aware of the Code of Student Behaviour (78%) and the Grading Policy and Procedure (60%). However, 10% of respondents were aware of *none* of them.
3. While slightly less than half of all respondents knew where to find information about their academic rights and responsibilities, nearly 40% of respondents had no knowledge of where to look.
4. A majority of respondents (nearly 60%) were unaware of appeal processes in case of disciplinary action against them.
5. 31.69% students indicated “Students’ Union” whereas 21.99% and 19.67% students observed “Central University Administration” and “Faculty (administrative offices, staff and/or academic staff)”, respectively.
6. Slightly less than 5% of the respondents had had experience with the discipline and complaints process (whether as a complainant, a respondent, or both). Amongst them, only a slim majority of students feel they have access to all the information they need about their discipline process.
7. Less than half of students involved in disciplinary proceedings at the University of Alberta feel that the process educated them about their rights and responsibilities. Over a third of students feel the process to find information on how to make a complaint is difficult at the University of Alberta.
8. In response to “what additional information or resources would have helped you go through your disciplinary process”, the two most frequently occurring responses were the need for additional resources online and in person, followed by better education of the disciplinary process and their responsibilities under the COSB.

¹ The Code of Student Behaviour, the Grading Policy & Procedure, the Sexual Violence Policy, the Ethical Conduct & Safe Disclosure Policy, and the Discrimination, Harassment & Duty to Accommodate Policy.



Following is a **list of recommendations** based on the findings of this survey:

1. Reduce the gap in knowledge and awareness of rights and responsibilities among undergraduate students through education and outreach.
2. Provide easily accessible information on rights and responsibilities (especially procedural rights and responsibilities) to undergraduate students to meet the unmet need for information.
3. The Students' Union should lead in educating undergraduate students on their rights and responsibilities, especially since majority of the respondents indicated seeking such information from the organization.
 - a. InfoLink and the main Students' Union office could have resources and/or knowledgeable staff to respond to students' questions about their rights.
 - b. The Students' Union should take a proactive approach to educating students on their rights and responsibilities at strategic times of the year, including early in the year and during awareness weeks (such as rights surrounding the reporting of sexual violence during sexual assault awareness week or using existing campus events to discuss students' rights and responsibilities in relation to those events)
 - c. Collaborate with the University of Alberta to develop more effective techniques to educate students on their rights and responsibilities.
 - d. The Students' Union may wish to work with the University of Alberta to create a consolidated document that outlines all student rights and responsibilities at one place to improve awareness and accessibility of information among all undergraduates.



INTRODUCTION

As a representative advocacy organization, the University of Alberta Students' Union (hence, forth the Students' Union) has a vested interest in the protection and promotion of undergraduate students' rights. Undergraduates at the University of Alberta (henceforth, the University) have a variety of rights and responsibilities that generally fall under one or more of the categories of academic, procedural, and fundamental rights. Academic rights relate to student assessment, grading, plagiarism, grade appeals, and academic accommodations. Procedural rights involve student discipline, which can be either academic or non-academic, and also rights and responsibilities related to complaints and appeals processes. Finally, fundamental rights include all rights afforded by federal and/or provincial legislation, including protections from discrimination and harassment. However, the Students' Union has never undertaken any primary research into how familiar students themselves are with their rights and responsibilities. Information about students' levels of awareness of their rights and responsibilities as contained within the University's policies, including gaps in knowledge, would aid the Students' Union in better engaging with the student body.

METHODOLOGY

This was an exploratory study due to lack of prior data on awareness and extent of knowledge about rights and responsibilities among undergraduate students. It used a quantitative approach to data collection. This involved a web-based census survey administered to all undergraduate students through the official monthly newsletter of the Students' Union.

Data Collection Tool

The survey questionnaire was administered on November 23, 2017 using Google Forms. It collected data on basic demographics such as gender, race/indigeneity, domestic/international status, faculty, year of study and knowledge of rights and responsibilities as undergraduates of the University of Alberta. The survey included a variety of questions about possible sources (authorities, policy documents, codes) of information on rights and responsibilities and familiarity with different types (academic and procedural) of disciplinary and appeals processes. Additionally, the survey also contained specific questions on experiences of interacting with the campus disciplinary process for those who had been involved in it, whether as complainant, respondent or both. The survey involved a prize draw of two \$25 University of Alberta Bookstore gift cards to encourage a higher response rate. The survey contained a total of 39 questions, of which 13 required responses from all respondents whereas the remaining 26 were answered by respondents who had experience interacting with the disciplinary process. A total of 11 questions sought open-ended responses while the remaining were closed-ended questions.

All data for this study was collected in English.



Sample Size

A total of 1733 students responded to the survey of which 1721 responses were utilized for analysis after data cleaning (to remove illegible and duplicate responses). The margin of error is plus/minus 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and report writing was carried out between December and February 2017 by a team of three researchers employed with the Department of Research and Political Affairs of the Students' Union of University of Alberta.

