

Felician University Informal Resolution Policy

What is the purpose of this Policy?

On May 19, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education issued a Final Rule governing the Title IX grievance process, effective August 14, 2020. The Final Rule requires that all colleges and universities hold a live hearing before making any determination regarding responsibility for covered reports of Title IX sexual harassment, including sexual violence. This hearing must provide for live cross-examination by the parties' advisors.

However, under § 106.45(b)(9) of the Final Rule, colleges and universities may offer and facilitate informal resolution processes, as long as each party voluntarily agrees to the process through an informed, written consent. This option is a change from long-standing Departmental guidance discouraging the use of informal procedures to address sexual harassment and prohibiting the use of mediation to address sexual assault. In the Preamble to the Final Rule, the Department states that it views informal resolutions as a way to resolve sexual harassment allegations in a less adversarial manner than the investigation and adjudication procedures that comprise the § 106.45 grievance process.

No college or university is required to adopt an informal procedure for addressing Title IX-covered sexual assault, nor is there any obligation to create or put in place such a policy by the August 14, 2020 implementation date. Institutions should use caution in pursuing an informal resolution process to ensure that facilitators have significant training in the chosen methodology.

This Policy, in turn, provides guidance regarding the contents of a Title IX-compliant process and the types of informal resolution procedures you may consider adopting.

Elements of an Informal Resolution Process

Procedures for Entering and Exiting Informal Resolution Process

Parties who do not wish to proceed with an investigation and live hearing, and instead seek Felician University's assistance to resolve allegations of Title IX-covered misconduct, may elect to enter the informal resolution process. Parties may elect to enter the Felician University's informal resolution process at any time after the filing of the Formal Complaint through an informed written consent. This informed written consent will include all terms of the elected informal process, including a statement that any agreement reached through the process is binding on the Parties.

No Party may be required to participate in informal resolution, and Felician University may never condition enrollment, employment, or enjoyment of any other right or privilege upon agreeing to informal resolution.

The Parties may elect to leave the informal resolution process at any point until the informal resolution process is concluded. If a Party elects to leave the informal resolution process, the formal resolution process recommences. In participating in the informal resolution process, the Parties understand that the timeframes governing the formal process temporarily cease, and only recommence upon reentry into the formal process.

Determination to Approve Entry into Informal Resolution Process

Even where the Parties agree to submit a matter to informal resolution, the Title IX Coordinator must approve the decision to move the matter to the informal resolution process and may determine that informal resolution is not appropriate under the circumstances.

Factors that the Title IX Coordinator may weigh in considering the appropriateness of the informal resolution process include, but are not limited to, the gravity of the allegations, whether there is an ongoing threat of harm or safety to the campus, whether the respondent is a repeat offender, and whether the Parties are participating in good faith. This determination is not subject to appeal.

Informal resolution processes may never be applied where the allegations include rape, statutory rape, or incest. Informal resolution is only permitted to address allegations of student-on-student sexual harassment and is never allowed as an option to resolve allegations that an employee sexually harassed a student.¹

At any time after the commencement of the informal resolution process, the Title IX Coordinator may determine that the informal resolution process is not an appropriate method for resolving the matter and may require that the matter be resolved through the formal process. This determination is not subject to appeal.

Role of the Facilitator

Informal resolution processes are managed by facilitators, who may not have a conflict of interest or bias in favor of or against complainants or respondents generally or regarding the specific Parties in the matter. The Title IX Coordinator may serve as the facilitator, subject to these restrictions.

All facilitators must have training in the definition of sexual harassment under 34 C.F.R. § 106.30(a), the scope of Felician University's education program or activity, how to conduct informal resolution processes, and how to serve impartially, including by avoiding prejudgment of the facts at issue, conflicts of interest, or bias.

Confidentiality:

In entering the informal resolution process, the Parties agree that any testimony and evidence (including admissions of responsibility) they share or receive during the informal resolution process concerning the allegations of the Formal Complaint is confidential while the parties are participating in the informal resolution process. No evidence concerning the allegations obtained within the informal resolution process may be disseminated to any person, provided that any Party to the informal resolution process may generally discuss the allegations under investigation with a parent, friend, advisor, or other source of emotional support, or with an advocacy organization. Should the Parties withdraw from the informal resolution process, information disclosed or obtained for purposes of the informal resolution process may be incorporated into the formal investigation and live hearing, provided that this information is disclosed and reviewed by the Parties under the investigatory and hearing procedures described in the Title IX Grievance Process.

Informal Resolution Options

¹ See, 85 Fed. Reg. 30026, 30054 (May 19, 2020).

Felician University offers the following informal resolution procedures for addressing Formal Complaints of sexual harassment covered under this Policy:

Administrative Resolution

Should the Parties mutually determine to enter the informal resolution process, and the respondent elects to accept responsibility for the allegations of the Formal Complaint at any point during the informal resolution process, Felician University may administratively resolve the Formal Complaint.

