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Building and Strengthening the Academic Appeal Environment

2021-2022 Academic Appeals Review



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability for a student to appeal an academic-related decision is an integral component of the postsecondary education experience. It allows students the opportunity to question and challenge the reasoning of an academic decision through the use of a respectful process. This process also holds faculty accountable for their academic responsibilities and ensures students have an outlet to express their dissatisfaction with a decision and are treated fairly.

As the CSI Board of Directors identified that there had been a perceived increase in the number of students requesting assistance in the appeal process through anecdotal evidence, they requested that CSI's Advocacy Team review the academic appeals environment. The review had three main objectives:

1. Audit and Evaluate Conestoga's Academic Appeal Process Usage.
2. Compare Conestoga's Academic Appeal Process to Mid-Large Sized Ontario Colleges for Best Practices
3. Audit and Review the Current Communication Strategies for the Academic Appeal Process

This review process extended from November 2021 to February 2022 and generated recommendations to improve the overall appeal environment at Conestoga College. The recommendations are:

Awareness of the Process

To improve the overall awareness of Conestoga College's academic appeal process on a proactive and ongoing basis, CSI recommends:

1. Conestoga 101 should include a short module informing students about their right to appeal academic decisions outlined by the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure, finding more information, and where support can be received.
2. When an academic decision other than a grade is issued to a student covered by the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure, the student should be provided information on how to appeal the decision.
3. The "Grades" section of each course on eConestoga should include information about the student's right to appeal a grade received that meets the minimum grade value requirement.
4. An academic appeals-specific web page is created and hosted in a highly accessible and searchable area of Conestoga College's website that provides an overview of the policy and procedure and the support available if assistance is required.
5. Develop a comprehensive ongoing communication strategy to inform students of their right to appeal academic decisions through official Conestoga communication channels (email, social media, eConestoga, etc.). This strategy should consider the most common times of year for issuance of academic decisions to ensure communication is targeted during the academic year when academic decisions are most likely to be issued (i.e. mid-terms and semester-end).

6. Program Handbooks across all program areas should include consistent and accurate information regarding the appeals process through a standardized description.

Accountability and Clarity of the Process

To ensure accountability for the process and provide clarity regarding the procedure, CSI recommends:

7. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to redefine the informal and formal stages. An appeal that reaches Step 2 should be considered part of the “Formal Appeal Process” and be accountable to the Registrar’s Office.
 8. After the informal faculty step, all stages should be facilitated through the Registrar’s Office through an online submission portal that outlines the required information students must submit, timelines to follow, and directs communications to the appropriate person depending on the stage.
 9. The Registrar’s Office should ensure academic appeals and the specific type of appeals are tracked and recorded in a central database to determine usage trends and associated reasoning.
 10. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to include specific criteria that students can use as a basis for filing and/or escalating an appeal to ensure a consistent application of the process applied across academic schools. This recommendation has been previously suggested by the Student Rights and Responsibilities Office
- due to program areas or schools applying their own criteria to determine what is or isn’t valid to move through the dispute process, and in some cases, incorrectly issuing decisions about validity.
11. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to include specific resolutions available for each appeal type to ensure consistent resolutions are applied across academic schools. Students are currently unaware of what potential resolutions are available.
 12. Resources should be created that assist students as supplementary material to the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure that outline the necessary actions taken during each step, including workflows, templates, etc.
 13. Lower the minimum grade value required to appeal an assessment from 25% to 10%.
 14. Shortening the timeline of the current “formal stage” (Step 4) from 35 working days to 20 working days or less to be more consistent with similar colleges and reduce the impact of an appeal on a student’s semester.
 15. Clear roles and responsibilities should be outlined for appeal stakeholders to determine the scope of their involvement, power, and assistance in the process, including CSI and external advisors.

Improved Appeal Supports

To limit the mental health concerns associated with an academic appeal and ensure students are supported during their appeal process, CSI recommends:



16. A stakeholder in the appeal process should develop and introduce personal support services that are specifically trained and equipped to guide students in the academic appeal process and not limit their ability to file an appeal.

17. A stakeholder in the appeal process should develop and introduce academic appeal workshops to explain the process, types of appeals available, and supports available.

DISCLAIMER: The following suggested recommendations are for the consideration of CSI's Executive Team and/or Board of Directors. These recommendations are not guaranteed to be adopted and/or implemented by CSI. An individual or collective action plan (such as CSI's Strategic Plan) will be created and published in the future which may or may not include these suggested recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

The ability for a student to appeal an academic-related decision is an integral component of the postsecondary education experience. It allows students the opportunity to question and challenge the reasoning of an academic decision through the use of a respectful process. This process holds faculty accountable for their academic responsibilities and ensures students have an outlet to express their dissatisfaction with a decision and are treated fairly.

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

As part of the issues identified in the 2021-2022 academic year, the CSI Board of Directors requested that CSI's Advocacy Team review, academic appeals were identified as an area of concern. It was identified by anecdotal evidence that there had been a perceived increase in the number of students requesting assistance in the appeal process from CSI.

As Conestoga College's official student association, the CSI Board of Directors wanted to ensure our organization was proactive in responding to the perceived increase in support requests through a review of the academic appeal environment at Conestoga College and across similar mid to large-sized colleges. The review had three main objectives:

4. Audit and Evaluate Conestoga's Academic Appeal Process Usage.
 - a. Determine the current and historical usage of the academic appeal process to evaluate the types of reasons appeals are filed and provide insight into usage trends.

5. Compare Conestoga's Academic Appeal Process to Mid-Large Sized Ontario Colleges for Best Practices
 - a. Determine the similarities and differences between mid-large-sized colleges' (10,000+ students) academic appeals process through a review of their policies and procedures to determine common/best practices for recommendations. This should also include research on the student associations' involvement and support.

6. Audit and Review the Current Communication Strategies for the Academic Appeal Process
 - a. Determine the methods used by Conestoga College to communicate and raise awareness of the academic appeal process. Through this audit, provide recommendations on methods to increase communication and awareness of the process.

This review process extended from November 2021 to February 2022.