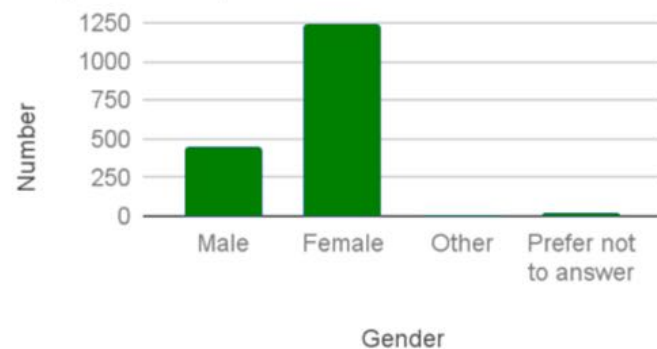
Analysis of quantitative data was conducted primarily using Microsoft Excel and included both descriptive (simple summaries about the sample and measures) and inferential (drawing conclusions for generalizations) statistical analysis for select questions. The data collected through the census survey is unweighted and has a female bias.

In analyzing the open-ended survey questions, themes were developed through multiple readings of the data. Data analysis throughout the project (especially coding and thematic analysis) relied on a collaborative effort (and deliberation in case of disagreements in coding and assigning themes) by the team of researchers. This process eliminated personal bias and ensured consistency in data interpretation.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

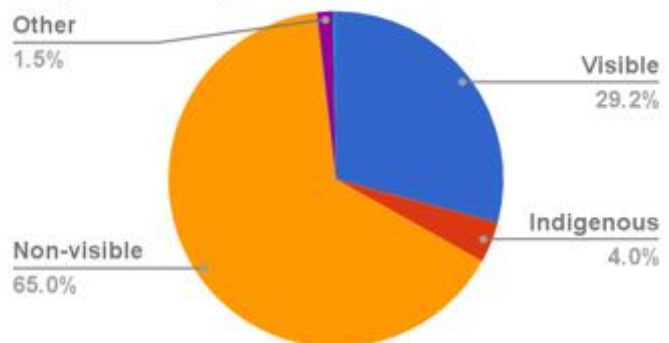
Women were overrepresented in this survey, with 1244 respondents (72.28 percent) identifying themselves as female, and 450 respondents (26.15 percent) selecting male. 19 respondents (1.1 percent) preferred not to answer, and 8 respondents (0.46 percent) selected other.

Respondents by Gender



The majority of respondents (65.02 percent) identified as non-visible minority whereas 29.17 percent selected “visible minority” and 3.95 percent selected “Indigenous”. Respondents had the option to self identify their race/ethnicity, which 31 chose to do. 26 of these responses were legible, with a variety of responses including “white passing” ethnic groups.

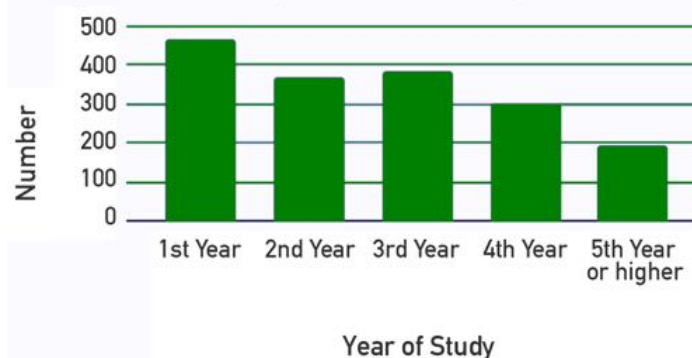
Respondents by Ethnicity





Approximately 27 percent of respondents were in their 1st year, 21.50 percent were in 2nd year, 22.43 percent were in 3rd year, 17.61 percent were in 4th year, and 11.27 percent were in their 5th year or higher. Furthermore, 95.18 percent of respondents were domestic students, and 4.82 percent were international students, who were significantly underrepresented in this study. In the 2016/17 school year, 14 percent of the student body were international students and 86 percent were domestic students.

Respondents by Year of Study



Undergraduate students from all faculties were represented in this survey. However, no one faculty was significantly over- or under-represented.

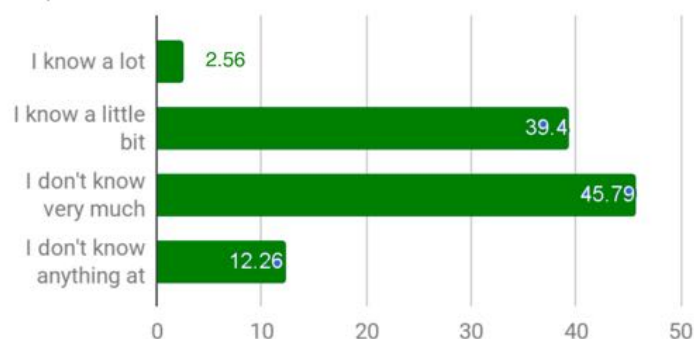
FINDINGS

Awareness

How much do you think you know about your rights as a student at the University of Alberta? (Mark only one: I know a lot; I know a little bit; I don't know very much, I don't know anything at all)

Overall, a majority of respondents said that they either didn't know much, or didn't know anything at all, and very few were confident that they knew a lot about their rights.

