

# **STUDENT COMPLAINTS: HANDLING AND RESOLUTION**

## **POLICY STATEMENT**

Alabama A&M University (AAMU) is committed to continuous improvement of its non-academic and academic support services for its students. The University also provides adequate, easily activated procedures to deal with student complaints. Effective complaint resolution processes provide AAMU with valuable opportunities to analyze recurring or persistent problems and ensure continuous development and improvement of student services and student satisfaction.

Alabama A&M University has a commitment to ensuring that all student complaints are resolved quickly, using a clear, fair and reliable management process. The University treats complaints seriously and ensures all processes are clear, prompt, confidential and fair to all parties and will use its best endeavors to ensure an acceptable resolution is achieved using the principle of “natural justice” (as identified by EOC).

The University is also committed, wherever possible, to dealing with complaints at the local level (within the confines of the University). Complaints that are resolved quickly, locally and with the fewest people have the greatest chances of removing any impediment to good working/teaching/learning relationships.

### **The complaints policy and procedures are based on the following principles:**

1. That the process used to handle and resolve complaints is fair and is perceived as fair; it is impartial and capable of offering appropriate outcomes;
2. That complaints are treated confidentially and information is only used for the purposes for which it was collected;
3. That the complaints procedures are easily understood and that students and staff have access to information about the operation and outcomes of the process;
4. That any barriers which deter or prevent students from accessing the complaints system are identified and steps taken to remove them;
5. That bias in favor of either students or staff is avoided and that reasons for decisions are provided to all parties concerned;
6. That faculty/staff involved in resolving complaints apply rules of natural justice; give all parties to a complaint the opportunity to respond to issues raised where appropriate; and treat each complaint on its merit regardless of the manner of presentation of either the complaint or the complainant;
7. That the complaints system is supported at all levels of the University, where a student’s right to complain is recognized;
8. That a mechanism is in place to ensure that no student is victimized or suffers detriment as a result of making a complaint. Any attempt to penalize a student for compiling a complaint may be subject to University disciplinary procedures;
9. That complaints are handled in a timely manner with achievable deadlines clearly stated for each step in the resolution of the complaint;

10. That faculty/staff who handle complaints are enabled and encouraged to use their judgment within a framework of documented guidelines, procedures, legislation or University policy;
11. That wherever possible complaints are handled, resolved and reviewed locally and have the fewest people necessary involved;
12. That all students have the right to appeal local decisions to the next level and ultimately to the President of the University, who will only intervene when local reviews have not satisfactorily resolved the issues raised by the complainant;
13. That a mechanism is in place to monitor the nature and outcome of complaints across the University and identify issues of widespread concern to students; and
14. That the effectiveness of the complaints system is regularly evaluated by faculty/staff and students involved in the process.

## **APPLICATION**

This policy covers issues of concern relating to any aspect of the University life, including:

- The delivery of academic and administrative services;
- The delivery of other support services; and
- Discrimination on equal opportunity grounds.

This policy does not cover:

- Sexual harassment (please contact the Office of Human Resources)
- Complaints that are outside the scope of University operations;
- Student misconduct (any violation of University Policy, Procedures or Standards, please refer to Section II – Academic Life);
- Complaints about individuals who are not full or part-time members of staff or enrolled at The University.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

All faculty/staff and students have a responsibility to contribute to a teaching, learning and working environment that is characterized by mutual respect, open communication and the resolution of conflicts. Additionally:

The Divisional Vice Presidents will:

- a. ensure that commitment of the University to the satisfactory resolution of complaints is an integral part of providing high quality services for students and is understood by senior University managers; and
- b. receive a report as to any decisions of lower management and take such steps, as she/he may consider necessary to ensure its full and effective implementation.

Academic Deans and Unit Directors will:

- a. ensure that complaint processes are promoted openly, and actively supported;
- b. ensure that staff have access to adequate support, information, resources and training in resolving complaints;

- c. ensure that information is gathered on the number and types of complaints received and used to inform policy and procedural review;
- d. ensure that any corrective actions arising from complaints are implemented and where appropriate, reasonable steps are taken to prevent a similar complaint re-occurring; and
- e. monitor working and teaching environments to prevent victimization as a result of complaints.

Department Chairperson and Administrative Managers will:

- a. be accountable for conducting a review of complaints which have not been satisfactorily resolved at the local level, unless they have been involved in the resolution or have conflict of interest. In these cases the accountability will lie with the next managerial level.
- b. Be responsible for consulting with any person or group of people, including University committees, necessary to establish the fact of the complaint and offer an appropriate resolution. Unless the permission of the complainant is gained, this consultation will be as a case-in principle.

All academic and general staff will:

- a. attempt to resolve all complaints using principles of natural justice in a timely manner according to the procedures and guidelines on complaint resolution;
- b. ensure that all complaints are treated seriously, investigated sensitively and that confidentiality is maintained at all times; and
- c. be familiar with the relevant regulations and awards, University policies, administrative instructions, guidelines and complaint resolution procedures.

