

## Gender and Respect in the University Community

*Following is a memo written to the faculty at the University of Michigan from the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA). As part of the instructional staff at the U of M, graduate student instructors have the same responsibilities in relation to their students as do the faculty.*

September 15, 1986

To: The Faculty

From: SACUA

RE: Gender and Respect in the University Community

SACUA has recently discussed the sensitive topic of sexual relationships between faculty and students and we would like to share our observations with you.

Faculty members have complex--sometimes paradoxical--obligations and responsibilities regarding students. We share with these adult students, and contribute substantially to, an important period in their intellectual and professional growth. When they are our co-workers, as teaching and research assistants or junior colleagues in research and scholarship, we are simultaneously responsible for them and dependent upon them.

The relationship between faculty and adult students, however complex it may be, is ultimately and structurally asymmetrical. Like any professional relationship, it rests upon a special form of trust and reciprocal respect. Sexual relationships between faculty members and students risk diminishing or even voiding this trust and respect to the detriment of all. Moreover, the asymmetry of this relationship means that any sexual relationship between a faculty member and a student is potentially exploitative and should be avoided.

Sexual interactions between faculty and students may be characterized variously as coercive, offensive or consenting. Any attention paid to an individual which suggests that his or her grade or other evaluation will be influenced by sexual activity is coercive and cannot be condoned. We are particularly concerned with such practices since they undermine the professional trust upon which the faculty-student relationship is founded and clearly conflict with University policy.

Similarly, we oppose offensive or derogatory treatment of individuals or groups of students based on their gender. Behavior which stigmatizes in this way is a violation of the respect with which we are all obliged to treat each other. Including salacious remarks or illustrations in lectures, or consistently inviting comments or opinions from members of one gender more than the other are two examples. Likewise, overly insistent attention to the personal aspects of a student's life demonstrates an offensive disregard for the personal autonomy of students.

Especially difficult is the problem of what might appear on the surface to be a consenting sexual relationship. Because of the asymmetry of the faculty-student relationship, consent is very difficult to assess. In particular, we feel that when the faculty member has any professional responsibility for the student's academic performance or professional future, sexual relationships, even mutually consenting ones, are a basic violation of professional ethics and responsibility.

**We take special note of teaching assistants who have the same responsibilities in relation to their students as the professorial faculty.** Supervising faculty have an obligation to make this clear to their assistants.

Our general principle is this: the position, autonomy, respect and authority of the faculty impose a particular responsibility in the matter of sexual relationships with students; the structure asymmetry of faculty-student relationships cannot be overcome by collegiality or mutual affection. Those who neglect this principle also neglect their professional responsibility as faculty members.