CONESTOGA COLLEGE'S ACADEMIC APPEAL POLICY & PROCEDURE

OVERVIEW

Conestoga College's academic appeal policy and procedure is formally known as the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy/Procedure and became effective at Conestoga College on September 1, 2007. The policy outlines that all appellants are to self-represent and that it applies to all applicants, students, faculty, Registrar and the academic team of the College.¹

The policy and procedure have been revised primarily by Academic Forum, the Policy and Procedures Committee and the Academic Coordinating Committee.^{2,3}

The procedure outlines the grounds an appellant may file an appeal, which includes:

- a decision to deny evaluations through the portfolio or challenge process;
- an academic promotion decision such as discontinuance;
- a final grade, including a failed PLAR challenge;
- an evaluation worth 25% or greater in a course;
- a sanction assessed under the Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy
- a sanction assessed under the Academic Integrity Policy⁴

The process consists of a 3-step escalating authority informal process followed by a formal appeal hearing if the appeal cannot be satisfied during the informal process. The informal appeal process is waived for appeals related to one of the following three scenarios:

- Issued an academic decision by the Executive Dean/Dean of their program of discontinuance;
- Assessed a penalty under the Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy; or
- Unable to meet the deadline as noted in Step 1 due to a documented medical condition/incident.⁵

¹ Barbara Kelly, 'Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy' (Conestoga College, 13 January 2020), https://www-assets.conestogac.on.ca/documents/www/about/policies/academic-administration/academic-dispute-resolution-and-appeal-policy.pdf?_gl=1*10ijvj*_gcl_aw*RONMLjE2NDM5ODg3OTQuQ2owSONRaUF1dk9QQmhEWEFSSXNBS3pMUThFU2lyTmIFMHRTR1IFdVUwSU9sVUw4OEZaZFN3RVhmM3VISIRMbzhJcENvUHpvMEM4VXVqb2FBc1N3RUFMd193Y0I.

² Kelly.

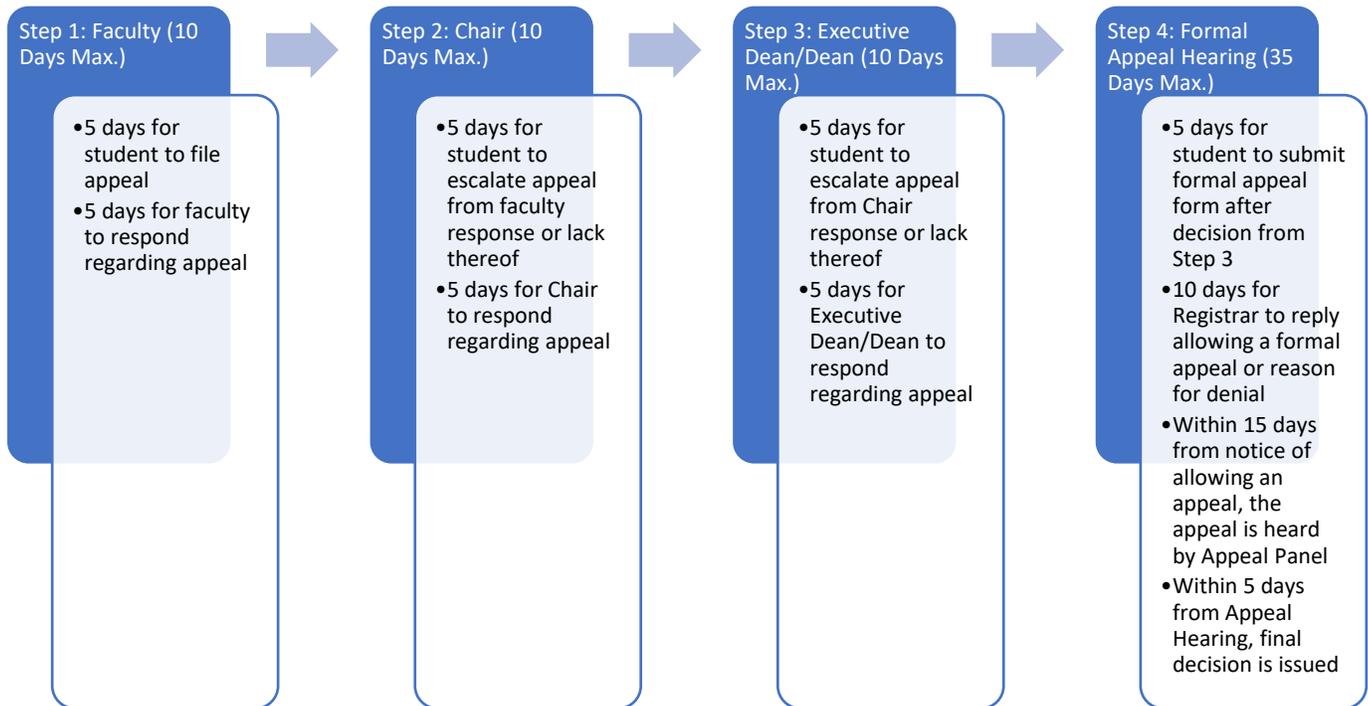
³ Barbara Kelly, 'Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Procedure' (Conestoga College, 7 February 2020), https://www-assets.conestogac.on.ca/documents/www/about/policies/academic-administration/academic-dispute-resolution-and-appeal-procedure.pdf?_gl=1*f4bnaj*_gcl_aw*RONMLjE2NDM5ODg3OTQuQ2owSONRaUF1dk9QQmhEWEFSSXNBS3pMUThFU2lyTmIFMHRTR1IFdVUwSU9sVUw4OEZaZFN3RVhmM3VISIRMbzhJcENvUHpvMEM4VXVqb2FBc1N3RUFMd193Y0I.

⁴ Kelly.

⁵ Kelly.

Each step outlines specific deadlines for each activity that must occur on working days. Extensions for specific activities during an appeal step can be provided for exceptional circumstances. The timeline for each step is outlined below:

Figure 1 - Conestoga College Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Procedure Timelines



If a student is to follow the process and all maximum timelines are followed by participants, the overall process could take up to 65 working days, the equivalent of 13 working weeks.

The potential decisions of the appeal process, both informal and formal components, are not defined for any step except Step 2.

Any decision made through the formal appeal process is final and binding.

USAGE

The usage of the appeal process is not publicly available. Through discussions with various Conestoga stakeholders, there is no central tracking procedure to determine any trends related to the frequency or reason for the use of the process.

