Faculty Student Relations: Maintaining Professional Boundaries
Mount Royal Faculty Association
Professional Standards and Ethics Committee
Event Summary (January 12, 2018)

Resources for Faculty

These resources have been compiled by the committee and are linked below.

- What CAUT has to Say - general considerations on the topic
- SAMRU Student Resource Handout – refer students to the Student Advocacy Officer
- MRU Policy Resource Document – summarizes relevant sections of applicable policies
- MRFA Ethics Bylaws – refers faculty members' position of trust in relation to students

Panelists

- David Hyttenrauch, Associate Professor - Chair of English, Languages, and Cultures
- Janet Miller, Professor - Student Counselling
- Sonya Jakubec, Associate Professor - Nursing and Midwifery
- (Moderator) Darlene Dawson, Associate Professor - Assistant Chair, Nursing and Midwifery

Context from the MRFA Perspective

The MRFA has around 800 members who collectively teach thousands of students every semester and, overwhelmingly, there are very few problems regarding student and faculty relations: generally things go well. However, we need to be aware of appropriate boundaries and of when things have the potential to go wrong. We need to be proactive in avoiding problems by ensuring clarity in our communications with students. Related considerations in navigating student faculty relations:

- Professional boundaries with students are required to maintain work-life balance.
- Teachers need to avoid perceptions of bias, favoritism and unfairness.
- Faculty need to remember the power imbalance between them and their students. Students look up to faculty and view them as an authority with control over their academic and professional lives. These are positions of trust and responsibility.

When faculty keep these considerations in mind their behavior towards students changes. It is important to engage the appropriate amount; that is, it is important that faculty do not make themselves vulnerable to student complaints while still providing the support that students need.

Event Summary

How Professional Boundaries Evolve with Experience and Over Time

At various points in faculty careers they may approach scenarios differently. Faculty earlier in their careers may have served as resources for students with their personal problems and this occasionally resulted in deep and long-standing relationships with former students. However, being more aware of boundary issues has resulted in faculty referring students to others who are better equipped and trained to support them. This protects the faculty member and the student and helps the student more in the long run both personally and professionally. This evolution has occurred over time due to gender/identity, cultural shifts, and social media among other things. Also, personal changes of faculty as they develop, grow and age change the way they act and how students perceive them. Also, expectations of students have also evolved in terms of access to faculty – they expect instant responsiveness from faculty. So, it is advisable for faculty, and in particular new faculty, to consider appropriate boundaries and methods of setting/maintaining these boundaries. For instance, it is important to set and stick to boundaries around email and other forms of communication.

Awareness and Management of these Concerns

Faculty need to decipher what, in a student concern, is something academic that the faculty member can take on and what is personal and needs to be referred. Faculty need to focus on the academic issues and not respond to or engage in the personal issues aside from referring them to applicable resources. Faculty need to be continually aware of boundaries and consulting with other colleagues helps faculty manage these concerns.

Setting Expectations with Students

Faculty members may have different boundaries and different expectations and this makes it confusing for students. This makes it even more important for faculty are clear at the outset. Faculty should convey the fact that serious work is being done in the course and that it is going to be a positive, friendly and enriching experience, but that this is not a friendship. To set the tone and avoid confusion, it is helpful to put clear guidelines in course outlines. Such as:

- "Students are responsible for reading the course outline, reading all assignment guides/outlines, regularly checking the course Blackboard site and their MRU email, asking questions for clarification, and attending classes.
- The instructor is responsible for ensuring that course and assignment information is made available to students." (example provided by Brenda Lang).

Handling Conflict of Interest

Having an external grader is one way to manage perceived conflicts of interest when there is a known pre-existing personal relationship between a faculty member and a student. Even this is complicated because faculty cannot be fully transparent with the class on the issue. A student cannot be prevented from attending a class because their access to education cannot be blocked – this then gets into competing rights and related frameworks.

When do faculty know when a "grey" area becomes "black and white"?

If what a faculty member is doing is going to put them in a meeting with the Dean, HR or the Human Rights office, then stop doing it. Having a complaint against faculty can be career defining (ending) and can be permanently shaming. When faculty are aware that they are in a grey area they need to speak with people who can be resources: speak to the student advisors to get their perspective and to other people and rely on their advice. If a faculty member is uncomfortable consulting with another person this is a good sign that they are in a situation they should not continue in. Faculty may refer to the [10 step decision making process in psychology] as a resource.

