

January 1999

## The ethics of intimate student-faculty relationships

Brian Craig Steinberg  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1999 Brian Craig Steinberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Steinberg, Brian Craig, "The ethics of intimate student-faculty relationships" (1999). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1589.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1589>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

---

## The ethics of intimate student-faculty relationships

### Abstract

What are the ethics behind intimate student-faculty relationships in higher education? Should such relationships be allowed? Can they be legally controlled? Should there be a penalty for faculty and students who engage in these relationships? Consenting romantic and/or sexual relationships between faculty and student, or between student services professional and student, although usually not expressly forbidden, are generally deemed unwise (Cahn, 1986). According to Svinicki (1994), codes of ethics for most professional associations forbid "professional-client" sexual relationships. In an educational institution, the professor-student and student affairs professional-student relationships are thus such "professional-client" relationships. The respect and trust accorded a professor by a student, as well as the power exercised by the professor over the student in giving praise or blame, grades, recommendations for further study or future employment, etc., can greatly diminish the student's actual freedom of choice in such relationships (Svinicki, 1994). Consequently, it is incumbent upon those with authority to make certain students not be exploited.

**THE ETHICS OF INTIMATE STUDENT-FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS**

**A Research Paper**

**Presented to**

**The Department of Educational Leadership,  
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

**by**

**Brian Craig Steinberg**

**May 1999**

This Research Paper by: Brian Craig Steinberg  
Entitled: The Ethics of Intimate Student-Faculty  
Relationships.

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement  
for the degree of Masters of Arts in Education.

4-17-99

Date Approved

Larry Keig

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

4-18-99

Date Approved

Carolyn R. Bair

Second Reader of Research Paper

4.21.99

Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner

Head, Department of Educational  
Leadership, Counseling, and  
Postsecondary Education

What are the ethics behind intimate student-faculty relationships in higher education? Should such relationships be allowed? Can they be legally controlled? Should there be a penalty for faculty and students who engage in these relationships?

Consenting romantic and/or sexual relationships between faculty and student, or between student services professional and student, although usually not expressly forbidden, are generally deemed unwise (Cahn, 1986). According to Svinicki (1994), codes of ethics for most professional associations forbid "professional-client" sexual relationships. In an educational institution, the professor-student and student affairs professional-student relationships are thus such "professional-client" relationships. The respect and trust accorded a professor by a student, as well as the power exercised by the professor over the student in giving praise or blame, grades, recommendations for further study or future employment, etc., can greatly diminish the student's actual freedom of choice in such relationships (Svinicki, 1994). Consequently, it is incumbent upon those with authority to make certain students not be exploited.

Members of the teaching faculty, including graduate assistants, who enter into a consensual romantic

relationship with a student should be aware that any romantic involvement may make them liable to a charge of sexual harassment or discrimination on the basis of sex.

The charge of sexual harassment might follow the termination of the relationship on bad terms. This charge most likely would be directed toward the person who has the "power" in the relationship. A charge of sex discrimination could even be brought by colleagues of the student or by another employee when the subordinate person in the relationship has been given unwarranted benefits such as higher grades, merit pay, better evaluations, or leniency in the administration of sanctions.

Anytime there is a relationship where one party has authority over another, the topic of power surfaces. Power relationships between students and faculty are not unusual on campuses throughout the United States. People in positions of authority should recognize the vulnerabilities of those in lower positions (Plaut, 1993).

The issues of intimate faculty-student relationships are infrequently addressed in the entertainment industry and the media. For example, few feature-length films have portrayed such relationships in higher education. The movie *Animal House* is one of the few that portray these kinds of relationships. In this movie, Katie played by Karen Allen,

has an intimate relationship with her English professor Dr. Jennings, played by Donald Sutherland. This situation arose because of Dr. Jennings's poor teaching performance in his English class. Dr. Jennings used intimate relationships to get closer to his students, which helped him compensate for his poor teaching performance. It was clear in this movie that Dr. Jennings's poor teaching style challenged the attention span of his students. Like most colleges and universities in the United States today, Faber College (the college portrayed in the movie *Animal House*) does not make any attempt to handle this situation.

According to Plaut (1993) only 20% of colleges and universities in America address sexual relationships between professors and the students with whom they work. "At best, they write vague policy decisions saying that they advise against [consensual relationships], they never tell professors or students what the penalty will be" (Plaut, 1993, p. 214).

