

Resolving Graduate Student Concerns and Conflicts

Graduate school involves close working relationships among students, faculty, advisors, supervisors, program directors, and other members of the University community. Most of these relationships are positive and productive, but disagreements and conflicts sometimes arise.

A disagreement with an advisor or faculty member does not necessarily mean that someone has done something wrong. Graduate students and faculty may have different expectations, communication styles, interpretations of policies, or views about academic work. When concerns arise, addressing them early and constructively can often prevent a disagreement from becoming a more serious problem.

The University of Memphis encourages graduate students to seek assistance when they have concerns. **You do not have to navigate a difficult situation alone.**

Start by understanding the concern

Before deciding what to do, it can be helpful to identify the nature of the problem.

Ask yourself:

- What specifically happened?
- What outcome am I hoping for?
- Is this primarily a misunderstanding or communication problem?
- Is there a disagreement about academic expectations, degree requirements, research, teaching, funding, or responsibilities?
- Is there a University or program policy that may apply?
- Do I feel comfortable discussing the issue directly with the person involved?
- Would it be helpful to talk with someone outside the situation before deciding what to do?

The [University of Memphis Academic Catalog](#) contains University policies and regulations governing graduate education, including academic regulations, degree requirements, and appeals procedures. Your program's graduate handbook may also contain additional policies and procedures.

Keeping a written record of important communications, expectations, deadlines, and meetings can also be helpful, particularly when a concern involves academic progress, assistantship responsibilities, research, or degree requirements.

Whenever possible, start with a conversation

If you feel comfortable and it is appropriate to do so, the first step is often to talk directly with the person involved.

A productive conversation might begin with:

“I would like to talk about something that has been concerning me. I want to make sure I understand your expectations and see if we can find a way forward.”

When discussing a concern:

- Focus on the specific issue rather than the character or motives of the other person.
- Explain what you understand happened.
- Ask questions when expectations or policies are unclear.
- Be clear about what you would like to see happen.
- Listen to the other person's perspective.
- Try to identify a mutually acceptable next step.
- Follow up in writing when appropriate so that everyone has a shared understanding of what was discussed.

Not every conflict can or should be resolved directly. **You should not feel required to confront someone directly when doing so would be unsafe, inappropriate, or likely to worsen the situation.**

You can seek advice before taking action

You do not have to decide on your own how to proceed.

Your Graduate Program Director or Graduate Coordinator

Your program's graduate director or coordinator can help explain program expectations, procedures, degree requirements, and the appropriate process for addressing academic or programmatic concerns.

If your concern involves your advisor, you may ask to speak with another faculty member, the Graduate Program Director, department chair, or college Dean, or another appropriate administrator.

Your Department Chair or College Graduate Studies Director

If a concern cannot be resolved at the program level, or if the person with whom you have a concern is your program director or another person in the normal chain of communication, you may seek assistance from the department chair or the appropriate college-level graduate administrator.

The Graduate School

The [Graduate School](#) can help graduate students understand University-level policies and procedures and identify the appropriate place to take a concern.

The Graduate School may be particularly helpful when a concern involves graduate education across departmental or college boundaries, University graduate policies, graduate assistantships, degree requirements, or questions about the appropriate grievance or appeal process.

[Contact the Graduate School](#)

The Graduate Student Association

The [Graduate Student Association](#) is another resource for graduate students seeking information, advocacy, and connection with other graduate students.

Know the policy that applies

Many graduate student concerns are governed by University policies. Before beginning a formal appeal or complaint, review the policy that applies to your situation.

[University of Memphis Academic Catalog](#)

The catalog includes information about academic regulations, degree requirements, graduate programs, academic standing, and University procedures.

The Graduate School also maintains a [Graduate School Forms and Resources](#) page with forms and information concerning matters such as grade appeals and other graduate processes.

Academic and program-related concerns

Examples may include:

- Disagreements about academic expectations
- Dissertation or thesis supervision
- Committee concerns
- Degree requirements

- Academic progress
- Program policies or procedures
- Course-related concerns
- Concerns about advising or mentoring

Possible first steps: faculty member, advisor, Graduate Program Director, Graduate Coordinator, Department Chair, College Graduate Studies Director, or Graduate School.

Whenever possible, begin at the lowest appropriate level and move to the next level if the concern cannot be resolved.

