Administrative Policy Governing Student Academic Complaints

No. 6125

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Affected Parties:
Undergraduate
Graduate
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1.0 Purpose
2.0 Policy
3.0 Procedures
4.0 Definitions
5.0 References
6.0 Approval and Revisions

1.0 Purpose

To establish a procedure for all students to file a written complaint related to an academic decision.

2.0 Policy

Virginia Tech seeks to create a productive learning environment for all students, one in which academic policies and procedures are applied in a fair and consistent manner. Our Statement of Principles of Ethical Behavior calls for faculty and administrators to "foster honest academic conduct and to assure that our evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit." Thus, when an undergraduate, graduate, or professional student believes he/she has suffered negative consequences due to an unfair or capricious decision related to academic policy, the student should be empowered to raise concerns and to seek appropriate resolution.

A student who believes an academic decision violates university academic policies and procedures may file a complaint with the appropriate department or unit head. Academic decisions do not include decisions regarding admission to the university, scholarship or financial aid awards, Undergraduate Honor System, Graduate Honor System, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Honor Code, Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine Honor Code, or Office of Student Conduct decisions, or any grading decision or allegations of professional misconduct unrelated to a student's academic standing or performance.

3.0 Procedures

The following procedures have been developed to provide guidelines for undergraduate, graduate, professional, and distance-learning students to file an appeal or complaint.

3.1 Undergraduate Student Academic Complaint Process

Before making a complaint to the appropriate department or unit, the student must have attempted to resolve his or her concerns directly with the decision maker in a timely and sincere manner.

The complaint must be made by the student in writing and must specify:

- The academic policy or procedure allegedly violated;
- How the policy or procedure was misapplied;
- How the decision in question unfairly or adversely affected the student;
- Efforts the student made to resolve the concern informally; and
- A requested resolution.

The student bringing the complaint is responsible for providing supporting documentation at the time of submission.

The written complaint should be filed with the appropriate department or unit head that will consider the case. If the appropriate department or unit head is a party to the case or is otherwise unable to serve, the complaint should be filed with the appropriate associate dean or other official as designated by the dean.

If the complaint involves any allegation of discrimination or harassment, the complaint shall be directed to the Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education and any further consideration of the academic complaint under this policy will be held in abeyance until the conclusion of Civil Rights Compliance review.

The department head, unit head, associate dean, or designated official will investigate the complaint. Investigation will include but is not limited to reviewing relevant documentation and meeting with the student and the faculty member or University official who made the decision being contested. Within thirty (30) calendar days after receiving the complaint, the individual who investigates the case will communicate in writing her/his decision to both the student and the faculty member or official.

The student may appeal to the dean and, failing resolution at the college level, a final review may be requested of the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Academic Affairs. The only basis for appeal is documented evidence that resolution of the complaint failed to comply with the procedural requirements of this policy. Dissatisfaction with the outcome of the complaint shall not be grounds for appeal. All documentation provided in the initial complaint and any additional information gathered during the resolution process should be forwarded to the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Academic Affairs.

Records of the complaint and its resolution are maintained at each level of consideration through an electronic log. Documentation related to the complaint shall be retained for a period of 5 years after graduation or withdrawal.

3.2 Graduate and Professional Student Academic Complaint Process

Before making a complaint to the appropriate department or unit, the graduate or professional student must have attempted to resolve his or her concerns directly with the decision maker in a timely and sincere manner. The Office of the Graduate Student Ombudsperson is available to assist graduate and professional students at any time prior to or during the appeal/complaint process.

If, after attempting to address a concern through informal avenues, the matter remains unresolved, graduate and professional students have the option to file a formal appeal or complaint in accordance with this policy.

The appeal/complaint must be made by the graduate or professional student through a formal letter of complaint/appeal to the department (department head, chair, or graduate or other appropriate program director). If the department head or chair is a party to the grievance, the associate dean for graduate education or other appropriate associate dean of the academic college will assume this responsibility.

If the complaint involves any allegation of discrimination or harassment, the complaint shall be directed to the Office for Civil Rights Compliance and Prevention Education and any further consideration of the academic complaint under this policy will be held in abeyance until the conclusion of Civil Rights Compliance review.

The department head shall attempt to resolve the question at the departmental level. The department head's response may include but is not limited to reviewing relevant documentation and meeting with the student, the student's academic advisor, or the student's advisory committee. The department head also may consult the

departmental graduate or appropriate professional student committee. The student shall be informed in writing of the results no later than one month after the student submits the appeal to the department head.

Should graduate or professional students believe that their rights were abridged at the departmental level, they may file a complaint/appeal with the Dean of the Graduate School. The graduate or professional student must provide a written statement to the dean clearly stating the substance of the complaint/appeal.

The Dean of the Graduate School may resolve the question through actions that may include but are not limited to review of documentation of the appeal process at the departmental level, request and review of additional relevant information, and consultation with parties involved in the departmental review. The dean also may refer an appeal directly to the Graduate and Professional Student Appeals Committee for review. This committee will consist of three faculty members and one graduate or professional student. For each case, if necessary, the dean shall appoint to the committee one additional faculty member knowledgeable in the academic area of the complaint/appeal.

The review by the Graduate and Professional Student Appeals Committee will have available to it all pertinent information in the student's record in the university and

- the department's policy statement concerning its degree expectations
- a summary of the department's action on the appeal
- copies of the student's statement to the dean of the Graduate School recording the student's view of alleged irregularities (i.e., the basis for university appeal).

The Graduate and Professional Student Appeals Committee will determine the appropriate course of action for each case. If deemed appropriate the committee may hold a formal hearing on complaints. A graduate or professional student complainant also may request a formal hearing.

