

Conflict Resolution Resource Guide

Purpose

Occasionally interactions between students, staff, and faculty result in misunderstandings, disputes, and/or differences of opinion. Sometimes, these differences can be resolved with an informal discussion between the persons involved. In instances where informal resolution is unsuccessful, members of the Department of Psychology at URI have various formal avenues for complaint resolution.

The purpose of this resource guide is to provide students, staff, and faculty with the various options available for addressing work-related conflicts. The emphasis of the conflict resolution process is on early identification and resolution of disputes with fair consideration of both sides of a conflict. Conflict resolution is seen as a process designed to end some dispute by meeting some individual and shared needs. While this document describes and provides hyperlinks to various University-level policies, this document does not serve as its own policy. What is included serves as a resource that describes potential avenues for conflict resolution.

For the purposes of this document the words conflict, dispute, problem, and complaint will be used interchangeably.

General Recommendations

These guidelines are primarily intended to address conflict. It is recommended that you:

- Seek advice from trusted peers or colleagues (see Roles on p.5) and resolution as early as possible.
- Be open to different solutions and perspectives.
- Inform yourself about the spectrum of resources available to support you in completing your work or study within your program (listed in this document).
- Become familiar with department-specific, University-wide, and non-URI policies and regulations for managing conflict (listed in this document).
 - There is a general student complaint procedure for the University that can be found here: <https://web.uri.edu/online/student-resources/complaints/>
- Document the record of conflict and strategies you have tried to implement.
 - Create a log that includes the date, time, and location of conflicts; the specific conflict(s), and the names of any students, faculty, or staff that witnessed the conflict.
 - Save emails or other written correspondence related to the conflict.
 - Follow-up private conversations about conflict with an email to involved individuals that summarizes the discussion.

There are several other options for conflict resolution, which we describe below beginning on page 3.

Items to Consider When Resolving Conflict

What is Your Goal?

Before beginning the process of conflict resolution, it is important to consider your specific goals.

- For example, if confidentiality is important to you, it is recommended that you **directly** inquire with whom you are interacting with about the possibility of confidentiality prior to engaging in the conflict resolution process. You should never assume that conflict resolution procedures are confidential (i.e., kept private). In certain cases (i.e., you are at risk of harming yourself or someone else), your well-being as well as that of others will be prioritized over confidentiality.
- As another example, if you desire for action to be taken against someone you are experiencing conflict with, it is important to know that material reported anonymously about a faculty member cannot be used for faculty evaluations or included in faculty personnel file per URI's Collective Bargaining Agreement. Thus, if this is your goal, you will need to file a non-anonymous report (e.g., a complaint that you sign and file with any URI office/department). Students are strongly encouraged to provide feedback about faculty instructors on course IDEAs which is included in evaluations.
- Determine whether you want to retain the relationship with the individual or not. For example, if there is an issue with a major professor, consider whether you are interested in continuing in the program under their mentorship, or whether you are interested in changing mentors. Depending on your goal, different strategies may be considered.

What is the Nature of the Conflict?

Before beginning the process of conflict resolution, it is important to consider the nature of the conflict, including the severity and frequency of the conflict(s), the persons involved in the conflict(s), and the history of prior conflict resolution strategies. These factors will help determine what steps could be best for your particular conflict(s). While this document presents conflict resolution from resolving conflict internally (e.g., 1-1 with the individual, within the department) to externally (e.g., providing resources outside of the department and URI, more broadly), it should be understood that some types of conflicts may not follow this process (e.g., students may want to seek support outside of the department as a first step). We provide a general figure (page 14) about resources for conflict resolution, but there are too many variables to consider when resolving conflict (e.g., severity of behavior, whether a power dynamic is present, individual styles toward resolving conflicts) to determine in advance what steps would be best for every conflict.

- For example, when the conflict is with someone for whom there is a significant power imbalance or who is in a leadership position within the department, you might consider using an external conflict resolution resource (e.g., an Ombuds Officer see p. 7) first.
- As another example, external conflict resolution resources are most appropriate for types of conflict for which they were designed to address. For instance, OEO if you experience sexual harassment or discrimination or the GAU if you experience a workplace violation in your university assistantship.