How much do you think you know about your rights and responsibilities as a students



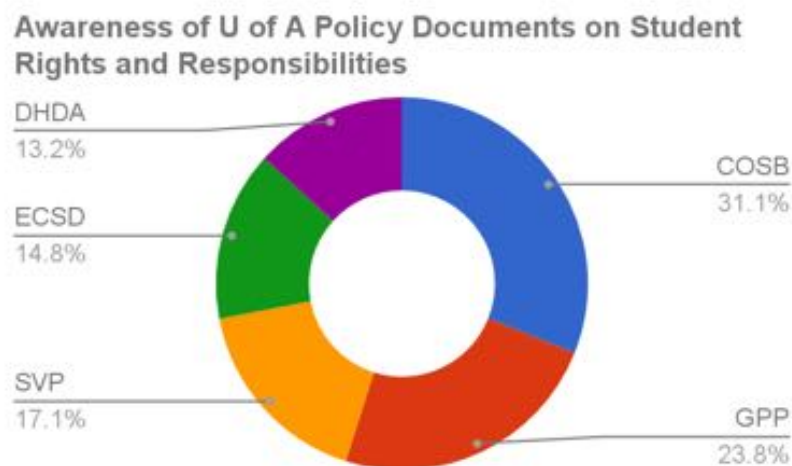
First year students were the least likely to know a lot or a little bit about their rights, with 66.02 percent of them saying that they did not know very much or did not know anything at all. This is compared to 58.32 percent of 2nd year students, 57.51 percent of 3rd year students, 53.46



percent of 4th year students, and 46.39 percent of 5th year or higher students reporting not knowing very much or not knowing anything at all. This suggests that as students go through their university careers, they progressively report higher levels of knowledge of their rights.

Which of the following University of Alberta policies that deal with students' rights and responsibilities are you aware of? [Check all that apply: Code of Student Behaviour (COSB), Sexual Violence Policy (SVP), Grading Policy and Procedures (GPP), Ethical Conduct and Safe Disclosure Policy (ECSD), Discrimination, Harassment and Duty to Accommodate Policy (DHDA), None of these documents, Others (please specify)]

The COSB was selected most frequently, with 78.97 percent of respondents indicating that they were aware of it. This was followed by the GPP, with 60.37 percent of respondents selecting it. 43.4 percent of respondents indicated that they were aware of the SVP, 37.54 percent were aware of the ECSD, and 33.64 percent of respondents were aware of the DHDA. Additionally, 16.91 percent of respondents were aware of all five documents outlining students' rights and responsibilities, while 9.99 percent of respondents were aware of none of the policies.



There were no gender-based differences in levels of awareness of the COSB, GPP, ECSD, and DHDA policies. However, in case of the SVP, male respondents (51.78 percent) exhibited a higher awareness than female respondents (39.15 percent). There may be varying explanations behind this difference. Male respondents may be more likely to presume (and therefore indicate a knowledge of such policy irrespective of whether they know for certain) that there is an institutional policy on sexual assault and violence given the growing awareness surrounding the issue on university campuses among the public. Alternatively, female respondents may be likely to presume that sexual assault and violence are issues governed purely by the criminal code and not be aware of existence of a specific institutional policy in this regard. It is also likely that preventive education and awareness programs targeted to males exist on campus.



Furthermore, the survey results also indicated a difference in awareness of the GPP between domestic and international student respondents. For instance, 53.01 percent of international students were aware of the policy, compared with much higher proportion of domestic students (61.54 percent). It should be noted that international students were underrepresented in this survey.

There was, however, no significant difference in awareness of policies by respondents' year of study.

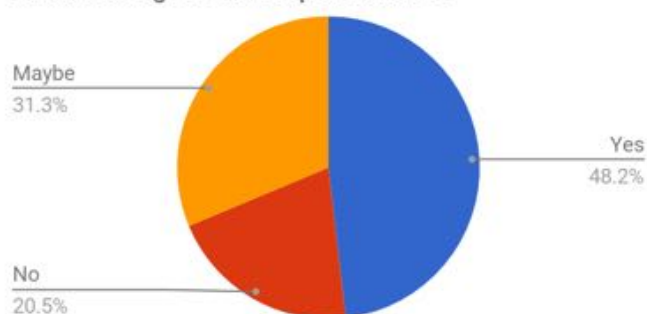
Accessibility of Information

To gauge ease of accessing information about their rights and responsibilities, the survey asked respondents to indicate their agreement with a set of statements.

Statement 1: I know where I can find information about my academic rights and responsibilities

Slightly less than half of all respondents knew where to find information about their academic rights and responsibilities, with approximately another one-third indicating they were unsure. Additionally, 1st year students were significantly more likely to indicate lack of knowledge of information sources on academic rights and responsibilities than students from other years.

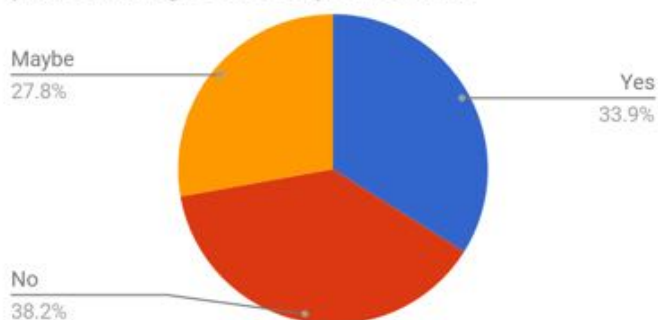
I know where I can find information about my academic rights and responsibilities.



