AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENT COMPLAINTS
For academic year 2017-18

SUMMARY
As required by the federal government and HLC, the accrediting body of Western Michigan University, a report has been compiled detailing complaints that were filed during the 2017-18 academic year.

OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS
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Overview of Student Complaint Tracking and Reporting, 2017-18

Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Policy: Institutional Records of Student Complaints

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is Western Michigan University’s accrediting agency. The HLC ensures that each of its member institutions are meeting their Title IV program responsibilities as well as complying with the expectations of specific regulations accreditors must enforce. Compliance is necessary to ensure that HLC-accredited institutions are eligible for federal financial aid.

One of their policies states the following:

“An institution shall make available an account of the student complaints it has received, its processing of those complaints, and how that processing comports with the institution’s policies and procedures on the handling of grievances or complaints.”

This specific policy (FDCR.A.10.030) was passed down through regulation enacted by the federal government.

Establishing a Policy for Student Complaint Tracking and Reporting at WMU

In 2017, a committee was assigned to develop and implement a University policy on complaint tracking that would lead to a standardized process and language for handling complaints. Following this, a process of tracking the complaints and then reporting them was established in order to learn from the findings and integrate necessary changes for improving services, teaching, or learning and workplace satisfaction.

The resulting policy can be found on wmich.edu/policies/student-complaint-tracking-reporting. This page lists the definition of an “official complaint” as “any documented concern that WMU has violated a law, policy, or incorrectly applied an established practice. Complaints may be academic or non-academic in nature. Complaints do not supersede or replace misconduct or grievance procedures already in place.”

Over the summer of 2018, units from all divisions were asked to submit a form detailing their log of student complaints from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018. The form collected information on:

- Total number of complaints
- Complaint categories
- Description of the process the unit/department uses to manage student complaints
- History of complaints received and processed
- Average timeline for complaint reviews and resolutions
- Resolution type
- Documentation of how units review complaint information and utilize in planning for process improvement
- Website link to unit student complaint procedures

This information was collected to solidify our compliance with federal policy on student complaints. 23 units from 3 divisions reported on the aforementioned pieces of information:
Since these categories are somewhat abstract, here is a glossary with definitions and examples from the data:

**Academic** – Any complaint that arises in the academic sphere of the university, including complaints about instructors, grades, syllabi, faculty, etc. **Example:** a complainant felt that the syllabus had not been followed by the instructor.

**Communication** – When some vital information has failed to be disseminated correctly or viably. **Example:** a complainant was unable to find a policy about their residence hall.

**Disability Services** – Any complaint that involves a disability or inaccessibility that must be accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act. **Example:** one complainant was not offered adequate time to complete an exam in line with their disability.

**Discrimination** – A discriminatory complaint arises when a complainant feels that they have not been treated equitably due to a protected identity that they hold. **Example:** one student was told that they were not permitted to wear something which was what their religion required of them.

**Facility/Housing** – A facility or housing complaint involves any issue that pertains to an on-campus building, residence hall, or other facility. **Examples:** a complaint about mail processing in the residence halls, a complaint about a student group’s use of a facility, and a complaint about some pests in a building.
**Financial** – A financial complaint concerns any fines, fees, or bills that a student believes has been assessed to them in error, but the definition also includes complaints about financial aid. **Example:** some students complained about charges they were assessed as “damage” in their residence halls.

**Health and Cleanliness** – Any complaint that has to do with hygiene, health, wellness, or cleanliness belonged to this category. **Example:** one complainant was upset about a staff’s lack of hand washing in a setting where it would have been expected.

**Interpersonal Conflict** – Any verbal, physical, or emotional abuse that occurs between two individuals. **Example:** a complainant felt that their roommate was emotionally abusing them.

**Law/Policy** – Any complaint that claims that a law or policy that the institution is bound to has been broken, unsatisfactorily met, or gone entirely unfulfilled. **Examples:** a group of students complained that their laundry had been stolen and the issue had not been resolved and another group of students complained about the structure of a program in which they participated.

**Workplace** – A workplace complaint involves a student’s on-campus part time job. **Example:** Several students raised complaints about their work schedule.

**Other** – A complaint that does not fit into any of the primary categories.

The majority of complaints were academic in nature and came from the Ombudsman; grade appeals, hardship withdrawal, etc. Many of the “other” complaints were also provided by the Ombudsman. Those complaints crossed over into other existing categories but were grouped as “other” and could not be separated. Only one complaint each was recorded relating to Disability Services and Health and Cleanliness. The former was about length of time for an exam, and the latter about hand hygiene.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Row Labels</th>
<th>Sum of # Complaints</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Ombudsman</td>
<td>262</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of the President</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Life</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Education and Human Development</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the Provost and VPAA</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs Facilities Services</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELCIS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Honors College</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Undergraduate Studies</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career and Student Employment Services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Reciduale Health Center</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development &amp; Alumni Relations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haworth College of Business</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Recreation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Finance</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Fine Arts</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Aviation</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>WMUK 102.1 FM</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Admissions and Services</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended University Programs</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Services</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>490.5</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Many units reported no complaints whatsoever, which may demonstrate a need for clarity in the reporting forms and definitions. The lack of information also suggests that the new policy on tracking complaints has not been effectively broadcasted or consistently understood across campus. Meanwhile, the Ombudsman and the Office of the President fielded many complaints. Nearly all of these complaints were referred out to the appropriate units for resolution. Note: the “grand total” results in a fraction due to units providing ranges of complaints rather than set numbers; in these cases, the average of the two numbers given was taken (i.e. 10-20 would be 15), resulting in fractions.

