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## The ethics of student "affairs": Intimate relations between residence hall directors and students

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## The ethics of student "affairs": Intimate relations between residence hall directors and students

### Abstract

An examination of the literature concerning higher education over the past decade reveals that "ethics" has been a topic of increasing interest. Many professions have taken new steps to ensure that ethical behavior is a top priority, student services among them. Some of the primary professional associations of student services administrators such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the National Association of Women in Education (NA WE, formerly NA WDAC) have developed formal statements of ethical standards for their members. Also, many graduate preparation programs in college and university student services now integrate the discussion of ethics into their courses (Welfel, 1990).

THE ETHICS OF STUDENT "AFFAIRS":  
INTIMATE RELATIONS BETWEEN RESIDENCE HALL  
DIRECTORS AND STUDENTS

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

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## The Ethics of Student "Affairs":

### Intimate Relations Between Residence Hall Directors and Students

An examination of the literature concerning higher education over the past decade reveals that "ethics" has been a topic of increasing interest. Many professions have taken new steps to ensure that ethical behavior is a top priority, student services among them. Some of the primary professional associations of student services administrators such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the National Association of Women in Education (NAWE, formerly NAWDAC) have developed formal statements of ethical standards for their members. Also, many graduate preparation programs in college and university student services now integrate the discussion of ethics into their courses (Welfel, 1990).

Along with the efforts made by the profession of student services as a whole, several areas within student services have taken the initiative to examine ethical issues specific to their individual departments. In admissions, staff have analyzed student recruitment strategies and made new recommendations for more ethical behavior in this area (Johnson, 1989). Career counseling and placement have also focused new attention on ethical issues as they advise students concerning employment opportunities and their interactions with corporations and other job agencies (Fein, 1988, 1989).

Residence Life is another area which has further explored ethics. In 1985, the Association of College and University Housing Officers--International (ACUHO-I) published and later revised in 1991 a code of ethics designated specifically for housing professionals. Also, some professionals in this area have tackled ethical issues specific to housing personnel (Davis & Daugherty, 1992). Despite these new efforts, however, one problematic issue has failed to receive the explicit attention that it has in the fields of counseling and academic affairs. That issue involves intimate relations or personal interaction which extends beyond mere friendship between residence hall directors and students (Welfel, 1989; Robert A. Hartman, personal communication, January 18, 1993). For the purposes of this paper, intimate relations is defined as sexual contact and/or deep feelings of affection between two people of the same or opposite sex.

While the hall director position often requires assuming roles such as advisor, advocate, or educator, a relationship between a hall director and a student might more closely resemble that which might exist between a faculty member and student rather than a counselor and patient. With this in mind, an examination of the literature concerning faculty/student relationships might prove helpful in approaching this topic.

This paper will discuss the concept of "ethical behavior" in student services, examine how student services has approached the

topic of staff/student intimate relations and note some ethical issues which researchers have discussed in terms of faculty in such relationships. Finally, this research will be related to hall director/student relationships, offering recommendations to residence life directors as to how to better address this sensitive topic.

### "Ethical Behavior" in Student Services

In the past 25 years, student services professionals have been presented with a variety of ethical standards statements from professional organizations, each meant to provide some basic guidelines for ethical behavior. Canon (1989) points out that, in some cases, these statements have varied considerably in their focus, depending on the organization's structure. The ethical code developed by NAWPE, for example, places great emphasis on issues involving sexual harassment since most of its members are women professionals. NASPA, on the other hand, depends heavily on fees paid by institutional members and thus, tends to support the employing institution with their code of ethics. ACPA, the organization which draws its membership mostly from middle and entry-level management, speaks to both the students' needs as well as institutions' with its standards statement.

As student services professionals are faced with ethical dilemmas in their everyday work, differences between ethical codes can cause some confusion for those belonging to more than one

organization. Also, professionals may be troubled by individual ethical codes as many have been found to have internal inconsistencies. As a consequence, professionals in student affairs have been offered some suggestions to deal with such conflicts (Winston & Dagley, 1985).

Kitchener (1985) has put forth five fundamental principles student services staff could use in conjunction with ethical standards statements to guide their behavior. These principles suggest that practitioners make sure that their behavior: (a) benefits others, (b) is just, (c) respects individual autonomy, (d) is trustworthy, and (e) causes no harm. Kitchener notes that these ethical principles can also come in conflict at times, but for the most part, they provide some consistent advice on which professionals can base their ethical actions and decisions.

