

Appendix F: Romantic and/or sexual relationships between faculty/staff and students, and fellow employees.

The freedom to choose courses, fields of study, and advisors is essential to education and research at Wright State University. Students and postgraduates have the right to pursue their academic and professional interests in an environment free from preferential or unfair treatment, discrimination, or bias, and the potential for coercion. Romantic or sexual relationships between academic authorities and subordinates are prohibited whenever those relationships interfere with that right. Specifically:

It is the responsibility of the institution to guarantee that every member has the freedom to pursue their academic and professional interests in an environment without preferential or unfair treatment, discrimination, or bias. Even where fully consensual, romantic or sexual relationships between instructors or other authority figures and students affect more than just the parties in the relationship. They can harm the overall academic environment by compromising the authority's professional judgment and impartiality then and in the future, impacting grading, distribution of resources, academic or professional recommendations, and more. They often undermine collegial dynamics among the students themselves because of rumored or actual favoritism. They can tarnish the academic reputation of the instructor, the student, the field, and Wright State itself. Regardless of their outcome, their presence can linger within the careers of all parties, potentially driving the student from their discipline or hampering their lifelong academic and professional progress.

There are special risks in any sexual or romantic relationship between individuals in inherently unequal positions of power. These relationships may be subject to concerns about the validity of consent and unfair treatment of other students or employees. Such relationships can undermine the atmosphere of trust essential to the educational process and the employment relationship. They may, moreover, be less consensual than the individual whose position confers power believes. The apparent consensual nature of the relationship is inherently suspect due to the fundamental asymmetry of power in the relationship and it thus may be difficult to establish consent as a defense to a charge. Even when both parties consented at the outset to a romantic or sexual involvement, this past consent does not remove grounds for or preclude a charge or subsequent finding of sexual harassment based upon subsequent unwelcome conduct. The greater the institutional power differential that exists the greater risk there is for exploited consent. Exploited consent exists when consent to a relationship is given as a function of the position of power one individual occupies over another within an institution. Many international students, faculty, and staff come from cultures in which deference to any authority figure is important and sexual harassment laws do not exist. Some individuals may be especially vulnerable to exploitive relationships given cultural, language, and immigration/visa issues. Faculty, staff, and students should be very careful to avoid relationships that may be exploitive in nature.

Terminology and Scope

This policy addresses sexual and romantic relationships that are consensual and have a dynamic that involves or reasonably could involve a power imbalance. This means that one individual in the relationship (the authority) can or could influence the academic or professional progress of the other (the subordinate). The policy largely applies only to those situations in which the subordinate is a student or postgraduate. The authority is typically a faculty member, but it can also be a student, postgraduate, or member of the non-academic staff.

For purposes of this policy post-docs, visiting critics, visiting fellows, and professional school interns/residents are postgraduates. All other academic title holders are faculty from the standpoint of this policy, including those whose titles are modified by “visiting,” “courtesy,” “acting,” “adjunct,” or “emeritus.”

This policy section only pertains to consensual relationships. The remaining policy sections cover discrimination, harassment, and sexual and related misconduct.

Positions of academic or professional authority include but are not limited to course instructors, course graders, teaching assistants, special committee members, and other positions of evaluation, including academic, dissertation, research or thesis advisors; work-study or other student supervisors; advisors; coaches; residential life staff; the director or associate director of a degree program, field, laboratory, research group, or center; the chair or associate chair of a department; and deans.

Exceptions to these prohibitions can be made in cases of preexisting relationships or where the prohibition restricts educational or research opportunities or induces economic hardship for the subordinate. Exceptions require disclosure, approval, and recusal.

Important Advisory Statement on Relationships Between Individuals of Different University Status

Consensual relationships between individuals of different University status that occur outside the instructional or direct supervisory context can also lead to difficulties and are strongly discouraged. In a personal relationship between an instructor or other officer and an individual for whom the instructor or other officer has no current professional responsibility, the instructor or other officer should be sensitive to the possibility that they may unexpectedly be placed in a position of responsibility for that individual’s instruction or evaluation. This could involve being called upon to write a letter of recommendation or to serve on an admissions or selection committee involving the individual. In addition, one should be aware that others may speculate that a specific power relationship exists even when there is none, giving rise to assumptions of inequitable academic or professional advantage for the student involved. Although graduate students, teaching fellows, tutors, researchers, and undergraduate course assistants etc. may be less accustomed than faculty members to thinking of themselves as being in a position of greater authority by virtue of their professional responsibilities, they should recognize that they might be viewed as more powerful than they perceive themselves to be.

Enforcement Procedures/Violations

Prior violations will be taken into account. In all cases, the authority must be removed from power over the subordinate. Any harm rendered to a subordinate that results from a violation of this policy must be remedied by the authority’s unit under the guidance of the Office of Equity and Inclusion, the Provost’s Office and/or Human Resources.