There are ethical guidelines by which faculty members should abide. As Sarton (cited in Baker, 1996, p.22) explains, "the relationship between student and teacher must be about the most complex and ill-defined there is." However, ethical guidelines for relationships between faculty and students have been outlined. Biaggio, Paget,

and Chenoweth (1997) have asserted there are three. They are (a) "acknowledging the power and responsibility of the faculty role," (b) "developing a frame for evaluating faculty-student relationships," and (c) "fostering and maintaining a climate that supports ethical relationships with students" (p.185). The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have both published ethical standards that can be applied to student-faculty relationships: The Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (ACPA) and Standards of Professional Practice (NASPA). More specifically, ACPA Ethical Standard 2.4 states that student affairs professionals should "abstain from sexual intimacies with clients or with students for whom they have supervisory, evaluative, or instructional responsibility" (Komives & Woodard, p. 569). ACPA also has a Standing Committee on Ethics which is available to "assist in the resolution of conflicts among members of ACPA" (Komives & Woodard, p. 569). One of the Standing Committee's functions is "receiving and processing complaints of alleged violations of the Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards" (Komives & Woodard, p. 574). Sarton (1961) believes that the teacher should always act as a friend, seeking the good of the student for the student's

own sake and recognizing this is a unique form of friendship.

An instructor's primary responsibility usually is to teach students. If a relationship interferes with this obligation, then faculty members are not doing their jobs (Bowman, 1995). College and university faculty members have a certain power over students because students' fates depend on their teachers' opinions and grading procedures (Cahn, 1986). This can be a potentially threatening circumstance, and teachers should avoid it. If a student accepts a faculty member's advances, that student could gain an unfair advantage over other students. Conversely, if a student refuses the instructor's attention, the student could suffer a disadvantage.

Colleges and universities recently have begun to institute statements and policies to discourage sexual relationships between students and faculty (Begley, 1993). A statement from the University of Michigan dealing with this issue reads, "when people whether students, faculty or staff feel coerced, threatened, intimidated, or otherwise pressured by others into granting sexual favors, their academic and work performance is likely to suffer. In addition, such actions violate not only the dignity of the

individual, but also the integrity of the university as an institution of learning" (cited in Keller, 1990, p. 30).

At the University of Pennsylvania, "the relationship between teacher and student is central to the academic mission of the University. No non-academic or personal ties should be allowed to interfere with the integrity of the teacher-student relationship. Consensual sexual relations between teacher and student can adversely affect the academic enterprise, distorting judgments or appearing to do so in the minds of others, and providing incentives or disincentives for student-faculty contact that are equally inappropriate" (cited in Keller, 1990, p.31).

At the University of Florida, "the relationship of teacher to student, while often friendly, personal, and intellectually intimate, is a professional one governed by norms of professional ethics. For a professor to become sexually involved with a student represents a prima facie violation of those norms. Because members of the college together constitute a community, these standards govern not only faculty members' relations with students they teach, coach, advise or evaluate, but also their relations with all students in the college" (cited in Keller, 1990, p.31).

A debate continues to rage on campuses nationwide over the issue of professor-student dating and sexual

relationships. The University of Iowa is the first to institute a policy prohibiting these practices (Keller, 1990). While some professors are against such policymaking, arguing that an ethical issue can not be mandated, others feel that policies of this kind are a necessary evil, to prevent sexual harassment.

Kimmerling (1992) believes that if a relationship based on mutual feelings evolves, it is the instructor's obligation to remove her or himself from the grading procedure. Students should be asked to transfer to another section of that course or restrain their desires until the semester has ended. Many researchers (Baker, 1996; Blevins-Knabe, 1992; Dixon, 1996; Markie, 1994; Svinicki, 1994; Taylor, 1992) agree that individuals involved in romantic relationships should be equal, but in the case of a student and a professor it would not be.

Several colleges and universities have policies like the University of Iowa which prohibit faculty from using their position or authority to coerce sexual activity (Keller, 1990). They include the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Yale University, Santa Rosa Junior College, the University of Pittsburgh, Washington University, and the University of Virginia. Some colleges and universities have strict policies that outline rules regarding student-faculty

relationships, in some instances actually prohibiting relationships between faculty and staff, faculty and students, or staff and students. The University of Northern Iowa has no policy or statement against student-faculty, faculty-faculty, or faculty-staff relationships.

