

OTHER PERSONAL INTERACTIONS

Instructors have different styles in interacting with students and these often vary in the level of formality. While there is nothing wrong with being friendly with students (and in fact this can convey to students that *you* are approachable and concerned for their well-being – something the University encourages), it is important to be aware that students can have very different perceptions of behavior. 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.

Behaviors 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

Healthy Boundaries with Students

A guide for anyone in a position of trust and/or authority to students including in a teaching, coaching, and/or supervisory role.



**DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY**

Human Rights & Equity Services

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Navigating healthy relationships with students can be complex and may involve a variety of roles including teacher, advisor, mentor, and counsellor. Individuals have different personal styles in how they interact with students and students come with a variety of expectations of their relationships with members of the university community. 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.

It is important to recognize the power dynamics that exist between and within those in a position of trust and/or authority and students. These power dynamics can be illustrated, 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 them in high esteem because of their position at the institution. It is the responsibilities of the person in a position of trust and/or authority 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, but not limited to, senior faculty—junior faculty, faculty—staff, and administrator—staff relationships.

CONSENSUAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Significant problems can arise when there is an intimate personal relationship between someone in a position of trust and/or authority and a student, particularly where the individual 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 not be. 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 or employment progress.

Dalhousie University's Conflict of Interest Policy requires individuals 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 Conflict of Interest Policy also states that anyone in a position of trust and/or authority should recognize that an intimate personal relationship with a student may constitute or give rise to a subsequent claim that the relationship constituted sexualized violence.

For more information on the Conflict of Interest Policy and Sexualized Violence Policy, see dal.ca/policy.

To book an appointment with a HRES advisor, please contact HRES@dal.ca or **902.494.6672**.