Multiple Role Relations
and Conflicts of Interest

Among the most difficult situations to navigate in any professional setting occur when faced with multiple-role relationship conflicts. Multiple-role conflicts exist when the demands and obligations of the primary role are compromised by the demands and obligations of one or more additional roles. College and university campuses are fertile ground for multiple-role relationship conflicts.

Like in other professional settings, explicit hierarchies exist in which some members are supervised or evaluated by other members. Conflicts arise because the power imbalance appropriate to the primary relationship may be inappropriate in the context of the secondary relationship. The dynamics of these mixed roles are complex, and their impact can have negative influences at many levels.

Complicating the matter further is the implicit mandate that instructors should be actively involved with students beyond the role of teaching content. Postsecondary educators are also expected to facilitate students’ socialization into their adulthoods and the world of work and to model good citizenship. To accomplish these roles, it is necessary to spend time getting to know students as individuals and to interact with them outside the classroom. In other words, instructors are expected to engage in multiple roles! The challenge, then, becomes how to act as teachers, advisors, mentors, confidantes, and role models to students while maintaining appropriate boundaries in the process.

The cases in this chapter highlight the many ways that multiple-role relationships between students and instructors can occur in the campus environment. Our commentaries focus on ways to avoid risky multiple-role relationships, ways to extricate oneself from inappropriate multiple-role situations that inadvertently arise, and ways to manage unavoidable multiple-role relationships that carry a risk of harm.
Case 13-1. Look Who Showed Up in Class!

Professor Buddy is surprised to see that his best friend’s daughter, whom he has known since she was a baby, enrolled in one of his classes. She smiles widely as he speaks, calls him by his first name, and, he suspects, has told the other members of the class stories related to their preexisting relationship.

The circumstances Professor Buddy faces create a problem if favoritism leads, even without Buddy’s full awareness, to unequal evaluation performance. The same dynamic could exist with students Buddy knows and likes from previous classes, students who have served as baby sitters in his home, or students who were close friends of Buddy’s daughters or sons. Indeed, such occurrences are common when many local students attend postsecondary institutions in smaller towns and cities.

Buddy’s simplest solution is to attempt to convince the student to enroll into a different section of the course. If that cannot be accomplished, ground rules need to be created that minimize any appearance of favoritism, not to mention any actual advantage for the student. Buddy must insist that the young woman call him “Professor,” “Mister,” “Doctor Buddy,” or whatever is customary. He needs to discuss the relationship complication with the young woman and insist that her behavior conform to the demands of the appropriate roles while she is in class. However, Buddy should have foreseen his current dilemma and headed it off before classes began. (See also 13-2.)

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose Buddy and his family frequently celebrate holidays and birthdays with this student and her family. Should there be new, temporary ground rules for out-of-class contacts between Buddy and his friend’s daughter?

2. What levels of familiarity between instructors and students are problematic when a prior relationship exists? That is, what are examples of potential (or easily perceived) conflicts-of-interest that would require a sharp limitation of the instructor/student role?

3. Most college-level teachers in smaller cities or towns or with a large local population of students have run into the kind of situation discussed in this case. If you have faced such a dilemma, how did you handle it?

Case 13-2. Friends Enrolled in Class

Professor Pal’s good friend Marci wants to take Pal’s class. Marci tells Pal, “I’ve been hearing about your work for so long, and it’s so interesting. I will have no problem getting an A.”

Many adults return to take college level classes. This phenomenon is enriching for mature students as well as for instructors. However, when a good friend or other close relative wants to take a class, in most cases he or she should be discouraged.

Pal should explain to Marci that her presence could make things difficult for both of them. Marci has already waved a bright red flag, namely her expectation of receiving a top grade in the class. Pal should remain firm in dissuading Marci, even if Marci complains. Pal can help Marci find another class that she would find valuable.

The situation becomes more complicated if the friend or close relative is in a degree program that requires the course and only one person teaches it. If this dual-role situation is unavoidable special safeguards should be explored, such as conscripting an outside third party to help monitor the student’s progress. (See also 13-1.)

Discussion Questions

1. Occasionally our colleagues from other departments want to audit or take one of our classes for credit. What unique problems does this pose for the instructor?

2. Suppose Marci is the spouse of a high-ranking university administrator or someone above you in the chain of command. What additional safeguards should be established for dealing with this awkward situation?