Besides the principles that Kitchener has offered, several student services organizations have joined together to form the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS). Through this council, some uniform national standards and guidelines for ethical behavior have been developed for all student services professionals. Ethical obligations listed in the CAS Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (General-Division Level), include: (a) maintaining confidentiality in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (Buckley Amendment) of 1974,

(b) complying with the employing institution's human subjects policy and all other institutional policies concerning ethical practice, (c) ensuring equal access of services to students and avoiding any personal conflicts of interest both within and outside the institution, (d) refraining from the sexual harassment of students, and (e) recognizing when referrals need to be made to other sources based on the limits of their training, expertise and competence (Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/ Development Programs, 1988).

Kitchener's principles and the CAS standards statement provide student services professionals with some broad standards by which to regulate their behavior, but practitioners are often faced with a number of complex ethical situations which require more specific direction. One situation which can become complicated is that which involves an intimate relationship between a staff member and a student. In cases such as this, staff might benefit from looking to other resources, in addition to guidance from the profession.

#### Intimate Relations Between Staff and Students

While it appears that many ethical codes of professional student services organizations recognize that intimate relationships between staff and students have the potential for causing ethical problems, little beyond this has been written on the subject. For example, ACPA, the organization which claims the membership of most student services professionals (Welfel, 1990), notes under

"Professional Responsibility and Competence", Section 1.9 of its Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (1989) that student affairs professionals should: "Abstain from sexual intimacies with colleagues or with staff whom they have supervisory, evaluative, or instructional responsibility." Nowhere, however, does this document elaborate on the subject, explaining to professionals the unethical implications involved with intimate relations between staff and students (Association of College Personnel Association, 1989).

With the exception of the area of counseling, most student services areas have failed to explore this ethical issue in any depth (Welfel, 1990). Although the term "counselor" is used in several areas of student services (i.e. admissions counselor, financial aid counselor), that job or role differs significantly from the professional counselors found in Counseling Centers. Consequently, research concerning relationships between students and professional counselors does not offer other student services areas a suitable reference (Winston, 1989).

Unlike most other areas of students services, counseling center staff interact most often with students whose complex, personal problems require specialized training. Thus, the relationship between counselor and student is more comparable to doctor-patient, and therefore, not the same as that of other student services staff and students. In other student affairs areas, the staff-student relationship is more analogous to that of the faculty-student, for just as the

faculty member is responsible for the learning environment, student affairs staff are responsible for much of the living environment outside the classroom (Yarris, 1988).

Academic affairs is an area in higher education which has given some attention to the issue of staff/student relationships and perhaps, serves as a more appropriate reference than for most areas of student services. Research has been conducted and articles written in this area, specifically in terms of the ethical issues surrounding faculty/student relationships. Faculty and student services professionals have many similarities in how they interact with students (Canon, 1985); consequently, it might be helpful to examine the literature in this area for the guidelines it may offer.

#### Intimate Relationships Between Faculty and Students

In their book entitled, Ethical Problems in Higher Education, George M. Robinson and Janice Moulton (1985) discuss the issue of faculty/student intimate relationships, explaining that most times, professors are encouraged by their institutions to have additional contact with students outside the classroom in order to make the learning experience more meaningful to students. Thus, faculty become more personal with students through such activities as residence halls events, departmental parties or occasional dinners at their homes.

These authors note that such activities can prove to be quite positive for students; however, when relationships become too

personal, ethical problems are likely to occur. For example, an instructor has a more difficult time remaining impartial concerning a student with whom he or she is having a relationship. They write: "Suppose the student deserves to fail or does badly on the final exam after a lovers' quarrel. Suppose the student is competing for a scholarship and the instructor is on the awarding committee" (Robinson & Moulton, 1985, p. 92).

Robinson and Moulton (1985) further note that to make matters worse, fictional accounts of romantic relationships between teachers and students glamorize these intimate relationships, hiding the potential dangers. Becoming intimately involved with someone in a higher position of power is seen as intriguing, while in reality, such relationships often lead to unfair exploitation of students.

Issues such as those described by Robinson and Moulton were explored by Pope, Levenson and Schover (1979) in a study which surveyed former psychology students concerning their relationships with their instructors. This study revealed that 25% of those questioned had experienced sexual activity with their psychology educators during their graduate study. Only a very small percentage of respondents, however, felt that these relationships could be beneficial to both parties.