Occasionally, however, department heads at the University of Northern Iowa want to know if such relationships occur. No such policy is in place at the other Iowa regent institution, Iowa State University. Some colleges and universities have policies only against a relationship where a faculty member and student are in the same classroom. Leatherman (1993) discussed that many institutions have found it nearly impossible to set guidelines since there are too many details to define clearly what is acceptable and what is not in student-faculty relationships. Several researchers (Barreca, 1997; Keller, 1988; Taylor, 1982) debate if institutions of higher education should have policies against intimate student-faculty relationships.

"How can you tell people they cannot fall in love?"

In describing an extremely controversial case involving herself, Jane Gallop, a well-known feminist theorist and English professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, analyzes accusations of sexual harassment leveled against her by two female graduate students in 1991 and

1992. The University found Gallop innocent of harassment but guilty of violating its restrictions against sexual relationships between students and faculty. Gallop argues that the current concept of sexual harassment varies radically from its original meaning, and that personal, even sexual, relationships between teacher and student are normal and beneficial to both.

Other researchers (Churchill, 1982; Dill, 1982) believe that virtually any close student-faculty relationships are just opportunities for conflict. One very serious issue that sometimes results from intimate student-teacher relationships is the issue of sexual harassment. When student-faculty relationships go sour (break-up of the relationship), problems often occur. A faculty member who enters into a sexual relationship with a student (or supervisor with an employee) where a professional power differential exists must realize that if a charge of sexual harassment is subsequently lodged, it will be exceedingly difficult to prove immunity on grounds of mutual consent (Taylor, 1982). Wilson (1997) describes a case at Colby College where a professor's personal teaching style won him praise but cost him his job. This professor was denied tenure at Colby because of sexual harassment complaints made by some of his female students.

Intimate student-faculty relationships aren't always restricted to a male teacher and a female student or a female teacher and a male student. Cahn (1986) describes cases where intimate student-faculty relationships have occurred between male teacher and male student and female teacher and female student. Cahn (1986) and Leatherman (1997) also describe situations where undergraduates and graduate assistants/graduate students participate in intimate student-faculty relationships.

Sometimes in intimate student-faculty relationships the question of "where does consent end and harassment begin?" comes into play (Bacchi, 1992). Often students charge faculty with making passes at them and even forcing sexual encounters. In certain extreme circumstances, it has been noted that students and faculty actually try to use sexual favors for grades (Dziech and Weiner, 1990).

What kind of relationships should students and faculty have? Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) believe that some form of ethical relationship should exist. According to Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) an ethical relationship is one that involves a great deal of integrity, self-awareness, and self-control.

An instructor should be not only an instructor, but also a mentor and role model. The most difficult thing for

a faculty member is to abide by acceptable ethical and moral consent in relationships with students.

Taylor (1982) argues that college faculty should value their social relationships with students both inside and outside of the classroom. It would be a great loss for both students and teachers if fears over sexual harassment and other lawsuits eventually resulted in the restrictions of such contacts. Both teachers and students in education often consider social outings beneficial. Some of these social outings include going out to local establishments for refreshments and conversations, conference involvement and attendance, and movie going (Perillo, 1997). Flannelly (1990), Lamport (1993), and Fusani (1994) found that close student-faculty relationships resulted in higher student academic achievement and involvement. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Chickering and Gamson (1991) suggest that close ethical student-faculty relationships are vital to student growth and development throughout the college years.

The issue of intimate student-faculty relationships or relationships between student services professional and student probably is not discussed enough in education.

"Many colleges and universities simply ignore the problem of consent in their sexual harassment policies, and almost none

have been courageous or practical enough to ban consensual relationships altogether" (Dziech, 1998, p. B5). Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) believe that faculty members spend too much time discussing numbers and paper work. If faculty and teachers continue to ignore this increasing problem it will continue to exist in education, and discredit many institutions and individuals. Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) also believe that educational institutions must communicate this issue with their faculty, staff, administration, and students. And finally, addressing these dilemmas and issues may provide valuable lessons for the students' future professional interactions with clients, students, and other professionals (Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth, 1997).

