



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES

Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Teaching Center

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TA-Student Relationships

Whether TAs teach independently or TA for a faculty member, Teaching Fellows are prohibited from having personal relationships, whether intimate or not, with students whom they also supervise or evaluate.

TAs evaluate papers and exams. They may assign grades. They develop and enforce policies related to class or section requirements, assignments, due dates, attendance, etc. TAs also determine consequences for students who fail to meet requirements or deadlines. TAs are asked to consider requests for extensions, change of grades, extra credit, and additional help, tutoring, and information. TAs must be able to carry out these responsibilities fairly; students need to know that their TAs are treating them all objectively and that interactions with them are based on a relationship that is developed solely around the content and conduct of the course.

Teaching Fellows will not be perceived as objective and fair if they have relationships outside the instructional role and responsibilities. And whether TAs believe they can be fair and objective is not as critical as whether students perceive their TA to be. Other students are unlikely to believe their TA gives them grades, resources, and opportunities using the same criteria as the TA does for students with whom the TA has a close or romantic relationship. Special relationships damage both professional identity and authority as well as the academic credibility and peer relationships of students whom TAs may favor with those relationships.

Any relationship between people with different degrees of power, such as the one that exists between instructor and students, mentor and protégé, advisor and advisee, is lopsided. What may appear as a consensual, reciprocal relationship may actually be experienced and viewed as pressure and coercion by students. It can even be argued that with unequal status and power in the TA-student relationship, the student is unable to consent freely to a relationship. All too often, when the relationship ends, accusations of harassment, intimidation, and worse (assault, rape) are leveled. Teaching Fellows must not place themselves at such risk.

In cases where faculty or students report that a TA is being unfair, showing favoritism, practicing discrimination, exhibiting unprofessional conduct, or intimidating or harassing a student, the TA's Director of Graduate Studies and GSAS will investigate the complaint. TAs can be, and have been, removed from their instructional responsibilities for showing poor judgment and inappropriate behavior as a TA.

We do not mean to imply that it is always easy to determine appropriate conduct, especially responses to student-initiated behaviors. Can a TA accept a student's invitation to lunch, dinner, or for a drink? What if a group of students from a Teaching Fellow's class invites the TA out? Must it be an event or occasion that is open to all students in the class before the TA can agree to socialize with his or her students? We encourage TAs to discuss these issues with their DGS and faculty mentor.

We encourage Teaching Fellows to read Columbia's policy on sexual harassment (p. 78 in FACETS http://www.columbia.edu/cu/facets/0708_fulltext.pdf) and Columbia's romantic advisory policy (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/eoaa/docs/romance.html>).