

MFT Program Policy on Student Concerns, Complaints, Grievances, and Appeals

This policy is available to the public via the [Program Handbook and Policies](#) link on the [MFT website](#).

In the interests of maintaining an environment in which students are safe and treated fairly and with respect, the MFT Program has a clear policy on how [graduate student can address concerns, complaints, appeals, and grievances](#).

MFT Documentation of Concerns and Complaints

The MFT Program has adopted the [COAMFTE Accreditation Standards V12 definitions of Student Concerns, Complaints, and Grievances, \(p. 53\)](#)

Student Concerns are informal and relate to minor issues that can be solved between individuals such as student/instructor or student/program director and are usually communicated to the program director or faculty verbally or through informal written communication (i.e., email). Examples may include concerns about course scheduling, timeliness of faculty feedback, etc. Programs do not generally keep formal records of student concerns, although they should have a policy in place for responding to them.

Student Complaints are communicated to the program in writing regarding issues that have significant negative impact on students' learning experiences. Examples may include a grade appeal or appeal of an admissions decision. Complaints usually require a formal process within the program to bring about resolution, and records regarding their resolution are generally kept on file for a period of time based on the program's and/or university's policy.

Student Grievances refer to formal complaints filed with the program and/or the university through a formal grievance channel. They refer to issues that may violate students' rights. Examples include sexual harassment and discrimination. Records regarding the resolution of grievances are generally kept on file for a period of time based on the program's and/or university's policy.

I. Student Concerns (informal)

An aspect of becoming a professional is learning to effectively seek resolution for disagreements, concerns, and complaints in an appropriate and professional manner. The MFT faculty consider the ability to engage in a respectful interchange of ideas and concerns with peers, supervisors, faculty, and staff to be an important part of a student's professional development and an important graduate student level skill as well as the most expeditious route to problem resolution. Most student concerns can be effectively addressed and resolved between the student and the involved peer or faculty member(s). When a student has an informal concern or

wishes to lodge a complaint, he or she should speak first with the student, faculty, or staff member involved. If the complainant does not feel comfortable meeting with the involved faculty/staff member to discuss a concern, he or she should request to meet with a trusted advisor, faculty member, or the Program or Clinic Directors. The student may prefer to contact the person's supervisor (program director or department head) and request that his or her identity be kept confidential. This meeting will include discussion of what the student would consider to be a resolution to the problem and how he or she would like to proceed after this initial meeting. Notes will not be retained unless the meeting proceeds to a formal procedure.

Faculty response to a student concern is expected to be timely and made within a reasonable time frame (preferably within hours, within a day or two at the most). Faculty should operate on the assumption that a quick response is always better than a delayed response. A timely response conveys faculty desire to be helpful, while a delayed response may convey a negative message, however inadvertent.

II. Student Complaints (written)

The [steps necessary to address a formal complaint, made in writing, such as a grade appeal or a formal student complaint](#) are outlined below. These steps can also be found at the [Graduate School website](#), the [VSU Graduate Catalog](#), and the COEHS Grade Appeal policy.

[Forms](#) for course grade appeal, grievance related to disability, denial of admission to the program, and appeal of dismissal from the MFT program are below.

- [VSU Course Grade Appeal Form](#)
- [Grievance related to a disability](#)
- [Admissions Denial Appeal Form](#)
- [Dismissal from Graduate School Appeal Form \(receipt of a warning letter\)](#)
- [Appealing the 7-Year Rule](#)
- [All Appeal Forms](#)
- [BOR Policy Manual, 4.7.1: The Georgia Board of Regents Policy on student appeals](#)

Grade Appeals

The evaluation of academic work is the prerogative of the instructor and the rules for determining final course grades are to be established by the instructor and given to the students in a course syllabus at the beginning of the semester. The grade appeal procedure is not to be used to review the judgment of an instructor in assessing the quality of a student's work. Possible grounds for an appeal may be circumstances such as these:

- (a) An obvious error in the calculation of the grade.
- (b) The assignment of a grade to a particular student by application of more exacting requirements than were applied to other students in the course.

This policy addresses COAMFTE Eligibility Criterion I: Student Concerns, Complaints, and Grievances Updated Spring 2019. Scheduled for review as necessary or when university policy changes or Spring 2022.

- (c) The assignment of a grade to a particular student on some basis other than performance in the course.
- (d) The assignment of a grade by a substantial departure from the instructor's previously announced/published standards.

Students who believe they have a case that meets these grounds should review the following information and follow the process as outlined. A grade appeal must begin within 30 working days after the registrar's office has posted final grades. Once the appeal process is initiated, the burden of proof is on the student. All forms and meeting notes generated by an appeal or grievance will be retained by the MFT program for no less than two years after the student has graduated or left the program.

