Chapter 89

Impact and Prevention of Misconduct in the Faculty–Student Academic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Faculty face the conundrum of the simultaneous duality of their roles - they are both teachers and mentors. When the sanctity of the institution is compromised by inappropriate faculty-student relationships, and the purpose and integrity of university programs are compromised. One has to consider the issues of differential power, boundary crossings and violations and its impact on faculty, students, the program, and the profession. What legal and ethical responsibility do institutions have for reporting these violations? Attention must be given to the areas of vulnerability and safeguards must be put in place.

INTRODUCTION

Attending university is both a privilege and a necessity in the present marketplace. The expectation that students receive a valuable learning experience is an assumption made by both student and faculty. This learning experience in the human services fields at all academic degree levels is both didactic and interactive, first in the classroom then in the clinical fieldwork training. In preparation programs in the human services fields, faculty face the conundrum of the simultaneous duality of their roles – as both teachers and mentors. The nature of the preparation programs and learning experience is different at each degree level, and the roles on the continuum of teacher-mentor shifts accordingly. The shift that occurs is organic and varies within each degree level. One might question if the shift in relationship

and roles are a matter of better defined boundaries, or better professional ability to distinguish between these dual roles. This duality of roles can pose a challenge to faculty who are not only encouraged by administration to mentor students, but also to demonstrate how they do so as part of the annual faculty evaluation process. The message is clear: develop relationships with students.

The appropriate nature of what these faculty-student relationships are, have both explicit and implicit expectations and outcomes. The explicit expectation is that faculty foster academic relationships with students within the university environment and outside the university in professional arenas. The expected outcome is increased collaborative faculty-student professional presentations, publications, and even service, which in turn provides the university visibility. These academic relationships, particularly mentoring, may mean that faculty and student must make time outside of the traditional work week and even outside of the university to work on projects. The explicit expectation raises the questions: What university and/or professionals' discipline-specific regulations and codes of ethics guide the development of these relationships? What are the acceptable parameters of the conversational bantering that goes on in classrooms, meetings, and collaborative learning experiences? The implicit expectation is that these academic relationships are behaviorally appropriate for and by the faculty and student. The implicit expectation raises the questions: What constitutes inappropriate behavior? Who defines inappropriateness? Who monitors and regulates these academic faculty-student relationships? The answers to these questions are driven by both personal and professional ethics. The sanctity of an academic institution is compromised by inappropriate faculty-student relationships, potentially impairing the purpose and integrity of university programs.

The literature (Braxton & Bayer, 1999; Dekker, Snoek, Schönrock-Adema, van der Molen, & Cohen-Schotanus, 2013; Kitchner, 1992; Lazarus, 2015) considering sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in higher education has examined relationships within multiple disciplines. Plaut (2008) suggests that the general principles, from medical education research, can also be applied to any area of professional education. In their examination of faculty-student behaviors, Dekker et. al. (2013) explored to what extent faculty and students perceive certain behaviors as misconduct or as sexual harassment in the faculty-student relationship. They determined unprofessional behaviors can be grouped by different levels of severity: (1) atypical of the standard faculty-student relationship, including discrimination, (2) crossing boundaries, and (3) violating boundaries. While typical faculty-student relationships promote student learning and encourage participation in the learning process, the three areas of unprofessional behavior are exploitative in the learning process. Additionally, the emotional complexities and the subsequent toll on all parties involved must not be underestimated (Lazarus, 2015).

Can faculty and students have informal relationships that do not breach or threaten ethical behavior? Navigating a space between formal and informal or close and distant challenges these relationships. In lieu of systems theory, social construction, postmodern thought, and in lessening power differentials, it appears that this could lead to a greater definition and respect of dual relationships in academia. Co-constructed relational boundaries can be the only solution to a continuing problem in academia.

This chapter begins with the theoretical foundations for understanding relationships, then to discussing issues of faculty-student relationships and vulnerable areas that may lead to misconduct. The impact of the misconduct on the faculty member, student in the relationship, the University including other students and faculty and administration, and the professional discipline are explicated. Guidelines for reporting, remediation, and penalties for faculty and student misconduct, respectively, are delineated. Each of these key concepts are illustrated using a case in counselor education. The chapter concludes with safeguards that can be put in place moving forward.

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