Students will:

- a. behave in a manner consistent with the rules and code of conduct outlined in this handbook;
- b. express concerns and make comments in order to improve current practices and inform new policy and procedures;
- c. provide timely and accurate information during the course of a complaint; and
- d. not make vexatious complaints that are complaints, which are mischievous, trivial or malicious.

## **PROCEDURES FOR HANDLING AND RESOLUTION OF STUDENT COMPLAINTS**

This process is designed to meet the following objectives:

- To provide procedures that recognize and protect the rights of students to make complaints and which are driven by AAMU to ensure that the rights of the complainant and the respondent are addressed in an even handed way;
- To provide processes which are accessible to all students and which are appropriate for dealing with all complaints in an equitable and culturally sensitive manner;

- To clearly identify the various steps and processes involved in handling and resolving complaints;
- To clearly identify sources of information for students and faculty/staff involved in a complaint;
- To specify timelines by which processes must be completed;
- To ensure that mechanisms are in place to maintain confidentiality, with a minimum number of people involved and secure record keeping; and
- To provide processes for feedback on service provision to staff and encourage dissemination of best practice examples.

## **PROCESS SUMMARY**

### **STEP 1**

When a problem or issue arises, students are advised to seek information and assistance from the Student Government Association's Office. Students have three options for proceeding:

- Take no further action
- Make comments or suggestions regarding the issues, or
- Make a complaint (SEE STEP 2 BELOW)

### **STEP 2**

A student makes a complaint (oral or written) to the member of faculty/staff responsible for the service, decision or action about which they wish to complain. Faculty/Staff will endeavor to find a resolution. **The majority of complaints are resolved successfully at this Step.**

### **STEP 3**

Students who feel that their complaint has not been satisfactorily resolved can request a review by Department Chairpersons or Administrative Managers. Chairpersons and Managers will independently review the complaint and either support the original offer or provide an alternative resolution. The next managerial level should conduct the review where the Chairperson or Manager was involved in the initial attempts at resolution or has a conflict of interest in the review.

### **STEP 4**

If satisfactory resolution has not been obtained at this point, students can lodge a written appeal with the Divisional Vice Presidents who will hear the complaint and render a final decision based on all the evidence presented. The President of the University may only overturn this decision.

## **ACTION**

### **MAKING A COMPLAINT**

Students are encouraged to seek information and assistance about their options before proceeding. (Within 72 hours of occurrence).

### **ACKNOWLEDGING RECEIPT OF COMPLAINT**

Staff must acknowledge in writing a complaint within 5 working days from receipt to the next level of management. The letter should identify the staff member handling the complaint and give an estimated time frame for resolution. (Within 5 University working days).

### **NOTIFICATION OF INITIAL RESOLUTION**

Staff will send resolution details in writing to the student giving reasons for the decision. (Dependent on the case, but in a timely manner)

### **REQUESTING A REVIEW OF THE DECISION**

Students who are not satisfied with the offer of resolution can submit a request for a review to Department Chairpersons or Administrative Managers within 20 working days of the date of the notification of initial resolution. (Within 20 University working days)

### **ACKNOWLEDGING A REQUEST FOR REVIEW**

Chairpersons/Managers must acknowledge in writing a complaint within 5 working days from receipt. The letter should identify the staff member handling the complaint and give an estimated time frame for resolution. (Within 5 University working days)

### **NOTIFICATION OF REVIEW DECISION**

The Chairperson or Manager will send resolution details in writing to the student giving reasons for the decision. (Dependent on the case but in a timely manner)

### **LODGING AN APPEAL**

Students can lodge an appeal to the Divisional Vice Presidents within 20 working days of the date of the notification of the review decision. (Within 20 University working days)

### **APPEAL REVIEW**

Other than in exceptional circumstances, the Divisional Vice Presidents will hear the complaint within 15 working days of receipt of the students' appeal. (Within 15 University working days)

### **NOTIFICATION OF APPEAL DECISION**

Students will receive notification of the Divisional Vice Presidents' decision or estimated time frame for further investigation within 5 working days of the date of the appeal review. (Within 5 University working days)

### **WITHDRAWING A COMPLAINT**

Students have the right to withdraw a complaint at any time during the process, in which case the complaint shall be registered as concluded and noted as withdrawn. If the complaint was made in writing, the withdrawal should also be in writing to the person handling the complaint. The staff member who receives the notification will advise all parties to the complaint in writing of the withdrawal. Staff may still decide to initiate appropriate corrective action as a result of the complaint.

If the complaint was against another person or group of people, they have the right to make a written statement following the withdrawal. This should be addressed to the member of staff handling the complaint, who will then circulate the response to all those involved in handling the

complaint to date. The complaint will then be concluded and no further correspondence will be required.

Students who choose to withdraw complaints must include their reasons for withdrawal.