
The Ombuds Guide: **RESOLVING A DIFFICULT PROBLEM**

Purpose of this Handout:

This handout provides you with a number of ideas to assist you in handling problems with people at the College – instructors, staff or other students.

Some of these suggestions will seem like common sense, others may be new to you – try to keep an open mind as you read them.

1. Try to solve a problem informally first. Many disputes can be resolved through informal discussions, thus avoiding stressful, time-consuming, and adversarial appeal procedures.
2. Follow the appropriate decision-making levels at the College. If you have a problem with a person or department, first go to that person or department to resolve it. Writing letters to the Dean or to the President of the College prior to working your way through the organizational structure does not usually speed up resolution of the problem.

If you have a problem with an instructor, normally you should talk with them first. If you think the instructor's response isn't satisfactory, then talk with the chair of the program, and then, if necessary, the Associate Dean or Dean of the School.
3. Focus on the problem, not the person. You will have greater success if you see the other person as a potential partner or resource in solving the problem. Avoid personal attacks on the individual you're in conflict with!
4. Stay focused on the problem. If you are talking to an instructor about a grade, this is not the time to state all of your complaints about how the class was organized or managed. You may express those concerns at a later time, or in a course evaluation.
5. Have an realistic goal in mind. Do you want a decision to be reviewed or changed? A new regulation or procedure put in place? Someone's behavior to change? What you hope to achieve may affect the approach you take in addressing a problem or conflict.
6. Be assertive, but be *courteous*. Civil and respectful behavior and constructive criticism go a long way toward getting someone's cooperation in achieving your goal and solving the problem.
7. Consider that other people in a dispute will have a different point of view. Most people genuinely want to be fair. In presenting your own perspective, anticipate questions, issues, and viewpoints the other person may have.
8. If you don't feel comfortable talking with someone in person, send a letter explaining how you feel and what solution you think is fair. List each point you would like addressed, and ask for a written response to each point. If you forget an item or want to add something later, send an additional note.
9. Be specific. When you make a complaint, list your concerns and ask for a response to each concern. This will help lead to an appropriate and complete response.
10. When it appears that someone has made an honest mistake, let them save face; give them room to find a graceful way out. Accept their apology if it's offered. And, if you realize you were in the wrong, be prepared to offer a sincere apology.
11. Watch your language. Focus on the results of an action and how you've been affected, not on your why you think the other person acted the way they did. "Can you please explain how you arrived at my grade; I believe I met the criteria outlined for a "B"

for the following reasons . . . " is more tactful than "You graded me unfairly." The first response states your concern and offers reasons to support your position; the second is likely to be received as an attack. This may close down communication rather than open it up.

12. Allow people time to consider the issues you raise. Do not always press for an immediate answer. Writing letters is one way to accomplish this. Let the other person know that you will contact them if you do not hear back by a certain date. Check back with people even if they deny your request at first. If given time to think, they may change their minds.
13. Give yourself time to think about any options that are presented. If you are communicating by e-mail, don't send a reply right away - especially if you are feeling angry or upset. Save your reply and send it after you've had a chance to calmly think it over and check your message for tone. E-mail can feel like informal conversation, but it's better to think of it as a form of written correspondence. Be careful about making "jokes" in email messages. Remember that the person receiving it can't see the smile on your face!
14. Don't send anything over e-mail that you wouldn't want repeated or "on the record." If you are involved with an issue of a confidential or sensitive nature, don't use e-mail at all. E-mail is not a secure form of communication.
15. Be creative and open to new solutions. Sometimes, by talking openly with the person you are in conflict with, the two of you can jointly find a solution that neither of you had initially thought of. Other times, when two people have different points of view and nothing else has worked, the best solution is a compromise.
16. Keep a log (date, time, place, person, matter discussed) of anything that happens which is related to your complaint or problem.
17. If you believe that your concern may not be resolved satisfactorily, send a copy of your

complaint to the Ombudsman or drop by the office to explain your situation.

18. Finding others who feel the same way you do about a situation may add weight to your complaint. However, if you are approaching someone you're in conflict with as a group, use extra caution so you don't put that person on the defensive. Talking to group can feel more threatening than talking with one person.
19. Pick a good time to talk. Talking with an instructor in a crowded hallway after class or when you know a person is under pressure is likely not the best time to resolve a problem or discuss a sensitive matter.
20. If you are only seeking information and you are not complaining, or you want a conversation to be confidential, state this so there are no misunderstandings.
21. Don't look for revenge! If you decide to "teach someone a lesson", you'll find it becomes very difficult to find a quick and satisfactory solution to your problem.
22. Stay curious. The person you're in conflict with has legitimate reasons (from their perspective) for their decision or position. Trying to understand the other person's reasons can help to solve problems.

Please remember, you are welcome to contact the Ombudsman if you wish any clarification, information or assistance regarding this or other College policies, rules or procedures. (Lansdowne - Paul 222; Interurban - Campus Centre Room 234 - 370-3405; ombuds@camosun.bc.ca)

This is one of a series of handouts produced by the Camosun Ombudsman's office.

(Thanks to the University of Michigan, Office of the Ombuds, for permission to adapt their handout "Sorting Through a Difficult Problem.")