Usage data that is available includes:

- Number and type of appeals that reach the Formal Appeal Hearings
- Number of inquiries/interactions with the Student Rights and Responsibilities Office regarding academic disputes and academic integrity
- Number and type of academic integrity incidents (warnings and offences) issued

It was identified that as the informal process falls within the scope of each academic school, there is not a central incident tracking system in place for them. The Registrar's Office has noted in our stakeholder discussions that improvements to the appeal process to track appeals that reach Step 2 and 3 are in progress.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Conestoga College takes a proactive approach to inform students of their right to appeal at the beginning of their academic career and subsequent academic years, in conjunction with a more passive approach throughout the year.

The proactive communication of the right to appeal and related policy and procedure include:

- Student Protection Acknowledgement
 - Each academic year, all students must acknowledge and accept that they are aware of the College's policies and procedures. The acknowledgement also sends an email to the student, including links to the most relevant policies and procedures.⁶
- Conestoga 101
 - During the first semester of each student's academic year, they are required to complete a one-hour online course that provides a high-level overview of supports, services, and opportunities available at Conestoga College.⁷ The right to appeal is briefly mentioned during an overview of Student Rights and Responsibilities.

The passive methods of communication of the right to appeal and related policy and procedure include:

- Program Handbooks
 - Each program at Conestoga College has a corresponding Program Handbook. These handbooks provide information specifically related to their program, which generally, not always, references the appeal process, although they lack consistency and provide inaccurate information. Some refer students to speak to an academic advisor or SSA before moving to Step 2,⁸ which is false, while others provide reference to the use of the policy for discontinuance,⁹ and others do not.¹⁰

⁶ 'Conestoga College Program Handbook - Records and Information Management', accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/handbook/1265>.

⁷ 'Conestoga 101 | Continuing Education | Conestoga College', accessed 8 February 2022, <https://continuing-education.conestogac.on.ca/courses/CON0101>.

⁸ 'Conestoga College Program Handbook - Business', accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/handbook/0062>.

⁹ 'Conestoga College Program Handbook - Biotechnology Technician', accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/handbook/1164>.

¹⁰ 'Conestoga College Program Handbook - Carpentry and Renovation Technician', accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/handbook/1142>.

- Student Guide
 - The Conestoga College Student Guide refers to the appeal process under Student Rights and Responsibilities, but it does not clearly outline what the process may be used for.¹¹
- College Website
 - College Policies
 - The policy is hosted and available for students to review on Conestoga College’s website in the policies and procedures section, under the academic administration tab with approximately 45 other academic policies and procedures.¹²
 - Student Rights and Responsibilities
 - The policy is referenced and hyperlinked under the “Rights” tab of the Student Rights and Responsibilities section of Conestoga College’s website.¹³ A limited amount of information is available, and students are referred to contact their Student Success Advisor.
 - Academic Integrity (Library Services)
 - The academic integrity section of the Library Services’ website references the ability to appeal an academic integrity decision and the support available from CSI.¹⁴

Outside of Conestoga College's communication avenues to communicate the appeal process to students, CSI also has a dedicated web page. It informs students of the process and resources available, allows them to use an interactive tool to determine where to start in the appeal process, and includes a contact form to contact a CSI representative for additional support.¹⁵

¹¹ ‘Conestoga College Student Handbook’, accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/handbook/student-guide>.

¹² ‘Policies | Conestoga College’, accessed 8 February 2022, https://www.conestogac.on.ca/about/corporate-information/policies?gclid=CjOKCQiAxiQBhCRARIsAPsvo-z9v15nJ8N3T14MKibsnvSu7wR5Mf1ggOjc1EY8bkaeBYKy9tUM0ikaAsGvEALw_wcB.

¹³ ‘Student Rights | Conestoga College’, accessed 8 February 2022, <https://www.conestogac.on.ca/student-rights/rights>.

¹⁴ Chris Woodley, ‘Library Services: Academic Integrity: Procedure for Academic Incidents’, accessed 8 February 2022, <https://lib.conestogac.on.ca/academic-integrity/procedure>.

¹⁵ Conestoga Students Inc., ‘Academic Appeals’, accessed 11 February 2022, <http://www.conestogastudents.com>.

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND EXPERIENCES

As a student association, it is imperative the student experience is reflected in our research and recommendations. CSI has undertaken two strategic approaches between November 2021 and February 2022 to ensure students' lived experiences and feedback guided the overall academic appeal review process. The two approaches consisted of:

1. Membership survey
2. Interviews with students that have completed the academic appeal process

CSI YEAR-END SURVEY

OVERVIEW

The 2021 CSI Year-End Survey is a membership-wide survey distributed to gather the feedback of members as owners. The survey received a total of 3,130 student member responses. For an outline of the overall purpose and methodology of the CSI Year-End Survey, the report can be viewed on [CSI's website](#).

As academic appeals were identified as a topic for further exploration, a total of 6 high-level questions related to academic appeals were included:

1. Do you understand what plagiarism is?
2. Are you aware of the Conestoga College academic appeal process?
3. Have you participated in the academic appeal process?
4. Why did you use the academic appeal process?
5. Was the academic appeal process easy to follow and understand?
6. Did the academic appeal process lead to a result you were satisfied with?

Questions 3 – 6 had logic applied to ensure responses were only recorded from student members who were aware of the process and had participated in the process.

PLAGIARISM

Students overwhelmingly stated they understood plagiarism, with 97.8% indicating they understood it. However, this question offered no test of a student's ability to identify plagiarism, nor did it offer a definition of plagiarism. It is difficult to draw any conclusions from the data gathered, but it is promising that students believe they have an understanding of it.

AWARENESS & PARTICIPATION

When student members were asked about their awareness of the academic appeals process, 79.46% stated they were aware of the process. While this suggests a high general awareness of the appeals process, a significant number of students are unaware of the process, limiting their ability to exercise their right to appeal an academic decision. Filters looking for discrepancies across years of study and international v. domestic were unable to provide any definitive cause for why a 1/5th of Conestoga students surveyed were unaware of the appeals process.

With an absence of College data on usage, we are reliant on student members to communicate to use the proportion of students that have needed to participate in an academic appeal. Of the students who indicated they are aware of the academic appeal process, 10.5% of student members indicated they have participated in the academic appeals process in some manner, suggesting most students surveyed are generally satisfied with their grades or academic decision they have received.

USE OF THE APPEAL PROCESS

To determine the types of appeals being filed on behalf of students in the absence of data from the College, students who participated in the process were asked why they filed an appeal.

Students indicated they are entering the academic appeals process for various reasons, with a non-insignificant number of students using the appeals process for all the listed eligibility criteria for lodging an academic appeal. However, 47.5% of students using the appeals process did so for one of two reasons: they were denied evaluation through the portfolio or challenge process or challenging a specific grade they received on a project or assignment.