What are the Potential Consequences?

Before beginning the process of conflict resolution, it is important to consider the potential negative and positive consequences you may experience during the conflict resolution process. Students often fear retaliation because of conflict resolution. Conduct that could constitute retaliation is prohibited by the URI (as is addressed by the Policy on Nondiscrimination). Further, our department is opposed to retaliatory acts and committed to doing our best to hold each other accountable and protect members in our community with less power. Nonetheless, in situations where there is a strong fear of retaliation, students should seek advice and consider resources that allow for anonymity and/or are external to the department.

Resolution by the Parties Themselves

Because many conflicts can be resolved through improved communication, if the parties involved in the conflict feel comfortable doing so, they are encouraged to talk with each other and attempt to resolve the conflict by mutual understanding, mutual consent, or “agreeing to disagree” without further injury to either side. The parties are advised that confidentiality, which is an important foundation of personal dignity and professional standing, can most easily be preserved if conflicts can be resolved in this manner. This option will not work for everyone. Directly approaching someone you have conflict with can be emotion-laden and uncomfortable. Further, it is recognized that there are inherent power dynamics between students and faculty that make this approach difficult. If students are concerned about potential negative outcomes of conflict resolution, we encourage them to seek support and guidance from the Graduate Program Director, Chair, or other trusted faculty member(s) (see below).

Communication Strategies for Students, Staff, and Faculty to Consider When Managing a Conflict

There are four principles to keep in mind when trying to resolve conflict:

1. **Be engaged in active listening.** Displaying a willingness to listen can help alleviate conflict.
 - Encourage the speaker by asking questions and showing interest.
 - Validate the speaker. You can still show interest in the person while not necessarily agreeing with her/his point of view.
 - Restate the speaker’s message by paraphrasing main points.
 - Center the conflict by trying to find the key points of the message.
2. **Be aware of non-verbal communication.** Body positioning, facial expressions, and vocal tone can go a long way in communicating either support or invalidation. Be open and aware of your body language, helping to defuse emotion.
3. **Use “I” statements.** This is centered in the belief that if the speaker takes responsibility for their statements, others will be less likely to simply react and put up a defense. When comparing the following statements, the first puts the receiver of that message on the defensive due to the blaming and accusing nature of the statement and the second shows the speaker taking ownership.
 - You Statement: “You hurt the lab when you don’t show up on time”
 - I Statement: “I am frustrated when you don’t show up on time”
4. **Avoid common communication obstacles.** Some common obstacles that get in the way of effective mediation are:
 - *Advising...* “Well, I’ll tell you what I’d do...”
 - *Diagnosing...* “Your problem is that you...”
 - *Discounting...* “Cheer up, it’ll work out...”
 - *Lecturing...* “How many times do I have to tell you...”
 - *Threatening...* “This is the last time I will...”
 - *Preaching...* “You ought to know better than to...”

Along with the above strategies, there are several dos and don'ts of managing conflict:

Do...	Don't...
Convey the value of your relationship with the person.	Communicate the solution; it is better to focus on the problem.
Go slowly with what you want to communicate.	Stop communicating.
Try to understand the other person's position.	Use put-downs or sarcasm.
Listen to what the other person is trying to communicate.	Rely on nonverbal hints to communicate, be direct and forthcoming.
Confront the situation or behavior, not the person.	Discuss the problem with others not associated with the conflict unless they are offering support/mediation.

Adapted from: Hedstrom, R.A., & Lauer, L. (2006). Resolving Conflict: Effective mediation tools for coaches. Adult learning module for the MHSAA coaching advancement program. East Lansing, MI: MHSAA.

