

In 1993 a plan was proposed at the University of Virginia that would forbid sexual relationships between professors and undergraduate students. The plan, initiated by an advisory committee on women's issues would prevent professors from becoming intimately involved with any undergraduate, not just with those in their classes or departments. In addition, the plan would forbid professors to make overtures or have sexual relationships with graduate students who are in their courses, under their supervision, or enrolled in programs in the same department. Teaching assistants under the plan also could not become sexually involved with students they teach.

Is the plan morally justifiable? Why, or why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The proposed policy at the University of Virginia is not morally justifiable. It is far too restrictive in terms of the personal freedom of both faculty and students in an intensely personal area of life where strictly dictated standards can cause much unhappiness. Granted, sexual relationships between faculty and students can involve significant risks in terms of emotional harm, unfair advantage taking, and/or coercion. There are ways, however, of addressing these evils, which, though imperfect, avoid the extreme abridgment of personal freedom in the proposed plan at the University of Virginia.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.