

## ACADEMIC GRIEVANCE AND GRADE APPEAL PROCEDURES

### **A. Purpose**

Consistent with CSU Executive Order 1037, California State University, Northridge has adopted policies that provide for the redress of student concerns about certain academic decisions made by faculty. The following procedures, which implement said policies, are established pursuant to authority assigned to the Academic Grievance and Grade Appeals Board and are administered by the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. Students may elect to use these procedures when they are unable to resolve academic disputes with members of the faculty.

These procedures are limited to actions that fall within the definition of an “academic grievance” or “grade appeal” as defined below. The University has various complaint procedures and, therefore, students are encouraged to seek advice before filing a formal complaint. Students who believe they have been subject to illegal discrimination or harassment must contact the Office of Equity and Diversity at (818) 677-2077 for assistance. Students who only want to express a complaint about a faculty member’s professional conduct, and are not seeking a grade change, are encouraged to bring their concerns to the attention of the chairperson of the department in which the instructor is employed. Individuals who need assistance in identifying an appropriate department chairperson, or evaluating whether these procedures are appropriate to a specific concern, may visit the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs (OVPSA), which is located in University Hall 310, or may call (818) 677-2391.

### **B. Definitions**

These procedures are appropriate if an unresolved complaint meets one of the following definitions. The Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs will return any complaint that does not meet one of the definitions.

An “**academic grievance**” is a complaint that meets all of the following conditions:

1. It must concern an academic decision, action, or judgment for which no existing university complaint procedure is available; it must not involve a grade.
2. It must not be within the scope of the University’s petition procedures for waiving academic regulations.
3. It must be a matter for which the Board can identify a remedy.

A “**grade appeal**” is a complaint about a final course grade, which involves one or more of the following conditions, the existence of which the student is required to prove:

1. The instructor violated a specific University rule or policy.
2. The instructor refused to correct a clerical or administrative error made in the process of

transmitting a grade to the Office of Admissions and Records.

3. The instructor refused to report any grade at all for the individual student.
- 4.. The grade is based on an allegation of cheating or other academic dishonesty, and the instructor has chosen not to request formal disciplinary action with the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.
5. The grade is based on an allegation of cheating or other academic dishonesty and, pursuant to the student disciplinary process, it has been determined that (a) there was insufficient evidence to proceed with formal disciplinary action or (b) the student was found innocent of the charges.
6. The grade reflects threatening, abusive, exploitative, or similar personal, improper conduct towards the individual student.

### **C. Important Clarifications Pertaining to Grade Appeals**

Most complaints considered by the Board involve a grade appeal. It is important for students to know that, in accordance with the policies of the California State University, the Board must presume that an assigned grade is correct. Therefore, **it is the student's responsibility to prove that the final course grade is improper based on one of the criteria listed above under the definition of "grade appeal."** The Board's authority in cases involving a grade appeal is very specific and limited to the conditions included in the above definition. The Board cannot tell an instructor that he/she has graded an exam too harshly; or that his/her standards are too high; or that particular assignments are unreasonable; or that other classroom practices or expectations applied to the class as a whole are unfair. These are all matters of professional judgment, which, if consistent with applicable campus policies, are entirely within the prerogative of the instructor. Concerns about such matters should be discussed with the instructor and, if necessary, the appropriate department chair or college associate dean.

### **D. Overview and Steps for Filing a Complaint**

Complaints may progress through three stages, each of which has a specific set of steps and processes as outlined below. It should be noted that the use of devices for the purpose of recording meetings that occur as a part of the complaint process is prohibited.

#### **Stage 1: Prior Efforts to Resolve Concerns**

The University supports and encourages responsive and respectful dialogue between faculty and students when there is a disagreement about an academic decision or final course grade. Prior to filing a formal complaint, students must communicate their concerns directly to the involved instructor and seek clarification of the decision in dispute. If the instructor does not provide an adequate or timely response, the student may bring the concern to the attention of the chairperson of the department in which the academic decision was made or the course was taught.

**STEP 1**            Whatever the nature of the potential grievance or grade appeal, the student must

make an effort to discuss the matter with the faculty member. This may be done through a scheduled meeting, phone conversation, or in writing. The faculty member is expected to discuss the matter with the student in a timely manner, provide a clarifying response to the student's inquiry, and, if appropriate, adjust the disputed academic decision or grade. During periods of regular instruction, faculty should attempt to acknowledge or fully respond to a student's inquiry within ten (10) academic days after it is received.

**STEP 2** If the student is not satisfied with the faculty member's response, or if a timely response is not received, the student shall attempt to discuss the potential complaint with the chairperson of the department in which the academic decision was made or the course taught.

### Stage 2: Filing a Complaint

If, after pre-complaint efforts are exhausted, a student chooses to bring a formal complaint, the student must file the formal complaint through the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs (OVPSA).

**STEP 1** The student must complete an Academic Grievance and Grade Appeal Student Complaint Form, which is available through the OVPSA. Sections A and B of the Form must be completed for all complaints. Section C should be completed when the issue involves a request for a grade change. Section D must be completed if the complaint meets the definition of an academic grievance. A written statement of the facts and circumstances giving rise to the complaint must be attached to the Complaint Form. This statement must be clear, complete, accurate, and truthful, and **may not exceed two pages**. In the case of a grade appeal, the complaint must be justified based on at least one of the six conditions that form the basis for a grade appeal.

