

# The Community Norms Document

## Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages

The Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian, and African Languages strives to create a professional working atmosphere in which the views and contributions of each member are valued equally. Our department is both large and culturally complex, as necessitated by our mission. It is important to establish a common understanding of standards we wish to uphold. In order to maintain a collegial atmosphere, the members of this community have agreed upon certain principles. Members of the department assume responsibility for their words and actions and the potential impact they could have on others and make every effort to reflect before speaking or acting. At the same time, members assume that colleagues are acting or speaking with good intentions and therefore avoid jumping to conclusions about the actions of others. Here, we specifically highlight a few issues that are possible areas of conflict and consider ways of resolving them. Having said that, this is a living document that is intended to be part of an ongoing conversation about community norms in the department and the college.

### **Power Differences**

This document begins with a discussion of power differences because they often underlie many instances of unprofessional behavior and incivility. Daily interactions in any university setting are fraught with situations involving implicit power differences between staff and faculty of various ranks, and students. While some of the power differences result from existing structures, it is incumbent on us to minimize such inequities where possible. Such power differentials can easily lead to (often, unintended) abuse if individuals are not aware of them. While it is important to acknowledge that power differentials exist, it is also important to recognize that all individuals working in the department are essential for the university's mission, however with different professional goals and responsibilities. Such recognition allows us to better appreciate each other's time and space. For example, we should have a single set of expectations regarding behavior in faculty, staff, and student spaces, since we are all entitled to the same respect and decorum.

### **Respect and Civil Behavior**

#### **Bullying**

There are many definitions of bullying, but what they have in common is that the behavior toward targeted individuals is severe, repetitive, and pervasive. Bullying comprises a range of negative behaviors that create an oppressive work environment in order to impose control, including derision, ridicule, accusatory language, extreme and routine rudeness, and even threats. Often such behavior is excused as "that's just how they are"; however, such behavior can lead to loss in productivity, higher turnover, and especially poorer health for the victim. Therefore, it is important that bullying plays no part in civilized discourse. It is up to each of us to strive to create an environment in which bullying has no place, and to respectfully counter all bullying. If we can all commit to that, the result will be a happier, healthier, and more productive workplace.

It is recognized that some of the worst offenders can be those who perceive themselves to be victims of bullying. The term 'victim bullies' (from the College Administrator's Survival Guide, 2006, p. 124) has been used to describe this, along with the familiar expression 'hurt people hurt people'. Victim bullies may be unable to imagine the harm they cause to others as they view bullying only as something that others do to them, so this may be the hardest form of bullying to address. The sources of anger may be understandable; however, it is helpful for the individual and those around to reflect and find a productive channel for that anger.

### Microaggressions

Microaggressions can include more subtle forms of negative behavior targeting individuals. They are not as severe or pervasive as bullying, but still fail to live up to reasonable standards that we expect in the department. They may include dismissive remarks, veiled insults and other intended and unintended behaviors that indicate biases. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect can result in the same negative outcomes as bullying.

All members of the department should be aware of microaggressions and strive to eliminate them from their daily interactions with others. As with bullying, addressing microaggressions within our community will allow us to all be our best selves and fulfill our potential.

### The Role of Bystanders

As a community, we have a shared responsibility to address bullying and microaggressions. A key element in this endeavor is that bystanders (those who witness such behavior) do not merely stand by, but engage when they are in a position to do so. It is far from easy to engage effectively, and doing so may take us out of our comfort zone, but if we can remain polite and professional, even under duress, then we are more likely to arrive at a positive outcome. Note, sometimes engagement could take a more active form of diffusing the situation, but other times it needn't be direct; it could be as simple as redirecting attention to first de-escalate the situation and then figuring the appropriate course of action. Bystanders who find themselves in a privileged position due to the seniority of their rank or tenure should be especially ready to intervene as bystanders.

## Communications

### Email and Online Communication

These forms of communication should not be used to disrespect, demean, or intimidate. For example, emails should be succinct and respectful. Both the sender and the receiver should operate with respect for one another's time and for the task at hand. Much of the department's business is conducted by email, so for most emails we should strive to acknowledge or reply to department-related messages within 24-48 business hours. Furthermore, in many cases, a clear statement of a reasonable timeline by the original sender prevents the possibility of misunderstandings. When writing an email, consider your tone and consider both the appropriateness of word choice and formatting decisions such as all caps, highlighting, and bold typeface. When addressing an email, consider the appropriateness of using "reply all" or the cc and bcc lines. Keep in mind that power differentials play out even in online communications, both consciously and unconsciously.

### Scheduling

Open communication is important to the work of the department and planned interactions should be as inclusive as possible. Mutual respect when scheduling means that everyone should be understanding of scheduling conflicts and sensitive to each other's professional, academic, and personal demands.

Generally speaking, the hours between 8am-5pm are considered general business hours, and a goodwill effort should be made to be available.

### In-person or Virtual Meetings

It is important to note that we all have a responsibility to ensure that all participants have a voice in any discussion or meeting. These exchanges should demonstrate intellectual honesty and openness to criticism and change. Personal attacks, dominating the conversation and discouraging opposing viewpoints are antagonistic to this goal. Interpersonal communications will often involve some disagreement but deliberations must be respectful and aimed at addressing issues under discussion.

### When we mess up

In the course of everyday interactions, it is likely that people are going to appear to transgress some of the above expectations. Sometimes such actions are not intended to hurt but do nevertheless have an impact. When we recognise that we have violated one or more of the above norms, the simplest starting point is to reach out and apologize. When we are the victim of a violation or witness one, the focus of any response should be on the impact. Furthermore, in either case, we think it is helpful to start from the presumption that the person who appears to have transgressed had good intentions, and approach the issue in a respectful and constructive way.

There are cases when a simple professional approach on a one-to-one basis is insufficient to achieve a resolution due to either personal constraints or due to inherent power differences. In such cases, we recommend that you reach out to the following people for consultation for a second opinion and to see what the possible next steps could be:

- If you are a staff member: Ken Desloover (college chief of staff), your specific staff union representative.
- If you are faculty: contact your department chair, or your mentors, or other trusted colleagues.
- If you are a student employee: your immediate supervisor, or another trusted colleague.

If you don't feel comfortable approaching any of the personnel above, then please look at the Additional Resources below.

### Additional Resources

There are other resources that one can access in case you are not completely sure of your own experiences and would like a second opinion both towards your experiences and the options you have going forward.

- a) The MSU Ombudsperson (<https://ombud.msu.edu/>)
- b) The MSU Faculty Grievance and Dispute Resolution Office (<https://fgo.msu.edu/>)
- c) MSU Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives: Faculty Resources (<https://inclusion.msu.edu/campus-resources/faculty-staff-resources.html>)
- d) MSU Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (<https://eap.msu.edu/contact>)
- e) The College of Arts and Letters Faculty Excellence Advocate (Alison Dobbins, [dobbinsa@msu.edu](mailto:dobbinsa@msu.edu))
- f) Bystander training (<https://poe.msu.edu/programs/index.html>)
- g) MSU Resources on Civility and Community Enhancement in Academic Environments: <https://aan.msu.edu/msu-resources-on-civility-and-community-enhancement-in-academic-environments/>
- h) Toward a Respectful Workplace: <https://workplace.msu.edu/>