

Overtures from students

In some instances an instructor may feel that a student is attempting to initiate a romantic, sexual or overly-personal relationship with them. This can similarly take the form of invitations, gifts, inappropriately-toned e-mail or voice-mail messages, frequent visits outside of regular office hours, personal questions and physical touching.

Instructors should advise the student as clearly, firmly and directly as they can that the behaviour is not acceptable. Let them know that if it doesn't stop, you may have to withdraw from the instructor/student relationship and report the problem to the appropriate Chair or Dean. It is a good idea to document what has happened and the steps you have taken. Discussing the situation with a colleague may also give you some ideas for dealing with the situation. If you are feeling harassed by the student, you can report it to the Office of Human Rights, Equity and Harassment Prevention. The University can take disciplinary action against students who harass or stalk faculty or staff members.

Office of Human Rights, Equity and Harassment Prevention

494-1137
hrehp.dal.ca

Tips for maintaining a professional relationship with students

- Avoid initiating discussions with students about their social or sexual life, or giving unsolicited advice on personal matters (family, relationships, etc.).
- If a student asks for help with a personal issue, be supportive, but avoid taking on a counselling role. Refer them to resources that may be of assistance to them.
- Be aware that others may not be comfortable with physical touching. Consider other ways to demonstrate concern or sympathy.
- Avoid romantic or sexual relationships with students.
- Be aware that students from cultures different from your own may interpret actions differently than you do.
- Communicate your own boundaries for interactions with students. If a student crosses a boundary, let them know that it is inappropriate in the context of your relationship with them.

INSTRUCTOR/ STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

A Guide for Faculty and Teaching Assistants



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The instructor/student relationship

The instructor/student relationship can be a complex one and may involve a variety of roles including teacher, advisor, mentor and counsellor. Instructors have different personal styles in how they interact with students, and students come with a variety of expectations of their relationships with their teachers. There is no single “right” way to interact with students. Instructors need to develop an approach that is comfortable for them and for the students they teach.

That said, it is important for instructors to recognize the power they have over students (for example, in grading, thesis supervision, and the provision of references for graduate and professional schools or employment), and the fact that some students will hold instructors in high esteem because of their position at the institution. It is the instructor’s responsibility to maintain a professional relationship at all times.

Under the law, teachers are viewed as being in a position of trust with respect to their students. They have a duty to avoid any conflict of interest and to exercise their powers over students only in the interests of the students and not in their own interests.

It should be noted that the concerns outlined here can also be present in other types of relationships, including senior faculty/junior faculty, faculty/staff and administrator/staff relationships.

Consensual relationships between instructors and students

Significant problems can arise when there is an intimate personal relationship between an instructor and a student, particularly where the instructor has a supervisory role over the student. Because of the power imbalance that exists, a romantic or sexual relationship with a student that appears to be consensual may actually be unwanted. Students may have difficulty communicating freely that they do not want such a relationship, or that they want the relationship to end, because of concern over the impact it may have on their academic progress.

Dalhousie University's **Conflict of Interest Policy** requires teachers who are engaged in an intimate personal relationship with a student to disclose that relationship to their administrative head, and, normally, to remove themselves from any teaching, supervisory, advisory or evaluative responsibility for the student.

The Policy also states that teachers should recognize that an intimate personal relationship with a student may constitute or give rise to a subsequent claim that the relationship constituted sexual harassment.

(For more information on the Conflict of Interest Policy, see www.senate.dal.ca)

Other personal interactions

Instructors have different styles in dealing with students and these often vary in the level of formality. While there is nothing wrong in being friendly with students (and in fact this can convey to students that an instructor is approachable and concerned for their academic and personal well-being -something the University encourages), it is important to be aware that students can have very different perceptions of behaviour. Interactions that are perceived as informal and personal can, in some circumstances, make students uncomfortable, confused or anxious about the instructor’s true intent. Students may be concerned, for instance, that the instructor is interested in a more personal relationship, or that their personal privacy has been invaded.

Behaviours that sometimes cause concern include :

- social invitations made to an individual student (for coffee, dinner, concert, etc.)
- invitations to the instructor’s home when no one else is present
- gifts
- proposals to share accommodation (conferences, research trips, etc.)
- hugs, kisses or other physical gestures
- questions, discussions and other perceived intrusions of a personal nature