

# 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 UM 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.

### 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
- Remember that there are (at least) two sides to every story; try to refrain from making a judgment until you have gotten 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 that 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 ([http://www.sos.umn.edu/staffaculty/Graduate\\_Student\\_Advising\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.sos.umn.edu/staffaculty/Graduate_Student_Advising_Guide.pdf))
- 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 student to integrate new information and design an action plan

### **Possible Action Steps for Chairs**

#### Coach Student to Write to / 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 s/he may be contributing to the problem and how the student can modify his/her own behavior.
- Offer to proofread any letter or message before it is sent.
- Prior to a meeting, walk through the conversation to help the student gain confidence.
- Advise the student to politely and quickly leave the meeting if it becomes hostile.

#### Facilitate a Meeting Between Student and Faculty Member

- Before the meeting, help the student identify issues of concern.
- Recognize that the purpose of the meeting is to help repair the relationship and set expectations. Ideally, the parties will mutually agree upon action steps going forward.
- Understand that while holding a position of leadership in a department, you cannot serve as a neutral party.

#### 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 s/he has 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:

- 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.

#### During the Meeting:

- 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

#### After the Meeting:

- Ensure timely follow-through on plan steps
- Meet regularly with the faculty member in an effort to monitor progress and provide support

#### **Utilize a Third Party Neutral to Facilitate a Resolution**

- Provide a referral to the appropriate office (see resource below)
- 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

#### **On-Campus Resources**

Office for Conflict Resolution

[conflict.resolution@umn.edu](mailto:conflict.resolution@umn.edu)

<http://www1.umn.edu/ocr/>

624.1030

Assists with employment related conflicts among faculty and staff.

Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)

<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/>

625.3041

CTL enriches the professional growth of faculty, instructional staff, and teaching assistants through programs, services, and resources that promote significant learning experiences for students.

Student Conflict Resolution Center (SCRC)

[sos@umn.edu](mailto:sos@umn.edu)

[www.sos.umn.edu](http://www.sos.umn.edu)

626.0689

The SCRC ombudsman provides information and support for those involved in campus-based conflicts.