



Go Ask Rog—Sexual Harassment Advice for Graduate Students

(The following situation is fictitious and utilized solely for educational purposes. Any similarity to actual persons or circumstances is coincidental and unintentional.)

Dear Rog:

A close friend in my department told me that he has been dating a department faculty member on a casual basis. He swore me to secrecy out of concern for his professional reputation. My friend's research area is different from the professor's expertise and I don't imagine that they would ever collaborate on a project. Nonetheless, I feel weird knowing some of the personal details about them. Others in the department suspect that they are an item and some people have been pressing me for confirmation. What should I do?

Dear Grad:

It can be awkward playing the role of confidante. You want to remain loyal to your friend but you also want to be true to your own personal feelings about the situation. Here are some issues to consider.

Consensual relationships are not sexual harassment per se, but when one dates another in the same department, complications and conflicts of interest may arise. Even though your friend is not working directly with the faculty member, the perception of unfair bias may exist. Others might conclude that any honors awarded to your friend were the result of his consensual relationship and not based on academic achievement. Under the UC faculty student relations policy, a faculty member is prohibited from dating any student for whom the faculty member has or should expect to have in the future supervisory responsibility. If you are in a small department, the relationship might be covered by this policy. What if, because of the department size, the faculty member must be involved in your friend's qualifying exams?

Assuming that you are in a large department where there is truly no chance that your friend will be supervised by the faculty member, pursuing this relationship still ranks high on the list of "Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid In Graduate School."

The difference in power may put your friend at a disadvantage in ways he can't imagine right now. Of course he is free to make bad choices but when the relationship tanks, he will probably feel like a spectacle around the department.

If you can't talk him out of this risky pursuit, you can avoid making matters worse by gossiping about it with department colleagues. Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*, compares gossip to a computer virus that interferes with communication, is contagious and can infect anyone who comes into contact with it. Department gossip may seem like a harmless form of recreation, but it can be damaging and hurtful. Is gossip a form of sexual harassment? It could be if it is unwelcome, sexual in nature, persistent and unreasonably interferes with the work or educational environment. Dishing is sometimes irresistible but it is usually unprofessional and often disrespectful. In other words, if there is enough gossip, your friend might actually feel sexually harassed. As his close friend, you should resist participating in this.

If you don't want to hear about your friend's sex life, find a tactful way of letting him know. You could show him this column or direct him to the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) website at <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu>. You or he can get advice without filing a complaint.

Finally Grad, you and your friend should remember why you are here at UCSD—to conduct research and get an education. A complicated love life with a faculty member is likely to distract you from your main purpose in being here.