

COMPLAINT HANDLING GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to assist in the handling of student complaints not elsewhere addressed by other UM policies and procedures. For help deciding whether or not a student complaint can be resolved by existing policy/procedure:

- Review the student-related policies online: [Governing Documents: Students](#)
- Contact [Student Advocacy](#).

This document is a guideline only, and is intended to help decision-makers (academic administrators and faculty) be consistent and fair, and address complaints in a timely manner.

Understanding Fairness

To decide which mechanism/support/service is the best option for a given student, it is helpful to understand how fairness works at the U of M. Whichever administrative staff makes a decision or hears a complaint, complete fairness requires **substantive fairness, procedural fairness**, and **relational fairness**. For detailed information about fairness and how to maintain it, view the [Understanding Fairness document online](#).

Bringing Forward a Complaint: Expectations of Students

1. A complainant should first try to address their issue with the person directly involved (e.g.: professor in a course; graduate supervisor).
2. If the complaint is not resolved at the interpersonal level as above, the next step is to address the matter with the head of the respective Department.
3. If a complaint is still not resolved as above, it can be brought before the Dean or Director (or designate) of the respective Faculty/College/School or Administrative Unit.

NOTE: these levels will differ for undergraduate and graduate students. Please refer to the attached [flow chart](#) for further information

Sometimes a student may need help or advice with how to proceed. A student complainant can seek such help before starting the process, or at any time during the process. Campus offices that can help include:

- [Student Advocacy](#)
- [Office of Human Rights and Conflict Management](#)
- [UM Graduate Students' Association](#) or [Health Sciences Graduate Students' Association](#)
- [UM Student Union](#)
- [Student Counselling Centre](#)

Roles of the Administrator Responding to a Complaint

Administrative officers (administrators) at the UM have the authority to hear, and make decisions about, student matters. Examples of administrators include: Department Heads, Deans and Associate Deans, Directors, course coordinators, and graduate program committee chairs.

When receiving and responding to a complaint, an administrator has the following responsibilities:

- To **provide information** on complaint resolution policies and procedures;
- To **consider the rights and interests** of both the complainant, and the respondent in an unbiased manner;
- To **facilitate a resolution** of the complaint through informal resolution by:
 - Providing advice to the complainant about what kinds of outcomes can be expected;
 - Advising the respondent that a complaint has been received, explain the process to be followed in addressing the complaint.
 - Discussing the complaint with both the complainant and the respondent individually
 - Referring complainants and respondents to campus resources.
- To **investigate** a complaint where it is deemed appropriate.

Process for Responding to Student Complaints

In general, an administrator should undertake the following tasks as part of their complaint-resolution activities:

- A. **Meet individually with the parties (complainant and respondent).**
- B. **Investigate the issues.**
- C. **Decide on the outcome.**

At any time (at the outset or during the process), the administrator should feel free to access advice/support from on-campus resources including:

- [Office of Fair Practices and Legal Affairs](#);
- Supervisors (Deans and Directors in most cases);
- [Student Advocacy](#);
- [Office of Human Rights and Conflict Management](#)

MEETING WITH THE PARTIES

- **Meeting with a student complainant.**
 - Offer the student an opportunity to bring an advocate from the Student Advocacy office, a representative from the University of Manitoba Students' Union, a representative from the Graduate Students'

- o Association, family member or a friend.
 - o Listen to the student's concerns.
 - o Keep a written record of the meeting. Discuss how confidentiality will be handled regarding the notes.
 - o Ask if the student has previously discussed their concerns with the respondent.
 - o Clarify the outcome the student is seeking.
 - o Help the student review their options for proceeding.
 - Student can meet with the respondent (again, or for the first time) to try to resolve the issue.
 - The administrator can meet with the respondent to discuss the matter. This can be done without revealing the identity of the student if confidentiality is a concern.
 - The administrator can arrange a meeting with both complainant and respondent in the presence of a mediator to resolve the dispute. The administrator can act as a mediator, or seek support from the Office of Human Rights and Conflict Management.
 - The administrator can take no action, and allow the student to review their options before proceeding further.
 - Advise the student about other options not involving a complaint.
 - Refer the student to any relevant supports/services, and policies/procedures.
- **Meeting with a faculty or staff member respondent.**
 - o Inform the respondent of the complaint.
 - o Offer the option for them to bring a representative to the meeting.
 - o Keep a written record of the meeting. Discuss how confidentiality will be handled regarding the notes.
 - o Explain, in detail, the complaint brought forward by the student.
 - o Ask for and listen to the respondent's perspective on the matter.
 - o Explain the choices that were presented to the complainant, and the outcome they are seeking.
 - o Invite the respondent to offer their perspective on a resolution.
 - o Discuss the next steps with the respondent.
 - o Refer the respondent to any relevant supports/services, and policies/procedures.

INVESTIGATING THE ISSUES

1. Keep a record of your activities in resolving the complaint. Be specific about names, dates and other information.
2. Determine if the complaint merits further action, and if so, what type (formal or informal).
3. Interview any witnesses connected with the complaint. Remind them of your confidentiality procedures.

4. Determine whether or not you will conclude the investigation and prepare an outcome, or if a more formal investigation needs to be undertaken. In the case of a more formal investigation, refer the matter to a senior administrator or your supervisor to continue the investigation and/or make a decision.

If you are responsible for conducting a formal investigation of a complaint that has been referred to you:

- Inform the parties in writing that a formal investigation is underway. Include mention of the matter under review, the relevant policies, and available resources. Use [Template A](#)
- Be mindful of confidentiality ([FIPPA](#), [PHIA](#) etc.).
- Meet with complainant and respondent, and allow both to provide written response.
- Review the procedures undertaken with any previous administrator who dealt with the matter.

DECIDING ON AND COMMUNICATING AN OUTCOME

A complaint resolution process may conclude in a variety of ways:

1. The authority hearing and/or responding to the complaint should keep a record of the encounter, any action taken, and whether it was resolved formally or informally.
2. In cases of formal resolution:
 - a. The parties involved should each receive a formal letter from the authority who heard/responded to the complaint. Use [Template B](#)
 - b. Keep a record of the outcome.
3. Consider implementing wider initiatives with the goal of prevention of similar complaints in the future. Examples include staff education, revisiting policies/procedures etc.