**STEP 2** When properly completed, the Complaint Form is submitted to the OVPSA in University Hall 310. The complaint will be returned to the student without processing if: a) the Complaint Form is incomplete, b) the complaint is not timely filed (refer to paragraph "F" below for definition of "timely filed"), c) the student has not initiated pre-complaint efforts with the faculty member, d) the complaint describes issues or concerns that fall outside of the definition of an academic grievance or grade appeal, e) the complaint seeks re-consideration of a matter on which the Board has previously ruled, or f) the complaint seeks consideration of a grievance that has already been answered through the University's discrimination or harassment complaint procedures.

**STEP 3** The OVPSA will forward a copy of the Complaint Form to the faculty member, along with a Faculty Response to Student Complaint Form. The completed Faculty Response must be returned to the OVPSA within 10 academic days of the date it is received. The faculty member shall immediately inform the OVPSA of circumstances that might prevent a timely reply.

**STEP 4** The OVPSA will forward a copy of the Faculty Response to the student. Upon receipt

of the Faculty Response, the student has ten (10) academic days to notify the OVPSA in writing that: a) the faculty response is acceptable, or b) request that the complaint be considered by college dean/designee. Failure of the student to timely notify the OVPSA of the action requested shall normally result in the termination of the complaint.

**STEP 5** If further consideration is requested, a copy of the Faculty Response, along with a copy of the Student Complaint, will be sent to the appropriate department chair and college dean/designee. The OVPSA will request that the dean (or designee) call a meeting with the student, the faculty member, and the department chair in an effort to mediate the dispute. Typically, this meeting will be arranged within three weeks after the dean/designee has been notified of the complaint, or as soon as the schedules of all participants permit. If possible, the dean/designee will propose a solution. Any solution to which the student and faculty member agree should be placed in writing and communicated to the OVPSA and all interested parties. The dean/designee will complete and return the Dean's Response to Student Complaint Form to the OVPSA within five (5) academic days after the meeting. If the student does not wish to participate in the meeting, the dean/designee shall interview the parties separately and then complete the Dean's Response.

**STEP 6** The OVPSA will forward a copy of the Dean's Response to the student. Upon receipt of the Dean's Response, the student has ten (10) academic days to notify the OVPSA that: a) the dean's response is accepted, or b) request that the complaint be considered by the Board. Failure of the student to timely notify the OVPSA of the action requested shall normally result in the termination of the complaint.

### **Stage 3: Board's Review of Formal Complaint**

The Academic Grievance and Grade Appeals Board consider complaints that remain unresolved following the above stages and steps. The Board's decisions are final and conclude the University's consideration of the merits of an academic grievance or grade appeal. Any properly filed formal complaint that has not been resolved following the above steps will be forwarded to the Board for review.

**STEP 1** One member of the Board will be appointed to conduct a preliminary investigation. He/she will interview the student, the faculty member, and the dean/designee, and will report his/her findings and recommendations.

**STEP 2** The Board will make a determination as to whether the grievance or grade appeal has merit (i.e., sufficient grounds to proceed with a formal hearing). If the grievance or grade appeal is found to be without merit, that determination will conclude the Board's consideration of the complaint and the student will be so notified.

**STEP 3** If the Board finds that the case has merit, it will name three of its members to hold a hearing at which the student and the faculty member will be asked to testify separately and present whatever evidence or witnesses may be appropriate. *A witness*

*must be able to offer testimony relevant to the complaint. Unless otherwise approved by the chair of the panel hearing a complaint, any party wishing to present a witness during the hearing shall inform the chair of the hearing panel at least three academic days prior to the hearing. No one appearing before a hearing panel will be accompanied by a representative, observer, or any other third party to the complaint. Further, the use of recording devices shall also be prohibited.* Following the hearing, the panel will deliberate and make a recommendation to the full Board.

**STEP 4**

The Board will render a final decision and all parties will be informed of the outcome. Board decisions are not subject to further appeal, except on procedural grounds. Because of the procedures the Board must follow, the parties to the dispute should not expect a final response from the Board in less than eight weeks following initiation of the Board's review. In addition, it is almost always the case that complaints filed late in the semester will not be resolved until the following semester, especially when summer recess intervenes.

**E. Records Retention**

Once a student contacts a faculty member concerning a potential grievance or grade appeal, all academic records that may be relevant to the potential complaint should be retained until the matter is resolved.

**F. Deadline for Filing a Complaint**

To preserve his/her rights under these procedures, a student must timely file his/her formal complaint with the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs in University Hall 310 before the end of the semester following the semester in which the matter originated or in which the grade was assigned. The Board does not grant extensions for filing complaints.

**G. Assistance**

Assistance in the submission of a complaint is available in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs located in University Hall, Suite 310. You may contact the office by phone at (818) 677-2391 (V/TTY) or by email to [william.watkins@csun.edu](mailto:william.watkins@csun.edu). The complaint process can also be viewed on-line at <http://www.csun.edu/studentaffairs/forms/appeals.htm>

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