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# **A Student Guide to Self-Advocacy**

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## **Acknowledgment**

*Portions of this document have been adapted from “The Advokit”,  
produced by the Penticton Advocacy Network, January 1996.*

## **Getting Assistance from an Advocate**

The services of an advocate are available to Vancouver Island University students through the Vancouver Island University Students' Union. If after reviewing this manual you feel having the assistance of an advocate would be helpful, you can inquire at the Student Union Building or telephone (250)754-8866.

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## What is Self Advocacy?

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Self-Advocacy is:

- Acting or speaking for yourself to ensure your issues are addressed.
- Deciding what is best for you and taking responsibility for making it happen.
- Claiming your personal rights or standing up against unfair or discriminatory treatment.

## How to Be an Effective Self-Advocate

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This booklet was developed by the Office of the Executive Director, Student Services to assist students who are experiencing difficulties with the Vancouver Island University “system” to advocate for themselves. It provides practical tips on how to be an effective self-advocate as well as background information on the relevant university departments, personnel, and policies related to student issues.

This guide can be used to:

- Identify the kinds of records and information you may need;
- Identify relevant departments and personnel to contact;
- Make you aware of your rights and responsibilities; and
- Help you develop concrete self-advocacy skills.

## When to Use Self-Advocacy

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There are many different kinds of problems students can encounter, for example:

- Dissatisfaction with the service received from university departments or service providers;
- Conflict with another student, which is disrupting the learning environment;
- Harassment by another student, which is disrupting the learning environment;
- Difficulties with an instructor;
- Disagreement with a university policy, rule, or regulation;
- Not being allowed to continue in a program due to academic or conduct issues;

- Fees, costs, or refund policies that you think are unwarranted or unfair;
- Disagreement regarding grades;
- Acquiring permission for a late withdrawal from a course or semester; and/or
- Being denied admission to a program when you think you should be admitted.

In some situations you may want the university to assist you in finding an appropriate resolution to your problem or complaint. Other situations may occur as the result of actions the university has taken under various policies and procedures related to student conduct, academic probation, suspension, or termination. The practical tips outlined in this booklet will be useful in assisting you to be clear about what the issues are and what you want to occur.

## What You Need to Know to Self-Advocate

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### *What Are Your Rights & Responsibilities?*

You have the  
**Right** to:

- Be treated with fairness, respect, and courtesy;
- Be treated as a competent human being;
- Be informed of university policies and procedures;
- Change your mind;
- Ask for what you want;
- Expect confidentiality;
- See the information the institution has about you;
- Not be discriminated against because of race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital or family status, physical or mental disability, sex, age, or sexual orientation.

You have the  
**Responsibility** to:

- Treat all people with fairness, respect, and courtesy;
- Respect the right of Vancouver Island University staff and faculty to be safe from physical and verbal abuse;
- Become familiar with university policies and procedures pertaining to your chosen program of study;

Responsibility,  
cont'd

- Be honest;
- Let those you are dealing with know if you change your mind and be prepared to accept the consequences;
- Ask what will be done with the information you give the institution;
- Realize that the institution's policies and time limits may interfere with getting what you want.

## Skills Required for Self-Advocacy

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Important  
skills to  
consider...

You probably already have the skills you need to advocate for yourself. There are two areas, however, in which many people can use more practice: **keeping records** and **communication skills**.

### *Record-Keeping*

It's important to keep records as you go along. Take as many notes as you can about:

- Who you talked to;
- When you talked to them;
- What was said;
- What action they said they would take;
- When and how they will let you know that the action has been taken;
- What action you said you would take;
- Whether or not you need to call them back.

Actions you could take include:

- Documenting incidents or information;
- Making a habit of making notes immediately following a meeting while your memory is still fresh;
- Asking someone to take notes for you.

It is important to keep copies of everything, including:

- Your notes;
- Copies of papers, exams, and assignments;

- Copies of policies and procedures.

If someone at Vancouver Island University wants copies of the information you have collected and if you agree to give it to him/her, ask that person to make a separate copy for his or her own use.

