



Adelphi University

Complaint Process Assessment

Executive Summary

February 2021



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Work Performed

Baker Tilly performed a Complaint Process Assessment at Adelphi University (Adelphi or the University) to understand and evaluate current processes in place to gather and manage complaints from students, faculty, staff, and other members of the University community. Specifically, Adelphi was seeking an evaluation of how complaints are received, addressed, and followed up on for the multiple entry points available at the University, including:

- Efficiency of the process
- Responsiveness or time to resolve issues
- Approach to investigation of the complaint, including assignment and oversight of investigations and investigation protocols and tools
- Resolution of issues
- Extent of the communication/documentation to the parties involved in the complaint
- Compliance with regulations or requirements
- Effectiveness of communications with the University community as to the overall complaint process

Baker Tilly identified opportunities to centrally coordinate and communicate complaint processes, standardize complaint processes and tracking mechanisms, enhance the support and advocacy provided to Adelphi community members involved in a complaint, and address broader cultural concerns raised by members of the University community.

The observations and recommendations discussed in this report are based on interviews Baker Tilly conducted with University personnel, students, and other parties involved in Adelphi's complaint processes; reviews of policies, procedures, and communications; and testing performed on selected samples of complaints made within the University.

Adelphi Participants

Baker Tilly met with individuals from the following groups and offices at Adelphi to gain perspectives across the campus community:

- Three interviews/focus groups for representative students
- Two interviews/focus groups for representative faculty members
- Center for Student Involvement
- Dining & Event Services
- Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Human Resources
- Information Technology
- Office of Internal Audit
- Office of the President
- Office of the Provost
- Public Safety
- Residential Life and Housing
- Student Access Office
- Student Conduct and Community Services
- Student Financial Services
- Title IX Office

Current University Strengths

During the review, Baker Tilly noted the following strengths:

- Executive leadership's openness and willingness to understand and address challenges, including the commitment to performing this assessment and addressing the challenges noted.
- Use of leading practice complaint tracking systems in key University areas.
- Proactive outreach to students by certain University areas that proactively interact with students to gather feedback and resolve concerns.

Summary Themes for Successful Complaint Resolution

As Adelphi moves forward in enhancing its complaint process, Baker Tilly noted the following consistent themes that must be adequately addressed in order to provide a transparent, consistent, fair, and timely complaint process to the University community:

- **Central coordination of complaints** to ensure community members understand what office can effectively address their concerns
- **Proactive communication** of status and next steps in the process, giving community members comfort that their complaints are being taken seriously and addressed timely
- **Resources for support and questions** throughout the complaint process
- **Standardization and tracking** of complaints to ensure all complaints follow a consistent process and are actively tracked and managed
- **Education and awareness** to the University community to provide transparency into key policies, processes, timelines, points of contact, and expectations for all parties, so the entire Adelphi community can know what to expect when involved in a complaint
- **Thoughtful consideration of diversity and inclusion impacts** to the complaint process

Summary of Recommendations for Change

Baker Tilly observed the following key challenges and recommendations. Below we have presented these issues in order of timeline, believing that the University can improve over time by tackling these challenges in the order presented.

	Challenge Observed	Impact to Adelphi Community	Recommendations
1	Adelphi students, faculty, and staff must navigate a complex, decentralized system of multiple intake points, handoffs between responsible parties, and a variety of processes and timelines ; stakeholders felt that the University does not consistently offer individuals a resource to support and assist with navigating the system.	Complainants and other involved individuals can feel overwhelmed and confused, may not understand the appropriate resources or next steps in the process , and some noted perceptions of a lack of consistent, caring treatment from the University.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider identifying an ombuds or other office to serve as a confidential, impartial resource to address community concerns, guide individuals to the appropriate contacts and resources, and support and advocate for those navigating the system. Provide clear central resources and guidance targeted to students, faculty, and staff, regarding the appropriate office to contact and what to expect from the complaint process, such as website resources, periodic email outreach, and additional training.
2	Certain complaint processes are not formalized or standardized to allow for a consistently applied process, timeline, and outcomes in a given office.	Without formalized processes and structures, University offices may be less able to process complaints consistently, potentially leading to confusion in terms of timelines and next steps, unmet expectations, and potential perceptions of either unfair treatment or a general lack of concern from the University . Further, offices may inconsistently document and escalate complaints, and there is a potential for lack of follow-through due to lack of tracking concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement formal complaint tracking mechanisms for all offices receiving complaints to allow for follow-up and tracking. • Formalize complaint resolution processes and internally disseminate protocols for resolving complaints to improve consistency. • Establish guidance for escalation to allow for consistent communication of critical issues to supervisors, directors, and executive leadership. • Define process for investigating complaints of bias that do not rise to the level of objective discrimination, threats, or harassment that would be resolved through disciplinary or Title IX processes; define a responsible area and develop related procedures and communications. • Clarify Title IX Policies to provide additional context and readability.

	Challenge Observed	Impact to Adelphi Community	Recommendations
3	There is not a consistent customer-oriented culture for dealing with complaints at the University that considers the involved individuals holistically and across the complaint timeline. Individuals should be able to expect clear, consistent approach by the University, proactive communication by the responsible office on key steps, timeline, and potential outcomes, regular status updates, ongoing follow-up and connection to further resources, and a resource to help explain issues and answer questions faced by the individuals involved.	Individuals can feel frustrated, unheard, isolated, and not supported by the University, especially in cases that are handed off between offices or cases with extended timelines. These individuals may opt to air grievances via social media or to escalate issues to the President. Further this can discourage future reporting of concerns and perpetuate a feeling that University administration is not responsive to complaints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature a customer service-oriented approach across the University by enhancing guidance, training, and performance management expectations to further instill a culture of a holistic, individualized, caring approach. • Ensure the University community understands Adelphi's commitment to address complaints and gains awareness of University processes and timelines for addressing complaints by responding effectively and consistently to publicized complaints. • Address perceptions of limited transparency and follow-through by increasing communication throughout the resolution process, to the extent possible, and connecting involved parties with further resources.
4	Some members of the University community described barriers to inclusivity and transparency and fears of potential retaliation from reporting complaints and concerns at Adelphi. Despite recent acknowledged changes in leadership and initiatives to address these challenges, interviewees noted continued concerns over representation and inclusiveness.	These concerns may lead members of the campus community to hesitate to report concerns or complaints, to feel undervalued and disrespected during the complaint process, and to be more likely to turn to alternate mechanisms outside University channels such as social media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a representative group to, where appropriate, address challenges outlined in this report, leveraging unique perspectives to ensure transparency, representation, and ongoing dialogue throughout the implementation of recommendations. • Longer term, explore and address perceptions of inclusivity, transparency, and retaliation by leverage existing structures, such as the Equitable Action Adelphi Team and the Academic Diversity Implementation Team, to develop formal approaches to addressing these perceptions in the University community and expand diversity training and resources to further educate the community.