

Process for Student Complaints

Overview

In the spirit of the community of mutual respect and understanding that undergirds education in the Department of English, we're hoping to articulate a clear process by which we, as a department, handle student complaint issues. The effort is to create a process that protects both student and faculty, is transparent and fair, and whose fundamental ethic is to care for and support both parties as the issue is resolved. These processes will address the majority of complaints, although there will be exceptions. This document focuses on complaints made during the semester. A grade appeal occurs after the end of a semester and that process is explained in the department code. The nature of complaints is various, and we are outlining three organizational processes by which complaints will be handled, each with the ultimate hope that the problem—through conversation and consideration—will reach a positive outcome for all parties involved.

Advice to Faculty: Reduce or Eliminate the Most Likely Reasons for Complaints

- Make class policies (attendance, grading, etc.) simple and sensible on your syllabus; refer back to syllabus when possible/appropriate.
- Be approachable: a friendly air helps in disarming conflict.
- Don't make the issue personal: treating the conflict in a neutral, reasonable manner can undo the emotional turmoil the student may be feeling.
- Apologize if an apology is due: owning up to a mistake can put the problem behind quickly.
- If the student isn't able to consider the issues reasonably and calmly, turn to other resources in Department, College, University (see resources below).
- Maintain appropriate decorum in classroom: don't let the problem affect the class entire.
- Be cautious in using email to communicate with students or colleagues about complaint issues; at a public institution, email messages are public record. All the advice for person-to-person meetings applies equally to written communication: friendly, direct, non-personal approaches have the best likelihood of successful resolution.

Process for Addressing Student Complaints

Students should speak with the designated faculty member to resolve a conflict in their classroom or with their instructor. Complaints arising from composition courses should be directed to the Director of Composition or Associate Director of Composition. Complaints about English courses should be directed to an Assistant Chair (currently Dan). In all communications with students, these faculty use the following guiding principles.

Guiding Principles

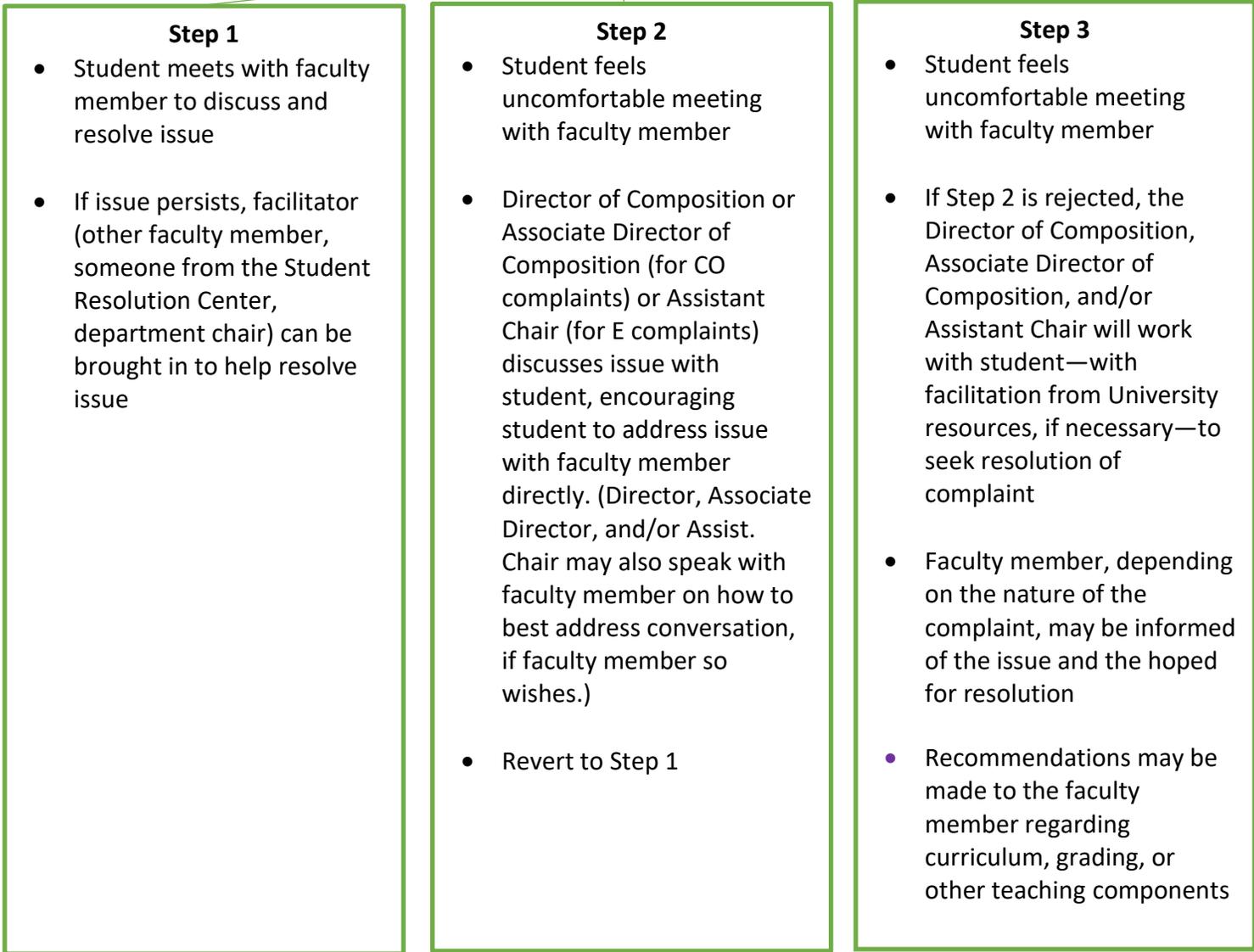
- To encourage direct communication between the student and the instructor.
- To offer support and guidance to both faculty and student in holding difficult conversations.