Statement 2: I know where I can find information about my procedural rights and responsibilities

Participants were divided over awareness of information sources about procedural rights and responsibilities. However, the number of respondents who indicated no knowledge constituted the largest group, nearly 40 percent of the total sample.

I know where I can find information about my procedural rights and responsibilities.



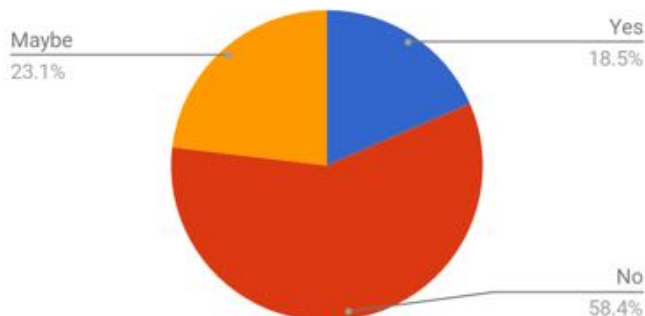
There was no significant differences by year of study among those who are unsure about their awareness of procedural rights and responsibilities. However, 4th year respondents were overrepresented (by nearly 3 percentage points) among respondents who claimed to have no knowledge of such rights.



Statement 3: If I wanted to appeal a disciplinary action against me by the university, I know where I can find the information to do so

The majority of respondents (nearly 60 percent) indicated lack of awareness of appeal processes in case of disciplinary action against them. First year respondents were more likely to be unaware of appealing disciplinary actions, and 3rd year respondents were more likely to indicate uncertainty (that is, answered “maybe”) of appealing disciplinary actions.

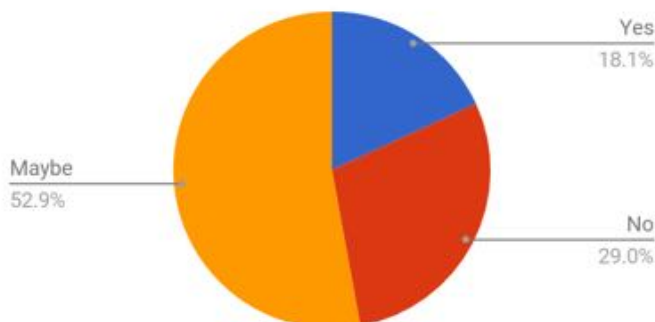
If I wanted to appeal a disciplinary action taken against me by the university, I know where I can find the information to do



Statement 4: Information about university policies and my rights as a student are easy to find

More than half of the respondents were unsure about the ease of accessing information about their rights and related university policies.

Information about university policies and my rights as a student are easy to find.



Overall, analysis of student responses to the four statements indicate that respondents have greater awareness of academic rights and responsibilities than their procedural rights and responsibilities. This is likely due to the frequency of their interaction with information on academic rights and responsibilities on course outlines and related discussions led by instructors in classes as mandated by the University. However, lack of awareness (generally as well as of specific information sources) of procedural rights and responsibilities and appeals processes suggest the need for awareness generation, education, resolving accessibility issues the relevant information sources among the student population.

Likely Sources of Information

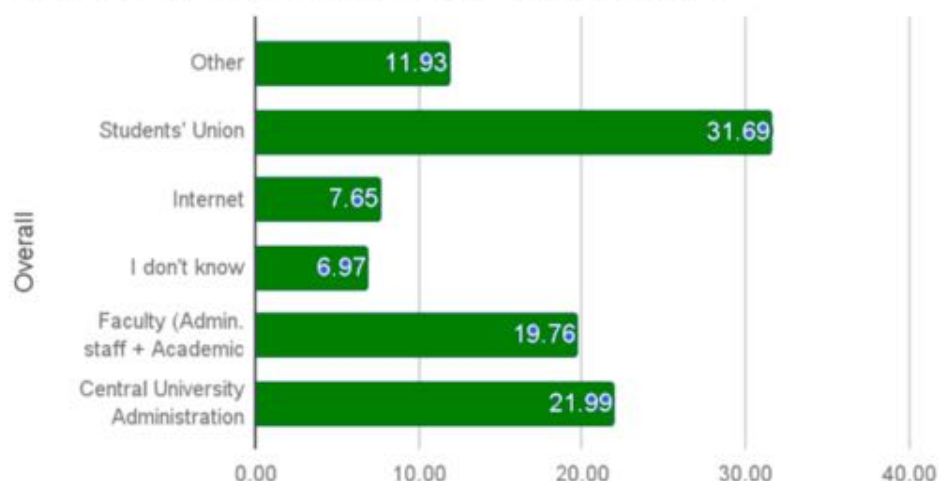
Who would you approach to get information about your rights as a student (for example, which individuals, offices, organization. etc.)?

Four distinct themes emerged in analyzing the responses to this question. These are: 1) central university administration; 2) respective faculty administrative unit staff including academic staff members (professors and instructors); 3) the Students' Union (SU); and 4) the internet.