What to Include in an Email Addressing a Conflict

1. **Identify the problem.** Consider: What is the conflict? How does it affect you and the other person? What are your goals and expectations?
2. **Choose the tone.** The tone (casual vs. professional) should match the severity and nature of the conflict. Avoid using harsh, accusatory, or sarcastic language as this can escalate the conflict or (when resolution is the goal) damage the relationship.
3. **State the facts.** State the facts concisely. Explain what happened, when, where, and why without exaggerating or omitting details. Provide examples or evidence to support your claims, if possible. Avoid making assumptions or judgements about the other person's intentions or actions. Focus on the facts, not the opinions.
4. **Express your feelings.** After stating the facts, you can express your feelings about how the conflict made you feel using "I" statements. This can help the other person understand your perspective.
5. **Propose a solution.** Propose a solution that can resolve the conflict. Explain why you think this solution is the best option and how it can improve the situation. Invite the other person to share their feedback and suggestions and show your readiness to compromise and negotiate.
6. **End with a follow-up action.** Suggest a follow-up action, such as a meeting, a phone call, or an email, to continue the dialogue and finalize the solution.
7. **End with a positive note (If relevant to the conflict/goals).** Leave a note that reinforces your relationship and expresses your hope for resolution. Thank the other person for their time and attention and acknowledge their efforts and contributions. Express your appreciation and respect for them and reaffirm your commitment to work together and overcome the conflict.

See also: <https://louisville.edu/ombuds/selfhelp/reading/writingaletter.pdf>

Resolution within the Psychology Department

Roles:

- **Graduate Program Director** - The program directors can mediate conflicts within their respective program area (Clinical or Behavioral Science)
 - [Dr. Ellen Flannery-Schroeder \(Clinical\)](mailto:efschroeder@uri.edu) - efschroeder@uri.edu
 - [Dr. Joseph Rossi \(Behavioral Science\)](mailto:jrossi@uri.edu) - jrossi@uri.edu
- **Chair** - The department chair can mediate all issues within the department. Involving the chairperson is an option at any time but will be especially important in cases of cross-disputes, or conflicts involving several people.
 - [Dr. Mark Robbins](mailto:markrobb@uri.edu) - markrobb@uri.edu
- **Another Faculty Member** – A trusted faculty member, inside or outside of the department, may help mediate the conflict or offer advice on next steps.
- **Another Student** – A trusted student may help offer support or advice on next steps.
- **A Staff Member** – A trusted staff member may help offer support or offer advice on next steps.

In all scenarios where a third party is involved, the role of the third party and the expectations of all parties should be clearly defined at the outset. A student, faculty, or staff member may decide to ask a third party within the Psychology department to advise, mediate, or advocate for them. For students who are involved in a conflict, there are several types of faculty who might be considered as third parties, including a student's advisor or major professor, the chair, the graduate program director, or another trusted faculty member. Confidentiality remains very important and should be respected by the third parties as well as by the principal parties to the conflict.

1) If there is a complaint or grievance regarding a specific course or supervisor/supervisee or mentor/mentee relationship, the student should consider whether they feel comfortable raising the concern with the faculty member first. The student may choose to involve a neutral third party ("mediator"). If they do not, or if they do and the problem is not resolved, the student can then contact a third party to help mediate the concern. For most conflicts and in most cases, it is recommended that the student involve the Graduate Program Director to help mediate the concern. If further support is needed, the Department Chair can be included to help resolve the problem. If there is a complaint about a Graduate Program Director, the student should contact the Department Chair to help resolve the concern. If there is a complaint about the Department Chair, the student should contact the Dean within the College of Health Sciences assigned to the Department of Psychology to help resolve the concern.

2) If there is a complaint or grievance regarding the conduct of a peer, the student can contact a third party to help mediate the concern. For most conflicts and in most cases, it is recommended that the student involve the Graduate Program Director. If further resolution is needed, the Department Chair can be included to help resolve the concern.

3) If there is a complaint about the graduate program, the student can contact a third party to help mediate the concern. For most conflicts and in most cases, it is recommended that the student should contact the Graduate Program Director. The Department Chair can be brought in to help resolve the problem.