This paper has presented both sides on the issue of intimate student-faculty relationships and student services professional-student relationships. This researcher agrees with Flannelly (1990), Lamport (1993), and Fusani (1994) that close ethical (non-intimate) student-faculty relationships result in greater student success and achievement. This researcher also agrees with Churchill (1982) and Dill (1982) that intimate student-faculty relationships too often lead to conflict. This conflict

usually occurs in the form of sexual harassment cases through the misuse and abuse of power.

## References

- American College Personnel Association. (1993b). Statement of ethical principles and standards. *Journal of College Student Development*, 34, 89-92.
- Bacchi, C. (1992). *Sex on campus—Where does "consent" end and harassment begin?* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 453 130)
- Baker, R. L. (1996). The ethics of student-faculty friendships. In L. Fisch (Ed.), *Ethical dimensions of college and university teaching*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. No. 22. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Barreca, R. (1997, October 3). Loving the profession—and the professor. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B9-B10.
- Begley, S. (1993, May 3). Hands off, Mr. Chips! More schools ban profs from dating students. *Newsweek*, pp. 58-59.
- Blevins-Knabe, B. (1992). The ethics of dual relationships in higher education. *Ethics and Behavior*, 31(2), 151-163.
- Biaggio, M., Paget, T. L., and Chenoweth, M. S. (1997). A model for ethical management of faculty-student dual relationships. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 28(2), 184-189.
- Bowman, V. E., Hatley, L. D., and Bowman, R. L. (1995). Faculty-student relationships: The dual role controversy. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 34(3), 232-242.
- Cahn, S. M. (1986). *Saints and scamps: Ethics in academia*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chickering, A. W., and Gamson, Z. F. (Ed.), 1991 *Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 47. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Churchill, L. R. (1982). The teaching of ethics and moral values in teaching. *Journal of Higher Education*, 53(3), 296-306.

Dill, D. D. (1982). Professional ethics. *Journal of Higher Education*, 53(3), 255-267.

Dziech, B. W., and Weiner, L. (1990). *The lecherous professor: Sexual harassment on campus*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 326 160)

Dziech, B. W. (1998, March 20). The abuse of power in intimate relationships. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B4-B5.

Dixon, N. (1996). The morality of intimate faculty-student relationships. *Monist*, 79(4), 519-536.

Flannelly, S. J. (1990). *Student/faculty contact and academic quality of effort: Excerpted results from CSEQ surveys*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 323 869)

Fusani, D. S. (1994). "Extra-class" communication: Frequency, immediacy, self-disclosure, and satisfaction in student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 22(3), 232-256.

Keller, E. A. (1988). *Consensual amorous relationships between faculty and students: The constitutional right to privacy*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 377 715)

Keller, E. A. (1990). Consensual relationships and institutional policy. *Academe*, 76(1), 29-32.

Kimmerling, G. F. (1992). Faculty-student relationships: Where to draw the line. *American Counselor*, 1(4), 5-38.

Komives, S.R., & Woodard, D.B. (1996). *Student Services: A Handbook for the profession* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lamport, M. A. (1993). Student-faculty interaction and the effect on college student outcomes: A review of the literature. *Adolescence*, 28(112), 971-990.

Leatherman, C. (1993, May 8). In the debate over faculty-student dating, the talk turns to ethics, sex, even love. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A15-A17.

Leatherman, C. (1997, March 7). A prominent feminist theorist recounts how she faced charges of sex harassment. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A12-A14.

Markie, P. J. (1994). *A professor's duties*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (1994). Standards of professional practice. In National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, *NASPA member handbook* (pp. 15-16). Washington, DC: Author.

Pascarella, E., and Terenzini, P. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Perillo, L. (1997). The enduring value of the beer-pizza ritual. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B6-B7.

Plaut, S. M. (1993). Boundary issues in teacher-student relationships. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 19(2), 210-219.

Sarton, M. (1961). *The small room*. New York: Norton.

Svinicki, M. (1994). Ethics in college teaching. In W. J. McKeachie, *Teaching tips*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Lexington, MA: Heath.

Taylor, R. (1982). *Having love affairs*. New York: Prometheus.

Wilson, R. (1997, November 14). A professor's personal teaching style wins him praise and costs him his job. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A12-A14.