

ETHICAL ISSUES IN COLLEGE TEACHING

As an instructor, you have multiple responsibilities. In addition to leading discussions or running labs, you evaluate student performance, provide academic advice, and serve as a scholarly role model. You may also be asked to provide personal advice.

Through these roles, you occupy a position of considerable power and authority—including the power to grade—largely free from direct oversight. You enjoy a large degree of academic freedom—but with power comes responsibility. Your actions have a considerable impact on your students' lives, just as your mentors' actions profoundly influence yours. Such authority can easily be abused.

There is, in short, an ethical dimension to college teaching—although it is a dimension seldom discussed or scrutinized. Some ethical issues are easy: One may not use racist or sexist humor in class or exchange grades for money or sexual favors. Papers and exams must always be graded and returned to students in a timely manner. But many issues are tougher.

As we discuss these sticky issues, ask yourself: *Are there some basic norms and standards that we can agree form a basis for our actions in the classroom?*

- **ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

Does the principle of academic freedom allow you (or your students) to:

- use language in class that some might find offensive?
- discuss unrelated topics in the classroom?

- **GRADING:**

How do you fairly grade a student who has ticked you off or offends you?

How can you assure that grading is fair and not arbitrary or biased?

- **PRIORITIES:**

How can you properly balance preparing your teaching with your other obligations?

- **INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM**

Is it appropriate to express ideas or viewpoints that offend some of your students?

Must you remain neutral when teaching controversial issues?

Do you have an obligation to present opposing perspectives on a particular topic (for example, evolution)?



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- ***CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT***

How can one best handle problematic behavior without embarrassing a student?

- ***CONFIDENTIALITY***

What should you do if a student tells you something in confidence that raises concerns about the student's mental well-being?

Can you discuss a particular student with other TAs or with faculty?

When, if ever, can you breach a student's confidentiality?

- ***INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS***

When can you provide personal advice to a student?

Can a graduate student have a romantic relationship with an undergraduate?

What kinds of personal relationships with students are appropriate?

- ***ACADEMIC HONESTY***

Must you report every case of plagiarism or cheating to the course instructor, or can you resolve the problem informally?

- ***A HOSTILE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT***

Is an instructor justified in making students feel uncomfortable in the interest of promoting critical inquiry and reflection?

What should you do if you think an instructor is biased, for example, on the basis of gender or sexual orientation?

- ***INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY:***

What are your obligations, when teaching, in acknowledging ideas that you obtained from others?

Can you use another instructor's syllabus, handouts, or tests without acknowledgement?

- ***LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION***

Can you refer to a student's race or ethnicity in a letter of recommendation?

Can you decline to write a letter on behalf of a student?

Can you write a negative or mixed letter of recommendation?

- ***ADVISING & MENTORING***

What should you do if a student cries in your presence?

What should you do if you have a problematic relationship with your mentor?

- ***RESEARCH ETHICS***

Fudging or fabricating data: What should you do if you suspect a lab mate is fudging or fabricating data?

Honesty in interpretation and reporting: What should you do if you believe that a lab mate is not accurately reporting the results of an experiment?

Allocation of credit: How should credit for a finding be allocated?