Case 13-3. Lending Money to Students

Bob is a pleasant student who is down on his luck. His roommate left in the night with back rent due. Bob was laid off his job. Professor Kindly loaned Bob 500 dollars until Bob could get back on his feet.

It is easy to view Professor Kindly as a Good Samaritan. But Kindly’s loan set up an ethically problematic bond between the teacher and student, one that could lead to potential coercion. Kindly might, for example,
devalue Bob's work because Bob gets behind in his payments, or enhance his view of Bob's work if Bob is ahead with payments. Such biases might operate without Kindly's full awareness. Further, even if Kindly could be completely objective, any course evaluation of Bob could appear to reflect considerations other than Bob's performance.

Professor Kindly would be wiser to help Bob find emergency funds from the financial assistance office or from a commercial banking institution. As it stands now, Kindly has created an incompatible dual-role relationship as Bob's teacher and Bob's banker.

The size of the loan can also be an issue. Although a small loan (such as a quarter for parking) is unlikely to create any problem, even if the student forgets to pay it back, 500 dollars is a sizeable amount. It does not appear that Bob will be able to pay back Kindly's loan any time soon. How will Kindly react when he sees Bob wearing a new leather jacket or overhears Bob describe his new stereo to a friend? Might such resentment create an influence when it comes time to assign grades? Helping a student is rarely considered to be an ethical problem, but the creation of circumstances that might lead to disaffection or coercion is.

Discussion Questions

1. What if a student lost her purse and is hungry for lunch? The sympathetic instructor loans her 5 dollars. Three weeks pass and the instructor is rather irritated that the student has not repaid the loan, even though it is small and the instructor can afford to forgive it. How would you feel if this happened to you, and what would you do?

2. Is there ever a situation in which an instructor could borrow something from a student without creating an ethical conflict?

3. What complications can arise when colleagues make loans of money or other goods to colleagues? What precautions might preclude ethical dilemmas when loans among colleagues become complicated (e.g., money is not repaid as agreed upon or the borrower loses or breaks a borrowed object)?

Case 13-4, A & B. Gifts From Students

Professor Vogue compliments a well-dressed student of very average academic ability on her lovely outfits. The student tells Professor Vogue her clothes are from her father's store and that Vogue is welcome to come in and choose anything she wants at her father's wholesale cost.

We believe that the opportunity to shop at a considerable discount at a student's father's store should be declined while the student is in class, or if there is any possibility the student will be in another class at some time in the future. Anything other than refusal will lead to an appearance of impropriety.

Can Professor Vogue accept the offer at some later date? If the student has graduated, or if the offer is made not just to Vogue but to other faculty members as well, circumstances could permit an acceptance. However, even these criteria may still leave a question of indiscretion, especially if the student needs a letter of recommendation in the future. Vogue is wisest not to accept the offer.

Professor Likeable is in a similar situation. The gift is expensive, the timing is questionable, and the possible precedent could be a bad one. The gift should be returned. The instructor might write a thank-you note, declining the gift but reinforcing the thought that kind evaluations from students are much appreciated.

Small (inexpensive) presents are probably acceptable as long as they are tokens of appreciation at a suitable time (e.g., upon graduating). A predicament, however, is agreeing on what constitutes "small." A coffee cup, a little box of candy, or even the proverbial teacher's apple would likely meet the "appropriately small" criterion. Also, sometimes students make gifts especially for instructors (e.g., a needlepoint pot holder with the school logo). To refuse such gifts could be upsetting to the givers and cause more problems than would acceptance. If a instructor is unsure about a gift, consultation with colleagues is advised.

We should note that even a small gift could be inappropriate if it is too personal, although drawing that line can also be difficult. We heard of a student who gave her instructor a pair of boxer shorts sporting printed red ants. We do not know the motivation for selecting this particular gift (the instructor was not an entomologist), and it may well have been as simple as giving something cute to a favorite instructor. But, the student's choice was not appropriate.

Finally, it should be noted that sometimes students offer opportunities that lead to an educational advantage for an entire class or department. As an example, using a father's contacts to enable the class to take a special
field trip would normally be appropriate. Even then, however, care must be taken to objectively grade the student who facilitated the opportunity. (See also 17-5.)

Discussion Questions

1. Would giving an instructor a bottle of cologne or a single red rose be examples of questionable gifts? What other determinants (e.g., the gender of student and instructor, nature of previous interactions) might make such gifts appropriate or inappropriate?