Further, 83% of students who participated in the academic appeal process found it easy to follow and understand, suggesting minor difficulties for students who participated in the process.

Lastly, students were asked to share if they were satisfied with the result of filing an appeal. According to students surveyed, students who filed an appeal are receiving resolutions they find satisfactory more than 80% of the time. This suggests that the appeals process is leading to satisfactory conclusions for students.

It is important to note that the same number of students who stated the appeal process was easy to follow and understand was reflected in the process results leading to a satisfactory conclusion. However, the same students did not answer the questions in uniform ways, as 16 of 217 students who found the process easy to understand still did not find the process satisfactory, representing 36% of students who did not find their conclusion satisfactory. This suggests a slight correlation between not understanding the process and coming to a dissatisfactory result, but not a direct 1 to 1 correlation.

OVERALL SURVEY FINDINGS

The six questions from the CSI Year-End Survey ultimately demonstrate the importance and relatively high level of satisfaction with the current process. Although student members are relatively satisfied, improvements surrounding awareness of the process and the ability to follow and understand the process are required to limit the barriers in filing an academic appeal.

ACADEMIC APPEAL INTERVIEWS

As the CSI Year-End Survey did not allow student members to suggest methods to improve awareness and usage of the process, qualitative data to inform solutions was gathered through interviews with students who had participated in the appeal process. For an outline of these interviews' overall purpose and methodology, please review [Appendix A](#).

OVERVIEW

Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes and followed a semi-structured format of 10 questions.

A total of 20 interviews were booked, but only 7 students attended their interview and were eligible to participate. These students shared their experiences with the appeal process related to 3 of the 6 eligible appealable areas: a final grade, specific assignment or project, and sanction under the academic integrity policy.

KEY INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Need for Improved Awareness

The lack of awareness of all components of the appeal process was a common theme throughout the interviews. The existence of the process, where to learn about and access the policy and procedure, what the procedure entails, the available supports, and the rights students have to appeal were all consistently repeated throughout the interviews.

Awareness of all components of the appeal process should be improved through more meaningful and intentional efforts to inform students of the different components, emphasizing their right to appeal and where to find more information about the policy and procedure.

Improved Appeal Supports

Students who tried to seek out support for an academic appeal were largely unsuccessful in finding any support. Any students who received support found the support offered to be somewhat underwhelming or were misguided and restricted from exercising their appeal rights.

The policy and procedure make no reference to where support can be received, mainly because students lack available support options. Overwhelmingly, students are seeking personal assistance to better exercise their right to appeal academic decisions and accompanying resources that outline the process more clearly.

Clarification of Role of Each Appeal Stakeholder

Students are currently receiving academic appeal support inconsistently from Student Success Advisors, Student Rights and Responsibilities, Conestoga Students Inc., and the Academic Team.

- Student Success Advisors were found to have restricted the ability for a student to exercise their right to appeal an academic decision, leaving the student with false information.
- Student Rights and Responsibilities was found to receive positive feedback overall for helping students learn about the process and finding appropriate information.
- Conestoga Students Inc. provides guidance and overviews of the policy and procedure for students and will attend meetings with a student as a neutral note-taker, but this is not communicated in the policy/procedure, but is widely known and accepted in practice leading to confusion in CSI's role in the process.
- Some academic team members are forthcoming and willing to provide information about the process to students, while others do not provide any information to students.

Each stakeholder is currently offering support to students in the process. It should be defined between all parties who are most appropriate to offer support and at what stages. This should also be clearly communicated to students to ensure clarity regarding stakeholders' responsibilities and roles in the process.

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND EXPERIENCES DISCUSSION

Through the results of the 2021 CSI Year-End Survey and insights provided through the academic appeal interviews, it is evident that the current academic appeal environment at Conestoga College is receiving mixed feedback from students. While it is highly unlikely the academic appeal process will completely satisfy all students, there continues to be room for improvements.

The current process generally derives a high level of satisfaction from surveyed students. Still, a significant portion of the population is unaware of the existence of the appeal process. This was heavily reinforced through the interview process when almost all participants stated they were unaware of the process's existence until they were actively involved in it or made aware of it due to receiving an academic decision.

The interviews further demonstrated the lack of available supports and knowledge of the process from students. One student even described their experience with the academic appeal process as, "There was no impression that the faculty, chair, or deans were following any type of process, and it felt like the school was only trying to get my money." No student should leave an appeal feeling like there was not a meaningful and fair process provided.

To assist in improving the experience of students in the appeal process, the main areas for improvement are:

1. Awareness of the Process
2. Accountability and Clarity of the Process
3. Improved Appeal Supports

ONTARIO MID TO LARGE-SIZED COLLEGES COMMON & PROMISING PRACTICES

As every postsecondary institution in Ontario understands the importance of the right for students to appeal academic decisions, they also have academic appeal policies and procedures with accompanying resources. To determine the variations in appeal processes and resources at similar institutions to Conestoga College, an environmental scan was undertaken of 14 mid-large sized colleges (10,000+ students) with a focus on:

- Types of Appeals Permitted
- Procedure Structures
- Awareness and Support Strategies

A summary of common and promising practices identified through the environmental scan is discussed in this section of the report.

TYPES OF APPEALS PERMITTED

The use of academic appeal processes is varied by institutions. Some have created all-encompassing procedures that oversee various academic decisions, while others have individual appeal processes for each type of academic appeal process, such as academic integrity, final grade appeal, promotion appeal, etc.

The most common types of appeals allowed by the various appeal processes at the institutions include:

- Merit of Work
 - Belief the academic decision issued is unfair, including but not limited to breaches of academic integrity, unfairly or inaccurately graded assessments, or PLAR's.
- Course Management
 - Appeals that allege the delivery of a course or evaluation departed from the description of the course or evaluation criteria.
- Extenuating Circumstances
 - Medical, legal, or compassionate circumstances that lead to a student being unable to perform the requirements of their academic work for reasons outside of the student's control that result in an unfavourable academic decision.
- Unfair Treatment
 - Appeals that allege a student has received unfair treatment by a faculty member in comparison to their peers that has negatively affected their performance. Many other colleges move these types of appeals to another policy and procedure such as harassment or human rights.

Conestoga's current process is a broad policy and procedure that does not specify any significant parameters for the reasons an appeal can be initiated, but it does limit the scope of the policy to six possible academic decisions that may be appealed that are generally aligned with other institutions.