### *Responsible Communication*

Clear & appropriate language is key

Advocacy involves communicating by letter, e-mail, telephone or in person. While e-mail may seem like a convenient way of making contact, it is recommended that in-person communication occur if the matter is important to you. Relying solely on e-mail can lead to miscommunication and unnecessary escalation of the issue or concern.

The ability to communicate what you want and to listen to what others are saying will increase your chances of getting your desired outcome. The only way that other people are going to know that you disagree with them or that you feel your rights have been violated is for you to tell them in an appropriate manner. Speaking up is a big step towards resolving any problems you may encounter.

When communicating with others:

- Use a “reasonable” tone of voice and attitude;
- Be brief, clear, and consistent;
- Ask for explanations until you understand what is being said;
- Listen to what the other person has to say and repeat it back to them to show that you understand. You don’t have to agree, but try to understand that they have a different point of view;
- Make sure everyone at the meeting or appointment understands what you want; and
- Let people know that you appreciate their efforts, whether or not you get what you want.

As you advocate for yourself, you will probably need to outline your situation repeatedly. The people you deal with in the resolution of your situation will appreciate it if you can be as brief and consistent as possible.

### *Take Responsibility for Your Feelings*

Staying calm will work to your advantage

You have the right to be safe from physical and verbal abuse and so does the person to whom you are talking. When you show your anger it can make the person you are talking to uncomfortable and effective communication will then cease. Try taking a friend along for support to appointments where you anticipate feeling angry or upset.

## Helpful Questions for the Self-Advocate

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### *What Happened?*

The following questions are intended to help you be clear about what happened and who you should speak to and deal with.

**Q: What is the problem as you see it? (be as specific as possible)**

**Q: What reasons did the people you were dealing with provide for not giving you what you asked for?**

**Q: What are the names of the people you approached in your attempt to resolve this situation?**

### *How Has This Situation Affected You?*

**Q: What difficulties has this situation caused for you?**

**Q: What is the priority issue for you to deal with right now?**

**Q: What will happen if this issue doesn't get resolved right away?**

**Q: Are you concentrating on what is most important to you right now?  
If not, why?**

**Q: Do you need assistance or support in this process?**

**Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

### *How Can You Resolve This Situation?*

There is often more than one way to solve a problem. You may already have some good ideas about what to do next.

**Q: What are your ideas about how to resolve this situation?**

**Q: What got in the way when you used these ideas to try to resolve this situation?**

**Q: The University calendar and website ([www.viu.ca/policies](http://www.viu.ca/policies)) are important resources in finding out what policies exist. What do Vancouver Island University policies say about your rights in this situation? (See p. 16 of this guide for possible relevant policies.)**

**Q: Based on the information you have collected, what do you want to have happen in this situation?**

**Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

# Self-Advocacy

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## *Advocating In-Person*

The following information may help you get organized and prepared for an appointment where you intend to advocate for yourself.

Be on time  
for any  
appointments  
you make

<p><b>Name of Person I Need to See:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Their Title:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Telephone Number:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Appointment Time:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Address:</b> _____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Documents I need to take with me:

- Letters from doctors or other professionals;
- Other documents, papers, exams, and/or assignments;
- My notes and other information I have collected about my situation; and
- A written statement of the problem.

There are some additional points you may want to consider as you prepare to advocate for yourself in a person-to-person meeting:

- Am I clear about what happened, what I want to do about it, what policies apply to my situation and what my rights and responsibilities are?
- Do I want to take someone with me for support, to help me stay calm, to interpret or to act as a witness?
- Could that person take notes of the meeting for me?
- Anything else that I can think of:

List  
important  
details to  
remember

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Once you are at the meeting or appointment where you are self-advocating, talk as clearly and concisely as possible. Try using the communication skills mentioned in the “Responsible Communication” section of this document.

### *Self-Advocacy Statement*

You may want to follow these guidelines for writing a self-advocate’s statement detailing the problem:

- Keep it short (no more than one or two pages);
- Be courteous;
- Make sure your letter is readable and legible;
- Write about only one issue per letter;
- Make sure you keep a copy of all documents for yourself; and
- If you have access to the technology, try sending your letter by fax or e-mail (also e-mail yourself a copy for your own record-keeping purposes).