4) If there is still a complaint that has not been resolved by going through these steps that end with involving the Department Chair in scenarios #1-#3 above, the student can contact the Dean within the College of Health Sciences assigned to the Department of Psychology.

Changing a Major Professor or Mentor

While most students enter the Department with a major professor or mentor, there are many instances in which students might change mentors or find a co-mentor during their studies. The department is strongly committed to securing appropriate mentors for students who decide to change mentors due to conflict. Students should not be worried that the decision to change mentorship will result in dismissal from the program.

Outlined below are some steps a faculty member might take to identify and remediate conflict in a mentoring relationship:

- a) Clearly define expectations for the mentor and the mentee, including by completing the Mentor-Mentee Agreement. Revisit and revise these expectations (Mentor-Mentee Agreement) on a regular basis (e.g., annually).
- b) Regular (e.g., annual) evaluation of the mentor/mentee relationship.
- c) Regular meetings (e.g., bi-weekly) to encourage communication, including addressing mentor and other (e.g., lab) conflicts as they arise, reviewing progress in the lab and larger program (e.g., milestones), and identifying needs.
- d) Model conflict resolution behavior, including active listening and collaborative problem solving.

Outlined below are steps a student might take if they are considering changing mentors. The Graduate School outlines specific policies and procedures in URI's Graduate Student Manual in section [8.50 Changes in Committee Membership for Master's and Doctoral Students](#).

- e) Explore alternative advisors. Speak with trusted peers about who might be a good mentor to switch to. Let them know that you are just exploring your options and you would appreciate their discretion. If they ask why you are thinking of leaving, explain at a high level, such as "incompatible styles." Remember that your prospective advisor doesn't have to match with your research interests 100%. They need to provide advice and support; technical expertise can be provided by subject matter experts internal and external to the University.
- f) Talk to prospective advisors and find out if they are open to your interests and to mentoring a student at your level in the program (e.g., pre-master's, post comps).
- g) Once you've located a prospective advisor that you would like to work with, collaborate with them to identify the best timing for the transition.
- h) If you're comfortable, have a conversation with your current advisor about the incompatibility in your styles and your plan to change advisors. You might want to include another trusted third party in this meeting such as a Department Chair or Program Director.

Resolution beyond the Psychology Department at URI

Outside the department, parties to a conflict may consult the Dean of the College of Health Sciences, the Dean of the Graduate School, the Associate Deans of the Graduate School, or the University Ombuds Officer. Using these resources would come (i) after exhausting options within the department or (ii) in cases where the nature of the conflict made resolution outside the department preferable. Confidentiality remains very important; however, the difficulty of maintaining confidentiality may increase as more people, and people further removed from the original conflict, become involved. *If confidentiality is important to you, you will want to verify before providing details to anyone what their ability to maintain confidentiality is.*

Dean/Associate Deans of the College of Health Sciences

If there is still a complaint that has not been resolved by going through these steps that ended with involving the Department Chair in scenarios above, the student can contact the Dean of the College of Health Sciences. If there is a complaint about the Department Chair, the student should contact the Dean of the College of Health Sciences to help resolve the concern. Of note, the Associate Dean assigned to the Department of Psychology will be included in these conversations with the Dean. If the student decides to go to the Associate Dean assigned to the Department of Psychology, the Dean will be included in the conversation. Unless the conflict is with the Chair, the Dean/Associate Dean will share the issue with the Chair.

Website: <https://web.uri.edu/chs/people/>

Dean of the Graduate School

Should the issues comprising the conflict extend beyond the bounds of department control or resolution or if the student is unsatisfied with the outcome at the department level, the conflict may be taken to the Dean of the Graduate School. They handle matters relating to graduate policy and regulations, academic performance, financial support, and other unforeseen or unique problems.

Website: <https://web.uri.edu/graduate-manual/>

University Ombuds Officer

Website: <https://web.uri.edu/ombud/>

All Conversations and Meetings are Confidential with the Ombuds Officer

The Ombuds officer is an advocate for fairness and equity who offers community members a chance to talk about issues in a candid and authentic manner without fear of reprisal. Efforts are geared toward managing conflict, thereby improving the student experience and the work environment.

