

Graduate Advising and Mentoring: Worst Practices

Why Does it Matter?

Hostile, intimidating, or offensive behavior on the part of an advisor or mentor can seriously interfere with their students' ability to be successful.

Such behavior can harm students in multiple ways, even causing them to consider leaving the University. Most importantly, this type of harassing behavior harms current students in terms of their progress and successful completion of their degrees. This destructive type of behavior damages the reputation of the University with prospective students, alumni, employers of our graduates, and the public at large.

Resources

Office for Conflict Resolution

www.ocr.umn.edu
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall
Contact: Tamar Gronvall

Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action

www.eoaa.umn.edu 612.624.9547,
274 McNamara Alumni Center

Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

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It also dampens the morale of the members of the University community who observe such behavior or experience the consequences. Faculty members often develop close professional relationships with students, especially advisees, and a vibrant and engaged relationship between faculty and students is often mutually beneficial. Faculty should, however, be sensitive to the power differential in these types of relationships, which can be intimidating to students.



Since faculty/student interactions often include situations that are ambiguous, included below are some examples to consider. It is the responsibility of the faculty member to set and observe appropriate boundaries. Although you may not be directly involved in these types of situations, you may know of faculty members who are. Any faculty member can advocate for a student and encourage best practices by fellow faculty members.

Things to Avoid in Faculty/Student Interactions

Asking a student with a RA or TA appointment to work extra or late hours

Students should be expected to work the hours for which they are paid. Students may volunteer to work extra hours to gain more experience (e.g. grant writing), gain authorship on a paper or to help meet a deadline. You should not automatically expect a student to work these extra hours. Please remember that international students should be treated with the same consideration regarding work schedules.

Threatening, intimidating, or shaming

Such behavior, even when used in a “joking” manner can create a hostile environment for students. Be careful when using sarcasm or “teasing” since it can be demeaning or degrading for the student.

Remaining silent in the face of inappropriate or abusive behavior

If you have knowledge of inappropriate or abusive behavior but remain silent, this sends the message that you condone such behavior, and also allows for the potential of further harm to students. In the bigger picture, the result of such silence is an unhealthy campus community.

Making a student the target in a faculty dispute

Placing a student in the middle of a dispute can hinder the student's academic success. For example, it is not appropriate to withhold comments on papers or projects, or otherwise delay academic progress because of disputes you may have with another faculty member.



Using inappropriate comments or questions

Remember that 'Academic Freedom' is not license to simply say anything you choose. Think carefully before telling off-color stories or jokes. Comments or jokes pertaining to sex, gender, or a student's home country or culture might be considered harassment. Asking a student about his or her "love life" or making comments about a student's appearance or religious practice can be inappropriate and unwelcome. Students may not feel empowered to speak up about such comments despite feeling uncomfortable about them.

Encouraging students to engage in unhealthy behaviors

It is important to remain aware of the messages conveyed within the context of the advisee/mentor relationship. Informal gatherings outside of class can help build a sense of community, and mentors should give appropriate consideration to propriety within such contexts. For example, it is never appropriate to pressure students to drink alcohol. Similarly, being drunk in the presence of students does not send a good message about what is considered suitable behavior by a faculty member.

Asking an advisee to house-sit, take care of your children or pets, help you move, or do other errands

While some students may not mind assisting with such tasks, others may only agree to do these jobs because they feel obligated or worry that saying no will somehow have a negative impact on their relationships with faculty members. To avoid problematic situations, a faculty member may consider posting a flyer requesting assistance, for pay, to help ensure that respondents really want the job and that they are fairly compensated.

Asking a student to drive you somewhere

This includes the airport, home, or to meetings. Such a request does not fall under a student's duties. A situation when this may be acceptable is when the student has the same destination.



Violating the University "Managing Nepotism and Personal Relationships" policy

This policy provides guidelines to members of the UM community involved in familial, romantic, and intimate relationships. The full policy can be found at the [University Policy Library](#).

We Can All Make a Difference.

Yes, these practices do still occur. Faculty members or students who have questions or concerns about their own or their colleagues' interactions with students may consult their department's internal resources such as the Director of Graduate Studies, department head or program chair. For additional information or guidance in dealing with such situations, refer to the resources on the front side.