2. What if a student gives a gift that is unsuitable for any other recipient because it has been personalized? For example, what if a silver dish was engraved with the instructor’s initials? Or a personal message was written inside a very expensive book? Should this change the response that the instructor might make? If so, how?

3. Do you have experiences with a student gift? If so, how did you handle it?

Case 13-5. Selling Goods to Students

Professor Trestera was finally able to buy the car of his dreams. His struggling student assistant wants to purchase his older but still sturdy automobile. Trestera sells it to the assistant at “medium blue book.”

A primary issue in this instance is good business ethics. As long as Trestera offers the car at a fair price—which “medium blue book” is likely to be for a car still in good shape—there is probably no ethical risk. However, Trestera should encourage the student to consult a mechanic or others to ensure that the transaction is fair. A professional inspection also protects Trestera from any later complaints of pre-existing problems. Trestera should not finance the purchase. (See 13-3.)

It is preferable to avoid any financial transactions with students currently enrolled in one’s classes. We also do not recommend selling goods to students as the typical method of disposing of used items. If the student is ultimately dissatisfied with the purchase, the complications can be troublesome to everyone concerned. Difficulties are more likely with temperamental items that students might want to buy, such as automobiles, computer hardware, stereo equipment, television sets, and musical instruments. However, we recognize that it is sometimes to the students’ benefit to have access to opportunities that instructors are able to offer, assuming that fair business practices apply. (See also 13-6 and 13-8.)

Discussion Questions

1. What if a student buys a television set that was working fine when it was picked up from the instructor, but a week later the student claims it doesn’t work and wants her money back. The instructor knew it was in good working condition the day the student put it into her car and drove off. What should the instructor’s response be?

2. Should instructors ever purchase items from students? What might the ethical complications be?

Case 13-6. Bartering Services With Students

Clera is a student in Professor Trade’s class. Trade provides consultation for Clera’s parents’ business in exchange for manuscript preparation by Clera. Clera’s parents give Clera a break on her rent for her participation in this arrangement. Everyone seems happy.

Despite the current level of satisfaction with this three-way deal and the seeming arm’s length between Trade and his student, bartering arrangements involving students can go awry and should generally be avoided. What if Clera’s class or manuscript preparation performance erodes? What if Clera’s parents become dissatisfied with Trade’s advice? Would Clera’s standing with her instructor then be jeopardized? Given that Clera is stuck between her parents and her instructor, could Clera afford to assert herself if she becomes dissatisfied with any aspect of this arrangement?

Clera is clearly the least powerful component in this multiple role relationship and she probably has the most to lose if any facet turns sour. We believe that Trade should have never become involved because Clera’s vulnerability is obvious. Efforts should be made to minimize multiple-level relationships with students because the potential for exploitation is ever-present. (See also 13-5.)

Discussion Questions

1. Is there a way that the players could have remained the same, but the potential complications with ethical features greatly minimized?

2. Would it be markedly different if Clera was a student in Trade’s department, but not currently in one of his classes? Or, if Clera was a student, but not in Trade’s department?
Case 13-7. Asking Favors of Students

The affable Professor Needy often and repeatedly asks students for favors such as driving him home when his car is not working (as it frequently isn’t), taking his books back to the library, or picking up food from the cafeteria. His requested favors are usually small, not requiring students to go much out of their way. Students do not complain. In fact, they are often eager to help him out.

The words “often” and “repeatedly” are the key to this case. It appears that Needy acts in a nonreciprocal manner, using his status and influence to obtain services from students on a regular basis. Such a pattern is an inappropriate use of the inherent teacher-student power differential. By contrast, occasionally requesting small favors probably would not be out of the ordinary and would not pose any ethical concerns. For example, if a student says, “Well, I’m off to the library,” it would not be unreasonable for the instructor to ask if the student could also return his book.

True emergencies would also be an exception. A ride home is a favor, but a ride to the hospital in an emergency situation is quite another matter. Instructors could never be faulted for asking for help from anyone in the immediate vicinity should a dire need arise.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it more appropriate to request small favors from graduate students than from undergraduate students?

2. Say that Professor Needy asks one of his students to arrive at his office 10 minutes before class every morning and help him carry class materials to the room. Would that be acceptable and, if so, under what conditions? Would it make a difference if Professor Needy had asked for a volunteer (thus giving all students an opportunity to respond) rather than approaching one in particular?

3. What if Professor Needy asks to borrow small amounts of money from students for the food machines on a fairly regular basis, claiming that he “has no change today.” Assuming that he does pay it back promptly, is there a difference between borrowing money and the types of “gofer” favors asked in the case text?

