Graduate Student Appeals Procedures

Northeastern University affirms that it is essential to provide an appeals mechanism to students who believe that they have been erroneously, capriciously, inappropriately, or otherwise unfairly treated.

Academic Appeals

It is the policy of the university that all students shall be treated fairly with respect to evaluations made of their academic performance, standing, and progress. The university presumes that academic judgments by its faculty are fair, consistent, and objective. Students must understand that the substitution of a different academic judgment for that of the original evaluator is a serious intrusion upon teaching prerogatives. Nonetheless, the university believes it is essential to provide an appeals mechanism to students who believe that they were erroneously, capriciously, or otherwise unfairly treated in an academic or cooperative education determination. This includes claims of misinterpretation or inequitable application of any academic provision of the student handbook or Faculty Handbook. Issues concerning admission or readmission into a program cannot be appealed beyond the college level.

Before invoking the appeals procedures, students are always encouraged to speak informally to their instructors or academic advisors about any determination or grade about which they have questions. If students choose to pursue an appeal, the process is described in the appeals section that follows.

Scientific or Research Misconduct

Scientific or research misconduct is defined as fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the academic and scientific community for proposing, conducting, or reporting research and does not include honest error or honest differences in interpretation or judgments of data. (Further information can be obtained from the U.S. Office of Research Integrity, Department of Health and Human Services (http://www.ori.dhhs.gov/). Possible incidences of misconduct are to be reported immediately to the vice provost for graduate education, who will initiate the appropriate procedures. Findings of scientific or research misconduct cannot be appealed through the process below.

Nonacademic Appeals

It is the policy of the university that all students shall be treated with respect and that all evaluations of their employment performance will be fair, consistent, and objective. This includes claims of misinterpretation or inequitable application of any employment provision of the student handbook. The student is always encouraged to speak informally to his or her supervisor about any determination about which he or she has questions prior to invoking the appeals procedures.

If the student chooses to pursue an appeal, the process is described in the appeals section that follows.

Appeal of Final Grades

It is the policy of the university that all students will be treated fairly in evaluations made of their academic performance, standing, and progress. The university presumes that academic judgments by its faculty are fair, consistent, and objective. Students must understand that the substitution of a different academic judgment for that of the original evaluator is a serious intrusion upon teaching prerogatives. Nonetheless, the university believes it is essential to provide an appeals mechanism to students who believe that they were erroneously, capriciously, or otherwise unfairly treated in an academic or cooperative education determination. This includes claims of misinterpretation or inequitable application of any academic provision of the university’s undergraduate or graduate catalog, student handbook, or Faculty Handbook. However, graduate student issues involving admission or readmission in a program cannot be appealed beyond the college level.

In most cases, students should first discuss their concerns with the faculty member who taught the course to see if it is possible to reach agreement on the issue(s). If the student is not satisfied with the outcome of this discussion, or if the student is not comfortable discussing the issue with the instructor, the student should request a meeting with the department chair, or a person named by the chair, to attempt a department-level resolution of the appeal. If these informal attempts to resolve the issue fail, the student can enter the formal procedure at the college level as follows.

STEP 1

A student may appeal an academic determination by submitting a written statement (the Statement) that specifies the details of the action or judgment. This Statement should include when the problem occurred, who was involved, the basis of the appeal, and the resolution sought by the student. For students in the College of Professional Studies (CPS), the Statement is submitted to the school official designated by the Vice President for Professional and Continuing Studies. Graduate students (other than CPS) should submit the Statement to the graduate coordinator in the department (where one exists). If there is no department-level coordinator, the appeal should proceed to Step 2. All appeals of grades should be initiated and resolved before the student graduates. If a student wishes to dispute a grade in his or her final term, this must be done within forty-five calendar days of graduation. If the appeal concerns a cooperative education determination, it is submitted to the dean of the college in which the student is enrolled. The Statement must specify the details of the action or judgment and the basis for the appeal. All parties shall cooperate and act expeditiously in processing the appeal to completion.

Though students are always entitled to seek the advice of legal counsel, students may not be represented by a lawyer in the informal or formal academic appeal procedures. A student may consult with the Vice Provost for Graduate Education, Vice President for Professional and Continuing Studies (in the case of CPS students), or their designees at any point in this procedure for advice or assistance. The dean, vice president, or provost may take whatever steps they deem reasonably appropriate to achieve voluntary resolution of the problem at any stage of these procedures.

The Statement should be submitted within twenty-eight working days (or twenty working days [four calendar weeks] for CPS students) of the day when the student learns of the academic determination in question. For course grade appeal in the CPS, the Statement must be submitted within twenty days after grades are posted to the student academic record. Grades are typically available the Tuesday after the term ends and are viewable through the student’s myNEU account.

If a student feels that he or she has been the victim of harassment or of discrimination prohibited by law or by university policy, he or she should consult with the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity as soon as he or she becomes aware of alleged prohibited harassment or discrimination.
and is not required to wait until a term grade or determination is received before seeking advice or redress. If the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity is advised of such alleged prohibited conduct as part of an academic appeal (see below), the appeal shall be pursued and investigated first through the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity. In such cases, the student should submit the appeal to the appropriate dean(s) described in this step, with a copy also given to the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity. Following a resolution of the sexual harassment/discrimination issues, any remaining academic issues will be addressed, at the request of the student, according to the academic appeals procedures.