Academic appeals

Some academic decisions have formal appeal procedures. These procedures may include specific deadlines and requirements, so students should review the applicable policy before beginning an appeal.

For example, graduate students have a formal process for appealing certain **grade and retention decisions**. The Graduate School's [Graduate Appeal information and form](#) explains the process and applicable deadlines.

Important: Not every disagreement is an appeal. A formal appeal generally must involve a decision or process for which University policy provides an appeal mechanism.

Concerns about a grade

A disagreement with an instructor about a grade is not necessarily the same thing as a general grievance.

Graduate students should first review the applicable academic regulations and, when appropriate, discuss the concern with the instructor. If the issue cannot be resolved, the Graduate Grade Appeal process (found in the [graduate catalog](#)) provides a formal avenue for certain graduate grade appeals. The process includes specific deadlines, so students should act promptly.

Graduate assistantship or employment concerns

Graduate assistants occupy an important position within the University: they are graduate students pursuing a degree while also serving in an employment role.

Questions involving assistantship appointments, workload, responsibilities, compensation, contracts, or employment practices may involve both Graduate School and University employment policies.

When a concern involves employment or workplace practices, [Human Resources](#) may also be an appropriate resource.

[Human Resources – Employee Grievance and Complaint Information](#)

You may also contact the Graduate School with questions about graduate assistantship policies, contracts, benefits, or expectations.

Discrimination, harassment, or retaliation

Concerns involving discrimination, harassment, or retaliation should **not be handled solely as an informal interpersonal conflict**.

The University of Memphis prohibits discrimination, harassment, and retaliation and has established procedures for addressing these concerns through the [Office of Civil Rights Compliance and Title IX](#). This office provides information about the complaint process, supportive measures, and available resources.

[Report Discrimination, Harassment, or Retaliation](#)

You do not need to determine on your own whether conduct legally or administratively constitutes discrimination or harassment. If you are concerned that it may, you can contact the Office of Civil Rights Compliance and Title IX to discuss your options.

Sexual misconduct

Sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, dating violence, domestic violence, and other sexual or gender-based misconduct are addressed through University procedures.

[Title IX and Sexual Misconduct Resources](#)

You may also use the University's [Report a Concern](#) system to identify the appropriate reporting option.

Disability-related concerns

Students who have concerns related to disability access or accommodations should contact [Disability Resources for Students](#) and review the University's applicable procedures.

The University's [Report a Concern](#) system also provides a Disability Access Concern reporting option.

Student conduct concerns

The [Office of Student Accountability](#) administers the University's Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities and handles complaints involving student misconduct, including academic misconduct and disruptive behavior. The office also identifies conflict resolution and dispute resolution as part of its educational mission.

[Report a Student Conduct Concern](#)

General University concerns and complaints

Some concerns do not fall neatly into a particular category.

The University's [Report a Concern](#) website serves as a centralized clearinghouse for reports, complaints, and grievances and provides links to the appropriate University resources and reporting forms.

For a general University concern or complaint, the University ordinarily recommends using the normal administrative chain. Students may submit a formal complaint to the dean, department head, or director responsible for the area of concern. If you are unsure where to direct your complaint, the University identifies the [Dean of Students Office](#) as a resource.

[Submit a University Concern or Complaint](#)

What if I do not know where to go?

You do not need to know which University office has jurisdiction over your concern before asking for help.

The University's [Report a Concern](#) website provides a central starting point and directs students to resources for:

- Academic integrity
- Student conduct
- Disability access
- Discrimination, harassment, and retaliation
- Hazing
- Sexual misconduct and Title IX
- General University concerns and complaints
- Concerns about a student

- Other University and community resources

If your concern is specifically related to graduate education and you are unsure what process applies, you can also contact the [Graduate School](#).

When an informal resolution may be appropriate

Informal resolution can be especially useful when:

- The issue appears to be a misunderstanding.
- Communication has broken down.
- Expectations have not been clearly established.
- You want to preserve an ongoing advising or mentoring relationship.
- You believe a conversation could resolve the issue.
- You would like help identifying a reasonable solution without immediately filing a formal complaint.

An informal approach does **not** mean that your concern is unimportant. In many situations, addressing a concern early is the best way to resolve it.

