

The Ethical Professor

Volume 12 (05/09)

Student-Professor Relations

At this point in the term, we have established and are deepening “relationships” with our students. Teaching adults, albeit mostly young ones, raises certain questions about where we set our personal boundaries as college professors. When a student stays after class to further explore an issue raised in discussion, do we repair to the nearest coffee bar with him or her and chat for an hour or so, perhaps even eat lunch or dinner together? When a student’s car breaks down, do we offer him/her a ride home? Do we give out our personal cell phone number to particular students?

These actions can seem quite natural because, as educators, we’re in the helping business, and yet such behavior can lead to unexpected and unpleasant consequences. For one thing, other students, observing our interactions with a particular member of the class, may feel we are showing favoritism. There have even been instances where a student has taken legal action, accusing a professor of grading based on personal relationships instead of student achievement. On the other hand, a student who is emotionally very needy may misinterpret a teacher’s kind gesture and expect more from the relationship than is reasonable. This can lead the student to feel betrayed when the teacher doesn’t reciprocate. Sexual harassment suits have stemmed from such interactions.

These are just a few of the reasons that our Statement on Ethics states that ethical professors “avoid romantic or sexual relationships with students under our academic charge,” and that we “avoid favoritism, nepotism, breaches of confidentiality, and we try to avoid creating appearances thereof.”

It helps, when setting our boundaries, to remember that one of our major goals as a college is to foster independence in our new-fledged adults. When we’re tempted to offer a ride or a personal telephone number, we might stop and ask ourselves whether the student would be better off solving a particular problem by him or herself. We can offer sympathy for the struggle; we can help the student frame the problem so that a solution is easier to find; we can direct the student to any available resources. But perhaps this is where we should draw the line.