

Columbia University School of Social Work Student Grievance Procedures

Columbia School of Social Work believes that students, administrators and faculty have the right to express their views freely, within an atmosphere of tolerance and civility, and in an environment that is open to divergent views. Faculty and administrators must also, of course, treat students with civility and respect.

The following procedures specify how student complaints about faculty behaviors or language in the classroom, within the School, or at School-related events are to be addressed. The behaviors of concern are those that may appear to go beyond established bounds of academic decorum and that may appear to threaten or dismiss either an individual or a collective group or undermine basic understandings and recognized standards of conduct within our community.

I. Mediation

A. Students are strongly encouraged to seek resolution to their complaints by talking directly with their professors. In general, the School seeks to resolve issues in a timely manner and on an informal basis. Students reluctant to communicate a complaint directly because of a reasonable fear of reprisal have the following alternative avenues:

1. Students who believe that a faculty member has engaged in improper behavior in an instructional setting, as defined in section II C of this statement, may report the incident to the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Doctoral Students may **also** report an incident to the Chair of the Doctoral Program.
2. For concerns about a field instructor or field education issues, the student may speak first to the Associate Director of Field Education with whom she or he planned her or his field placement. If the student does not feel that the complaint has been adequately addressed, she or he may present the issue to the Assistant Dean for Field Education. The Associate Dean for Academic Affairs is another possible resource for the pursuit of a resolution, if neither the Associate Director nor the Assistant Dean for Field Education has been able to bring the matter to resolution with the student.
3. Matters related to general student life at the School of Social Work that nonetheless relate to a particular member of the faculty may be taken to the Senior Assistant Dean for Enrollment and Student Services who will work with the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs to resolve the matter.

B. After meeting with the student and gathering pertinent information about the complaint, the administrator will then seek to resolve the issue through a discussion with the

faculty member involved. With all these options, the strictest confidence is to be maintained at all times, among both students and concerned faculty and among intermediaries such as student representatives, faculty mentors, or members of the administrative team.

C. Students may also take their problems to the University's Ombuds Officer, who serves as an informal, confidential resource for assisting members of the University with conflict resolution. The Ombuds Officer provides information, counseling and referrals to appropriate University offices. The Officer will also mediate conflicts if both parties are agreeable. The Officer does not have the authority to adjudicate disputes and does not participate in any formal University grievance proceedings. **Further information on the Ombuds Office may be found at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ombuds/>.**

II. Formal Procedures

- A. Students are encouraged, but not required to seek an informal resolution to their complaints. They may elect, instead, to file a formal grievance. They may also file a formal grievance if informal mediation fails.
- B. If the faculty member holds an appointment in the School of Social Work, students may use the procedures described herein to address the issues listed below. If the faculty member belongs to another school, its procedures are applicable. Students may, however, ask for help from officials of the School in identifying and understanding relevant procedures.
- C. Issues that may be grieved under these procedures include:
 - 1. Alleged failure to show appropriate respect in an instructional setting for the rights of others to hold opinions differing from their own;
 - 2. Alleged misuse of faculty authority in an instructional setting to pressure students to support a political or social cause; and
 - 3. Any other conduct in the classroom or another instructional setting that adversely affects the learning environment when that conduct displays an intolerance for different views or a lack of civility.

D. These procedures may not be substituted for extant grievance procedures that address disputes over grades, academic dishonesty, or behavioral concerns as they relate to student conduct. Students should also use alternative procedures in the following situations:

- 1. If the alleged misconduct involves discrimination and sexual harassment, a student should file a complaint with the Associate Provost for Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action. The procedures for handling such complaints are described in the statement, *Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Policy and Procedure*, which is on the web at www.columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/eoaa/docs/discrim_sexharass.html.

2. Complaints against the School's faculty that allege scientific or scholarly misconduct are also evaluated using other procedures. These are contained in the statement, *Guidelines for Review of Misconduct in Science for The Columbia University's Health Sciences*, which is available at www.cumc.columbia.edu/research/priv/miscond/.

E. Any student currently enrolled in the University and directly affected by the behavior of a faculty member of the School may file a formal grievance under the procedures in this statement.

