

Proposals to Amend the Faculty Handbook

Prepared by Faculty Rights and Responsibilities Committee
& Approved by Handbook Committee

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The Faculty Rights and Responsibility committee exists to address “policies regarding academic freedom, teaching, research, interpersonal conduct, terms of appointment, promotion and tenure, and related matters, particularly with regard to the [Faculty Handbook](#).”

The two proposals in this memo build upon a “[Teaching Reassignment Issues](#)” briefing (Jan 7, 2026) and address the need for *rights of appeal* when a faculty member has been removed from the classroom or research facilities in a way that is an *exception* to departmental or school norms.

In its present form, there exists a *grey zone* in Faculty Handbook policies relating to cases in which a chair and/or dean can remove a faculty member from the classroom or research facilities and claim their action is *administrative* rather than *disciplinary*.

Allowing this grey zone to persist deprives affected faculty members of their due process rights.

Principles of academic freedom are designed around the idea that professors should have reasonable autonomy in the classroom and that teaching itself is integral to professional reputations. “Barring a teacher from [their] classroom,” a 1963 article in the American Association of University Professors’ *Bulletin* reported, “inflicts ignominy upon the teacher and is destructive to the morale of the academic community.” A 1966 follow-up article insisted that “to inflict such injury without due process and, therefore, without demonstrated reason, destroys the academic character of the University.”

[A 2008 AAUP report](#) (updated in 2023), argues: “Suspension usually implies an extremely negative judgment, for which the basis remains untested in the absence of a hearing, even though an administration may claim that it is saving the faculty member embarrassment. That potential embarrassment must be risked (or at least the faculty member should be permitted to risk it) if the individual is to have a chance of clearing his or her name...[S]uspension may create a prejudicial atmosphere totally out of proportion to the alleged offense and undeserved in the light of the professor’s previous record.” In other words, faculty need to be able to clear their names.

Proposal #1 - Academic Freedom and Disciplinary Action (Faculty Handbook, p. 6):

Current Language: “Disciplinary action will not be used to restrain faculty members in their exercise of academic freedom. If a faculty member believes a disciplinary action, including denial or delay of tenure or promotion, or termination of contract, violates their right to academic freedom, the faculty member may appeal, as outlined in the Faculty Handbook.”

Proposed Edits in Red: “If a faculty member believes a disciplinary action **violates their right to academic freedom, the faculty member may appeal, as outlined in the Faculty Handbook.** “**Disciplinary action,**” as used here, shall include but not be limited to any denial or delay of tenure or promotion, or termination of contract, **or removal from teaching duties or access to research.**”

Rationale: This change does two things. First, it strengthens the firewall between professors and administrators in terms of classroom autonomy. Second, it codifies due process rights for faculty should an administrator remove them from the classroom or deny access to research in a way that is exceptional.

Proposal #2 – Teaching Activities of the Faculty (Faculty Handbook p. 10)

Current Language: “School deans, department chairs, and program directors assign teaching responsibilities and courses to each faculty member with consideration for a faculty member’s engagement in research, service and other professional activities.”

Proposed Addition in Red: “If a dean, department chair, and/or program director takes the exceptional step of suspending a faculty member’s teaching duties, the faculty member has the right to appeal.”

Rationale: This addition does three things. First, it allows administrators to retain the power to remove faculty from the classroom if they deem it necessary in terms of “fitness for duty.” Second, it allows an affected faculty member to appeal that decision once it is taken, helping them protect their professional reputation and have rights of due process. Third, it reinforces the language in the Handbook on “Temporary Suspension” (see below), which acknowledges that such a step is “exceptional” and should be “narrowly tailored...so that the faculty member’s rights and privileges are not summarily abrogated...” To refuse a faculty member the right of appeal effectively abrogates rights of due process. (Faculty Handbook, p. 44)

Faculty Handbook Sections (p. 38):

Initiation of Disciplinary Proceedings and Fact Finding for Suspension

Initiation of Disciplinary Proceedings

When a complaint from any source is made against a faculty member, the faculty member’s dean⁶ may conduct an initial inquiry to determine whether additional fact finding is warranted. Such inquiry will be completed as expeditiously as possible.