A significant variation in Conestoga’s policy and procedure related to academic decisions compared to other institutions is the minimum grade value to qualify as an assessment eligible for appeal. Out of 14 mid-large-sized Ontario colleges, Conestoga has the highest minimum grade value criteria (minimum 25%) for allowing an appeal of an assessment.

Of the 14 colleges, 11 have no minimum grade value. The two remaining colleges, Durham and Humber, have unique approaches. Durham has no minimum grade value for the informal appeal process, but institutes a minimum grade value of 10-20% (dependent on further criteria) for their formal appeal process.¹⁶ Humber has a minimum grade value of 20% required, but also stipulates the student must believe the grade they should have been awarded is of at least a 10% discrepancy.¹⁷

PROCEDURE STRUCTURES

Each appeal process examined varied with their own quirks, timelines, and general idiosyncrasies. However, there were common themes and practices shared amongst most of the colleges examined, and some unique and promising practices.

INFORMAL AND FORMAL APPEALS

All 14 colleges analyzed structured their appeals process to include an informal and formal component. The informal component was generally limited to the beginning stages of the appeal process. Students are encouraged to settle their disputes through open communication with their faculty members before escalating to a more formal process.

Some colleges have even taken steps to make mediation an available resource for students and faculty during the informal stage to resolve the appeal before needing to escalate it further.

Generally, most colleges consider the informal stage of the appeal process to end once the appeal is escalated to a Chair or Dean, at which point it is considered a formal appeal.

The formal appeal stage also includes an Appeal Committee at all colleges most commonly overseen by the Registrar's Office. These committees are either established committees or formed on an as-needed basis, depending on the institution. Generally, the membership of these committees includes a student, a Registrar’s representative, and someone from the academic team. The most considerable discrepancy with the procedures to reach an appeal committee are the criteria for bringing a case forward. Some institutions require approval by a neutral third party like an ombudsperson or the Registrar, while others have no barriers to pursuing this phase of the appeal process.

¹⁶ ‘Grade Appeals’ (Durham College, December 2020), <https://durhamcollege.ca/wp-content/uploads/111-grade-appeals.pdf>.

¹⁷ ‘18.0 GRADE REVIEW and ACADEMIC APPEAL | Humber Academic Regulations’, accessed 9 February 2022, <https://academic-regulations.humber.ca/2019-2020/18.0-GRADE-REVIEW-and-ACADEMIC-APPEAL>.

Once a case is heard by an Appeals Committee and a decision is issued, the decision is final and binding. Only a limited number of colleges allow the Appeals Committee decision to be appealed, and these appeals must be based on the claim of misconduct within the Appeal Committee process. A neutral committee reviews the misconduct claims and allows for the appeal process to be restarted and conducted if found to be true.

Conestoga's current structure is relatively similar to those of other institutions in the process but classifies the Appeal Hearing stage as the only formal component of the process and is a final and binding stage that cannot be appealed.

TIMELINES

There is limited consistency in the timelines used across each institution's appeals processes. Each college has seemingly arbitrary markers for how long each step of the appeal process is permitted to go on. However, there is a commonality in timeline formats.

For informal appeals, a student can expect a timeline of approximately ten (10) to fifteen (15) business days from receiving an academic decision to reach an informal resolution or being permitted to initiate the formal appeal process. In the formal stage, students can expect timelines to run five (5) to fifteen (15) business days from contacting a Chair or Dean to receiving a decision on their formal appeal. And finally, a student can likely expect to wait twenty (20) business days between their request for the formation of an appeals committee to the resolution of that committee in the form of a final appeals decision and judgement.

Conestoga's informal process timelines are consistent with other institutions for the informal stage (including the Chair and Dean), but Conestoga has an extended formal process timeline of up to 35 days to resolve an appeal hearing.

RESPONSIBILITY, COORDINATION, AND OVERSIGHT

Some colleges allow the Faculty, Chair, and Dean stages of the process to be administered by the individual academic schools with limited oversight and assistance provided during the process by any other parties. Other colleges have taken the approach of centralizing the process through their Registrar's Office. Without insinuating as to why institutions have done this or applying reasoning that may not have been the cause of this move, it appears that colleges have made this move to ensure a neutral arbiter is handling the appeals process, leaving it out of the hands of the department administrators who may be forced into complicated and difficult decisions between faculty, students, and chairs/deans.

Also, a centralized process for the administration and oversight would likely improve the ability to track appeals and provide a big picture of the use of the appeal process for the stakeholder responsible for the creation and review of the appeals policy.

Conestoga's procedure is currently not administered by the Registrar's Office until it reaches the final stage of the process consisting of an appeal hearing. This leaves the onus on each

academic school to administer the informal stages of the process and ensure consistency within the process college-wide, with limited data tracking abilities during this stage.

RESOLUTIONS & PENALTIES

The resolutions and penalties across academic-related appeal policies were varied in the depth of resolutions and penalties presented within them. Policies that were broader and encompassing of various academic-related decisions did not outline the potential resolutions, while more targeted policies such as a final grade appeal policy provided specific resolutions that could be achieved through their processes.

The most common area for comparing penalties and resolutions across colleges is academic integrity or honesty policies. Generally, the penalties were relatively uniform across colleges and ranged from remedial coursework to expulsion and criminal charges in exceptional circumstances. Some colleges have taken on unique practices in their integrity penalties as a means of reducing harm and offering grace to the student, aiming to correct and adjust behaviours to reduce recidivism in place of censure and punishment.

Colleges like Durham, Fanshawe, Seneca, and Georgian all have taken on ameliorative practices in the instance of a first academic offence in place of immediate sanction. These colleges have taken an approach that if a first offence is not overly severe (which is determined by the discretion of the faculty or a predetermined list of offences), students are referred to their respective Academic Integrity departments to complete an academic integrity learning module, sign an academic integrity pledge, and/or write a self-reflection on academic integrity, and provide proof of such to the academic school if requested.

Conestoga also shares the same philosophy as these other colleges and takes a similar approach to academic integrity offences. Conestoga's Academic Integrity office also acts as a resource and provides guidance for faculty to determine what an appropriate penalty is based on the severity of the offence. Outside of academic integrity cases, Conestoga's academic appeal process does not clearly outline the potential resolutions that can be achieved through the process as it is a broad appeal policy for six different appeal types. This has left the potential for appropriate resolutions to be left up to the request and determination of the involved parties.