Your self-advocacy statement letter should be written in a professional format. Ensure that you include the proper address for the intended recipient, that you refer to the recipient in a professional manner in the salutation as well as the body of the letter and that you cover the essential points in a succinct manner. Always remember to leave a phone number where you can be contacted.

### *What If You Don’t Get What You Want?*

If the results of your meeting or appointment are not satisfactory, consider the following:

- Embark on an appeal process;
- Contact a supervisor or someone higher up who can change the decision;
- Contact the VIU Students’ Union [www.viusu.ca](http://www.viusu.ca) or Student Services for support and/or advocacy [www.viu.ca/student-services](http://www.viu.ca/student-services) ; or
- Other appropriate options you can think of.

## Appealing a Decision

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If you are not satisfied with the results of your self-advocacy and you wish to pursue the matter further, you need to ask if there is a formal appeal process.

If there **is** a formal appeal process, ask:

- Is there an appeal form that I need to fill out and submit?
- Where can I get the appeal form?
- Which is the appropriate department for me to deal with?
- Do I have to appeal within a certain period of time? If so, what is the time frame?

If there is **no** formal appeal process, ask for:

- The name of a supervisor you can contact about this situation or the Vancouver Island University department that handles complaints like yours.
- A list of departments and university personnel that respond to student complaints and appeals is provided in the following section.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Department:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Telephone:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Departments & Personnel Who Respond to Student Complaints & Appeals

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### **Office of the Executive Director, Student Services**

Nanaimo Campus, Building 200, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Phone: (250) 740-6594

- Assists students with resolving complaints regarding the institution, including making appropriate referrals.
- Accepts appeals under the Academic Appeal Policy and manages the academic appeal process (commonly used when students are placed on probation, terminated from their program, or not admitted to a program or section of a program).
- Accepts complaints regarding the conduct of other students under the Student Conduct Code.
- Can refer students to a Student Services staff member who can assist with the Academic Appeal process.
- Determines discipline for students who violate the Student Conduct Code.
- Accepts Human Rights complaints in the absence of the Human Rights Advisor.

### **Human Rights Office**

Nanaimo Campus, Building 200, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Phone: (250) 740-6430

Website: [www.viu.ca/humanrights](http://www.viu.ca/humanrights)

- Advises students on how to respond to discrimination and harassment.
- Assists students to resolve their concerns (including coaching on self-advocacy) on an informal level.
- Accepts formal and informal complaints of discrimination or harassment under the University's Human Rights Policy, Personal Harassment Policy, or Student Conduct Code Policy.

### **Registrar & Director of Enrolment Services**

Nanaimo Campus, Building 200, Room 338

Phone: (250) 740-6400 or toll-free 1-888-920-2221

- Accepts Final Grade Appeals and manages the grade appeal process.
- Accepts complaints regarding the admissions process and transcripts.
- Discusses fees, costs, and refund policies.

## **Office of the Appropriate Instructional Faculty Dean or Regional Campus Principal**

- In exceptional circumstances, the appropriate Instructional Faculty Dean or Regional Campus Principal can give permission for penalty-free late withdrawal from a course, **if** the instructor agrees that the request is reasonable.
- Can intervene when conflict or the conduct of others interferes with your studies.
- Can receive complaints regarding instruction or an instructor, although concerns must **first** be raised with the instructor and the relevant departmental Chair or Coordinator.

