

Union College Committee (UCC) Report - Conflicts and Collegiality

Although we discuss many things at UCC meetings, there were two recurring topics during this academic year, and this report will focus on them.

Student Complaints

This has been a topic of discussion for several years now, and there is still not a satisfactory process or policy in place, nor any consistency in how different managers and student advising staff deal with incidents of student complaints against faculty.

The current process is tied to the Respectful Organizational Culture policy. This policy is almost exclusively concerned with incidents of bullying, harassment and discrimination. If you have never read it, you should. You will see that it is entirely inappropriate for the handling of basic student complaints such as disagreement over evaluations, classroom management, communication etc... Our concern with using this policy to handle student complaints is that it encourages students to re-frame their relatively innocuous complaint in the much more serious language of bullying, harassment or discrimination.

We have been advocating for a separate policy, specific to conflicts and disagreements between students and faculty that do not fit properly under the Respectful Organizational Culture policy. Our position is that this policy should make every effort to inform and include the professor at every step of the way. This should start with a strong emphasis on directing the student(s) to discuss the matter with the professor directly before bringing the issue to a third party.

The reality is that in most cases a professor who is presented with a student complaint will successfully resolve that complaint very quickly and to the satisfaction of all parties. We believe that management should respect the professionalism of faculty and their ability to resolve these issues. It is part of our job. If a student comes to them with a complaint, the question should be "have you discussed this with the professor?" If the answer is no, they should be directed to discuss the issue with the professor as a first step.

Of course there are exceptions and in some situations, third party intervention or support will be required. That should be the exception however. All too often to managers or student advisors will listen to a student complaint in detail, give their opinion on the issue, involve others, hold meetings or begin an investigation, all before giving the professor a chance to resolve it, and in some cases before even informing the professor of the issue.

Management has recently introduced a new Conflict Resolution policy which is an improvement, but is not specific to student/faculty complaints, and in our opinion it is still far too weak on the insistence of having the complainant address this issue directly with the other party as a first step. We will continue to advocate for a better policy.

Union/College relations

Unlike student complaints, this is a new issue on the UCC agenda this year. It is the union's view that in the past three years or so, College administrators have been less willing to resolve issues at the UCC table, and this has resulted in an increase in grievances filed. Management has essentially

acknowledged this as a “new management style”, but however you label it, it makes for a less cordial and a more confrontational workplace.

The issue was addressed at several UCC meetings, and a separate management/union meeting was held to discuss the issue. Both sides expressed a desire to improve the relationship and many good intentions were expressed. We will make every effort to be reasonable while still defending our member’s rights and advocating for your interests.

Neal McNair
UCC Co-Chair
Associate Chief Steward
OPSEU Local 653