

Hot for Teacher: The Ethics and Intricacies of Student–Professor Relationships

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It is common for adults working in corporate or professional settings to be briefed on the law and/or policy on sexual contact and romantic relationships in the workplace. Any given company or individual work setting almost surely has an unwritten “culture” which guides conduct and is likely to be understood by the employees.

In a school setting, at least at the secondary level or lower, law and universal policy are clear and unequivocal. Students are minors, and sexual contact or sexual interaction of any kind between teachers and students is strictly forbidden, subjecting the transgressor to termination and/or criminal prosecution.

Falling between is the relationship between teacher and student at the undergraduate level. Most undergraduate students are legally adults, albeit often very young legal adults, who may or may not be prepared to deal emotionally with the ramifications of an intimate personal relationship with a superior.

Compared to most professional work environments, where typically extensive training on sexual harassment and intra-office romantic relationships is given, there is a relative lack of formal policy on many college campuses, and students and professors receive little or no briefing on this topic. During my freshmen year orientation I was instructed on everything from how to get along with roommates to how to respond to alcohol poisoning, but nothing was mentioned about how to conduct oneself within the sometimes mystifying student–professor relationship. The line of propriety in student–professor relationships is blurry at best and invisible at worst, even amongst experienced education professionals. “There is a grayscale,” said University of Alabama in Huntsville President David Williams when explaining

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appropriate student–professor interactions, “When does knowing a student outside of the classroom become a personal relationship?”

Adding to the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes an ethical student–professor relationship is the relatively open environment that exists in higher learning institutes compared to that of a business or a secondary level school. Certain classes will promote a level of personal familiarity between students and the professor, particularly small discussion classes. Unlike the professional work setting, personal or intimate topics such as love, family, politics, sexuality, religion, and morality are legitimate grounds for academic inquiry but may promote a sense of intimacy whose presence in a professional relationship can be questioned.

Ultimately, professors control the environment of their own classrooms and thus have tremendous power over the types of relationships they form with their students. Interestingly, it is precisely the issue of power in student–professor relationships that can make them problematic. Professors’ power to grade, write recommendations and assign research and other positions can and do influence a student’s academic career and future professional prospects. With this authority comes the potential for abuse. Even if a relationship is limited to a strictly teacher–pupil association, as is most often the case, students may feel they are the victims of unfair treatment due to the personalities or politics of their relationship with the instructor.

A close personal friendship or a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a professor can significantly complicate this inherent unequal balance of power. Issues of favoritism can arise, especially if other students know about the relationship. When frictions occur in a friendship or a romantic relationship ends, a professor may allow those feelings to affect his/her professional judgment. As education professionals, professors should be given the benefit of the doubt that they can be trusted to remain fair and professional regardless of their feelings for one another or their personal interactions. However, it only takes the appearance of unfair treatment or impropriety for conflict to surface.

It was to address the abuse of this same imbalance of power that sexual harassment became a social and legal issue from the earliest days of the contemporary women’s civil rights movement. In another time, a woman in the work place who was subject to sexual advances by a superior faced impossible choices. She could accept the unwanted advances and be complicit in her abuse, quit, or decline the advances and risk losing her job. By today’s standards, putting an individual in these circumstances is unacceptable. Although college students are generally of the age of consent, do schools want to risk compromising their students’ rights in the name of maintaining their freedom to engage in relationships as they see fit?

The answer may seem obvious to some, but it is far from agreed upon in academia.

The University of California-Berkeley, Yale University, the University of Alabama in Huntsville and other campuses codified policy regarding faculty–student relationships into their Faculty Handbooks and other regulatory texts. Under UAHuntsville’s policy, faculty members are not permitted to initiate or reciprocate sexual or romantic relationships with students currently enrolled in their classes or otherwise under their supervision. If there is a pre-existing relationship with a

student who enrolls in professor's class the professor is required to disclose that information to the chair of his or her department or the dean of the college. However, not all within the ivy-covered walls are in agreement. Regulating the relationships of two consenting adults is seen by some as an invasion of privacy. "It's the bureaucratization of sexuality," Barry Dank, Sociology Professor at California State University told CNN.

Despite the fact that the issue is being discussed among college administrations and faculty boards, students are often left out of the conversation. They are left with other less reliable sources to shape their opinions about proper student–professor interactions. Teenagers and young adults get much of their information about what constitutes normal relationships from the media and popular culture. Unfortunately, these sources have the tendency to glamorize teacher–student relationships and make their illicit nature seem exciting. They often gloss over the potential for emotional and professional harm these relationships can create.

