



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 live off campus and try not to come on campus because I can never find a place to park; however, I am a TA this quarter, which requires me to have office hours. I have invited students in my section to meet me for office hours at a nearby coffee house instead of on campus. I didn't see what the problem with this was until the other day, when I bumped into the department chair at the same coffee house. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but the chair seemed to give me a stern, disapproving look when he saw me meeting with an attractive undergrad over coffee. The next day, an email was sent to the entire department reminding us about the sexual harassment policy. Have I blown it somehow?

Dear Grad:

You probably haven't blown it—yet. Is meeting undergrads off campus for coffee a problem? That depends. You might be inviting trouble by continuing to hold your office hours at an off campus location. Here's why.

First, conflicts of interest can arise when we blur personal and professional boundaries. By meeting with students off campus for coffee, it might feel more personal, than professional, to the undergrads. There is a fine line between being friendly and actually being friends with those you are responsible for instructing. While mentoring is important, blurring that line between friendliness and friendship could result in an awkward and potentially unethical situation.

Second, you should be aware of perceptions of bias. Do you place a burden on students who don't have cars? What accommodations do you make to meet with students on campus who do not have any means of meeting you at the off campus coffee house? Students who are not able to meet you off campus might feel that those who do are receiving some type of special treatment or special

time to bond with the TA. As a TA, do your best to treat those in your section equally.

Third, there are different interpretations of the ritual of having coffee. For some, having coffee might be a casual way to connect with colleagues or friends. To others, it might feel more like a “date” with romantic overtones. As you know, undergrads sometimes develop crushes on graduate TA’s. You don’t want to encourage that by creating a situation that feels like it has more intimacy than meeting in an office or lab.

The department chair likely sent out a policy reminder because supervisors are responsible for taking proactive steps to prevent sexual harassment from occurring. Educating students, staff and faculty about harassment is one of the best ways to prevent it. It is recommended that TA’s have brief sexual harassment training once a year usually during TA orientation. Your chair may have been trying to caution you about this situation without actually singling you out.

So Grad, the less risky practice is to hold your office hours on campus in an office or lab setting even if you have to search hard for a parking space. Remember that your job as a TA is to assist with the course material and not necessarily to be a buddy. Maintaining professional boundaries will reduce chances for sending mixed signals about your role and intentions. For advice, contact the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Policy (OSHPP) at 534-8298 or oshpp@ucsd.edu. To take our student online program, log on to <http://oshpp.ucsd.edu>.