Another element faculty could consider is if they would be comfortable with an event or action being shared on social media. Social media has impacted how we interact with each other because things can be taken out of context and shared broadly. For instance, having drinks with students used to be an accepted and regular activity in post-secondary but it has decreased over time: it is not a good idea. Faculty are in a position of power. If a faculty member asks students to the bar there are so many unknown variables wherein students may attend even if they are uncomfortable. It is important to be friendly but not friends: we cannot treat students like colleagues, by going drinking with them, they are not yet colleagues.

Setting Boundaries – Specific Tips

- Do not share your cell phone or other personal communication channels with students
- Have and stick to an email communication policy (i.e. what will be communicated via email and when you will and will not respond to email)
- Outline student responsibilities and faculty responsibilities in outlines
- Do not accept gifts of any kind from students – and state this at the outset.

- Faculty members positions evolve throughout their careers; so, it is valuable to connect with peer groups that are in similar roles as you to have them as a resource and sounding board.
- Refer students with personal problems to counselling and with significant and ongoing academic problems to the Office of Student Success.
- Be firm and fair, and then you can be fun: set clear and specific boundaries.
- If you anticipate a difficult or uncomfortable conversation with a student you can put the student in touch with the Student Advocacy Officer and her participation is invaluable in this process.

Setting Boundaries – Further Consideration Needed

It would be beneficial for there to be some principles to standardize certain practices across the university. Faculty vary a lot in terms of when they give an I grade, when they will allow for make-up exams, when they allow for extra work to make up for a bad grade on another assignment, how they interact with students texting/calling/Facebook. This is a broader discussion that needs to be had to see if improvements can be made.

Q&A

Q: Is it appropriate to meet with students outside of your office?

A: No, in principle, meetings with students should only occur in the office. However, this is not always practicable with contract faculty who share offices or in situations where the learning or research is taking place of campus necessarily. So, if you cannot meet in your office, you need to consider what arrangements will still make the meeting professional and appropriate. Whatever your practice is with your students, it needs to be consistent for all of your students and you need to be clear on your practices up front.

Q: What do you do when a student wants to bring another person to class (e.g. a friend or a child)?

A: This could be related to the Human Rights Officer and Policy. Faculty cannot impose a hardship on a student. You need to consider the implications and the hardships on the student and the same impacts on the other students. Generally, the decision is up to the professor, but if it is a human rights issue it should be referred to the human rights officer. Related considerations include advance request for permission for a guest and that the guest not participate in the classroom. You can accommodate a child care need by allowing the child to come to class or by providing alternative arrangements for the student to catch up on the material covered.

Q: Should I be friends with students on Facebook or LinkedIn?

A: No. Though LinkedIn is more professionally based and could be alright. There are Facebook groups related to University departments which students can join – this creates a virtual network of support for students as they move beyond the classroom. If you do use Facebook for

University/student related matters then you could create two separate Facebook accounts – one for personal and one for work related matters.

Q: Are there rules around driving students?
A: Yes, policy 1510, and this requires completing forms for approval. You need to consider the intentions, boundaries and potential perceptions of favoritism.

Q: How do you deal with situations where a death affects the community?
A: It used to be that if there was a death or a funeral the student had to bring proof of the funeral, but it is difficult to do this without being insensitive. You can refer the student to counselling and the counsellor will provide the faculty member with documentation needed to verify the significant emotional distress. Regardless of the matter requiring verification, the student may need the support from counselling. Also, when a student discloses something you do not need to provide an immediate response to the student you can consider it and get back to them and get advice from counselling.

Q: Students are not succeeding, but continue in the programs but withdraw from the courses. There should be action taken here to help those students, but how do you maintain the professional boundary while acting on this?
A: There are a lot of variables here that need to be considered. We cannot simply limit the number of times a person may take a course, and this is why we have withdrawal with cause. You need to consider the ethical implications here. There is an early intervention program through the office of student success that faculty should refer students to. There is an online form you can fill out (students can fill it out and faculty can fill it out to refer students).