The most frequently mentioned response was “the Students' Union” (see chart on page 10). However, it was unclear whether this was because the Students' Union conducted the survey or due to its role as a student advocacy organization or both.

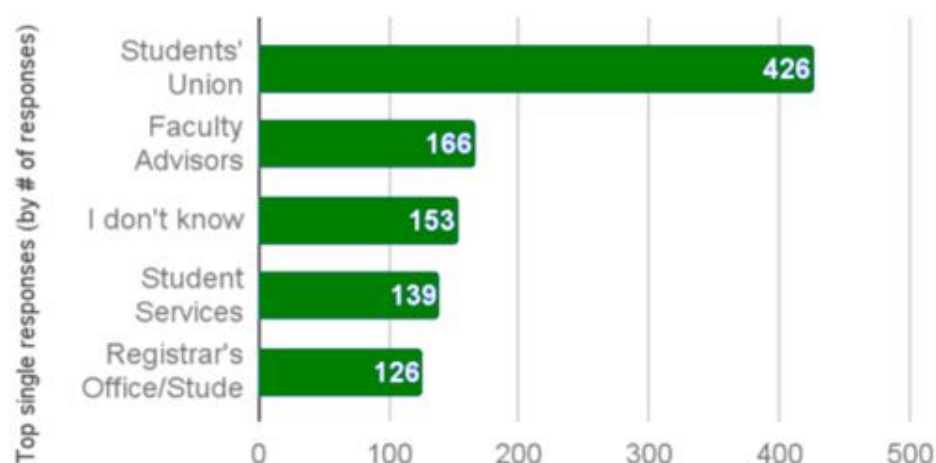


Sources of Information about Student Rights



It is noteworthy that many students indicated more than one source of information. Additionally, 80.65 percent of students indicated only a single source of information while the remaining indicated two or more sources of information they would approach to seek information about their rights and responsibilities.

Top 5 Responses Overall



An analysis of the top five single source of information indicated that the Students' Union (SU) is the most likely authority (426 respondents or 30.69 percent) students would approach, followed by "Faculty Advisors" (11.95 percent), "Student Services" (10.01 percent), "RO/Student Connect" (9.07 percent) as the second, fourth and fifth most frequently indicated source of information. The response "I don't know" (and variants of it) constituted 11.02 percent of respondents and was the third most frequently mentioned response.



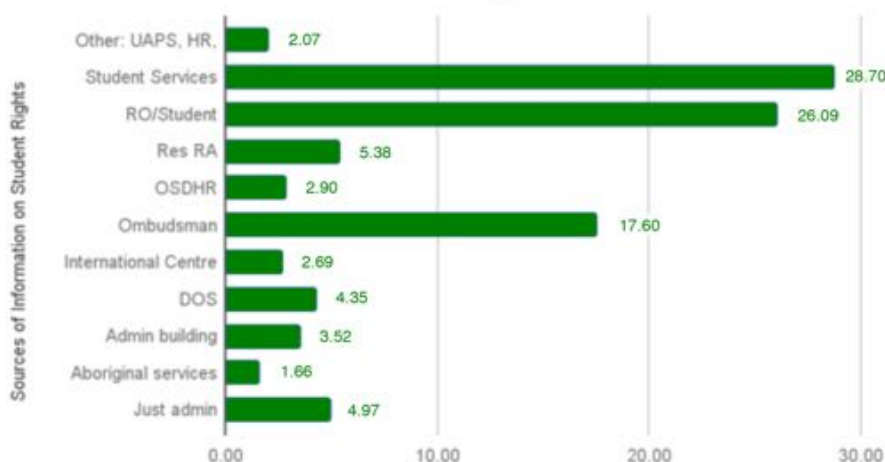
In contrast, a share of respondents, a total of 696 (31.7 percent) respondents indicated that they would approach the Students' Union. Within this category, respondents indicated the Students' Union Building, the Infolink, various units/divisions of the Students' Union, such as the "SU office", the "SU services", "the SU representatives", faculty associations, student groups, and "just SU". Majority of respondents (61.2 percent) indicating the Students' Union indicated "just SU", and did not identify any specific authority, unit or division within the organization that they would seek information from.

Sub-themes within "Students' Union"



Respondents who indicated authorities or units of central university administration constituted 22 percent of all respondents, whereas 19.8 percent indicated an individual officer, academic staff member or office in the decentralized faculty units. Interestingly, for both the central university administration and faculty categories, respondents identified specific offices, Registrar's Office (or Student Connect), Student Services for central administration and "Faculty Office or Advisor" and "Dean's Office" for faculties respectively.

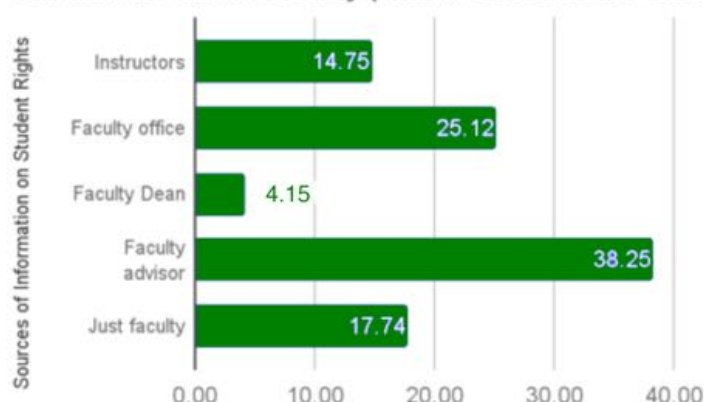
Sub-themes within Central University Admin.