Of all policies analyzed, only Centennial College stated that a student appealing a grade could receive a lower grade on an assignment or final grade.¹⁸ All other colleges did not explicitly state that a lower grade could be awarded. If Conestoga were to outline the potential resolutions that can be achieved, allowing a grade to be lowered should not be included to maintain the spirit of the purpose of the appeal process.

¹⁸ Centennial College, 'Grade Appeals Policy and Procedures', 3 March 2018, <https://p.widencdn.net/k0vq0w/GradeAppealsPolicyandProcedures>.

FEES

While all institutions recognize the appeals process exists as a means for students to ensure fairness in academic decisions, a limited number of institutions have introduced a pay barrier to filing an academic appeal. These fees range from \$25 to \$120 to pursue the entire appeals process. Depending on the college, the fee may be charged only for the formal process or at any stage. These fees are generally justified as a processing fee. All institutions that have a fee included in their appeal process indicate it is refundable if the student succeeds.

Conestoga does not require the payment of a fee for an appeal at any stage within its appeal process, therefore not limiting economically disadvantaged students from pursuing their right to appeal.

THIRD-PARTY INCLUSION

Many colleges allow some form of support or representation from a third party to be involved in the appeal process at the student's request. The third-party inclusion ranges from a student peer to take notes, an appeal advisor to assist in drafting, creating, and presenting their case, to the involvement of legal counsel.

The most common practice is to allow students the right to include an appeals advisor. These advisors assist students with understanding the process and procedure, creating and drafting any forms of communication that may be necessary, and in some cases, even presenting the appeal on the student's behalf.

Conestoga currently allows a student to have a CSI representative present during appeal meetings as a note-taker but not to present on their behalf. CSI is also able to assist students in understanding the appeal process. It is important to note that this practice has always been allowed, but it is not reflected in the informal stages of Conestoga's procedure. Conestoga's policy allows an external advisor to be present during the formal appeal hearing, but it does not outline to what extent their involvement may include.

AWARENESS AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

While the existence of an academic appeal policy and procedure is well established across the colleges analyzed, the approaches used to communicate their existence and offer support related to them vary greatly. Without a strong awareness and support strategy related to academic appeal policies and procedures, students cannot be expected to be aware of their right to appeal or how to participate in the appeal process. Analyzing the 14 college's public-facing awareness and support initiatives, the following common themes and promising practices were identified.

AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Direct & Indirect Communication

Most colleges subject to analysis had minimal *direct communication* efforts aimed at raising student awareness of academic appeals processes. Of fourteen (14) mid-to-large sized

colleges reviewed, twelve (12) had no openly discoverable direct communications to students regarding the academic appeals procedure, policy, or the academic integrity/honesty policies. These institutions often had dedicated web pages to either Academic Integrity/Honesty offices housing links to the appeals processes, but these websites were not actively promoted to student's vis a vis public communication.¹⁹

The colleges that have taken the initiative to utilize public communication methods to reach and teach students regarding the appeals process and policies were Centennial College & Seneca College.

Centennial College publishes important dates around the academic appeals process directly into student academic calendars connected to their college emails. It also creates social media adverts and PSA campaigns on campus to raise student awareness through direct and indirect communications.

Seneca College has sought to create an immersive method of communication and education for students regarding the college's academic appeals and integrity policy. Students are encouraged through various communication methods (orientation sessions, college social media channels etc.) to download the *Seneca College Integrity Matters* App. The app contains modules students can complete, testing their knowledge of academic integrity policy and appeals process. Students can earn rewards called *Badges*, which can be referenced in student credentials for future academic endeavours. Seneca College also publishes routine blog posts regarding academic integrity and appeals, in accessible language for students to better understand their responsibilities, rights, and the appeals process more broadly.

Conestoga does not actively attempt to inform students of their right to appeal through direct email, social media, PSA campaigns, or other direct and indirect communication methods on an ongoing basis.

Awareness by Educational Resources

Several colleges have created educational resources like infographics, how-to's, and various other resources - outside a restatement of their integrity and appeals policies - to teach and simplify these policies for their student populations. Colleges like St. Clair, Algonquin, and St. Lawrence have created accessible and easy-to-digest information documents for students to better understand the academic integrity policy and the appeals process. Other awareness through educational resources include:

¹⁹ While public communications to students by institutions were lacking, the advocacy department was not able to find evidence of private communications vis a vis college communications networks (emails, student accounts etc.) and therefore cannot make a judgement whether these communications were or are satisfactory to the task of informing students.

Academic Appeals Webpage

Several colleges have taken the initiative to house all their academic appeals and integrity information on a single webpage, in contrast to the oft-times sporadic and arbitrary placement of information of these processes at other institutions. Colleges like Centennial, St. Lawrence, Sheridan, and Seneca have housed much of the information regarding their academic integrity and appeals processes on, or redirect from, a single webpage. This is often a page created by an institution's library, or another department within the college. This provides students a more seamless experience in attempting to learn about these policies and simplify what can be a complicating and unnecessarily confusing information gathering step for students.

Awareness Weeks

Many colleges have taken the step to actively promote students' knowledge and understanding of the academic appeals and integrity processes through the creation of awareness weeks. Seneca College, for example, has taken to creating their Academic Integrity Week, a whole of institution approach in collaboration with Seneca Student Federation, seeking to remedy academic integrity and fairness issues and educate and empower students. Students are invited to actively participate in all the events and programming offered in conjunction with SSF, which include:

1. Destination Academic Integrity

An online "journey" through the supports and services that help students understand and practice academic integrity at Seneca. Through Destination Academic Integrity, students are encouraged and incentivized to complete and utilize all the academic appeals and integrity supports available through both the college and SA to be entered into a draw for a \$50 Amazon gift card from the Seneca Student Federation (SSF). All students who complete Destination Academic Integrity are entered into the draw and three winners are awarded.

2. Academic Integrity Milestone Badge

Students can complete the Integrity in Action, Plagiarism & Citation, and/or Integrity Matters modules to earn academic integrity badges. Students who earn all three badges earn a Milestone badge. During Academic Integrity Week, students who earn a milestone badge by a specific date are entered into an SSF draw for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

3. Academic Integrity Meme Contest

Students can create a meme that communicates the importance of academic integrity and become eligible to win a \$100 Amazon gift card.

