

## **The Ethical Professor #23: The Boundaries of (Im-)Propriety: Is It Ethical To Receive Personal Gifts From Students?**

*It is better to give than to receive - especially advice.*

Mark Twain

***Recently the topic of gifts to professors came up in our conversation. About eight years ago, this was the topic for an Ethical Professor. The Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee (PERC) thinks it appropriate to revisit this topic in light of new possible concerns our colleagues may have. We hope you find the discussion useful.***

In our various capacities as teachers, mentors, advisors and counselors to our students we may overlook the need some students have to reciprocate the attention and kindness they feel they have received from us. Some cultures, in fact, advocate giving a gift of appreciation for assistance received during the course of a semester. How, then, are we to reconcile the seeming conflict we face between impartiality and respecting the needs of a student to express gratitude with a gift of monetary value?

A gift from a student can take many different forms. A box of candy or a gift card to a coffee house or movie theatre seem to be quite popular, especially around the holiday season. Accepting such a gift from a student may be perceived as a relatively innocuous gesture, one devoid of coercion or grade manipulation on the student's part, especially in cases where the student has already earned an 'A' grade or the gift is received after grades have been submitted. However, as ethical professors, it is important for us to take a step back and reflect on how these actions may be perceived by others. A fellow colleague or another student may interpret the acceptance of a gift from your student as an attempted or successful act of undue influence, an impropriety. The statement on professional ethics adopted by this college back in 2002 explicitly advocates that we ought to refrain from the practice of favoritism towards any one of our students. However, in our effort to assure that evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit - and to protect our own and the College's integrity and reputation - we should also *strive to avoid even the appearance of favoritism.*

So, then, how can we effectively retain our integrity as representatives of the SMC community while still making our students happy? Here are three suggestions that may help us to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

1. State explicitly on your syllabus at the outset of the term your policy in regards to not accepting a gift of monetary value from a student. You may even want to list what you feel to be appropriate forms of expression of appreciation should a student so desire (a nice letter of appreciation, a note or a card, baked goods intended for the class to share on the last day, perhaps a donation to a charitable organization of the student's choice, to name but a few).

2. Should it come up, encourage your students to express their gratitude in non-monetary ways, such as in giving their time in service to their community (beach clean-up, tutoring kids after school, assisting people in need, etc). This presents a potential 'win-win' where the student can express his/her gratitude and the community is better off, as a result.

3. Strive to be as transparent as possible when acknowledging receipt of a gift from a student. For example, you may elect to share a food item with your department or display a card or note of appreciation on your office desk. This helps to mitigate the appearance of favoritism if you treat a gift received as a gift not solely intended for you.

-----

Please don't respond to this email; if you would like to comment or participate in the threaded discussion go to: **FAC 101** in eCompanion, "Faculty Forum" unit.

James Stramel (co-chair

Steven Kaufman

Teri Bernstein (co-chair)

Marco Llaguno

Sage Bennet

Gary Ortega

Wendy Dishman

Winnie Kakonge (Student rep.)

Craig Hammond