The appeal process proceeds as follows:

1. **Instructor.** First discuss your appeal with the instructor who assigned the grade. If the matter is not resolved, the student must fill out a Grade Appeal form and submit it to the instructor. Within 14 days of receipt of the Grade Appeal form, the instructor reviews the appeal, consults with the student as needed, and completes the "Instructor Section" of the Grade Appeal form. If the appeal is not resolved at this level, the appeal moves to the next level.
2. Department Head. Within 14 days of receipt of the Grade Appeal form, the instructor's Head of Department reviews the appeal and the instructor's decision, consults with the student as needed, and completes the "Department Head/Director's Section" of the Grade Appeal form. If the appeal is not resolved at this level, the appeal moves to the next level.
3. Dean of the College. Within 14 days of receipt of the Grade Appeal form, the Dean of the College in which the course was taught reviews the appeal and the decisions made by the instructor and department head, consults with the student as needed, and completes the "Dean's Section" of the Grade Appeal form. If the appeal is not resolved at this level, the Dean of the College may remand the appeal to the Graduate and Advanced Educator Preparation Program Appeals Committee for recommendation.
4. Dean of the Graduate School.
5. Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

III. Student Grievances (filed through formal grievance channels)

The College (COEHS) maintains a grievance process, available to all students, which provides for the discussion and resolution of grievances. Attempts to resolve a grievance should begin informally by speaking with the associated faculty or staff member in the program, department, center, or office most directly connected to the issue. If the issue is not resolved, the grievance may then be directed, in writing, to the department head or director appropriate to the area of concern. The written grievance does not use an established grievance form. Simply submit a

statement by email or in person that provides full details of the grievance and includes date(s), time, and names of witnesses and/or the parties involved.

If the grievance is not satisfactorily resolved at the initial level at which the grievance is initially submitted (typically faculty member, staff, or program director), the student may continue the grievance in writing to

1. the Department Head,
2. then the Dean of COEHS,
3. and finally, to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

If, for any reason, a student does not feel comfortable contacting the involved faculty/staff member to discuss a grievance, they may contact the person's direct supervisor (for faculty or staff, the program director; for the program director, the Department Head) and request that their identity be kept confidential.

Students wishing to report issues of harassment or discrimination should contact Dr. Maggie Viverette in the Office of Social Equity at (229) 333-5463.

Mediation. Students, faculty, and staff can avail themselves of mediation services. This is a voluntary process in which both parties must agree to participate. Notes or documents of any kind that might be generated during a mediation are not retained with the possible exception of a written agreement between the parties. Only the two parties involved retain a copy of the agreement. All other paperwork is shredded.

IV. Complaints of Discrimination and Harassment

Students

Discrimination and harassment are handled through Dr. Maggie Viverette at the Office of Social Equity. To learn about filing a report with the police and more about how to file discrimination and/or sexual misconduct complaints, [click here](#).

The following are guidelines for effective faculty response to complaints of sexual discrimination and misconduct (from the USG Annual Compliance Training, Course, *Title IX for Higher Education*, Topic: *Responding Effectively to Incidents of Sexual Misconduct*):

Purpose: *Use this job aid to help you respond to complaints of sexual discrimination, harassment, violence, and other misconduct at your educational institution.*

Take immediate action

- Take complaints seriously
- Gather as much information as possible about what happened, when it happened, and who else may have witnessed the incident
- Notify the Title IX Coordinator, Dr. Maggie Viverette, immediately at 229-333-5463 or mviveret@valdosta.edu

Observe appropriate confidentiality

- Handle the matter as discreetly as possible

- **Do not promise** the student that you will keep the information absolutely confidential, and inform him or her of your obligation to pass the complaint along according to the institution's grievance procedure. Here is a USG suggested script:
“Before you continue Jane/John, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to help you with what you are experiencing. Please know that if the information you disclose to me involves sexual, dating or domestic assault/harassment, I will have to report it to the proper campus officials so they can take the proper steps to ensure your safety and the safety of others on campus. I cannot promise confidentiality, but depending on the exact situation, it is possible that you may be able to remain anonymous.” Continue by providing the complainant a pamphlet on sexual victimization and pointing them to the resources available to them.

Use good judgment and common sense

- Approach complaints in the way you would to other types of serious misconduct
- Refer to your institution's Title IX policy for guidance. The VSU Sexual Misconduct Policy can be found at the following link: <http://www.valdosta.edu/administration/policies/cover-page-3004.php>
- Be aware of who the Title IX Coordinator is and seek help if you have any questions or concerns.

V. Forms

- [VSU Course Grade Appeal Form](#)
- [Grievance Related To a Disability](#)
- [Admissions Denial Appeal Form](#)
- [Office of Social Equity Intake form](#)
- [Dismissal from Graduate School Appeal Form \(receipt of a warning letter\)](#)
- [Appealing the 7-Year Rule](#)
- [All Appeal Forms](#)
- [BOR Policy Manual, 4.7.1: The Georgia Board of Regents Policy on student appeals](#)

Process for Continuous Improvement

Within a reasonable period not to exceed 60 days from the time a complaint, grievance, or appeal is submitted, the Program Director, faculty or staff member will bring the written complaint, grievance, or appeal to the full MFT faculty and facilitate a discussion of the qualitative data therein for the purpose of continuous program improvement. Questions to be explored include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Is there a program lack/deficiency/failure to act/etc. that played a role in the student's experience leading to the complaint, appeal, or grievance?
 - a. if a lack/failure can be identified, is there something the program can do to correct it?
2. Did the efforts to resolve the complaint, appeal, or grievance follow established COEHS policy and procedure?
 - a. if not, why not?

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- b. does the policy and/or procedure need revision?

Retention of Documents

- I. Any and all documentation (forms, email exchanges, and meeting notes) generated in the course of formal, written student complaints, grievances, or appeals filed with the program and/or the university through formal complaint or grievance channels will be retained by the MFT program for the purpose of accruing qualitative data for review and evaluation for no less than 2 years after the student has graduated or left the program. At the time of disposal, all documents must be shredded.
- II. The program will retain in perpetuity a *Master List of Formal Complaints, Grievances, and Appeals* (V-drive, Accreditation folder, Formal Complaints Grievances Concerns Appeals). This list will document the written complaint or grievance, the resolution, and the program action, if any. The Master List will not contain complainants' names.