Where the respondent admits responsibility, the Parties will receive simultaneous written notification of the acceptance of responsibility, and a Hearing Adjudicator will hold a sanctions hearing. The Parties will be given an opportunity to be heard at the sanctions hearing, including but not limited to the submission of impact statements, and the Parties may be accompanied by their Advisor, but questioning of Parties or witnesses will not be permitted. After the sanction hearing ends, the Hearing Adjudicator will determine the respondent's sanction and other remedies, as appropriate and consistent with institutional policy. The Parties will receive simultaneous written notification of the decision regarding sanctions and remedies, which may be appealed according to the process described below.

Mediation

The purpose of mediation is for the parties who are in conflict to identify the implications of a student's actions and, with the assistance of a trained facilitator, identify points of agreement and appropriate remedies to address them. Either party can request mediation to seek resolution; mediation will be used only with the consent of both parties, who will be asked not to contact one another during the process. The Title IX Office will also review any request for mediation, and may decline to mediate based on the facts and circumstances of the particular case. Either party has the right to terminate the mediation process and choose or resume another option for resolution at any time.

The mediation process will typically commence within ten (10) business days after the Title IX Office receives consent to mediate from both parties, and will continue until concluded or terminated by either party or the Title IX office. During mediation, any potential investigation will halt, and calculations for time frames will be stayed. If the mediation results in a resolution, the disciplinary process will be concluded and the matter will be closed. If a resolution cannot be reached, the Title IX Coordinator will determine other options for resolution, including investigation.

During mediation, a facilitator will guide a discussion between the parties. In circumstances where the parties do not wish to meet face to face, either party can request "caucus" mediation, and the facilitator will conduct separate meetings. Whether or not the parties agree to meet face to face, each party will be permitted to bring an advisor of their choice to any meetings who may be, but is not required to be, an attorney.

At the conclusion of the mediation, the facilitator will memorialize the agreement that was reached between the parties. The Title IX Office will monitor adherence to the proposed solution and close the matter when compliance is satisfactory.

Restorative Justice

A restorative justice (“RJ”) Conference is a dialogue, facilitated by a trained Felician University administrator within the Student Affairs division. RJ is intended to restore relationships and repair harm after a conflict has occurred. Both the responsible party and the individuals affected by the conflict come together to identify what harm was caused and, collaboratively, determine how conflict and trust might be, respectively, resolved and repaired.

A Party may request to engage in RJ at any stage of the disciplinary process, however, restorative justice may not be an appropriate mechanism for all conflicts. To qualify for RJ, the student accused of wrongdoing must accept responsibility and express remorse for the harm that was caused. The harmed party must also be willing to accept an apology offered by the student accused of wrongdoing. Additionally, all involved parties must agree to and abide by measurable and timely actions within the scope of this Policy and directives. The Title IX Office will review any request for RJ, and may decline to initiate RJ based on the facts and circumstances of the particular case.

The RJ Conference proceeds only if all parties agree to participate willingly. Upon doing so, the RJ process typically commences within ten (10) business days after the Title IX Office receives written agreements from all involved parties. The conference will continue until the conference is successfully concluded or until the Title IX Office determines that the conference will not be successful. If successful, an agreeable resolution is reached by all involved parties, at which time the process is concluded, and the matter is resolved. If a resolution cannot be reached, the Title IX Coordinator will re-evaluate other options for resolution.

The Title IX Office will monitor the parties’ adherence to their proposed solution and reserves the right to close the matter when compliance is satisfactory.

Appeals

Each party may appeal the outcome of any of the above-mentioned informal resolutions. To appeal, a party must submit their written appeal within five (5) calendar days of the conclusion of the chosen informal resolution, indicating the grounds for the appeal.

The limited grounds for appeal available are as follows:

1. Procedural irregularity that affected the outcome of the matter (i.e. a failure to follow Felician University’s own procedures);
2. New information/evidence that was not reasonably available at the time the determination regarding responsibility or dismissal was made, that could affect the outcome of the matter;
3. The Title IX Coordinator, investigator(s), Hearing Adjudicator, or informal resolution facilitator had a conflict of interest or bias for or against an individual party, or for or against complainants or respondents in general, that affected the outcome of the matter.
4. The sanctions imposed by the Hearing Adjudicator, informal resolution facilitator, and/or the Title IX Office were disproportionately severe and not aligned with the findings.

The submission of appeal stays any sanctions for the pendency of an appeal. Supportive measures and remote learning opportunities remain available during the pendency of the appeal.

If a party appeals, Felician University will as soon as practicable notify the other party in writing of the appeal, however the time for appeal shall be offered equitably to all parties and shall not be extended for any party solely because the other party filed an appeal.

Appeals may be no longer than three (3) pages (including attachments). Appeals should be submitted in electronic form using ARIAL, 12 point font, and single-spaced. Appeals should use footnotes, not endnotes. Appeals that do not meet these standards may be returned to the party for correction, but the time for appeal will not be extended unless there is evidence that technical malfunction caused the appeal document not to meet these standards. Outcome of appeal will be provided in writing simultaneously to both parties, and include rationale for the decision.