At URI, the Ombud is a confidential, objective, last resort for problems with university procedures and processes. The primary function of the Ombud is to mediate disputes where students, faculty or staff feel they have been treated unfairly by someone in authority at URI. The Ombud cannot alone reverse others' decisions but can report their refusal to follow Ombud recommendations to their administrative superiors up to the President of the University. The Ombud is to provide a system for handling individual problems and complaints about university processes. The Ombud has no authority to reverse or alter decisions by other university officials, for instance to change grades, or reinstate a student.

How can the Ombud Officer help me?

- Facilitate a difficult conversation or meeting.
- Strategize the most appropriate techniques for an ongoing issue or concern.

- Help to develop and evaluate different courses of action.
- Mediate disagreements or misunderstandings.
- Identify constructive processes for working through challenging situations.

What the Ombuds Officer cannot do?

- Advocate for the university or the student, or any particular point of view.
- Make or change university decisions, rules, or policies.
- Set aside a decision or supersede the authority of another university official.
- Participate in formal grievance procedures.
- Provide legal advice.
- Conduct formal investigations.
- Accept notice of formal complaints.
- Withhold concerns that fall under the Title IX statute from the Office of Equal Opportunity.

URI is now in the process of searching for a permanent Ombud. Gerry Tyler (gtyler@mail.uri.edu), Professor Emerita of Political Science, is currently serving as the Interim Ombud at URI.

The Graduate Assistants Union (GAU) at URI

The GAU is an organization of graduate assistants where they fight for better pay benefits, fair treatment, strong contracts, and a say in how the institution is run. The GAU at URI has an online form to voice concerns. If you would like to discuss an incident, workplace condition, or issue that you believe may violate your rights as an employee, contact GAU within 15 working days to report an incident.

More information is here: <https://www.urigau.org/gau-helpline>

****Note:** Students who have a fellowship are not able to join the GAU, although they may still reach out to voice concerns.

Anti-Bias Reporting at URI

If you experience or witness an incident of discrimination based on your age, gender, gender identity and/or gender expression, physical or mental disability, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status at the University of Rhode Island, you may submit a Bias Report Form. If you would like direct communication from the BRT, you are encouraged to provide your contact information. Note that your name and contact information are not required to submit the form.

<https://web.uri.edu/brt/>

Office of Equal Opportunity at URI

The Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) is responsible for leading and directing the University's civil rights compliance programs, with emphasis on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in service delivery; Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment; The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; equal opportunity and affirmative action compliance. OEO investigates and addresses complaints of harassment, discrimination, retaliation, and hostile work environment; provides training and counseling on civil rights compliance topics; conducts internal civil rights compliance reviews; serves as liaison between state and federal civil rights enforcement and regulatory agencies and the University; and identifies areas of underutilization in the workforce and works with the leadership to develop strategies to increase representation in the workforce.

If you have concerns about discrimination or harassment in service delivery or employment, you may contact OEO to schedule a consultation with a member of the team.

[-https://web.uri.edu/affirmativeaction/complaint-form-04-26-16/](https://web.uri.edu/affirmativeaction/complaint-form-04-26-16/)

Reporting Prohibited Discrimination

If any University faculty, staff, student, volunteer, visitor, affiliate, or contractor, believes their rights (and/or the rights of others) have been violated and wish further information, advice, or assistance in filing a complaint, they should contact:

Office of Equal Opportunity
201 Carlotti Administration Building
Kingston, Rhode Island 02881
Phone: (401) 874-4929

Office of General Counsel at URI

The role of the Office of General Counsel (OGC) is to represent and provide legal advice to the University and its Board of Trustees. Other than those situations qualifying for indemnification pursuant to Article IX of the [URI Board of Trustees Bylaws](#), OGC does not and cannot represent any students, employees, or other members of the University community in their personal capacities.

