

Strategies for Dealing with Academic Incivility: A Guide for Department and Program Chairs

Overview

Academic incivility creates detrimental outcomes in classrooms, labs, and departments. Chairs and other departmental leaders have an opportunity and a responsibility to both prevent and respond to complaints from students and other members of the U of M community. This guide is principally designed to offer informal strategies to address complaints from students regarding behavior of a faculty member. It is adaptable, however, when there is concern about the behavior of a student or staff member. Various on-campus resources to assist departmental leadership are provided at the end of this document.



Resources

Office for Conflict Resolution

www.ocr.umn.edu
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall
Contact: Tamar Gronvall

Center for Educational Innovation

www.cei.umn.edu
612.625.3041
University Office Plaza, Suite 400

Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

*A resource of the Dignity Project
Workgroup, 2019.*

General Principles

- Do not ignore harassing and bullying behavior. Such behavior has serious negative effects on performance and productivity, and contributes to high attrition of graduate students.
- Understand that while holding a position of leadership in a department, you cannot serve as a neutral party.
- Remember there are (at least) two sides to every story; try to refrain from making a judgment until you have received information from a variety of sources.
- Access campus resources to help guide decision-making.
- Do not promise things you cannot deliver; recognize limits of confidentiality.
- Maintain communication with the parties to monitor the problem, prevent unwelcome surprises, and support positive change in the situation.

First Steps

- Meet with the student in person and listen carefully to their concerns.
- Ask the student questions in order to fully understand the scope of the problem and its effect on the learning environment.
- Determine if the student has met with the faculty member. Remember the student may be in a precarious position and may feel unsafe meeting with the faculty member alone.
- Advise the student of campus resources that can assist them with their concern
- Design next steps for consultation with others to gather more information; get input from the student and share your plans.

- Remember confidentiality guidelines when discussing the situation with others.

Consultation/Information Gathering

- Consider at what point you inform the faculty member and provide an opportunity for him or her to respond; inform the student before contacting.
- Meet with appropriate individuals to gather information, generate options.
- Talk with on-campus resources to discuss options.
- Meet again with the student to integrate new information and design an action plan.

Possible Action Steps for Chairs

Coach Student to Write to or Meet with Faculty Member

- Assist the student in determining appropriate methods and tone of communication; recognize the limits of email.
- Assist the student in setting realistic goals and objectives.
- Coach the student to help reflect on how they may be contributing to the problem and how the student can modify their behavior.
- Offer to proofread any letter or message before it is sent.
- Recognize the purpose of the meeting is to help repair the relationship and set expectations.
- Before the meeting, help the student identify issues of concern and walk through the conversation to help the student gain confidence.
- Advise the student to politely and quickly leave the meeting if it becomes hostile.
- Offer to facilitate a meeting between the student and faculty member.



Meet with the Faculty Member

- If there has been an alleged violation of state or federal law, university policy, or behavior that threatens a student’s status, it may be more appropriate for the department chair to intervene directly with the faculty member after they have gathered the necessary information. Meet in person to inform about the concerns that have been reported and to ask for the faculty member’s perspective and ideas.

Coach the Faculty Member

- Coaching is designed to create shared expectations of performance based on the individual’s position and university expectations. This conversation can be made easier by approaching the person with compassion and respect; the goal is to engage them as a partner in the effort to improve the situation.

| Before the Meeting | During the Meeting | After the Meeting |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List specific examples of your concerns. • Identify resources on campus that can provide additional assistance to the faculty member. • Understand and be able to articulate your expectations going forward. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet in person; begin by stating the purpose of the meeting. • Share your concerns and all relevant information, including specific examples, if appropriate. • Listen to the concerns of the faculty member; ask questions. • Clarify expectations with regard to professional behavior, tie them to established university norms. • Explain your reasoning and intent. • Allow the faculty member the opportunity to respond and generate ideas for the plan. • Jointly design next steps. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure timely follow-through on plan steps. • Meet regularly with the faculty member in an effort to monitor progress and provide support. |
| <h3>Utilize a Neutral Third Party to Facilitate a Resolution</h3> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a referral to the appropriate office (see resources on front side). • Offer to assist the third party with necessary information and support. • Continue to serve as a resource to the parties to support positive change efforts. | | |