### **Dean of Arts and Humanities**

Dr. Steve Lane  
Nanaimo Campus,  
Building 340, Room 240  
Phone: (250) 740-6181  
Fax: (250) 740-6459

### **Dean of Education**

Dr. Harry Janzen  
Nanaimo Campus,  
Building 356, Room 274  
Phone: (250) 740-6220  
Fax: (250) 740-6463

### **Dean of Health & Human Services**

Laureen Styles  
Nanaimo Campus,  
Building 180, Room 114  
Phone: (250) 740-6242  
Fax: (250) 740-6454

### **Dean of International Education**

Dr. Graham Pike  
Nanaimo Campus,  
Building 255, Room 250  
Phone: (250) 740-6311  
Fax: (250) 740-6472

### **Dean of Management**

Mike Mann, Dean  
Building 250, Room 418  
Phone: (250) 740-6526  
FAX: (250) 740-6551

**Dean of Science & Technology**

Dr. Greg Crawford  
Nanaimo Campus, Building 359, Room 206  
Phone: (250) 740-6360  
Fax: (250) 740-6482

**Dean of Social Sciences**

Dr. Anne Leavitt  
Nanaimo Campus, Building 356, Room 312  
Phone: (250) 740-6391  
Fax: (250) 740-6550

**Dean of Trades & Applied Technology**

Fred MacDonald  
Nanaimo Campus, Building 180, Room 124  
Phone: (250) 740-6111  
Fax: (250) 740-6454

**Regional Campus Principal, Cowichan**

Maria Lauridsen  
Cowichan Campus, Building 601, Room 140  
Phone: (250) 746-3506  
Fax: (250) 746-3529

**Regional Campus Principal, Powell River**

Arlette Raaen  
Powell River Campus, Building 610, Room 130  
Phone: (604) 485-8026  
Fax: (604) 485-2868

**Chair or Coordinator of Program, Department, or Service**

- Accepts complaints related to the area they coordinate. Often, it is the Chair or Coordinator that can assist you in resolving your issue or complaint.
- Accepts complaints regarding the conduct of other students in the program or area and attempts to resolve the situation to your satisfaction.

**Instructor from Appropriate Department**

- Receives complaints regarding their instruction, student evaluation process, or other concerns related to the course they teach. More general concerns regarding a program should be presented to a Program Chair or Coordinator.

- Accepts complaints regarding student conduct in a course they teach and will intervene as appropriate.
- Responds to student requests for a penalty-free late withdrawal from a course.

### **Student Services – Information & Advocacy**

**Website:** [www.viu.ca/studentervices](http://www.viu.ca/studentervices)

- Nanaimo Campus Ph: (250) 740-6412, Building 200, Room 223
  - Cowichan Campus Ph: (250) 746-3509
  - Powell River Campus Ph: (604) 485-2878
  - Parksville/Qualicum Centre Ph: (250) 248-2096 *~Ask to speak to a Counsellor ~*
- Provides students with information on who to contact regarding a specific issue.
  - Provides students with information on policies and procedures relevant to a specific issue.
  - Provides you with personal support and counselling, if required.
  - Provides advocacy to assist you in resolving the concern.

### **Vancouver Island University Students' Union**

Nanaimo Campus, Building 193

Phone: (250)754-8866

Website: [www.viusu.ca](http://www.viusu.ca)

- Provides students with information on who to contact regarding a specific issue.
- Provides students with information on policies and procedures relevant to a specific issue.
- Accepts complaints related to Student Union business, including The Navigator Newspaper (although students can also go directly to the newspaper staff), Radio Mal, committees, and policies.
- Assists students in resolving issues and advocate on their behalf.

## **Institutional Policies Related to Student Issues**

For further information on Vancouver Island University policies and procedures, go to our website at <http://www.viu.ca/policies>

You may find the following policies relevant:

Academic Appeal	99.02
Accommodating the Observance of a Religious Holy Day	21.08
Conflicts of Interest Related to Employees & Students	21.06
Disruption-Free Learning & Working Environment	31.06
Employment of Students	32.01
Ethics in Teaching: Principles & Expectations	31.12
Human Rights - Education Initiatives & Complaint Resolution	21.03
Integrity & Conduct in Scholarly Activity	31.10
Library Conduct	34.03
No-Show Policy	33.03
Personal Harassment Policy	21.05
Student Academic Code of Conduct	99.01
Student Conduct Appeals	32.06
Student Conduct Code	32.05
Students with Documented Disabilities	32.02
Use of Information Technology	45.01