4. Academic Integrity Virtual Backgrounds

Academic integrity virtual backgrounds are created for students to use in their virtual classes to pledge their commitment to act with integrity.

5. *Academic Integrity Q&A for Students*

Students can ask questions regarding academic integrity and fairness with experts and a Q&A townhall with their student leaders regarding the appeals and integrity policies and processes.

Conestoga's Academic Integrity Team administers a smaller scale awareness campaign related specifically to academic integrity and is currently developing a more comprehensive, college-wide awareness campaign to be rolled out in the future to educate students about the importance of academic integrity.

Outside of this initiative, Conestoga does not have any actively ongoing initiatives that seek to inform students about their right to appeal and provide a detailed resource for students to reference similar to other institutions.

AVAILABLE SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS

Outside of the awareness and educational resources colleges analyzed provide, additional supports are offered to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and resources required to pursue an academic appeal. The supports provided to students beginning or going through the appeals process at the colleges reviewed vary wildly.

Some colleges, like Niagara, seemingly have no direct support available to students outside official documents outlining the appeals process. Others, like Seneca, bring a whole institution approach to the appeals and integrity process, providing students academic or support advisors, running information weeks for students to attend, partnering with Student Associations to better meet students at the resources they may be more likely to access. Some of the best practices are highlighted below:

Advisory and Personal Supports

Student Success Advisors

Several colleges, including but not limited to Centennial, Fanshawe, Georgian and Sheridan, offer students access to Student Success Advisors, or some variation, semantic or vocational, of that role. In the case of most colleges, Student Success Advisors offer students advice about the academic appeals and integrity processes, providing information students may need to know as they move through the process, reminding them of key documentation and information they require for the process. Advisors are often permitted to be in the appeals hearing (the latter stages of the appeals process, though some colleges permit advisors to be a part of the process all the way through) as a support for students but are not permitted to advise during the hearing.

Professional Staff

Niagara College's NCSAC has taken the humanized support process another step, hiring a professional staff member whose portfolio includes academic integrity and grade appeals.

This professional staff member will walk students through the process of appealing their grades, the forms they need to fill out, and answer any questions they might have.

Peer-to-Peer Support

Some SA's have taken an active and participatory role in the integrity and appeals processes, creating student advisory positions or having Board members available to students. For many college SA's, including CSI (Conestoga) and SAGBC (George Brown) and others, members of their Board of Directors, Student council etc., are available as peer resources to students going through the academic grade appeals or integrity appeals processes. These students act as silent advocates in meetings and note-takers, and provide broad guidance on the appeals process to students.

For Centennial's CCSAI, this has translated into the creation of their Student Advocates program. This peer-to-peer support program sees CCSAI hire students to be trained on the various academic processes and procedures within the College to then help guide students on how to navigate these processes when required.²⁰ The student advocates also offer student education on plagiarism, academic penalties, the services provided by CCSAI, and how to access support or advocacy for students' individual needs. These advocates will attend meetings with students throughout the appeals process and participate as silent third-party note-takers.

Webpages, Collected Resources, FAQ's

Several SA's have created web pages and compiled resources and FAQs regarding academic integrity and appeals policies for students to easily access. Some SA's, like Sheridan Student Union, have created a dedicated webpage with information on appeals, links for students to contact a VP of their board of directors for assistance, a direct link to the college's student advisement office, key dates students need be aware, and a quick, interactive information tool to help students understand if they can and should file an academic appeal.²¹

Additionally, Mohawk Students Association provides an in-depth overview of what students can expect from the academic appeals process on their advocacy page, including estimated timelines, the levels of the appeals process, tips on how to fill out forms, and how to proceed through each step of the process.²² They also offer peer support throughout the process and highlight in their summaries of the process that students are entitled to peer support. MSA also promotes information about the academic appeals process across their socials, including Facebook and Twitter. MSA has published an "Everything You Need to Know About Academic Appeals" article for students.

²⁰ 'Advocacy | CCSAI', accessed 11 February 2022, <https://ccsai.ca/services/advocacy/>.

²¹ 'Appeals Assistance', Sheridan Student Union, accessed 11 February 2022, <https://www.thessu.ca/appeals-assistance>.

²² 'How We Advocate For You | Mohawk Students' Association', accessed 11 February 2022, <https://www.mohawkstudents.ca/your-msa/advocacy/>.

Student Workshops, Modules & Clinics:

To actively²³ educate students regarding the ins and outs of the academic integrity policy and appeals processes, several institutions have created student workshops, modules, clinics and other participatory educational supports to engage students in these policies and processes.

- Centennial College has compiled several resources, including a grade appeal clinic available to students to participate in, held in conjunction with Centennial's SA at the end of each semester leading to the academic appeals deadline. These clinics offer information and coaching on:
 - The steps in the grade appeal process
 - The grounds for an appeal
 - How to talk to your instructor about your grade
 - Putting together an effective grade appeal package
 - Where to submit your grade appeal package
- Seneca College has taken this support a step further. As discussed previously, it has introduced a mobile app students can download to work through modules teaching them about academic appeals and integrity policies.
- Sheridan College has compiled several web tutorials for students to participate in, including online modules, YouTube short videos and more.

In comparison to the available options for support that other colleges have created and made available to students, Conestoga is providing a similar level of service to most. Although the level of services that Conestoga provides is on par with similar colleges, Conestoga has a very limited number of support initiatives and does not explicitly state what services and supports are available for students seeking academic appeal help anywhere.

²³ As opposed to passively educate through posted information on college webpages.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC APPEAL ENVIRONMENT AT CONESTOGA COLLEGE

Improving the academic appeal environment at Conestoga College benefits all stakeholders involved. Through the consideration and implementation of the following recommendations, Conestoga's academic appeal process and associated supports could be a leading model for other colleges in Ontario to ensure fairness for students and uphold their right to appeal. The following three themes categorize the 17 recommendations:

1. Awareness of the Process
2. Accountability and Clarity of the Process
3. Improved Appeal Supports

DISCLAIMER: The following suggested recommendations are for the consideration of CSI's Executive Team and/or Board of Directors. These recommendations are not guaranteed to be adopted and/or implemented by CSI. An individual or collective action plan (such as CSI's Strategic Plan) will be created and published in the future which may or may not include these suggested recommendations.

