

Year 1 Public Description of Work for  
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Washington University in St. Louis

**New Policies and Practices in Conflict Resolution**

**This Action Applies to Rubric Item(s):**

- 3. Leadership Education and Skill Development
- 8. Identifying and Reinforcing Community Values
- 26. Using Climate Assessments to Inform Action

**Description of Work:**

The Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences (DBBS), the graduate-student training arm of the Washington University School of Medicine (WUSM,) recently implemented new policies designed to manage conflict. The development of these policies and practices was in response to a graduate student climate survey that identified mentors as sources of stress in part related to problems with communication. The results of the survey were presented to the DBBS Executive Council which recommended the development of enhanced structure to mitigate conflict. The Executive Council is composed of the Associate Dean for Graduate Education, the Medical Science Training Program (MD/PhD program) co-directors, the Dean of the Graduate School, the Assistant Vice Provost for Diversity, the Chair of Biology, the Chair of Biomedical Engineering, several Chairs of Departments at the School of Medicine, a DBBS graduate student representative, DBBS Program Directors and a DBBS faculty representative. The new **Resolution of Conflict Policy** which describes conflict and all mechanisms of resolution available to DBBS students was then drafted and is included below. In addition, a **Mentee-Mentor Compact and Expectations** and a **DBBS Student Code of Conduct** documents were drafted. A link to these two documents can be found at the end of this work description. The Division then held a town hall for DBBS students at which the survey results and the proposed policies were presented. After incorporating feedback from DBBS students, finalized versions of these policy documents were approved by the Executive Council and implemented for all incoming students this fall semester of 2020.

The Division will survey students annually to determine the impact of these policies and practices on the climate for learning and work. Next steps in this work will involve other aspects of the climate survey including microaggressions experienced by women students and students of color from peers and instructors. In part to address such behavior by peers, the **Student Code of Conduct** was developed and implemented. It will be signed by all matriculating students.

The creation and implementation of new policies and practices around conflict resolution are well-aligned with multiple recommendations of the NASEM 2018 report. These

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include 3. **Leadership Education and Skill Development**...“institutional development of programs, practices and resources “that support and facilitate leaders at every level (e.g., university, school/college, department, classroom, laboratory, etc.) in developing relevant skills... These programs and resources include those that “develop conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation, and/or de-escalation skills; 8. **Identifying and Reinforcing Community Values**; and 26. **Using Climate Assessments to Inform Action.**”

### **Resolution of Conflict Policy**

#### **Conflict is normal.**

Conflict is a normal part of human interaction and provides an opportunity for making change. While conflict can be uncomfortable, it should not necessarily be avoided and can result in creative solutions, new ideas and an advancement of knowledge.

#### **Handle conflict early.**

While there is a significant power differential in the student/advisor relationship, the very nature of the relationship and the academic enterprise requires that ideas and assumptions be challenged. If conflict arises in this dynamic, it is best that it is handled early. It is easier to handle smaller issues as they arise, and sometimes options for resolution may diminish over time.

#### **Clear expectations help mitigate conflict.**

Conflict can be helped when expectations are clear and commonly understood by both sides. Put them in writing, if necessary. Consider using the **AAMC Compact Between Biomedical Graduate Student and Their Research Advisors** as a resource to accomplish this.

Students experiencing conflict with an advisor or other faculty member are encouraged to first discuss the situation with their Thesis Advisor or the faculty member and try to resolve difficulties amicably between the parties. If informal discussion does not resolve the problem, there is a process the student can follow.

As a next step, advice may be sought from the Program Director and/or Thesis Chair of the Committee. If resolution is not reached, the **University Ombuds** (<https://ombuds.med.wustl.edu/>) can be contacted. The University Ombuds is a confidential, off-the-record resource that can help the student or the advisor explore options, identify resources, manage expectations, and express frustrations. If resolution cannot be reached, the Associate Dean of DBBS may be contacted. Alternatively, a more formal complaint process can be followed as outlined below.

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If the nature of the issue is academic or related to professional integrity, a student may pursue a formal complaint. All complaints should be addressed to an Associate Dean of the Graduate School; see the **Academic Integrity Policy** for more detailed information.

(<https://graduateschool.wustl.edu/sites/graduateschool.wustl.edu/files/Academic%20Integrity%20Policy%202018.pdf>)

If the conflict is impacting the student's wellbeing, Student Health Services is available for confidential, onsite counseling. Student Health Services can be reached at 314-362-4357. The office is located at 4525 Scott Ave., Room 3420 (Third Floor), East Building. Students may also send a mail to [studenthealthservice@wusm.wustl.edu](mailto:studenthealthservice@wusm.wustl.edu) or visit the website at [wusmhealth.wustl.edu](http://wusmhealth.wustl.edu).

The **Mentee-Mentor Compact and Expectations** and **DBBS Student Code of Conduct** policy document can be found behind this [link](#).

**Website for further information (if applicable):** <http://dbbs.wustl.edu/Pages/index.aspx>  
(DBBS website is being updated to include the new policy documents)

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