The current generation of college students were pre-teens when the hugely popular television series *Friends* first aired the episode entitled "The One Where Ross Dates a Student." The episode chronicles the beginning of a relationship between one of the primary characters, Ross, a college professor, and Elizabeth, one of his students. When the relationship begins Ross is unaware that it is against school policy, but he decides to continue with it even after his colleagues inform him he could be fired. The next several episodes humorously portray the couple dealing with their problems such as Ross' jealousy over Elizabeth's spring break trip and his frustration with her preference for a dorm room balloon fight over a trip to the theater. Ross avoids being reported to the school through a series of comical and unrealistic hijinks reminiscent of Lucy and Ethel in the chocolate factory. It is Elizabeth's immaturity, not sensitivity to the ethical complexities of the situation, which causes Ross to end the relationship. The most severe consequence he suffers is being hit with a water balloon by the childish Elizabeth after he breaks up with her.

The teen dramas *Dawson's Creek* and *The Gilmore Girls*, which aired during current college students' formative years, both contained story lines involving romances between students and professors.

This sensationalism of this type of relationship in popular culture is certainly not new. Even today's college students are familiar with the hit song "Don't Stand so Close to Me" by The Police which was released in 1980 and describes the stresses and strains of a forbidden crush between a student and teacher. Van Halen's 1984 single "Hot for Teacher" still resonates as evidenced by music channel and college student staple VH1's decision in 2009 to include it on its list of greatest hard rock songs of all time.

Although popular culture generally dramatizes the sexiness, romance, and humor of student–professor liaisons that is not to say that situations worthy of a romantic comedy are not occasionally found in real life too. Some professors and students can and do conduct enjoyable and fulfilling relationships with each other and are able to part ways amicably when the relationship runs its course. Some students look back on their amorous relationships with professors as a cherished and valuable part of their college experience. A recent graduate of a small southern university

remembers his brief affair with his freshmen English professor as a carefree and exuberant admission into the world of adult relationships. The pair shared several dates over the course of one semester and ended the relationship before it became serious. “I don’t think there were any negative effects on me either during the relationship or after,” claimed the student. “It was fun and she was really cool. She taught me a lot and we actually had a lot in common.”

A 22-year-old senior at a large university on the east coast carried out a serious relationship with a biology professor that began her sophomore year. The couple even discussed the possibility of marriage after the student graduated. Eventually the 16-year age difference got in the way and the relationship ended cordially. “We realized we were at different stages of our lives,” explained the student. “I don’t see him much anymore because I am a studio art major so I don’t go to the parts of campus where he spends most of his time.” The student does not regret the relationship and feels that it would have worked out if the couple was closer in age.

For every optimistic tale of a student and professor who engaged in a mutually beneficial mature partnership there is surely a story of a professor who misused his/her power during an unequal and unhealthy relationship. Should consenting adults be banned from engaging in healthy relationships under certain circumstances to prevent the potential for unhealthy ones to develop?

Cristina Nehring, who as a graduate student was engaged to a professor teaching at the university she was attending, spoke to *Harper’s Magazine* about the dangers of overregulation of behavior in the classroom in a September 2001 article entitled “The Higher Yearning; Bringing Eros back to Academe.” Nehring argues that our culture of “walking on eggshells” to avoid even suspicion of impropriety does a disservice to maintaining the unguarded environment necessary for a successful learning. “Academic encouragement, easy jesting, an affectionate epithet—all of what used to be the currency of good fellowship as well as teaching—have become cause for vigilance, fodder for complaint, the stuff of suits” stated Nehring. Nehring also addresses the backbone of most arguments for regulating student–professor relationships: the problem of the power differential. She claims that no relationships exist in which there is a symmetrical balance of power. Should all relationships in which one partner has more professional, social, or economic power be regulated to protect the partner with less authority? “The crackdown on power differentials in student–professor (or senior colleague–junior colleague) relationships presupposes a power-balance in non-pedagogic relationships that is completely fictitious,” she claimed.

To further the argument against the power-differential problem, Nehring claimed that sex is actually a means to level the playing field between two otherwise unequal individuals. Sex and romance often bring together the most unlikely partners and they are able to find common ground for the sake of their mutual attraction. A professor may gain *more* respect for a student he/she is in a relationship with and a student may rise to meet the intellectual and social standards of dating his/her “superior.”

A professor can be a mentor, a confidant, an adversary or a friend and, yes, sometimes more. Student–professor relationships are developed through interactions during class time and outside of the classroom in both academic and

sometimes social settings. College students and their professors spend a great deal of time together and often share a passion for a subject that can lead to rich and rewarding relationships. Unfortunately, as is the case in all human relationships, when a relationship with a professor goes awry it can be emotionally, mentally, and professionally damaging to both parties. So how does a college community maintain the advantages of this special relationship while protecting itself from potential indiscretions?

Ultimately, college students are adults and thus have the legal and ethical right to choose with whom to engage in a personal, romantic or sexual relationship as long as his/her partner is a consenting adult. Navigating the emotions and politics of these relationships can even provide a lesson that cannot be taught within the confines of the classroom. “Ultimately what guides everything is that the student should respect the professor and the professor should respect the student,” stated President Williams; “that is the way it is in life anyhow.”