Glaser and Thorpe (1986) further researched this topic by examining sexual contact and advances between psychology educators and female graduate students. Specifically, Glaser and Thorpe

looked at the impact of these intimate relationships with faculty on students based on a questionnaire returned by 464 female graduate students (44%) which asked them to report: (a) their sexual contact with psychology instructors during their graduate training, (b) their experience with sexual advances, overtures, or propositions by psychology instructors which did not lead to sexual contact, and (c) their opinion concerning the ethicality of sexual relationships between psychology instructors and students while in working relationships and how likely they felt coercion entered into these relationships.

The results of this study pointed to some important issues surrounding intimate relations between faculty and students. First, similar to what Pope et al. (1979) had reported, Glaser and Thorpe (1986) found that the majority of respondents felt that sexual relationships between faculty and students, particularly during a working relationship, was "unethical, coercive, and harmful to the working relationship to a considerable degree" (p. 49). These researchers note that these responses were made both by those who had engaged in intimate sexual contact with educators (17% of the total respondents) and those who had not. Glaser and Thorpe also discovered that students who engaged in intimate relationships with faculty underwent a change in their attitudes about these relationships over time. While 29% felt that they experienced some degree of coercion at the time of their intimate relationship, 55% later felt

coercion was present during the relationship. This was also found to be the case concerning students' feelings about problems with their working relationships with these faculty. In either case, this change of attitude over time, according to these researchers, reflected "a significant degree of seriously unethical and harmful exploitation" (p. 49).

Such coercion and exploitation of the students has been the topic of Nancy Tuana's (1985) article, "Sexual Harassment in Academe: Issues of Power and Coercion". In this article, Tuana points out that many times, professors intentionally use their positions of power to coerce or exploit students in intimate relationships. There are also times, however, when neither professor nor student is aware that the student is subtly being coerced. Professors and students may be involved in a consensual intimate relationship; but even when both parties seem to consent to such a relationship, Tuana is skeptical. She comments: "Although there is no explicit threat, the context of the situation and the dynamics of a relationship between people of unequal power make the likelihood of unintended coercion very high" (p. 61).

Thus, some factors come into play when college faculty members and students engage in intimate relations which cause question as to the ethicality of such relationships. This situation, however, is not one which is limited only to college faculty. Student services professionals, such as residence hall directors, share certain

job characteristics with faculty such as close interpersonal contact, various responsibilities involving power over students, etc. which raise similar concerns about the implications of their intimate involvement with students.

### What Research on Faculty/Student Relationships Means for Residence Hall Directors

In her article, "Consensual Relationships and Institutional Policy," Elisabeth A. Keller (1990) writes: "The campus is an important locus of social interactions. Intimate relations are bound to form when people who share the same interests and educational backgrounds spend considerable time together" (p. 29). Keller is referring here to faculty and students, but her statement can also apply to hall directors and students.

Although residence hall staff positions are referred to by many different titles at different institutions, the main responsibilities for these positions are quite similar across college and university campuses (Schuh, 1988). Hall directors, like college faculty, are encouraged to spend a great deal of time with students. Most times, the job descriptions of residence hall directors require these individuals to live with students in the same housing, eat in student cafeterias, and attend social and educational events with students. Similar to faculty, this close interaction helps form personal relationships between hall directors and students which can become

problematic if they become too personal (Stuart Johnston, personal communications, January 20, 1993).

Although no specific data exists concerning the negative consequences of intimate relationships between students and student services staff such as hall directors, Welfel (1990) notes that the risk for exploitation of students may actually be greater in these relationships than in those between teaching faculty and students. She writes: "...students might be especially vulnerable to misperceive his or her ability to consent freely to an intimate relationship because the power differential between student services professionals and students is usually less obvious than that between faculty and students" (p. 211). Welfel adds that similar to what studies have found concerning relationships between students and faculty, a student involved with a staff member may not feel regret until after the relationship has been terminated.

Such is the case involving intimate relationships between residence hall directors and students. While on the surface, the power differential between hall directors and students often goes unnoticed, a closer look reveals that hall directors have a number of duties which often place them in positions of power over students. Such duties may include: the hiring/firing of student staff, issuing disciplinary sanctions, and/or the evaluation of job performance of student resident assistants. Each of these actions, among others, offer opportunities for favoritism or unfair exploitation of students

who may be involved in an intimate relationship with a hall director. Yet, because the dangers of such relationships seem less apparent, they are given less attention from college officials (Welfel, 1990).

Considering the ramifications of unethical conduct which may be associated with intimate relationships between hall directors and students, it seems that professionals in this area can no longer afford to overlook this situation. Those in charge of supervising residence hall directors must concentrate on how to prevent the problems which may be associated with this situation rather than merely reacting to a negative situation when it occurs. Since those in academic affairs have addressed these types of relationships, it might be helpful to draw upon recommendations from their experience.

