

Chapter 82

Maintaining Professional Faculty–Student Relationships

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ABSTRACT

University faculty departments are being challenged to adopt guidelines, policies, and procedures on how to maintain professional boundaries in order to keep up with the demands of university Title IX policies and the rapidly changing advances in technology. While some behaviors are more clearly defined as inappropriate (e.g. sexual harassment), others are less well-defined (e.g. texting). What constitutes as harmful unethical behavior on the part of a faculty member depends on the context in which the behavior occurs. As a result, it is important for faculty to maintain clear boundaries in order to prevent harming or exploiting students for their benefit. This book chapter will utilize this case study to: (a) examine the power differential in the student-faculty relationships, (b) examine contextual factors that lead to boundary crossings, and (c) identify preventative measures that can be taken by faculty and students to minimize the potential for boundary violations to occur.

INTRODUCTION

University faculty departments are being challenged to adopt guidelines, policies, and procedures on how to maintain professional boundaries in order to keep up with the demands of university Title IX policies and the rapidly changing advances in technology. Today's technological climate of email, social media, cell phones and texting challenge older traditional student-professor guidelines, as the society and culture advances towards more diffused work-life boundaries. As a result, defining what constitutes a boundary crossing or violation becomes more and more difficult to define. While some behaviors are more clearly defined as inappropriate (e.g. sexual harassment), others are less well-defined (e.g. texting). Often boundary crossings include (but are not limited to) giving students their personal cell phone number, accepting gifts from students, and meeting with students outside of traditional professional settings (Owen

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5631-2.ch082

& Zwahr, Castro, 2007). Yet, whether any of these activities constitute harmful unethical behavior on the part of a faculty member depends on the context in which the behavior occurs (Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002). It is, however, the erosion of professional boundaries that has been shown to be the most consistent precipitant to a sexual or romantic relationship between professor and student (Folman, 1991; Lamb & Catanzaro, 1998). As a result, the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) and American Counseling Association (ACA) have each published ethical guidelines to help promote clear boundaries by discouraging non-professional relationships between graduate faculty members and their students. Yet despite these guidelines, non-professional relationships between faculty and students continue to occur with potentially negative consequences for both parties (Lamb, Catanzaro, Moorman, 2003).

The number of violations reported is significant. According to a recent study, 10% (n=36/368) of individuals have reported at least one sexual boundary violation during their own psychotherapy, supervision experience, or education. Of those individuals, 14% reported that the violation occurred with their therapist, 42% with their supervisor, and 58% with their teacher (Lamb, Catanzaro, Moorman, 2003). These statistics are consistent with Gentry's (2007) estimates that 10% of counselors are actively violating an ethics code at any given time. The prevalence of confirmed ethics and licensure violations, however, is limited to just 0.5% to 1% of total membership among licensed counselors, with 31% of those being sexual dual relationships (Neukrug, Milliken, & Walden, 2001). Nevertheless, these studies reflect that one out of ten clients or students will experience a sexual and/or romantic boundary violation. Many others go unreported, as clients choose to simply not return to the counselor or students graduate and move away from their professor.

The impact of a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a student has the potential for significant negative consequences on the student's personal well-being and career as well. In a study by Lamb, Catanzaro & Moorman (2003), eighty percent of students that had engaged in a romantic or sexual relationship with their professor reported that it had a significant detrimental effect on their professional practice. Some of their responses were: "I learned how naive I was about power dynamics and how people are vulnerable ... and I am now more aware of those dynamics," "...I am less trusting of self," "...I maintain distance," and "...I feel cheap, sleazy," (p.104). Ninety percent of the same respondents said they would not engage in another relationship if the opportunity presented itself.

The following case example describes one doctoral student's experience of a non-professional relationship with her dissertation chair. The boundary crossings and violations that occurred while she was early in her doctoral program set the stage for an emotional struggle that extended beyond graduation before ending abruptly and with dire personal and professional consequences. This book chapter will utilize this case study to: (a) examine the power differential in the student-faculty relationships, (b) examine contextual factors that lead to boundary crossings, and (c) identify preventative measures that can be taken by faculty and students to minimize the potential for boundary violations to occur.

CASE EXAMPLE

Mary met Andrew in the first year of her doctoral program in Counseling, where Andrew, a tenure track professor and fourteen years older, was assigned to be her academic advisor. During that year, she took several courses from Andrew and expressed a desire to conduct an independent study with him over the summer, given their mutual professional interests. The next summer, Mary worked closely with Andrew collecting data for the independent study, a process that resulted in regular telephone and text commu-

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