4. Do students in Needy’s class realistically have an option to exercise voluntary and informed consent to such requests? That is, could a student comfortably decline Needy’s requests?

5. For faculty members not raised during the “computer age,” students are often in a position to be very helpful. Furthermore, students seem to get a kick out of helping their computer-perplexed instructors, and usually do so with enthusiasm and pride. Is asking our students to help us become more computer literate inappropriate or a win-win situation? What factors might determine the appropriateness?

Case 13-8. Businesses That Could Involve Students

Professor Rent owns several houses close to the university and has converted them to student housing. Occasionally tenants will also be students in Rent’s classes. This semester Tardy and Thunder are student-tenants. Tardy is always late with her rent, and neighbors often call Rent to complain about Thunder’s loud stereo.

Educators are not prohibited from outside investments or commercial ventures. However, this case illustrates why conflicts of interest should be avoided if at all possible. Rent’s difficulties with unsatisfactory student-tenants could transfer (or appear to transfer) to his evaluations of their work. The students may feel unable to consult with Rent about course matters because of their poor standing with their landlord. Also, students tenants may not feel comfortable complaining to their professor about any problems they are having with their living quarters.

Furthermore, suppose the problem is the opposite. The students are likeable and make excellent tenants, and Rent would very much like to retain them, but poor performance in his course is jeopardizing their prospects for staying in school. Might Rent be tempted to help them out with some extra generosity in their final grades?

The primary purpose of any relationship Rent has with students who attend his institution is the students’ education. Whether he wants to or not, he is also expected to model for students how to handle professional relationships (student-teacher, tenant-landlord) in an ethical manner. Rent courts a conflict-of-interest by failing to institute measures that would have distanced his outside enterprise from the students. Even though outside management might decrease Rent’s profits, this mechanism would defuse the problem. If it is not possible to create some form of reasonable arm’s-length distance between instructors and students when a longer term, continuing conflict-of-interest may be at issue, we believe that the outside business opportunity should be avoided. (See also 13-5.)


**Discussion Questions**

1. How could Rent minimize conflicts?

2. Are the ethical problems reduced if Rent screens prospective tenants to minimize the likelihood he will ever have them in class? Is it fair (or even legal) for Rent to discriminate against students who need housing simply because he might evaluate him at some point in the future?

3. Suppose Rent owns a small business in town that sometimes employs students. What problems may result if Rent hires (or avoids hiring) students who are in his class or majoring in his department?

**Case 13-9. Instructor–Student Love Relationships**

Linda Lovaprof, an undergraduate student, lives with Professor Shakeup. Although she takes no classes from him, she often attends parties where Shakeup’s colleagues are present. Linda has classes with a few of these other instructors. Other students believe that Linda probably gets an advantage simply by the added social exposure.

The affair between Linda Lovaprof and Professor Shakeup might put any of Shakeup’s colleagues in an uncomfortable situation. Case 13-10 deals with problems involved in dating one’s students, an activity that is not recommended. Here we focus on the impact of such relationships on colleagues and other students.

The couple’s attendance at faculty parties almost certainly creates dual-role problems for Shakeup’s colleagues. It is unlikely that Linda, because of her major study area, can avoid taking classes from Shakeup’s colleagues. Therefore, ground rules should be established to minimize the appearance of favoritism, although this matter is touchier because revealing Linda’s relationship with the instructor may create more problems than it solves. In such circumstances, colleagues might do best to avoid Linda outside the classroom, by not inviting Linda and Professor Shakeup to any social events, or by staying away from her if she attends.

This case reveals how dual-role relationships can be problematic beyond the individuals directly involved in a dual role. If Shakeup is despised by one or more colleagues, how might this affect the young woman who is in this colleague’s class? If Shakeup is a powerful member of the department, what are the personal consequences of avoiding the young woman at parties and other events or of giving her other than a glowing grade?

When faculty members are married to students in the same department, similar problems can exist. However, this situation may be viewed as a more stable and acceptable, especially if the couple was married before the spouse enrolled in a program. Even when the couple is married, however, there may be dual-role concerns. One of our friend’s provided an anecdote that reveals uncomfortable colleagues can be with student partners. The colleague of our friend was married to a student who was not doing well in her class. The colleague brought his wife to the New Year’s Eve party, hosted by our friend. The friend reported feeling ill-at-ease all evening and confided to us, “I’m not going to host another department party until that woman graduates.” Thus, despite the marriage bond, if a spouse is in a colleague’s class, the couple would do well to consider the awkward position in which they may place others, and proceed accordingly. (See also 13-10.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. Whereas Lovaprof and Shakeup are presumed to be consenting adults, is Shakeup himself at risk should the young woman later become dissatisfied with the relationship and press sexual exploitation charges?