- To work to resolve complaints on behalf of faculty.
- To seek transparency, with the understanding that different complaints require different sensitivities of approach.

Complaint Process

There are three possible processes for solving students' complaints. We always encourage students to start with Step 1, but they may select Step 2 or Step 3.

**What Happens When a Student Makes a Complaint:
Three Different Steps in the Process**



Student's Process When Meeting with the Director of Composition, Associate Director of Composition, and/or Assistant Chair

If the student wishes to speak with the Director of Composition, Associate Director of Composition, and/or Assistant Chair in order to resolve a conflict in their classroom or with their instructor, this heuristic is used when meeting with students to gather the context of the situation, learn more about the student, and encourage the student to develop their ability to advocate for themselves. Ultimately, the goal for meeting with students is to encourage them to use their agency to do their best work and to learn to advocate for themselves.

- Tell me about you, your major, what you're interested in, and whether writing matters to you or will help you with your major or career
- Tell me about the problem(s) you're experiencing.
- We strongly encourage students to meet with their instructor if there's a problem. In most cases, things can be worked out at that level. Plus it's an important skill for students to develop—respectful self-advocacy and agency. Have you met with your instructor face to face to discuss your concerns? If not, why not? If so, what did you learn from the conversation?
- What are some things that you appreciate about your instructor's class? Teachers are like most people—they respond better to constructive feedback that occurs after a strong sense of appreciation has been established for what's going well.
- What are some things you have tried yourself to improve the class dynamic? (For instance, if there are individuals or groups in the room who seem to be problematic, have you distanced yourself from them so that you're part of the solution? Are you showing engagement in the class?)
- What are some specific things that you think your teacher could do to address the concerns you have about the class? Would you be able to discuss these with your teacher? Can I help you rehearse that conversation?
- What role do you hope I can play on your behalf or on behalf of your class?

Involvement of the Department Chair

The department chair may become involved in any part of the process at faculty request. Complaints sometimes come directly to the department chair. After listening to the initial complainant (student, parent, concerned adult, other), the chair assesses the situation and may use the heuristic for conversation with the student. If the student is willing to be identified, Step 1 or 2 above may be appropriate. If the student fears retaliation, the chair follows Step 3. Faculty may be apprised of the complaint after grades are submitted if there is a pattern of concerns. Depending on the concerns, the chair and faculty member will discuss ways to understand and address them. If the complaint is isolated, the chair may not share it with the faculty member or act on it. The chair adheres to the guiding principles of this document.

University Policy

The CSU policy for student complaints can be found [here](#).