

Consensual Student-Faculty Romantic and Sexual Relationship Policies in Academia: Student Awareness and Attitudes

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Background

Consensual romantic or sexual relationships between university faculty members and students has been a widely debated issue for decades. To minimize the occurrence of such controversial relationships, some institutions have enacted disciplinary policies, but often fail to ensure that their policy is truly effective. Little is known about the prevalence and dynamics of these relationships, as an extensive literature review only located 5 related studies. Additionally, only 2 studies focused on institutional policies (Richards et al. 2014; Gossett & Bellas 2002). A previous study of mine (Castonguay 2017) – a content analysis of 56 institutions' policies – revealed that most schools lack any policies and that policy visibility was a major concern. The current study – operating as part of a larger project on consensual student-faculty relationship policies and attitudes – builds on the policy visibility and accessibility issue that current research has largely ignored. There were two goals that guided this study: (1) determine the extent to which college students in the U.S. are aware of the consensual student-faculty relationship policies that exist at their own institutions and (2) determine student perspectives on the ideal policies that colleges and universities might construct to regulate student-faculty relationships. I hypothesized that most students do not know their institution's policy on these relationships, nor the disciplinary actions their institutions would take against policy violators. I also speculated that the majority of students believe their institution should not regulate these relationships.

Methods

To assess student policy awareness and attitudes, an online, anonymous survey was sent through student email to students at 12 preselected institutions across the United States. All participants (n=358) were at least 18 years of age and consisted of both undergraduate and graduate students. Student email addresses were systematically collected, at random, from their institution's directory. The survey is comprised of 20 questions designed to assess student knowledge of their institution's policy on consensual student faculty relationships (CSFR), the disciplinary actions taken against student or faculty policy violators, how confident students are in their policy knowledge, and what their ideal policy would look like. Demographic questions, such as race and sexual orientation, were also included in the survey. Participant email and IP addresses were not collected to maintain anonymity. Survey duration was estimated to be 10 minutes. Data were analyzed using SPSS statistics software. In order to obtain a representative institution sample, schools were selected based on their size, location, type of CSFR policy (including no policy), and ability of the researcher to obtain student emails from their online directories.

Findings

In terms of confidence, only 21.0% of respondents self-reported feeling confident that they knew their institution's policy. When it came to policy knowledge, only 20.6% of respondents were

able to correctly provide their institution's policy. 79.4% of respondents did know their institution's policy, with 45.0% answering incorrectly and 34.4% answering with the "I do not know" option. Over 80% of respondents did not know how their institution would respond to individuals who violated the CSFR policy, with 88% for student violators and 81% for faculty violators. In terms of an ideal CSFR policy, the majority of respondents (54%) believed institutions should strongly discourage these relationships. 26% chose the prohibit-type policy as ideal, while 20% felt that no policy was ideal.

Implications and Future Directions

These findings suggest that students do not know their institution's policies on, nor the consequences of, consensual romantic or sexual relationships between students and faculty members. As a result, these policies are likely not effective if students are unaware of their content or that they exist. Revisions to the visibility and accessibility of these policies are necessary, if they are to be followed. Finally, these results suggest that students want some level of institutional involvement in the regulation of consensual sexual and romantic behavior between students and faculty members. Future research on consensual student faculty relationships could include investing further the types of policies institutions have in place, surveying faculty members on their consensual student faculty relationship policy knowledge, suggesting strategies for policy efficacy improvement, and examining the dynamics within these relationships.

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