

The Community Review Board Meets Student Needs for Fairness in Administrative Decision Appeals

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Colleges and universities have long ago seen the need for a system for handling student grade appeals in which challenged academic decisions are settled by individuals not involved with the original determination. Department chairs and academic deans typically hear and resolve such complaints; however, if matters still are unresolved, they are commonly presented to boards or panels consisting of disinterested faculty, students, and administrators. Such systems have, for the most part, worked well for all involved.

Appealed administrative and staff member decisions, on the other hand, have little history of similar independent resolution. Appeals of administrative and staff member decisions, if there is a formal appeal mechanism available to students, usually rests with a superior administrator who owes support and legitimation to subordinates who make original decisions. Students are thus caught in what might be termed an unintentional conflict of interest in which their appeals do not generally receive a truly unbiased hearing.

The lack of an independent appeals recourse for students was recognized as a potential source of alienation, resentment, ill will, and suspicion. Such feelings are bound to undermine the legitimacy of administrative and staff decisions and to produce lowered morale among affected students. It also increases stress levels for administrators and staff members trying their best to make humane and reasonable decisions.

Administrators at the University of Maine at Presque Isle saw merit in resolving this potential conflict and proposed the creation of a body of students, professional and staff members, and faculty to examine appealed administrative and staff decisions that impact students. This group came to be known as the Community Review Board (CRB). The CRB consists of three members each from: the student body, professional and staff members, and the faculty. At least one member from each of these three constituent groups is required at any appeal hearing. The student Senate nominates student members; the Faculty Assembly nominates faculty members; and the staff/professionals on campus nominate members from their ranks; and the university President makes final Board appointments. Members of each constituency serve staggered 1-3 year appointments assuring experienced members will be available at all times.¹

Students may appeal, in the traditional, hierarchical way, any staff/ administrative decision until it reaches the Vice Presidential level.² If, at that level, students are dissatisfied with their grievance settlement, they may request that an appeals panel be convened. Appellant students and the original grieved decision maker are requested to submit, in writing, a state-ment explicating the matter at hand. The CRB is authorized to (a) refuse to hear the case and remand it back to the appropriate VP; (b) render a decision based solely on the written statements; or (c) request that the student and/or decision maker attend a meeting of the CRB. Students have a final recourse: appealing the CRB's decision to the university President.

To date, the Board has heard four cases in its maiden year. Two of these hearings have resulted in decisions being modified or overturned in a student's favor and in the other casess, administrative decisions have been upheld. None of the CRB's decisions have been appealed to the President. The informal student grapevine suggests that the CRB is known to exist³ and its decisions have been reportedly seen as fair and legitimate.

The professionals whose decisions have been appealed have been cooper-ative, have responded to questions, and have received the Board's determin-ations in good spirit. Having only four appeals in a semster and six weeks into the second term provides evidence, we believe, that students understand the intended nature of the CRB: to hear legitimate cases where decisions do, in fact, have nuances inviting adjudication beyond the normal administrative chain of command.

The university community has expressed support for the CRB. We believe that such an appeal mechanism allows students assurance that their grievances are taken seriously and that the institution is seriously concerned that fair-ness be assured in all cases.

Endnotes

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1. Of the original nine member Board, three members had previously served on grade, conduct, or other appeals panels.
2. There are three VPs: student affairs, academic affairs, and administra-tion and finance, respectively.
3. The school newspaper, the student Senate, and inserts sent to students at their homes were employed to promote the Boards's purpose and presence.

