

## RELATIONSHIP OF PROFESSORS and UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS in a Teaching Situation

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What should be the relationship between a teacher and student in a teaching-learning situation? Should it be that of master-slave, benefactor-suppliant, autocrat-subject, elected official-elect, governor-governed, operator-machine, parent-child, or some other? Should there be a formal code of ethics that governs the behavior of the professor toward his undergraduate students?

Each teacher has a philosophy that governs his behavior toward his students, although he may not be able to put it into words. This philosophy may be the result of careful thinking and study or it may have "just grown".

This article is chiefly a review of the thinking of others on this subject of professor-student relationships.

The National Education Association covers the teacher-student relationship in their code of ethics (1), the pertinent portion of which is quoted below:

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### PRINCIPLE I

#### Commitment to the Student

We measure success of the progress of each student toward achievement of his maximum potential. We therefore work to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals. We recognize the importance of cooperative relationships with other community institutions, especially the home.

In fulfilling our obligations to the student, we—

1. Deal justly and considerately with each student.
2. Encourage the student to study varying points of view and respect his right to form his own judgment.
3. Withhold confidential information about a student or his home unless we deem that its release serves professional purposes, benefits the student, or is required by law.
4. Make discreet use of available information about the student.
5. Conduct conferences with or concerning students in an appropriate place and manner.
6. Refrain from commenting unprofessionally about a student or his home.
7. Avoid exploiting our professional relationship with any student.

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8. Tutor only in accordance with officially approved policies.
9. Inform appropriate individuals and agencies of the student's educational needs and assist in providing an understanding of his educational experiences.
10. Seek constantly to improve learning facilities and opportunities.

Although this statement of principles is not specifically designed for college level students, it appears that most of it is valid for the professor-college student situation. However, the statement, "We measure success by the progress of each student toward achievement of his maximum potential," does not appear to be valid in the college situation if grades assigned to a given student are indicative of his success. Presumably, in college, success is measured on an absolute scale not related to the "potential" of the student. There are doubtless some tenets not covered in the NEA statement that should be formulated for the professor-student relationship.

What rights and duties should the student have in the determination of course content? What rights should a student have when accused of wrong-doing such as cheating in the classroom? What rights of inquiry should there be for students? How much "academic freedom" should a student have? Monypenny (2) in reporting the work of a committee of the American Association of University Professors said,

"There are some logical implications of the term 'academic freedom' which have not been explored at all, or by omission have been denied. The community of scholars which is postulated is under the control of the senior scholars, (that is) the faculty, and the administrators, and the students come to study what these people are willing to teach. In this context, student academic freedom does not mean student control of the content of instruction, the standard of instruction, the selection of staff, or the direction of institutional development. On the other hand, there is an advantage in consulting about these matters. By their selection of teachers, courses, and curriculum, students do help shape the future of the institutions they attend."

It is probably true that few student groups are consulted relative to making school policies. There is, however, a current trend toward some form of student evaluation of teachers.

A situation not met too frequently is mentioned by Monypenny (2) in the following statement:

We do assert that students should not suffer penalties for the expression of their own viewpoint, nor for refusing to accept the assumptions of their instructors, nor for going beyond the classroom assignment for material to make an argument or test an assertion. They can properly be held to account for knowing the official viewpoint of the classroom, the particular selection of data which is there offered, and the necessary logical consequences of that viewpoint and those data. But knowing or asserting other or more is certainly

not to be penalized. If it is, student academic freedom suffers and academic freedom does not exist.

If students are to become mature, dissent probably should be encouraged to a degree. It must not, however, monopolize class time to the extent that it disrupts instruction. When leading discussions, the teacher should always be courteous, and should neither completely squelch the most vocal, nor discourage the timid.

The National Council for Social Studies, an NEA department, touched on the idea of student dignity in an article, "Essentials of Freedom to Learn and Freedom to Teach" (3) when it said, "Freedom to learn implies: The right of students to study and discuss all sides of the issue in an atmosphere where there can be a give and take idea or ideas without loss of personal dignity."

The student is, in a sense, usually at the mercy of the teacher. This is expressed by Monypenny (2) in this statement:

The difficulty is that students are essentially in a position of dependence, subject to the authority of the institution from which they hope to receive their degrees, subject to the authority of their teachers whose periodic grading and whose later recommendations to possible employers and sources of assistance for further study determine whether they will achieve the aims which they seek through higher education. There is no way of eliminating that dependence; the certificate of various educational authorities is the necessary condition for the fulfillment of many of their personal goals.

In another statement Monypenny asserts (2):

In all decisions about student life, however, we are in the standard position of a parent dealing with a young adult: we wish to provide some protection against the possible consequences of independent action, while still providing conditions which encourage the exercise of independent judgment.

The parent-child concept in this matter of teacher-student relationships means an active interest in the welfare of the young even when this is inconvenient to the teacher.

The American Civil Liberties Union expressed the following opinions in one article (4):

Regulations governing the behavior of students should be fully and clearly formulated, published, and made available to the whole academic community. They should be reasonable and realistic. Over elaborate rules that seek to govern student conduct in every detail tend either to be respected in the breach or to hinder development of mature attitudes. As a rule, specific definitions are preferable to such general criteria as "Conduct unbecoming to a student" or "against the best interests of the institution" which allow for a wide latitude of interpretation.

But since a student expelled for cheating may find it difficult or impossible to continue his academic career, he should be protected by every procedural safeguard. This is particularly necessary since the courts have rarely grant-

ed the student legal review or redress; they have assumed that the academic institution itself is in the best position to judge culpability. This places the college in the unique position of being prosecutor and judge and having at the same time the moral obligation to serve as a trustee of the student's welfare."

I found nothing in the literature pertaining to the professor-student relationship on grading disputes. Throughout my teaching career, I have developed a philosophy of teaching that includes certain convictions on grading. My philosophy embraces the following points.

1. I shall treat students with the same respect that I treat my professional colleagues.
2. I shall have a definite procedure for use in determining students' grades and shall inform the students of this procedure at the first class meeting or as shortly thereafter as feasible.
3. If there is a reasonable doubt on any

point of grading the student shall be given the benefit of the doubt.

For your serious thought and quiet contemplation. I pose the following questions: Should NACTA formulate a complete code of ethics statement that would cover professor-student relationships? Is one needed?

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, *NEA Handbook*, p. 66.
2. Monypenny, Phillip, *Academic Freedom*, by Hans W. Baade and Robinson O. Everett, Oceana Publications, Inc., 1964. p. 195.
3. "Essentials of Freedom to Learn and Freedom to Teach", *NEA Journal*, October 1953, p. 421.
4. American Civil Liberties Union, *AAUP Bulletin*, Summer 1962. p. 113.

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### **From Montana State University**

Tracy Dougher was named 2006-07 Professor of the Year by the Montana State University Horticulture Club. She was also promoted to Associate Professor in July 2007 for her quality teaching of plant propagation, turfgrass management, woody and herbaceous ornamentals, landscape

management, and horticulture science, and her research on native plants.

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