Guideline 128 - Complaints

Users' Complaints

Complaints can be quite useful in improvement of Library operations and should be taken seriously. While Guideline 127 concerning suggestions is understood to encompass written complaints in general, the present guideline and procedure has been devised to guide staff handling in-person (and telephone) complaints from users, as these are sometimes challenging.

During initial staff orientation and training, supervisors should advise staff of proper unit procedures for receiving and resolving complaints, and review with staff those types of complaints most commonly received. Supervisors should also periodically review the handling of complaints with unit staff, not only to confirm procedures and share techniques for complaint negotiations, but also to evaluate the substance and apparent pattern (if any) of complaints in order to improve operations.

Basic principles for staff handling of complaints include:

- Listen attentively to the complaint and do not react emotionally. Maintain “high ground” at all times;
- Do not return rudeness or abuse [see note below].
- Be sure to get the full name of the complainant early in the discussion. Sometimes anonymity tempts people to be rude or more abusive when complaining.
- Give the complainant your name and position/title—they have a right to know who is hearing their complaint. You don’t have to show identification or give other, personal information about yourself.
- Try to keep the complainant focused on what exactly the problem is and what the complainant wants done. Head-off digressions and get to specific facts, rather than perceptions.
- Know what limits have been set to your own discretion in resolving complaints.
- Know applicable unit and Library guidelines or where to find them in manuals, etc. Cite these and their underlying rationales if known. Do not “make up” guidelines or bluffs—if you don’t know, admit this and move to the next step...
- If you cannot resolve the matter then and there (either by fixing the problem or explaining it to the complainant’s satisfaction), then you should
  1. Tell the complainant what the next step or stage of appeal is (for example your unit head’s or the Director’s name and extension), and
  2. Take note of all information necessary to assist supervisor or other staff in investigating and resolving the complaint. Give this information in writing to your supervisor as soon as possible so they can prepare.

Notes regarding abusive situations: Sometimes complainants are extremely frustrated, overwrought, or so outraged that they become rude or abusive. It’s important not to return abuse or “trade words” since this puts you in the wrong, too. Calmly insist that the person lower his/her voice and treat you with respect/politeness. If this fails to restore civility to discussion of the complaint, you should: (1) tell the person you cannot discuss the complaint (or offer service) when being abused, (2) walk away from the exchange, and (3) inform your supervisor about the incident. [Be sure you have this person’s full name as noted above. And remember that you can require a student to show identification.]

If the situation gets out-of-hand, you may be well-advised to call another staff member to witness the interaction, or even to call campus police for assistance if you feel physically threatened.

Staff who believe they have been abused have recourse to various University and non-University mechanisms for redress and should consult their supervisors as soon as possible to determine which of them might be most appropriate to the case in hand.

Staff should assist student assistants in handling in-person complaints, especially if such complaints seem likely to become confrontational or abusive.

Staff Complaints

The University recognizes that legitimate problems, differences of opinion, and complaints may arise between the University as employer and staff as employees. It is the responsibility of all supervisors, administrators, and staff to establish and maintain a work climate within the Library in which problems or complaints may be promptly brought forward, discussed, and fairly considered.

Staff should bring their complaints to their immediate supervisor as soon as possible and/or follow established procedure provided in relevant University policies and personnel handbooks. Staff are also reminded that as Department Head, the Director of the Library is specifically charged and concerned to provide a work environment that is satisfying and productive. Accordingly, staff who feel unable to bring such matters to their immediate supervisors should discuss them with the Director.

References: Unit heads meeting minutes for 6/22/92, 6/29/92
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