Regardless of whether an initial inquiry is undertaken, the dean will notify the faculty member in writing of any allegations brought, the factual evidence supporting the allegations or other grounds for discipline, and any applicable policies or other standards of professional conduct.

The dean will give the faculty member an opportunity to respond to the allegations or other grounds for discipline. The dean and the faculty member may seek to resolve the matter by mutual resolution, either at the initiation of, or at any other time during, the proceedings. If the issue is resolved, the process terminates.

If efforts at informal resolution are not successful and the dean determines, in the dean’s judgment, that termination or suspension is not warranted, the dean will provide the faculty member with a written summary of the findings, if applicable, and notice of sanctions, if any, with a copy to the Associate Provost for Faculty. Any sanctions imposed may be appealed using the procedures outlined in the “[Appeal of Sanctions Other than Termination or Suspension](#)” section below.

Fact Finding and Sanctioning for Potential Termination or Suspension

If efforts at informal resolution are not successful and the dean determines, in the dean's judgment, that the allegations or other grounds for discipline could lead to the faculty member's termination or suspension, then a three-member *ad hoc* faculty committee will be appointed to conduct fact finding and prepare a report with recommendations, as described below. The Associate Provost for Faculty⁷ will appoint the *ad hoc* committee members from the Faculty Appeals Panel pool, in consultation with the dean and the Chair of the Faculty Appeals Panel Executive Committee. The faculty member will have a reasonable opportunity to disqualify potential committee members for reasons of possible bias or prior involvement in the case. When the faculty member is non-tenure-eligible, a majority of the *ad hoc* committee should be non-tenure-eligible faculty. Once the *ad hoc* committee has been appointed, generally within 15 calendar days, the Associate Provost for Faculty will notify the faculty member.

Faculty Handbook Sections (p. 44): Fitness for Duty and Temporary Suspension

Fitness for Duty

The [Faculty Fitness Panel Policy](#) addresses issues of significant impairment, disruptive behavior, or inability to perform essential functions of a faculty member's professional role. If concerns arise about a faculty member's ability to fulfill his/her/their professional obligations, this policy is intended to be used as a last resort once all other means of resolution have been exhausted. The faculty member's dean, school administrators, and the Associate Provost for Faculty should first seek to resolve potential issues informally before recommending or referring cases to the Faculty Fitness Panel.

Determinations of whether to mandate a fitness evaluation, the review process, the fitness evaluation, and the follow up to the fitness evaluation will be conducted pursuant to the [Faculty Fitness Panel Policy](#).

Other issues of faculty performance or discipline should be addressed through the disciplinary processes as outlined in this Faculty Handbook. Threats of violence to self or others should be referred first to the Behavioral Consultation Team (see "[Temporary Suspension](#)" section below) and then to the Faculty Fitness Panel.

Temporary Suspension

If, in the judgment of the provost⁸ and the faculty member's dean,⁹ after consulting with the chair (or chair's designee) of the University's [Behavioral Consultation Team](#), a faculty member poses an immediate threat of harm to his or her own safety, to the safety of others, and/or to Northwestern, the faculty member may be temporarily suspended from service pending ultimate determination of the faculty member's case (a "temporary suspension").

Situations calling for temporary suspension are exceptional, and the scope and duration of any temporary suspension must be narrowly tailored to the nature of the potential harm posed so that the faculty member's rights and privileges are not summarily abrogated more broadly than reasonably necessary. The faculty member's dean will consult with the provost and the Chair of the Committee on Cause concerning the length and other conditions of any temporary suspension. Salary and faculty privileges unrelated to the alleged behavior will continue through the period of the temporary suspension.