

Legal Issues Impacting Classroom Teaching

Compliance Resource Center

As a GSI, there are a number of legal compliance issues to keep in mind. You are a U-M employee, and are responsible for making sure you conduct your work as an instructor in accordance with the various legal and regulatory requirements that bind the University. As a primary interface with students, you are also in a unique position to spot potential issues that arise in the classroom, and to raise them with someone in your department before they cause bigger problems.

The four most important legal issues for you to keep in mind are:

1. Student records – protecting students’ information;
2. Safety – for yourself and your students;
3. Copyright – making sure class materials are legally used and distributed; and
4. Appropriate treatment of students.

1. Student records – protecting students’ information

All information about a student – such as their personal information, enrollment details, assignments and grades – form part of their “student record”, which is protected by a Federal law, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (commonly called “FERPA”). Student records must be handled in accordance with that law by all those who have access to them. For example, the requirements mean that:

- you may not post grades using the student’s name or ID number;
- when returning student tests and papers, a system must be used to prevent access and/or release to anyone other than the student;
- you should password protect spreadsheets that contain student information;
- you can only use student information for purposes directly related to your role as an instructor: it would be inappropriate to share personal information that you learn about a student in your capacity as a GSI with others in your capacity as a student.

For more information, see this Student Records compliance page (<http://compliance.umich.edu/topics/education/student-records/>).

2. Safety – for yourself and your students

The University has strict obligations to keep its students and employees safe. Never do anything that seems unsafe, and never let anyone else do something that seems unsafe. Here are some practical things you can do to improve everyone’s safety:

- The University has strict obligations to keep its students safe. Take a few moments at the start of the semester to familiarize yourself with the safety and emergency protocols of each of the classrooms and labs you are teaching in – what would you do if an alarm went off in class? Where would you evacuate to? Where is the nearest fire extinguisher?
- If your class has laboratory components, make sure you know who your lab’s Safety Coordinator is. Follow all relevant safety procedures and ensure students do the same. Get to know the general laboratory safety requirements (<http://ehs.umich.edu/research-clinical-safety/>). If you see something unsafe happening and can’t find your Safety Coordinator, contact Environmental Health and Safety (<http://ehs.umich.edu>). For more information see “Laboratory Safety,” page 112.
- If you are injured while working, or witness an incident where someone else is injured, you must report it in line with your Department’s normal procedures (or to Work Connections, <http://www.workconnections.umich.edu>).
- Program the Department of Public Safety (<http://www.dpss.umich.edu/>) non-emergency number, 734-763-1131, into your phone so you know you can call them anytime you need to.

3. Copyright – making sure class materials are legally used and distributed

When creating and reproducing class materials, there are copyright compliance issues to consider. Make sure you understand the legal limits of how you can and cannot use or hand out materials in your classes (or post them on Canvas) by reviewing the U-M Library Copyright Office site (<https://www.lib.umich.edu/copyright>) on using copyrighted materials.

4. Appropriate treatment of students

- Keep your interactions with and treatment of students professional at all times: See page 154 “U-M Policy on Instructor-Student Relationships” for more guidance.
- As an instructor, you must apply the same standards and offer the same opportunities to all students in your class. This includes students in special programs, like athletics.
E.g. You can give a student-athlete an extension or agree to some alternative assessment, if the same opportunity would be given to any other student in analogous circumstances; but you are not permitted to give them special treatment just because they are an athlete, nor are you permitted to deny them opportunities for academic flexibility that you would normally give other students.

- For students with disabilities, you must provide reasonable accommodations to afford them equal opportunity to succeed in the class. The Faculty Handbook (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0By-lfENntcB-NeW5DT19qU01QdUU/view>), developed by Services for Students with Disabilities (<http://ssd.umich.edu/>) gives an overview of disabilities that affect learning in a college or university setting and guidance on the adjustments that can be made to accommodate students with disabilities. For more details about supporting students with disabilities, see CRLT Occasional Paper #17, “Making Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Faculty and Graduate Students” (http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/CRLT_no17.pdf).

For more information, resources and links about legal and compliance issues relevant to teaching, see the Classroom Teaching guide (<http://compliance.umich.edu/activities/classroom-teaching/>) on the Compliance Resource Center website (<http://www.compliance.umich.edu/>).