When a formal complaint or grievance may be appropriate

You may wish to pursue a formal process when:

- An informal effort has not resolved the concern.
- You believe a University policy or your rights have been violated.
- The concern involves a formal academic decision that has an established appeal process.
- The person involved is not willing to address the concern.
- You are concerned about retaliation.
- The nature of the concern requires investigation or formal University action.

Formal processes have specific requirements, deadlines, and procedures. Before filing a formal complaint or grievance, make sure you understand which process applies to your situation.

Do not wait until a deadline has passed while trying to resolve a concern informally. If you believe a formal appeal may be necessary, review the applicable policy and deadlines at the beginning of the process.

You do not have to handle serious concerns informally

Some situations should be reported through established University processes rather than addressed through direct conversation.

These include:

- Discrimination or harassment
- Sexual misconduct
- Retaliation
- Threats or violence
- Immediate safety concerns
- Serious academic misconduct
- Other conduct that may violate University policy or law

The University's [Report a Concern](#) system provides a central starting point for many of these concerns.

If you are in immediate danger, contact University Police Services or local emergency services rather than using an online reporting form. The University specifically directs individuals to contact University Police Services or 911 in an emergency before submitting a concern or complaint.

What about confidentiality?

You can ask a faculty member, administrator, or University office about a concern without necessarily filing a formal complaint.

However, **not every University employee can promise confidentiality.** Some employees have reporting obligations under University policy or law. In addition, some matters cannot be investigated or resolved while maintaining complete confidentiality.

Before sharing detailed information, you may want to ask:

“Before I tell you what happened, can you explain what you will be required to do with the information I share?”

The University also identifies confidential resources, including the [University Counseling Center](#), for students who want to seek support while maintaining confidentiality to the extent permitted by law and University policy.

Retaliation is not appropriate

Students should be able to raise good-faith concerns without fear of retaliation.

If you believe that you have experienced retaliation because you raised a concern, filed a complaint, participated in an investigation, or otherwise exercised a University right, seek assistance promptly.

Concerns about discrimination, harassment, or retaliation may be reported to the [Office of Civil Rights Compliance and Title IX](#) or the University's [Report a Concern](#) system. The University's information for complainants specifically identifies retaliation as prohibited.

A simple guide to getting help

“I have a concern, but I'm not sure what to do.”

Talk with a trusted faculty member, Graduate Program Director, Graduate Coordinator, department chair, or the Graduate School.

“I have a disagreement with my advisor.”

If appropriate, try to discuss the issue directly. You may also consult another faculty member, your Graduate Program Director, department chair, college graduate administrator, or the Graduate School.

“My concern involves a program or academic policy.”

Start with your program or department. Review the [Academic Catalog](#) and your program's graduate handbook. If the issue cannot be resolved, move to the college or Graduate School as appropriate.

“I received a grade that I believe was assigned unfairly.”

Review the University's Graduate Grade Appeal process (found in the academic catalog) and pay close attention to the applicable deadlines.

“My concern involves my graduate assistantship or employment.”

Talk with your supervisor or appropriate program administrator and consult the Graduate School or [Human Resources](#) as appropriate.

“I believe I have experienced discrimination, harassment, or retaliation.”

Contact the [Office for Institutional Equity](#) and review the University's formal reporting options.

“I am concerned about student misconduct.”

Contact the [Office of Student Accountability](#) or submit a [Student Conduct Concern](#).

“I am not sure which office handles my concern.”

Start with [Report a Concern](#) or contact the [Graduate School](#) for assistance identifying the appropriate resource.

The goal is resolution

The goal of addressing a graduate student concern is not simply to determine who is right or wrong. In many cases, the goal is to understand what happened, clarify expectations, repair communication, and identify a path forward.

Graduate education depends on productive relationships among students, faculty, and staff. Seeking help when a relationship or situation becomes difficult is not a sign of failure. It is part of navigating graduate education successfully.

If you have a concern, don't wait until it becomes a crisis. Reach out, ask questions, and get help understanding your options.

Important University Resources

- [University of Memphis Academic Catalog](#)
- [Graduate School](#)
- [Graduate School Forms and Resources](#)
- [Graduate Student Association](#)
- [Report a Concern](#)
- [Office of Civil Rights Compliance and Title IX](#)
- [Office of Student Accountability](#)
- [Dean of Students Office](#)
- [Disability Resources for Students](#)
- [University Counseling Center](#)
- [Human Resources](#)