In contrast, 7.7 percent respondents indicated they would seek related information through web search (“on the internet”, University of Alberta website or simply “google”). A total of 8.89 percent or 153 respondents said they did not know who they would approach to gain information about their rights and responsibilities.

Sub-themes within Faculty (Admin or Academic Staff)

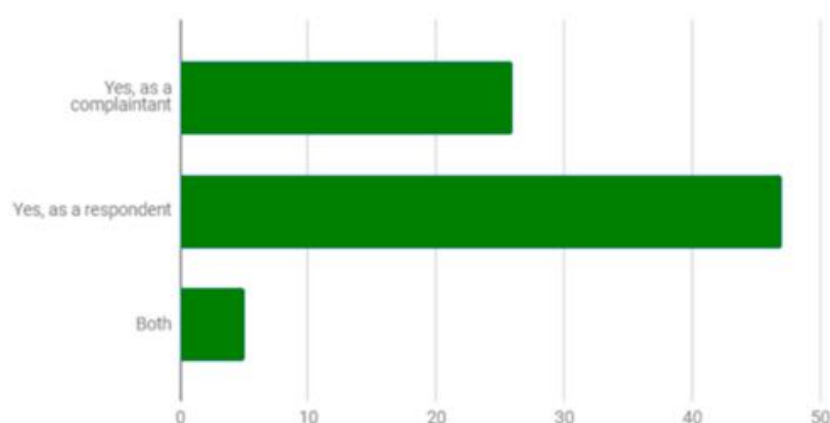


Experience with Discipline and Complaints Processes

Have you ever been involved in a disciplinary process at the U of A?

Approximately 5 percent (77 respondents) of survey respondents had had an experience with the disciplinary process at the U of A. Of these, 26 were only complainants, 46 were only respondent and 5 were both².

Have you ever been involved in a disciplinary process at the U of A?



² Thirty-five of the 46 respondents who answered this question had completed their disciplinary process. For seven respondents, the process was ongoing while 3 preferred not to answer and one respondent had multiple complaints, one complete and another ongoing. In contrast, two thirds (17 respondents) of the 26 complainants had a resolved disciplinary process. Four had an ongoing process and 5 preferred not to answer.



Gender identity and international student status had a small impact on the likelihood of someone being a complainant or a respondent. International students were more likely than domestic students to be complainants and respondents (separately, not combined) by approximately 1 percent each³.

Women are more likely to be complainants and less likely to be respondents than men (by approximately .5 percent and 1 percent, respectively). Of the total 36 complainants, 20 were women and 6 men whereas of the 46 respondents, 30 were women and 16 men.

Did you face academic discipline or non-academic discipline?

Out of 51 respondents, who answered this question, 27 respondents faced academic discipline, 16 faced non-academic discipline and remaining 8 respondents preferred not to answer. This suggests that a slightly higher proportion of students undergo the academic discipline process although it is difficult to draw any inferential conclusion due to the small size of the sample (of individuals who had been exposed to the disciplinary process).

Did you feel that you had access to all the information about the process you needed at the onset of the disciplinary process?

This question was asked to respondents and those who were both respondents and complainants (total of 51 participants). Over half (28) said they had access to all the information they needed. A fifth (7) said they had “somewhat” access to the information they needed, while a third (16) did not have access to the information they needed. This shows that only a slim majority of students feel they have access to all the information they need about their discipline process which may suggest a need to improve the accessibility of such information.

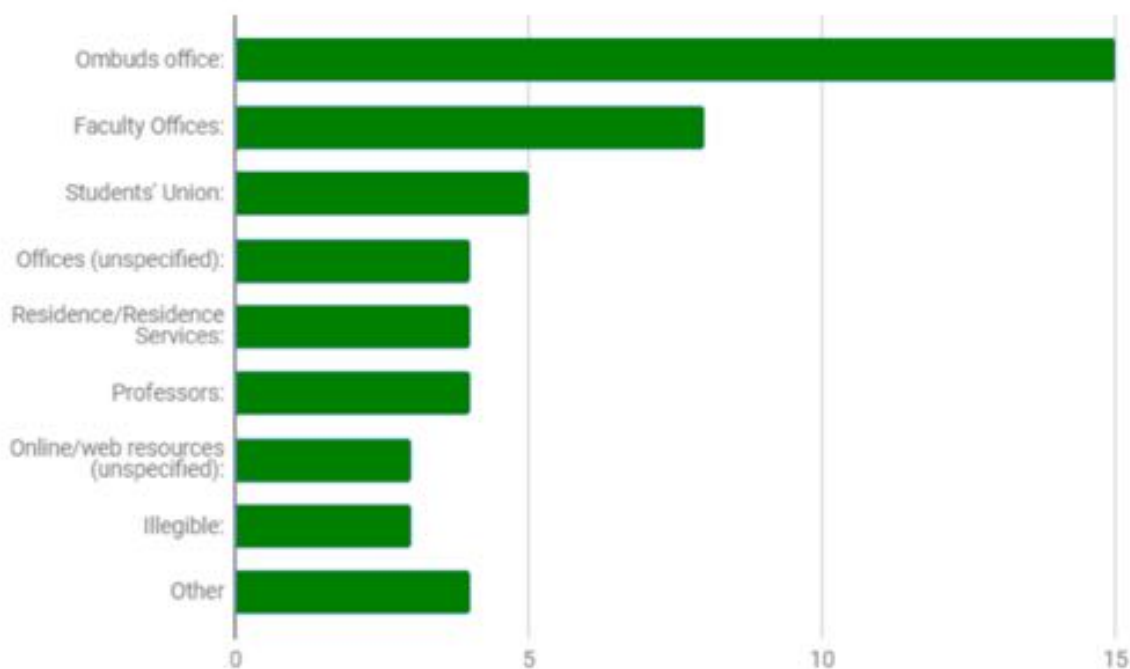
Did you feel like you were aware of your rights and responsibilities when you started your disciplinary process?

