

Grad to Grad Fall 2007

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:

I am working towards my doctorate and I'm interested in dating a faculty member in my department. This professor is not on my dissertation committee and I am not enrolled in a course taught by this person. The faculty member is a brilliant scholar and a major flirt. We enjoy lengthy discussions about our research while imbibing at The Pub. To be honest, I am quite flattered by the attention. The sexual tension has been building, but nothing physical has happened—yet. I am concerned that some of my colleagues may not understand the close relationship that is developing between us. What should I do? Grad

Dear Grad:

The answer to your query depends on a number of variables. Of course, there is no law against falling for a professor, but you would be wise to consider all of the possible outcomes of initiating a romantic liaison under these circumstances.

First of all, how big is your academic or research department? Although this professor is not currently supervising you, is there a chance that you might be enrolled in one of her/his courses in the future? Consensual relationships are subject to the **UCSD Consensual Relationships Policy**. If you enter into a consensual relationship with a faculty member who has responsibility for supervising you, arrangements must be made to ensure that your graduate work is evaluated in an unbiased way. The smaller your department, the more challenging it will be to obtain an objective evaluation of your work.

Second, what happens if the relationship sours? Think about your comfort level and how well you might work in a department in which your former partner is employed. You may have to attend the same department functions and these types of unavoidable interactions may create anxiety. In addition, will you still be able to conduct your research if the romantic relationship doesn't work out? A 1999 *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* article cites a study that found 51% of graduate students who had sexual relationships with faculty reevaluated those relationships in retrospect and later came to believe that there was some degree of coercion involved in the relationship. Hitting on your professor may seem like a good idea now, but will you still feel the same way later on?

Third, what effect might others' opinions of your relationship have on your professional career? Your reputation is everything, so be prepared for the potential consequences of dating within the department. If your relationship becomes the subject of public gossip, you face the potential loss of respect from your colleagues and other faculty. Some may believe that you receive favoritism due to your romantic relationship. Do you want others to suggest that your academic achievements are based upon your relationship rather than your intellect?

Fourth, do you value this person as a mentor? There are varying opinions about the appropriate degree of intimacy between faculty and graduate students. It is one thing for your professor to serve as a mentor, guide, and confidante, and quite another for this person to become your intimate sex partner. If you date, will this person be able to ethically write you a letter of recommendation? Blurred boundaries often lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Maybe this professor can have a more positive impact on your career by being your mentor instead of your lover.

My advice to you, Grad, is to think before you leap and proceed at your own risk. Whatever course of action you take, help is available if you find yourself in over your head. **Please contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) at (858) 534-8298, <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu> for a confidential consultation.**