**Resolutions of Complaints and Time to Resolution**

Complaint resolutions were broken down into 4 categories:

1. Clarification provided to student
2. Resolution provided to student
3. Procedural change recommended
4. Policy change recommended

Here are the outcomes among all reports:

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarifications</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolutions</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Changes</td>
<td>11</td>
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</table>

Not all units reported on this section. For some complaints, all 4 categories were selected, meaning a policy change, procedural change, resolution, and clarification were provided to the complainant.

Many complaints were passed on to the appropriate parties if they did not fall within the jurisdiction of a given unit. For complaints that were given clarifications, the clarification usually involved informing students on pre-established policy that must be followed. For resolutions, units at times had to address gaps in their own policy or conflicting internal policies. Resolutions also could have involved procedural changes and/or policy changes. One example of a procedural change was a switch from one timesheet reporting system to another. One example of a policy change was aligning a unit’s handbook with an official University contract.

Units were also asked the average number of days it took to resolve a complaint. Here are the breakdowns of that question by category:
Although the sample sizes are small, a comparison can be made to discover areas and units in which we, as an institution, can be more efficient in resolving complaints.

*This graph excludes data from units that reported zero complaints and from one outlier that had only one complaint that took 60 days to resolve.

Keeping in mind that sample sizes for complaints are small, this is a breakdown of the average length of time to resolution. The median number of complaints per unit was 14 while the median number of unique complaints per unit was only 3. This means that many students often would complain to units about the same issue. There was a moderately strong correlation (r=.48) between the average number of days to resolution and the number of complaints per unit. The Ombudsman had the most complaints processed at 262.
Decreasing Silos Through Collaboration

The complaint resolution process often involves cross collaboration between units. Units were asked to list units to which they referred complaints; they were also asked to name units that referred complaints to them. Units were not asked how many referrals were sent or received, just to list some units and departments that were helpful in resolving the students’ issues.

Here are the top 17 units that were mentioned:

![Most Mentioned Referral Units (top 17)](image)

Institutional Equity was the most referenced unit followed by the Ombudsman. Of units that had a non-zero number of complaints to submit, most of them provided referral units with which they had worked throughout the year.

Issues that Arose During the Process

1. Not all units submitted reports.

   We are missing reports from:

   a. Diversity & Inclusion
      i. Disability Services for Students
      ii. Kalamazoo Promise Scholars Program
      iii. LBGT Student Services
      iv. Multicultural Affairs
   b. Government Affairs & University Relations
   c. Office of the Vice President for Research
   d. Intercollegiate Athletics
   e. Budget and Personnel
   f. Institutional Equity
   g. Legal Affairs
   h. Provost & VP for Academic Affairs
      i. College of Engineering and Applied Sciences
      ii. College of Health and Human Services
      iii. University Libraries
iv. Enrollment Management  
v. Office of Information Technology

i. **VP for Student Affairs**  
i. Assessment and Effectiveness  
ii. Bernhard Center  
iii. Business Operations  
iv. Dean of Students  
v. Family Engagement  
vi. Finance and Infrastructure  
vii. Information Systems  
viii. Marketing and Communication  
ix. Office of Student Engagement  
x. Student Conduct  
xi. WMU Dining Services  
xii. WMU Signature

j. **Sustainability**

The large number of missing reports was expected due to the relatively quick expectation for units to report. Next year’s reports are expected to and must be more plentiful.

This list does not include units that did report but listed zero complaints, but units are encouraged to submit a report even if there are zero complaints to report.

2. **Some units expressed difficulty in filling out and understanding the form.**

Institutional Effectiveness was asked to clarify the form’s components by some units. This information will be used to develop the reporting instrument for 2019-19. This will be the second year of policy implementation. All units will be expected to comply with reporting requirements.

3. **Units claimed they had zero complaints.**

Here are the units that reported zero complaints for 2017-18:

a. Business and Finance  
b. College of Aviation  
c. College of Fine Arts  
d. Extended University Programs  
e. Immigration Services  
f. International Admissions and Services  
g. WMUK 102.1 FM

This list will be reviewed by the Ombudsman.
Federal Compliance

As per the federal government and the Higher Learning Commission, we have obligations in order to maintain compliance and maintain access to funding through Title IV. Here are the questions we need to prove we can answer:

1. What is the institution’s process for handling student complaints?

This process can currently be found on wmich.edu/effectiveness/wmichedueffectivenesscomplaints-0 and the policy on wmich.edu/policies/student-complaint-tracking-reporting. The page details the policy by which we collect and distribute a report on complaints. Further, the Formal Student Complaint Form has been launched through the Ombudsman’s office, located on https://wmich.edu/ombudsman/complaints.

2. Provide the institution’s complaint policy and procedure and the web address where the public can find this information:

These can be found at the below addresses:
wmich.edu/effectiveness/wmichedueffectivenesscomplaints-0
wmich.edu/ombudsman/complaints
wmich.edu/policies/student-complaint-tracking-reporting

3. Provide an aggregated report of the number and type of complaints received since the last comprehensive evaluation by HLC and explain their resolutions.

A modified version of this document as well as the original supplementary spreadsheet should be sufficient to fulfill this requirement.

4. How does the institution integrate what it has learned from the complaint process into improvements in services or in teaching and learning?

During the reporting process, units were asked how they integrate student complaints into their planning and quality improvement process. Most units stated that they address student concerns on an ad hoc basis, allowing the concerns to become discussions at weekly staff meetings or retreats. Some units also said that they learn about the best resources and collaborators on campus in solving student complaints through the process itself, and some units stated that they review the concerns from the year at a yearly retreat.