This question was asked to respondents, complainants and those who were both (total of 77 participants). Less than half of these participants (32) indicated feeling aware of their rights and responsibilities, and nearly one fifth felt they had some knowledge (13), while over a third (27) felt they lacked awareness about their rights and responsibilities. This suggests that a sizeable number of students lack knowledge of their rights and responsibilities while interacting with the disciplinary process.

³ This is based on a very small sample size and therefore cautious generalized is advised.



What were your sources of information regarding your discipline process (for example, which offices, individuals, organizations, etc.)?



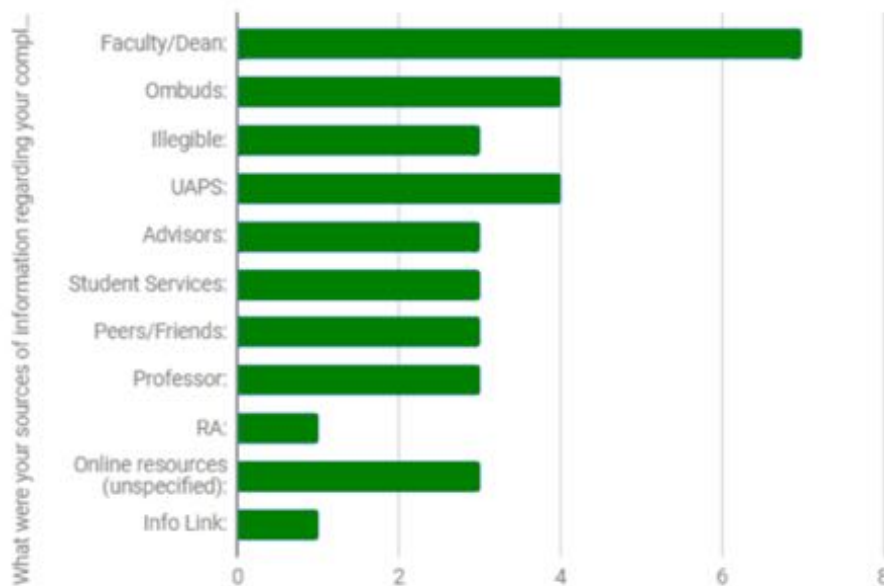
A majority of survey respondents who were respondents in the disciplinary process identified “Office of the Student Ombuds” as their primary source of information regarding the discipline process. There were 15 such mentions, followed by 8 mentions of “Faculty Offices”. There were also 3 and 4 respondents who indicated “online/web resources” or “Offices resources”, respectively. The University of Alberta Protective Services, academic advisors, alumni and the Student Code of Conduct each received one response (and were combined under the “Other”).

The responses also suggest that students disproportionately seek resources offered by the institution (including the Office of the Student Ombuds, Faculty Offices, Residence Services, or Professors) over student representative organization like the Students’ Union (even though majority of students initially identified the Students’ Union and related offices as the primary source of information about their rights and responsibilities) . Additionally, respondents who used “Office of Student Ombuds” and “Faculty Offices” reported greater awareness of their rights and responsibilities when undergoing the disciplinary office than those using any of the other sources of information indicated in the above graph. This is likely due to the specific mandate fulfilled by those two offices who serve and support students involved in disciplinary processes.

The “Office of Student Ombuds” and “Faculty/Dean’s Office” were also the top two most popular responses among complainants. However, unlike in case of the respondents, “Faculty/Dean’s Office” was a more popular source among complainants of information on student rights and respondents. Seven complainants indicated “Faculty/Dean’s Office” whereas only four indicated



“Office of Student Ombuds”. The “University of Alberta Protective Services” (UAPS) also ranked similar to the “Faculty/Dean’s Office” with 4 responses. This was followed closely by “Advisors”, “student services/student connect”, “peers/friend”, “professors” and “online (unspecified)” each of which received 3 responses. “Info Link” and “Resident Assistant” each received one response. Additionally, complainants found UAPS, professors and “InfoLink” to be the most useful source of information whereas “Faculty/Dean’s Office”, “Office of Student Ombuds” and “Advisors” performed average as sources of information (mostly receiving “somewhat” in response to the reliability of the information source). The remaining information sources identified by the complainants performed poorly as a reliable source of information.