2. What if Shakeup and Linda effectively hide their relationship? Is this a recommended solution?

**Case 13-10. Dating Graduate Students**

Professor Amore dates students provided that they meet all of the following criteria: (1) They are graduate students; (2) They are not enrolled in his classes; (3) It seems highly probable that they will not be in any of his future classes or under his supervision; and (4) They have initiated a clear indication of an interest in seeing him socially.

No matter how careful Amore might be, or what standards he establishes for dating relationships, potential danger lurks in dating any student in one’s own department. The power differential that characterizes teacher-
student relationships can come into play and will continue to exist as long as the student is enrolled in the program, regardless of whether the individual is a student in Amore’s classes. Moreover, other interactions the student might have, such as those with Amore’s colleagues or even among the student’s friends, may be affected by the relationship. (See 13-9.) The key is to avoid any conflict that might jeopardize this student’s (or any other student’s) opportunity to learn in an unrestricted environment.

We would also note that the academic level (i.e., undergraduate vs. graduate student) may be increasingly spurious. The growing numbers of re-entry, nontraditional undergraduate students may well be far more mature than many traditional (ages 21–25) graduate students.

For mental health professionals in psychotherapeutic situations, there is to be no sexual contact with patients at any time during the therapy according to both ethics codes and most state laws. Some people believe that current students should be viewed in exactly the same manner as current psychotherapy patients. The admonition by the American Psychological Association (1992) is that once a patient has concluded therapy, an extended “cooling off” period should exist before any sexual contact. Adapting the flavor of this ethic to the teacher–student situation, sexual contact with should, at a minimum, wait until after the student graduates or otherwise finishes the program. The waiting period policy, however, fails to address any future need for a letter of recommendation or other form of support. Because dating relationships often break apart, usually not comfortably, a student risks losing a potentially important professional supporter for now and even into the future. This risk can be avoided if Amore finds his dating partners elsewhere.

**Discussion Questions**

1. This case deals with students in Professor Amore’s department. Does the situation change if the student is from an unrelated department?

2. What if Professor Amore is not a faculty member, but a staff member (such as the department’s lab coordinator, office supervisor, or equipment manager)? Amore is, nevertheless, invited to many faculty social gatherings. In this situation Amore feels free to date any students in the department regardless of their specific circumstances. Does this present a problem for the students he dates, the faculty, or other students from the department?

3. Are instructors fully capable of assessing clues that students are expressing a romantic interest in them? What other dynamics could be operating?

**Case 13-11. Hiring Students From Personal Funds for Nonacademic Jobs**

Professor Labor hires students he knows well and trusts to baby sit, stay in his home while he and his family are on vacation, and do gardening and repairs around his house. He often expresses to his colleagues how fortunate he is to have such a responsible but financially needy pool of workers so readily available.

This scenario is so common that it may surprise readers to see it in an ethics casebook. Although such arrangements usually work out very well for all concerned, ethical risks are ever-lurking and should be considered whenever students are hired from personal funds to do personal work.

The scenario is not explicit regarding whether Labor’s students are currently in any of his classes. We recommend that students currently enrolled, or likely to enroll, in our classes should not be hired to do work in instructors’ homes. Unfortunate outcomes can cause serious conflicts. The student could fall down your stairs and break several bones. The student’s work performance could be subpar, causing an unpleasant dispute when the student asks for payment. Something very valuable could be missing from your house. The student could lose your dog while walking it. None of these examples are fanciful. Each has occurred to colleagues we know. Each caused difficulties that interfered with the primary role instructors have to educate and objectively evaluate students.

If students attend the college or university but are in different departments or highly unlikely to take the hiring instructor’s course, the ethical risks are markedly minimized. (Note: Tax issues may pertain and are not covered here.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. Some students are so in need of funds that they will work for far less than the job is worth. For instructors, is there an ethical responsibility to pay students the going wage for what work they do, or is this situation just another perk? How should the exact amount of the wage be determined?

2. Have you had experiences, either good or unfortunate, with hiring students to do personal work for you?