**STEP 2**
The dean or CPS vice president shall respond to the student in writing, including specific instructions for the student to seek an informal resolution to the matter, unless such course of action, as outlined by the student in his or her Statement, is demonstrably futile. These directions shall include discussing the matter with the person whom the student identifies as involved in the matter. If the student is not satisfied with the informal resolution, the dean or CPS vice president shall discuss the matter with the department chair (where one exists), graduate coordinator, consultant, program director, or associate dean (as appropriate) or equivalent supervisor and the dean of the college in which the faculty member involved in the matter serves, who shall attempt to effect an informal resolution. The student shall also have the right to discuss the matter with the chair (where one exists) or equivalent supervisor in which department the faculty member involved in the matter serves.

If the appeal involves allegations of prohibited harassment or discrimination, the dean shall consult with the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity before making this response and shall, as part of this response, explain the role that the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity will play in steps 2 and 3 of this procedure.

A copy of this response shall be sent to the department chair or equivalent supervisor of the appropriate unit.

**STEP 3**
If the appeal cannot be resolved informally within thirty calendar days of the student’s original submission of his or her Statement to the dean or CPS vice president, or if he or she is not satisfied with the disposition of the matter at Step 2, the student may proceed with the appeal through his or her college’s or school’s established academic appeals procedure. The dean or the academic standing committee, as applicable, must provide the student and the involved faculty member with a written report of the finding(s) and decision.

This step involves a review by an academic standing committee making the recommendation to the dean or CPS vice president. The student may obtain a copy of the operating rules of the academic standing committee from the dean of the college involved.

In appeals involving allegations of prohibited harassment or discrimination, the dean or academic standing committee shall receive a report of the findings of the investigation of the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity for incorporation into its own report on matters left unresolved by that finding that were referred to it. The dean/CPS vice president or committee shall be without authority to reverse or modify the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity finding(s) or resolution.

**STEP 4**
If the student or the involved faculty member is not satisfied with the dean’s or CPS vice president’s disposition of the matter or if the appeal is not resolved within thirty calendar days after originally submitted to the dean or CPS vice president pursuant to step 1, he or she may further pursue the matter by requesting in writing within fourteen calendar days that the university convene an academic appeals resolution committee to review the issue. Students may obtain information on this process in either the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs (104 EI) or the Office of the Provost (110 CH). This committee has been designated as the final authority on these matters. This request must be made within fourteen calendar days of the finding of the academic standing committee in step 3.

1. **Academic Appeals Resolution Committee**
The academic appeals resolution committee includes:

   - The Vice Provost for Graduate Education or a designee.
   - The student’s faculty advisor will be appointed by the appropriate vice provost except in cases where no specific advisor exists, or where the faculty advisor is involved in the dispute. In those cases, a faculty member from the student’s major college, department, or area of specialization will be appointed.
   - Two faculty members appointed by the Faculty Senate Agenda Committee (if the appeal is based on a cooperative education determination, one of the faculty members shall be a member of the cooperative education faculty, but not from the student’s area of study) and a representative of the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity (if the appeal had at any point involved a matter of sexual harassment/discrimination).
   - The chair shall be elected from among the committee’s three faculty members but cannot be the student’s faculty advisor.

2. **Preliminary Matters**
   If the academic appeals resolution committee determines, by a majority vote, that the appeal is patently without substance or merit, it may dismiss the appeal.

3. **Investigation**
The academic appeals resolution committee shall investigate the matter under appeal as quickly as possible by studying the relevant documents, interviewing the parties (especially the student and the involved faculty member), and taking any other action it deems appropriate. At no time shall the committee be bound by rules of evidence but shall at all times conduct itself in a manner that is not arbitrary or capricious. The academic appeals resolution committee may, but is not required to, hold a hearing prior to resolving the issues. However, in all instances, the student and the involved faculty member shall have the right to appear and testify separately and privately before the academic appeals resolution committee. The student shall have the right to have an advocate from the university community present during his or her testimony to the academic appeals resolution committee.

4. **Authority to Act**
The academic appeals resolution committee has been designated as the final authority on these matters. At the conclusion of its investigation, the academic appeals resolution committee shall resolve, by majority vote, the issue by either upholding the finding of the academic standing committee or dean/CPS vice president, in which case no further appeal is available, or granting such relief to the student as the appeals resolution committee deems appropriate.

   a. The academic appeals resolution committee may not determine a resolution that contradicts the prior findings or actions of the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity with respect to elements of this appeal.
b. In the event of a tie vote, the action of the academic standing committee or dean/CPS vice president shall be considered upheld.

5. Resolution
All direct parties to the appeal, including but not limited to the student, the CPS vice president or provost, the dean, the department chair or equivalent supervisors, graduate coordinator or equivalent supervisor, and the faculty member shall be promptly informed in writing of the decisions and actions taken (i.e., the Report) during this academic appeals procedure.

6. Report
A written Report of the appeal and its resolution shall be submitted by the chair of the academic appeals resolution committee to the student, the involved faculty member, the Faculty Senate Agenda Committee, the vice president for student affairs, the appropriate vice provost, the registrar, and the dean or CPS vice president, as appropriate.

7. Action
The dean(s) or CPS vice president or his or her designee in the involved college(s) shall take whatever action is necessary to implement fully the resolution of the academic appeals resolution committee. This includes reporting the change of grade to the registrar.

8. Appeal
No further appeal can be instituted by the student or the involved faculty member with respect to the issue(s) raised at any level of the formal appeals resolutions procedures once adjudicated.