

# Building Inclusion:

## Relationships between Students & Instructors

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As a university instructor, you will have the opportunity to work with many students from diverse backgrounds during your time at McMaster. Understanding how to establish boundaries within the relationships that you will form with your students is important to becoming a successful instructor. This is especially vital given your fiduciary responsibility to always be focused on the best interests of your students.

Instructors play a variety of roles including teacher, advisor, mentor and counsellor. Because there is no single “right” way to interact with students, instructors develop personal styles of interaction that can vary from formal to friendly and approachable. It is, however, essential to ensure that relationships between students and instructors are at all times respectful of the student. This means that it is important for instructors to recognize the power that they hold over students. Instructors exercise this power in grading, thesis supervision, and the provision of references for employment, advanced degrees or professional designations. Some students also hold instructors in high esteem because of their position at the institution.

Because instructors are in a position of trust with respect to their students, they have a duty to avoid any conflict of interest that may arise, for example if an instructor pursues a romantic or intimate relationship with a student who is currently enrolled in a course with that instructor.

**Please note that the concerns outlined here apply equally to other types of relationships including those between senior and junior faculty, faculty and staff and administrators and staff.**

### **Consensual Relationships between Students & Instructors**

Significant problems can arise when students and instructors pursue intimate personal relationships, particularly when 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 consensual may in fact be coerced or unwanted. Students may not feel that they can clearly express their unwillingness to enter into a relationship or their desire to end a relationship because of concern over the potential impact on their academic progress.

To prevent creating a conflict of interest, instructors should remove themselves from positions of power over students prior to engaging in romantic or sexual relationships. For more information about avoiding conflict of interest in your role as instructor, please refer to the McMaster University Faculty Association’s [Faculty Handbook](#).

In some instances, an instructor may feel that the student is attempting to initiate a romantic, sexual or overly personal relationship. This may take the form of frequent visits outside of regular office hours, invitations,

gifts, inappropriately toned email or voice mail messages, personal questions and physical touching. Because the instructor is in a position of power over the student, the instructor should clearly and firmly inform the student that this behaviour is not acceptable within the context of their relationship. Inform the student that if the behaviour does not stop, you will have to remove yourself from the situation by reporting the problem to the appropriate Chair or Dean. If the unwanted behaviour continues and you are feeling harassed by the student, you may choose to contact the Office of Human Rights & Equity Services (HRES) to speak with a Human Rights Officer.

## **Other Personal Interactions with Students**

Because instructors have many different styles in dealing with students, it is important to recognize that the impact of certain behaviours may be different from the intent. Interactions that you may perceive to be informal and personal can, in some circumstances, make students uncomfortable, confused or anxious about the instructor's expectations. Students may be concerned, for example, that the instructor is interested in a more personal relationship or that the student's grades will be affected by not meeting perceived social expectations.

Some behaviours that may cause concern include:

- Social invitations made to an individual student, for example an individual invitation for coffee or for dinner.
- Invitations to the instructor's home when no one else is present.
- Giving gifts to a student.
- Proposals to share accommodation, for example at a conference or on a research trip.
- Physical contact such as hugging, kissing or touching.
- Questions about a student's personal life.

## **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 such as family and relationships. Avoid disclosing personal details about your own life as well.
- If a student asks for help with a personal issue, be supportive but avoid taking on a counselling role. If you don't know where to refer the student, you may ask the student to contact HRES or you may choose to contact us directly for more information about campus and community resources.
- Avoid pursuing romantic or sexual relationships with students.
- Be aware that McMaster is made up of a diverse group of students who may not always interpret your actions in the way that you intend. Be mindful that the impact of your actions does not always line up with the intent.
- Communicate your own boundaries clearly with students and respect your students' boundaries.

If you have any questions about maintaining professional relationships, please contact HRES.