The aforementioned findings demonstrate that professors are a far better source of assistance when making a complaint then responding to one, and ombuds is far less effective in supporting complaints. They also reveal that the Students’ Union is not a common source of information for complainants, with Info Link only being mentioned once, a stark contrast to our earlier findings that show that the Students’ Union is one of the first authorities students would expect to turn to during a disciplinary process (32 percent of respondents mentioned the Students’ Union in question 8), but very few students actually follow through with that expectation.

Do you now feel that you know more about your rights and responsibilities than you did before you started your discipline process?

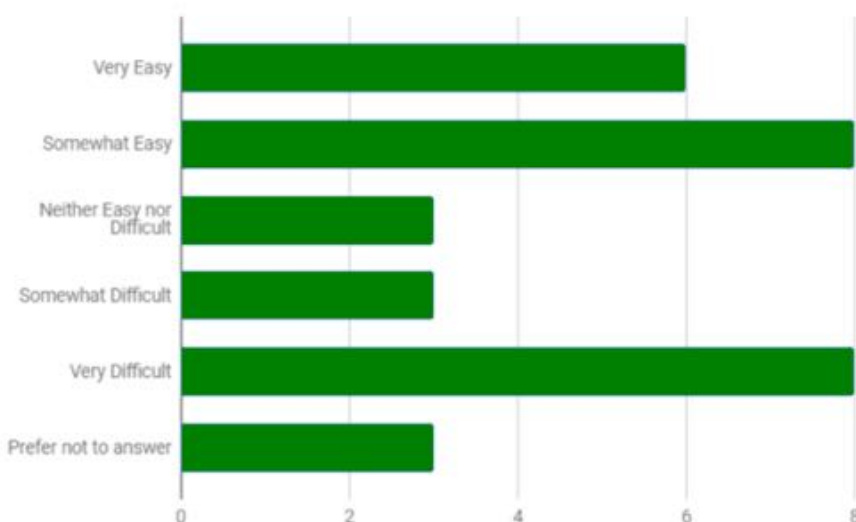
Out of the 77 participants who answered this question, nearly half (36) indicated gaining knowledge about the disciplinary process as a result of their interaction with it, while approximately a one-third (25) felt they learned “somewhat”, and one-fifth (15) felt they did not learn more as a result of their process. Only one respondent elected to answer ‘prefer not to say.’ This demonstrates that less than half of students involved in disciplinary proceedings at the University of Alberta feel that the process educates them about their rights and responsibilities.



How easy or difficult was it for you to find information on how to make a complaint?

[Asked only to complainants]

Participants were split in their response to the ease/difficulty of using information about the process of making a complaint. One-quarter (8) of the participants felt that making a complaint was very difficult, while the same number felt it was somewhat easy. One-fifth (6 respondents) felt it was very easy, and one-tenth (3 respondents) thought it was somewhat difficult, neither easy or difficult or preferred not to say. Effectively, over a third of students felt the process to find information on how to make a complaint was difficult at the University of Alberta.



What additional information or resources would have helped you go through your disciplinary process?

Four dominant themes emerged in response to this question. They included: 1) additional available resources both online and in person (10 respondents); 2) better education for students on the disciplinary process [including preventive education on violating the Code of Student Behaviour (7 respondents)]; 3) better support of students during the process (5 respondents); and 4) improved education for Resident Assistants and student advisors (3). Within the “additional available resources” theme, the most recurring comment was request for more online resources for students to educate themselves, with an additional student specifically mentioning that they would like “links and guides” available within Bear Tracks itself. Similarly, within the second theme, the two equally recurring suggestions were request for better education about students’ rights and responsibilities and a more simplified disciplinary process (4 respondents for each sub-theme).



Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to share?

There were very few responses to this optional question, but survey respondents chose to share some elements of their experience. A common theme was students expressing how difficult the process was for them. Here are some notable quotes of student experiences:

“The protective services were unable to identify the guy stalking me so I had to continue dealing with him.”

(Female, Domestic Student, Nursing, Complainant)

“At times I have wanted to appeal grades but had difficulty. The pathway of escalation is confusing, especially in courses with TAs, instructors, coordinators, etc. It would be nice if instructors provided the pathway of escalation as well as instructions for each stage to make it easier for students. I don't have time during the semester to figure that all out.”

(Male, Domestic Student, Engineering, Complainant)

“Having more support would have been nicer to go through the process with, I was very scared and unsure of what was going to happen as this incident was in my first year. I have told nobody about my discipline and it still haunts me to this day. It would be nice to see more support for students after who make an honest mistake and are punished academically for it. I felt very lost and on edge for a long period of time after the incident.”

(Female, Domestic Student, ALES, Respondent)

“More time and care needs to be taken with these types of matters. Staff also need better training in how to deal with these issues. I spent an entire night crying with my stomach in knots over a staff member not putting enough care into looking over the situation. My paper was flagged for a missing source that was given. The staff member simply didn't expand the text when reviewing it.”

(Female, Domestic Student, Science, Respondent)