#### Recommendations

Based on her examination of amorous contacts between faculty members and students, Keller (1990) suggests for those institutions which have not yet done so, a policy should be developed and implemented which specifically addresses the topic of intimate relationships between faculty and students. She adds that such a policy should be accompanied by clear and manageable guidelines as to how such relationships will be regarded and what disciplinary sanctions will result if the policy is abused. Keller further recommends that officials publish the policy in faculty and student handbooks so that both professors and students are recognized as having some degree of control in such relationships.

The development of such a policy for departments of residence could serve a variety of purposes. First, a specific policy on intimate relationships could help directors of residence life better deal with these uncomfortable situations when they arise. In her article entitled, "Discussion Guidelines for Supervisors and New Professionals," McManus (1991) writes: "Each institution, department, supervisor and new professional may have a different definition of appropriate behavior in this area" (p. 44). Thus, with a clearly articulated policy, there may be fewer "misunderstandings" between supervisors and hall directors concerning this situation.

Second, a specific policy concerning intimate relations between hall directors and students could provide directors with some guidelines for discussing this issue during staff training and/or staff development sessions. Intimate relationships can often be an uncomfortable topic for supervisors; nevertheless, this is a topic which must be brought out in the open. Such a policy might make discussions on this subject a little easier to conduct (McManus, 1991).

Finally, publishing such a policy in student handbooks, as well as hall director training manuals, might increase awareness of the issues on the part of both staff and students. Subtle differences in power between hall directors and students may be revealed as hall directors are shown to be regarded in the same light as faculty in this situation. Also, as with such a policy concerning faculty, when specific guidelines are presented to students in writing, students are

recognized as individuals, with certain rights and responsibilities. Students are given power as adults to make decisions concerning relationships with hall directors and this helps support the idea of providing an environment which encourages students' personal development (Association of College and University Housing Officers--International, 1991).

Keller (1990) suggests that each individual institution develop their own specific policy concerning intimate relations between faculty and students. Residence hall directors, however, might benefit more from a policy developed and universally recognized by the housing profession, as a whole. The residence hall director position has been found to have a high turnover rate (Herr & Strange, 1985); thus, with professionals frequently moving from one institution to another, new policies may cause confusion on such a subject as intimate relations with students. With one universal policy, hall directors would know what was expected of them wherever they were hired.

Another action taken by professionals in academic affairs involves providing resources specifically geared towards issues faced by new professionals. Through books such as Ethical Problems in Higher Education by Robinson and Moulton (1985) and The College Instructor's Guide to Teaching and Academia by Udolf (1976), new faculty are presented with detailed explanations of why intimate relationships with students are not advised.

New professionals who begin work as residence hall directors, on the other hand, are somewhat at a loss for resources which offer advice specifically concerning this situation. These professionals, sometimes right out of undergraduate study, are often handed broad standards or guidelines for ethical decision-making and left to encounter difficult situations rather blindly. Using their knowledge and experience in residence life, directors could collaborate to provide hall directors with their own resources which elaborate on difficulties characteristic to the hall director position. The development of a collection of case studies, for example, could bring out difficulties such as intimate relationships between hall directors and students, and discussion of hypothetical situations might surface new strategies for handling this situation.

### Conclusion

Certainly, not all intimate relationships between faculty and students involve exploitation and coercion. Researchers report that these relationships, at times, have led to positive, long-term arrangements such as marriage; however, these cases are exceptions to the rule (Tucker & Bryan, 1991). An examination of the research concerning intimate relationships between faculty and students suggests that such relationships have great potential for producing harmful conditions for students. Similar conclusions might be drawn about relationships between student and residence hall directors.

Canon (1989) writes: "The quality of the ethical conduct of faculty and staff has a direct bearing on the quality of ethical conduct that students will demonstrate or aspire to" (p. 58). Considering the ramifications of unethical conduct involved with intimate relationships between hall directors and students, it is imperative that residence life staff begin to openly confront this sensitive situation.

Specific research on the topic of intimate relationships between hall directors and students must be conducted. Until this is accomplished, however, directors of residence life might begin to effectively approach this issue by considering the ideas of those who have examined it in terms of faculty. Whatever action is taken by directors, it should focus on bringing discussion of this situation out in the open. It is important that both students and staff understand what constitutes "ethical" behavior in such circumstances.

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