

Guidelines for Teaching Assistants RE: Harassment and Discrimination

Responding to an Initial Complaint

When problems of harassment and discrimination arise, you may be the first person within an official capacity called upon to respond.

As a teaching assistant and employee, you are required under Waterloo's Ethical Behaviour Policy 33 (www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy33.htm), along with provincial human rights and occupational health safety legislation, to respond in a timely and sensitive manner. You are expected to take steps to notify your immediate supervisor as soon as possible. You are not required to take formal action on the complaint. It is important to listen to the complaint and to get help in determining how and where you should proceed.

Responding to an Initial Complaint

There is no set program or template for responding to an initial complaint since each situation is different. An effective initial response can positively influence resolving the problem.

REMEMBER TO:

Put the Individual at Ease:

It is difficult for most people to come forward with concerns. It will help the person if you provide privacy and your total attention, along with adequate time for her/him to express concerns. These actions indicate that you care and may provide a basis for trust. The individual may drop the matter or go elsewhere if trust and rapport are not established.

Listen Actively:

- Maintain an appropriate level of eye contact. Avoiding eye contact can send the message that you would rather be elsewhere.
- Try to **feed back** the substance and the emotional content of what the person is telling you, if appropriate (e.g., "It sounds as though you were very uncomfortable when those remarks were made to you"). This allows you to check for understanding and also lets the person know that you have heard her/him.
- Watch your body language – especially if you become uncomfortable with what you are hearing or in response to the complainant's emotions.
- Do not permit phone calls or visitors to interrupt your conversation.

Reassure:

Individuals sometimes believe that if they disclose their concerns they may **lose control** (i.e., Waterloo will take over the complaint). Indicate that you are there to **help work towards** a resolution. Inform the individual that he/she will not face reprisal or be disadvantaged by coming to you for assistance.

Document the Meeting:

Ask the person if he/she minds whether you take notes during the interview. If the person prefers that you do not, you should make notes immediately following the interview. Store notes in a safe place. Remember – eye contact is still important even while you are taking notes.

WATERLOO

Conflict Management and Human Rights Office

Explain Options:

These may include informal options (e.g. mediation), or more formal options (e.g. internal investigation), or filing a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, Safety Office and/or campus Police.

Explain What You Intend to Do:

Explain to the individual that you will contact the course professor, department chair, associate dean, or the director of the Conflict Management and Human Rights Office (CMAHRO) for assistance and information.

Discuss Confidentiality:

If the individual is concerned about confidentiality, indicate that you will not release his/her name while conferring with others. Also, indicate that there may be a time when it will be necessary to release more details, including names, and that you will attempt to inform him/her in advance.

Yes – maintaining privacy is important. However, as a teaching assistant and an employee of UWaterloo with responsibility for responding to Ontario human rights and occupational safety related complaints, **YOU CAN NOT GUARANTEE CONFIDENTIALITY.** Contact CMAHRO for clarification on whether or not a complaint falls within the jurisdiction of the Ontario Human Rights Code or the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

If a person indicates a strong desire to discuss a complaint in complete confidentiality, he or she should be referred to a counsellor at Counselling Services.

Suggest Other Resources:

Including Counselling Service, Health Services, campus Police, Safety Office and CMAHRO

Before Concluding the Meeting – Ask:

- Has the complainant expressed everything that he/she felt was important to discuss?
- What is her/his understanding regarding the next steps?
- Is he/she able to talk with someone close about their concerns?

If the person indicates a lack of understanding, or if you sense she/he may need more time, take the time now. Try to encourage the individual to fully disclose concerns without seeming impatient or forceful in your manner. If the person still appears to be in a highly emotional state, contact Counselling Services (Ext. 32655) for support, or after normal office hours, contact campus Police (Ext. 22222).

Agree on a Time for You to Get Back to the Individual and MEET IT:

Try to respond within 48 hours. Explain that you will seek out more information regarding the concern and commit to a time to have a follow-up discussion. This demonstrates that you are taking the concern seriously.

After the Initial Contact:

Draft Notes:

Compile your notes either during the meeting or immediately following as notes are critical if the complaint proceeds externally. Store notes in a safe place.

Get Help Immediately:

From your course professor, department chair, associate dean or from CMAHRO (Ext. 39526; <https://uwaterloo.ca/conflict-management-human-rights>).

REMEMBER: LISTEN AND GET HELP