AWARENESS OF THE PROCESS

To improve the overall awareness of Conestoga College's academic appeal process on a proactive and ongoing basis, CSI recommends:

1. Conestoga 101 should include a short module informing students about their right to appeal academic decisions outlined by the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure, finding more information, and where support can be received.
2. When an academic decision other than a grade is issued to a student covered by the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure, the student should be provided information on how to appeal the decision.
3. The "Grades" section of each course on eConestoga should include information about the student's right to appeal a grade received that meets the minimum grade value requirement.
4. An academic appeals-specific web page is created and hosted in a highly accessible and searchable area of Conestoga College's website that provides an overview of the policy and procedure and the support available if assistance is required.
5. Develop a comprehensive ongoing communication strategy to inform students of their right to appeal academic decisions through official Conestoga communication channels (email, social media, eConestoga, etc.). This strategy should consider the most common times of year for issuance of academic decisions to ensure communication is targeted during the academic year when academic decisions are most likely to be issued (i.e. mid-terms and semester-end).
6. Program Handbooks across all program areas should include consistent and accurate information regarding the appeals process through a standardized description.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND CLARITY OF THE PROCESS

To ensure accountability for the process and provide clarity regarding the procedure, CSI recommends:

7. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to redefine the informal and formal stages. An appeal that reaches Step 2 should be considered part of the “Formal Appeal Process” and be accountable to the Registrar’s Office.
8. After the informal faculty step, all stages should be facilitated through the Registrar’s Office through an online submission portal that outlines the required information students must submit, timelines to follow, and directs communications to the appropriate person depending on the stage.
9. The Registrar’s Office should ensure academic appeals and the specific type of appeals are tracked and recorded in a central database to determine usage trends and associated reasoning.
10. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to include specific criteria that students can use as a basis for filing and/or escalating an appeal to ensure a consistent application of the process applied across academic schools. This recommendation has been previously suggested by the Student Rights and Responsibilities Office due to program areas or schools applying their own criteria to determine what is or isn’t valid to move through the dispute process, and in some cases, incorrectly issuing decisions about validity.
11. The Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure should be amended to include specific resolutions available for each appeal type to ensure consistent resolutions are applied across academic schools. Students are currently unaware of what potential resolutions are available.
12. Resources should be created that assist students as supplementary material to the Academic Dispute Resolution and Appeal Policy and Procedure that outline the necessary actions taken during each step, including workflows, templates, etc.
13. Lower the minimum grade value required to appeal an assessment from 25% to 10%.
14. Shortening the timeline of the current “formal stage” (Step 4) from 35 working days to 20 working days or less to be more consistent with similar colleges and reduce the impact of an appeal on a student’s semester.
15. Clear roles and responsibilities should be outlined for appeal stakeholders to determine the scope of their involvement, power, and assistance in the process, including CSI and external advisors.

IMPROVED APPEAL SUPPORTS

To limit the mental health concerns associated with an academic appeal and ensure students are supported during their appeal process, CSI recommends:

16. A stakeholder in the appeal process should develop and introduce personal support services that are specifically trained and equipped to guide students in the academic appeal process and not limit their ability to file an appeal.

17. A stakeholder in the appeal process should develop and introduce academic appeal workshops to explain the process, types of appeals available, and supports available.



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Conestoga Students Incorporated's Advocacy team would like to thank various Conestoga College stakeholders for their participation in interviews and discussions regarding the academic appeal process. These stakeholders include Student Rights and Responsibilities, the Academic Integrity Team, the Registrar's Office, and Associate Vice President of Student Affairs.

We also would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the students who completed the 2021 CSI Year-End Survey and the students who shared their personal experiences with us regarding the academic appeal process.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ACADEMIC APPEAL INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW PURPOSE

The academic appeal interviews aimed to provide additional context to the questions asked during the 2021 CSI Year-End Survey and further insight into the process to provide recommendations for improving awareness of the process, the procedure of the process, and ensuring fairness in the process.

METHODOLOGY

All interviews were virtually hosted through Zoom and were made available to students enrolled at each campus who indicated they had experience participating in the academic appeal process and provided permission to be contacted about their experience.

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview process to allow for deviations and a more in-depth understanding of individual scenarios and ensure consistency for the high-level questions that would inform recommendations.

The goal was to have a minimum of 10 students and a maximum of 15 students participate in interviews. A total of 20 interview time slots were made available through an online scheduling software. More time slots were made available than desired to compensate for cancellations and no-shows. A total of 20 appointments were booked, but only 7 students attended their interview and were eligible to participate.

Recruitment of participants took place through direct email that contained a web link for the scheduling software. All direct emails were sent only to student members who provided consent in the 2021 CSI Year-End Survey to be contacted for follow-up regarding their experience. A total of 106 student members consented to a follow-up. Participants were also offered a \$50 gift card of their choice as compensation for their participation in the interviews.

Interviews took place between Monday, January 24 and Friday, January 28, and on Wednesday, February 2, at various times that align with representatives from the Advocacy Team and Associate Vice Presidents. Each interview had a total of 2 representatives from CSI; one full-time

All participants were informed and signed a digital consent form indicating they were voluntarily participating, could cease participation at any time, and their responses would be used in CSI's reports, but their personal information would be kept confidential.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To gain further insight into improving awareness of the process and the procedure of the process, the following predetermined questions were provided for interviewers to facilitate the session:

1. Please introduce yourself with your name and program of study.
2. Tell us what led to you filing an academic appeal?
3. In your experience with the academic appeal process, how far into the process did you go before either reaching a satisfactory decision or abandoning your appeal? (step 1, 2, 3, or 4?)
4. In your experience with the academic appeal process, were you satisfied with the result, and why?
5. How did you learn/know about the academic appeal process?
6. Did you find the academic appeal process easy to follow and understand? What made it easy or not easy to follow and understand?
7. Do you feel your academic appeal was resolved in a timely manner?
8. What resources/supports did you use to learn about, submit, or follow the academic appeal process?
9. What resources/supports do you wish were available to you to support you in learning about, filing, or completing the academic appeal process?
10. Is there any other feedback, comments, or ideas you would like to share with us about either your experience with an academic appeal or how the process could be changed?

Interviewers were also provided probing/follow-up questions for specific scenarios they may have encountered to assist with discussion or improve/continue the flow of conversation.

APPENDIX B: COLLEGE COMPARATOR RESEARCH

Double Click the Below Image to Access the Excel File.

A screenshot of a large Excel spreadsheet with multiple columns and rows, likely containing college comparison data. The spreadsheet is mostly white with blue headers and footers. The content is too small to read but appears to be a detailed data table.