If you wish to report a legal or compliance issue or concern, you should feel free to reach out to any attorney in the OGC but it is important that, in doing so, you understand that the role of attorneys in the OGC is to give legal advice to URI and its Board of Trustees and to represent URI only. This means that, although our communications are generally confidential and subject to the attorney-client privilege, that privilege belongs to URI, not to any individual making a report, and we may disclose information we learn from you in the interests of representing URI. If you wish to make a confidential report you are encouraged to make use of URI's reporting hotlines for [students, staff, and faculty](#).

Requests for legal services on any new University-related matter should be submitted via email to the OGC's matter intake email at OGC-service-request-group@uri.edu. All relevant documents and information, including any upcoming deadlines, should be included with your request. If the request is for review or drafting of a contract, please read the [Contract Review Protocol](#) for requirements and assure that the [Contract Cover Sheet](#) and [Appendix A](#) are completed prior to submitting your request.

Upon receipt of a new request for legal services we will verify that it is a new matter (that there is not an existing matter already open). If there is an existing file already open, the assigned attorney on that matter will email you with the matter number and name. If it is a new matter, it will be reviewed for completeness and compliance with the [Contract Review Protocol](#), if applicable. You will be contacted with an initial email from a member of the OGC, generally within one to two working days. If the request is not complete, this initial contact will consist of questions and requests for missing items. Once a new matter request is verified to be complete, an OGC file will be opened, and the matter will be assigned to one of our attorneys. You will then receive an email advising you of the matter number and name and who has been assigned to handle the matter. Once you have received this email, any email communications sent on your matter should be directed to the assigned attorney with the matter number and name in the subject line. It is not necessary to copy other members of the OGC.

Title IX at URI

Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on the sex (gender) of employees and students of educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance.

Any student, faculty, or staff member with questions or concerns about the [applicable University policies](#) or who believes that they have been the victim of sex discrimination, sexual harassment, or sexual violence may contact the University's Title IX coordinator: tixc@etal.uri.edu

The University's Title IX policy and procedures provide for the prompt and equitable resolution of student and employee complaints alleging any action that would be prohibited by Title IX, as well as a grievance process that complies with the Title IX regulations as they pertain to formal complaints. [The University's Title IX policy and grievance procedures](#) describe the grievance procedures and grievance process, including how to report or file a complaint of sex discrimination, how to report or file a formal complaint of sexual harassment, and how the University will respond.

Resolution beyond URI

All individuals shall be informed regarding their right to seek redress through the following outside agencies:

Office of Civil Rights, Region I US Department of Education 5 Post Office Square, 8th Floor
Boston, MA 02109-3921
Tel.: (617) 289-0111
Fax: (617) 289-0150 <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/howto.html>

United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission John F. Kennedy Federal Building
475 Government Center
Boston, MA 02203
Phone: 1-800-669-4000
Fax: 617-565-3196 <http://www.eeoc.gov/field/boston/index.cfm>

Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights 180 Westminster Street, 3rd Floor Providence,
Rhode Island 02903
Tel: 401-222-2661 // 401-222-2664
Fax: 401-222-2616
<http://www.richr.ri.gov/>

Legal Counsel

Students can always seek independent legal counsel. Additionally, if a student is a member of the [URI Graduate Assistants United \(GAU\)](#), the GAU may provide legal counsel or assist with finding legal counsel.

American Psychological Association (APA)

URI's Clinical Psychology program is accredited. You have the option to contact the appropriate accreditation entities, which may be a regional accrediting body and/or the APA accreditation office to file a complaint. Most accreditation entities have specific criteria that outline appropriate faculty/program interactions with students in ways that respect, support and empower students. See more information here: <https://accreditation.apa.org/>

If you believe that an ethical violation has occurred, you have the right to file a complaint with the APA ethics office about an APA member or you may contact the relevant state licensing boards about psychologists that they license. Having documentation about specific behaviors, as well as attempts to address the perceived problems may be requested and useful.

Conflict Resolution Support Summary

