

Student Complaint Process

Whatcom Community College emphasizes the importance of direct, courteous, and respectful communication to resolve student concerns and complaints. Following is a brief summary of the process and related guidelines for submitting a student complaint against a faculty member. This process applies to student complaints about a faculty member at Whatcom Community College, based on the criteria described below.

Summary of Student Complaint Process

The following are acceptable reasons for filing a complaint:

- Grade dispute
- Inequitable treatment by a faculty member
- Faculty member does not follow established college policies or course syllabus
- Violation of student rights protected by Washington Administrative Code [WAC 132A-125-025](#)
- Violation of federal [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) provisions

This process does **not** apply to the following:

- Complaints based upon disciplinary proceedings
- Complaints about policies adopted by the College
- Complaints about a staff member (non-faculty personnel) at the College. For these complaints, contact the individual directly; if the complaint is not resolved, contact the staff member's supervisor or Human Resources
- Discrimination or harassment complaints – for all [Title IX](#) grievances, including sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination, contact the Human Resources office at HR@whatcom.edu, 360-383-3400
- Complaints regarding dismissals from selective entry programs – refer to the program handbook or contact the Office of Instruction

The following issues are **not** actionable reasons for filing a complaint, and complaints based on these issues will not be processed through a formal complaint process. Students are encouraged to discuss any of these concerns directly with the faculty member:

- Instructor's grading methodology – Faculty have the freedom to determine grades based on their own criteria and specified distribution. WCC does not have a standardized grading scale for awarding A's, B's, C's, etc., or plus and minus grades, although some academic departments or programs have standardized criteria.
- The selection of instructional techniques, i.e., lecture, group work, class presentations, discussions, etc.
- The selection of instruction material, as long as the material relates to the course outcomes pursuant to Academic Freedom rights, as set forth in Article XI, Section A of the faculty negotiated *Agreement*. Students also have academic freedom rights protected under the students' rights and responsibilities section of the state Washington Administrative Code [WAC 132U-125](#).
- Complaints based upon classroom conduct not covered by Washington Administrative Code [WAC 132U-125-015](#).

No formal complaint can be made for an event that occurred more than 90 calendar days (55 instructional days) earlier, excluding summer quarter.¹ The formal complaint process must be adhered to in order for the complaint

¹ This equates to a maximum of 3 months after the event occurred. If this time period elapses between the last day of spring quarter and the first day of fall quarter, the last day the complaint may be filed is the last day of the first week of fall quarter.

to move forward in the review process. Faculty and staff will act in accordance with institutional policies throughout the process. Students will act in accordance with the [student code of conduct](#).

Step One – Informal Resolution

A student who believes a Whatcom Community College faculty member has treated them inequitably shall first discuss their concerns directly with that person. The student should schedule an appointment to meet with the individual. The purpose of this meeting should be to clarify the perceived problem and request specific action. Faculty may not retaliate against a student for raising a concern with that faculty member.

If the student has talked to the faculty member without resolution, or feels apprehensive about talking with that instructor, the student may schedule an appointment with the department chair. For students in professional-technical (P-T) programs, the student may wish to meet with the program coordinator for that particular P-T program. The student should be prepared to clearly articulate the complaint and desired resolution. The student should also be prepared to describe why the complaint was not resolved at the meeting with the faculty member. (If the complaint is against the department chair, the student may contact the division chair; if the complaint is against the division chair, the student may contact another division chair. See lists at right for department & division chairs, and program coordinators.)

The department chair will notify the faculty member about the concern and act as a facilitator for problem solving, which may involve a joint meeting or separate meetings with the student and the faculty member. **Most misunderstandings can be resolved at this level.**

Step Two – Formal Complaint

A student who is not satisfied with the proposed resolution of the complaint by the department chair and wishes to seek an alternate outcome may submit a **formal complaint**. The formal complaint is submitted using the [Formal Student Complaint Form](#). The formal complaint must be submitted within 90 calendar days (55 instructional days, excluding summer quarter ²) following the incident that occasioned the complaint, or after attempted mediation, and must include the following information:

- Student name and contact information
- Preferred mode of contact: email or US mail (all communication will be through this mode of contact)
- [Nature of the complaint](#)
- Instructor name, class, section, quarter
- Date of event(s)
- Description of the specific nature of the complaint, including the events and why the student believes they were treated unfairly. Attach any supporting documentation related to the situation, including dates and times. In a grade dispute, the student should submit specific information on performance scores, attendance, and any syllabus or written material on course grading criteria the instructor has provided to the student.
- Description of the actions taken by the student to resolve the complaint up to that point
- Description of resolutions that have been proposed up to this point by the student, faculty member, and department chair, and an explanation of why a formal complaint is being pursued. Include the names of all people contacted about this complaint.
- Supporting documentation

² Note: if this occurs over a quarter break or during summer quarter, the deadline may be extended. If this is the case, the student and faculty member will be informed of the actual deadline date.

- Proposed solution

Student will submit the complaint via the online [Formal Student Complaint Form](#).

Within three (3) instructional days of submitting the complaint, the student will be notified that the complaint has been forwarded to the appropriate division chair. If that division chair is not available, or has recused him- or herself, the complaint will be forwarded to another division chair. The division chair will forward the formal complaint to the faculty member, notifying them that they have ten (10) instructional days to respond. The division chair will then notify the student that the complaint was received by the faculty member and let the student know the date by which the faculty member must respond. The faculty member will provide a response in writing addressing the student's concerns and proposing a resolution. This response will be submitted to the division chair.

The division chair shall forward the faculty member's response to the student. The student is informed that they now have three options:

Option 1: The student accepts the written proposed resolution by the faculty member.

Option 2: The student clarifies any points resulting from the letter and requests a decision by the division chair.

Option 3: The student adds no further documentation and requests a decision by the division chair.

For all options, the student is informed that they have ten (10) instructional days (a specific date will be provided) to respond to the division chair. If the student does not respond within ten instructional days, the complaint is considered to be closed, and the faculty member's proposed resolution stands.

If the student chooses option 2 and submits clarifications, the division chair will share those clarifications with the faculty member, who then has ten (10) instructional days to respond to the division chair.

Following the student's request for a decision and, if necessary, the faculty member's final response to the student's clarifying points, the division chair has seven (7) instructional days to reach a decision and notify the student and the faculty member of the decision. In reaching that decision, the division chair may ask for clarifying documentation or to meet with the faculty member or student. Upon completing a written decision, the division chair will notify the student and faculty member that the student and faculty member have the right to appeal the division chair's decision, and will describe the process for doing so.

Appeal Process

In the case of a student complaint against a faculty member, if either party believes the division chair's decision is unfair or that the complaint process has not been followed, then either party may request a hearing by the **Academic Appeal Committee**.

1. The student or faculty member files a written appeal with the vice president for instruction. The appeal must be submitted within ten (10) instructional days of the postmark date on the mailed written decision or the date of the decision email. The appeal should address the following:
 - a. Summarize the attempts to resolve the complaint through both the informal and formal complaint processes. Include names of all employees who were contacted in an attempt to resolve the complaint.
 - b. Why does the student/faculty member believe the decision is unfair?

2. An academic appeals committee is formed consisting of students, faculty, and administration. The vice president appoints an administrative representative, the faculty union appoints two faculty, and student government appoints two students.
3. The chair of the appeals committee contacts all the individuals involved with this complaint to submit documentation of the proceedings up to that point. Documentation should include all materials submitted by the student in the formal complaint process, all materials submitted by the faculty member, and all materials submitted by the division chair. The committee chair may request additional documentation if needed.
4. The committee will schedule hearings with the student and with the faculty member within twenty (20) instructional days of receiving the appeal. Each hearing shall not exceed a 45-minute time limit for each party to state their case and respond to any questions from the committee members.
5. As a result of the hearings and the review of the documentation, the committee will issue a recommendation to the vice president for instruction within seven (7) instructional days of the second hearing. The committee may find in favor of the instructor's proposed solution, the student's proposed solution, the division chair's solution, or may recommend a new solution or action.
6. The vice president reviews the recommendation and writes a final decision within seven (7) instructional days of receiving the committee's recommendation. This written decision will be sent to the student and the faculty member. The vice president's decision is final.