F. A student initiates the formal grievance procedure by submitting a written statement to the Dean documenting the grievance. The request must be submitted no later than 30 days after the end of the semester within which the misconduct was supposed to have occurred.

G. The Dean serves as the final resource for complaints within the School if all other avenues fail or if a student believes that his or her concern cannot be pursued via any other avenue. The Dean may seek the advice of appropriate faculty, generally relying first, unless otherwise appropriate, upon the Committee of Academic Appointments for their counsel.

H. The Dean will review the complaint to determine if there are sufficient grounds to proceed or if the issues raised by the student can be resolved in another manner. If the Dean determines that a formal investigation is warranted, he or she will appoint an *ad hoc* committee to operate as a fact-finding body and report back on whether the complaint is justified.

I. The Dean will appoint three members to serve on the *ad hoc* committee. The composition of such a committee cannot be determined before the event. The Dean may seek the advice of appropriate faculty in determining the composition of the committee and for their expertise related to the issues raised. The membership will normally consist of faculty members, and, at the discretion of the Dean, could include a student and/or senior administrator.

J. The faculty member is given the student's letter of complaint and invited to provide the *ad hoc* committee with a written response. The committee reviews both statements and is provided access to any other written documents relevant to the complaint. It will normally interview both the grievant and the faculty member and may, at its discretion, ask others to provide testimony.

K. The Committee ordinarily convenes within 10 working days of being appointed by the Dean and ordinarily completes its investigation and sends the Dean its written report within 30 working days of convening. When appropriate, the committee may also recommend remedies to the student's complaint and disciplinary action against the faculty member. Such remedies may include an agreement to terminate the specific behavior, a letter to the personnel file, or withdrawal of the complaint.

L. The investigative committee serves in an advisory capacity to the Dean of the School. The Dean may accept or reject in whole or part its findings and recommendations.

M. The Dean normally issues his or her decision within 30 working days of receiving the committee's report. The Dean will inform both the student and the faculty member in writing of the decision rendered. The faculty member and the student will also have access to the committee's report.

N. The Dean may discipline faculty members who are found to have committed professional misconduct. Any sanctions will be imposed in a manner that is consistent with the University's policies and procedures on faculty discipline. In particular, if the Dean believes that the offense is sufficiently serious to merit dismissal, he or she will initiate the procedures in Section 75 of the University Statutes for terminating tenured appointments, and non-tenured appointments before the end of their stated term, for cause.

O. The lodging of a complaint is not in itself evidence of guilty behavior. A complaint shall not be taken into account during re-appointment, tenure, promotion, merit, or other evaluation or review unless and until the grievance process is completed, including any appeals, and unless the faculty member is found to have committed the offense charged.

III. Appeal

A. Either the student or the faculty member may appeal the decision of the Dean to the Provost. Findings of fact, remedies granted the student and penalties imposed on the faculty member are all subject to appeal. A written appeal must be submitted to the Provost within 15 working days of the date of the letter informing them of the Dean's decision.

B. Normally, the Provost will take no longer than 30 working days to evaluate an appeal. The Provost usually confine his or her review to the written record but reserves the right to collect information in any manner that will help to make his or her decision on the appeal.

C. The Provost will inform both the student and the faculty member of his or her decision in writing. If the Provost decides that the faculty member should be dismissed for cause, the case is subject to further review according to the procedures in Section 75 of the University Statutes, as noted above. Otherwise, the decision of the Provost is final and not subject to further appeal.

IV. Confidentiality

All aspects of investigations of a student grievance are confidential. The proceedings of the grievance committee are not open to the public. Only the student grievant and the faculty member accused of misconduct receive copies of the decisions of the Dean and the Provost. All participants in the grievance process, including the complainant and the faculty member, witnesses, mediators, members of the administrative team, and members of the ad hoc grievance committee, shall respect the confidentiality of the proceeding. Participants are authorized to discuss the case only with those persons who have a genuine need to know.

A full description of faculty obligations and rights may be found in the *Faculty Handbook* at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/fhb/main.html>.