Teacher-Student Relationships

A Guide for Student Academic Appointees
As a Student Academic Appointee teaching at Indiana University you are in the unique position of being both a student and a teacher. You may see yourself as a graduate student who is teaching a class. However, to your students, you are the professor and represent Indiana University. In many instances, the difference in age between you and your students could be small. But differences in power, responsibility and life experience will always be large. Especially in introductory-level courses for freshmen and sophomores, you are the link between the students and the department. Success in your role as a teacher can open a student's eyes to new possibilities while at the same time fostering new ideas and energy in the department.

What follows should help you navigate the sometimes complicated or confusing issues involved in the teacher-student relationship.
The student who has a conflict with attendance because of a religious holiday.

University policy requires you to make accommodations for students to attend or observe religious holidays. Because requests for these types of accommodations should be made by the second week of class, it is important for you to inform students of the course schedule and requirements at the beginning of a class. A list of religious holidays can be obtained from the Dean of the Faculties prior to setting your schedule; try to avoid putting important class events on these holidays. Procedures for administering accommodations, for religious observances, are outlined in the Student Academic Bulletin published each semester by Enrollment Services.

The student you know in another context outside of the classroom.

If you have a relationship with a student outside of the classroom in a non-instructional context, this could create a conflict for you as a teacher, e.g., if you have a friend, family member, roommate, or co-worker as a student. In these or similar cases, talk with your course supervisor, the Director of Undergraduate Studies or Chair of your department about options to minimize conflicts of interest, for example, having someone else grade the student’s work or, where feasible, being reassigned to a different section of a course.

The student who is struggling with the material or in class interaction.

Students often do not feel comfortable asking for help, even when they are struggling. It is always a good idea to request a meeting with a student when problems arise. You should also consider making an appointment to see you during office hours a course requirement. You should know about resources available to students who need assistance in your area, and refer students to these resources.

The student who comes to you because he/she is offended at the material or comments made in class.

Although courses are meant to make students aware of different ideas and challenge them to think creatively and critically, unnecessarily offensive material can have the opposite effect and disconnect students permanently from the subject matter. Preparing students for potentially offensive material ahead of time will help students academically and decrease the chance of offending students unnecessarily. You should explain the academic rationale for using potentially offensive materials and indicate what you expect students will learn from these materials. For assistance with leading discussions on this issue, contact Instructional Support Services.

If a student is offended by material in your class you should talk with the student about what offended them and why. Give them time to be heard and then reiterate the importance of the material for your class and assist the student to work with the material in spite of or in light of his or her reaction.

If the student is offended by comments made by other students in the course, discuss with all students the ground rules for class discussions. Ensure that all students feel included in class discussions. If the problem persists or hinders a student’s participation, consult with your course supervisor, the Director of Undergraduate Studies or Chair of your department.
The student who needs an academic accommodation because of either physical or learning disabilities.

If a student approaches you about an accommodation to fulfill the requirements of your course, you should refer him or her to Disability Services for Students who will determine the appropriate accommodation and work with you on what is required. You, as an instructor, are encouraged to assist students with temporary modifications such as arranging assistance for a student on crutches or helping a student who was sick make up work. If you have questions about such arrangements you should consult the faculty supervisor for your course, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, or Chair for your department.

The student who has great potential, insight, and energy towards the subject.

As someone well versed in the subject matter, you will be able to guide the student to other classes that might be of interest to him or her. You can also share your experience in the discipline and encourage them to become majors. Because you may be close to their age or share cultural references you may serve as an informal mentor to the student.

The student who expresses political, religious, or cultural values different from your own.

Being a college student involves learning about and exposure to different views. But as a teacher, you should not let your personal views dominate your class. This can alienate students and diminish opportunities to learn from you. In most instances, your students’ experiences of the world are different from yours. Moreover, they will not have the experience and knowledge needed to debate effectively with someone in a superordinate position. It is not unusual to encounter comments and responses from students that are based on emotional beliefs and values. But undercutting these in a hostile or tactless manner will undermine the student’s self-confidence and his or her respect for you.

The student you are attracted to or whom you might be interested in starting a romantic relationship.

Initiating a romantic or sexual relationship with one of your students creates a conflict of interest for you as a teacher. You should not become romantically involved with a student in your class, lab, or any situation where you are evaluating their academic performance and potential. Having a romantic relationship with someone you evaluate is a violation of Indiana University’s Academic Code of Ethics.

The student who is interested in a relationship with you.

Because entering into a relationship with a student would create a conflict for you as a teacher you should discourage a student interested in such a relationship. It is your responsibility as the instructor to set boundaries in your relationships with your students. If this becomes difficult you should contact your course supervisor, the Director of Undergraduate Studies or Chair of your department.

The student who comes to you with personal problems or incidents that should be addressed.

Sometimes students may feel more comfortable talking to you than to senior faculty members. While you don’t want to create a personal “buddy” relationship with the student, listening and directing the student to the appropriate offices or resources would be appropriate. Refer to the Dean of Students Office for more information on available resources.