The hearing will be conducted with the following procedural safeguards:

- All parties to the dispute will be notified of the time and place of the hearing at least 48 hours in advance;
- Hearings will be held on the Blacksburg campus with appropriate access provided to faculty and students elsewhere through phone, video conferencing, or other interactive media;
- The Dean of the Graduate School may convene hearings at other Virginia Tech campuses, as appropriate;
- The aggrieved student will be permitted, if the student chooses, to invite a member of the faculty or student body to represent him/her in the hearing;
- All parties in the dispute will be given full opportunity to testify and to present such evidence or witnesses as seem relevant;

All matters on which the finding will be based must be introduced into evidence at the hearing. The Graduate and Professional Student Appeals Committee will make a recommendation to the Dean of the Graduate School within 30 days of receiving the appeal, unless the Dean extends the committee's work due to the complexity of the case or other extenuating factors. The Dean of the Graduate School will communicate the committee's recommendation and the final disposition of the matter to all concerned parties within two weeks of receiving the committee's recommendation.

Records of the complaint and its resolution are maintained at each level of consideration through an electronic log. Documentation related to the complaint shall be retained for a period of 5 years after graduation or withdrawal.

3.3 Distance Learning Student Academic Complaint Process

3.3.1 Filing a Complaint with Virginia Tech

Distance learning students must follow the same academic complaint/appeal process at Virginia Tech as all undergraduate, graduate, or professional students, regardless of physical location.

In accordance with U.S. Department of Education Program Integrity Issues and State Authorization rules and regulations and the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) Policies and Standards, distance learning students can file a complaint about Virginia Tech with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Commonwealth's coordinating body for higher education and the state portal agency for SARA, or with the state in which the student resides.

3.3.2 Filing a Complaint with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)

Virginia Tech accepts SCHEV oversight in resolving complaints from students taking distance education under the aegis of the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA). If a student has exhausted the avenues provided by Virginia Tech and the complaint has not been resolved internally, the student can submit a Student Complaint Form to SCHEV found on the SCHEV agency website. Additional details on the formal SCHEV student complaints procedure can be found on the SCHEV agency website.

3.3.3 Filing a Complaint in all Other States

If a distance learning student residing out-of-state while enrolled in a Virginia Tech course has exhausted the student complaint avenues provided by Virginia Tech and the complaint has not been resolved internally, the student can submit a complaint about Virginia Tech with the state in which the student resides. The list of contact information for all state agencies with links to complaint process information can be found on the Virginia Tech Online Resources website under Student Complaint Resolution Procedures. The Enrollment Management office under the Vice Provost for Enrollment and Degree Management is responsible for keeping the contacts list and links to processes functioning and accurate.

4.0 Definitions

An academic decision is a decision made by a faculty member or a representative of the university acting in his/her official capacity that affects a student's academic standing or performance. Academic decisions do not include decisions regarding admission to the university, scholarship or financial aid awards, Undergraduate Honor System, Graduate Honor System, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Honor Code, Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine Honor Code, or Office of Student Conduct decisions, or any grading decision or allegations of professional misconduct unrelated to a student's academic standing or performance.

5.0 References

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement, Third Edition, 2018. Section 12.4 Student Complaints
https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2024/01/2024PrinciplesOfAccreditation.pdf

Faculty Handbook, August 2018, Section 2.7.1. "Statement of Principles of Ethical Behavior."
https://faculty.vt.edu/academic-personnel/academic-policies-and-resources/faculty-handbook.html

Graduate Catalogue, Policies, Academic Programs, Graduate Student Appeals
https://catalog.vt.edu/graduate/graduate-student-academic-appeals/

Undergraduate Grading Policies – No. 6800
www.policies.vt.edu/6800.pdf

Policy on Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Assault – No. 1025
www.policies.vt.edu/1025.pdf

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Student Complaints
https://www.schev.edu/students/resources/student-complaints

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Student Complaint Form
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/StudentComplaintForm

State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement Policies and Standards and Frequently Asked Questions. 2014.
https://nc-sara.org/sara-student-complaints-0

Virginia Tech Online, Enrollment Management, Resources, Student Complaint Resolution Procedures, Filing a Complaint in all Other States.
https://vtonline.vt.edu/Resources.html

6.0 Approval and Revisions

Approved February 10, 2015 by Senior Vice President and Provost, Mark G. McNamee.

- Revision 1
  - Made a correction to Section 3.2 to remove reference to the Commission on Graduate Studies and Policies. The Graduate Appeals Committee is an operational committee that reports to the Dean of the Graduate School, and not a standing committee of the Commission on Graduate Studies and Policies.
  - Changed the title of the Graduate Student Appeals Committee to the Graduate and Professional Student Appeals Committee.
  - Changed the title of Section 3.2 to add professional students and added references to professional students where appropriate in Sections 3.2 and 3.3.1. Added references to the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Honor Code and the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine Honor Code in Sections 2 and 4, and added links to those honor codes in Section 5.

  Approved November 28, 2018 by Interim Executive Vice President and Provost, Cyril Clarke.
- Revision 2
  Technical update in section 5.0 to reflect SACSCOC Section 12.4 student complaints standards

  Approved March 11, 2020 by Vice President for Policy and Governance, Kim O'Rourke.
- Revision 3
  Updated Section 3.2 to remove the Dean of the Graduate School consulting with the provost prior to communicating the committee's recommendation.

  Approved October 4, 2023 by the Executive Vice President and Provost, Cyril Clarke.

- Revision 4
  Technical revision to update organization titles in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 and updated references in Section 5. 0..

  Approved March 12, 2025 by Vice President for Policy and Governance, Kim O'Rourke.