

Relating to Students: Plain Language Guidebook for Instructors and Staff

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Why did we create this Plain Language Guidebook?

Relating to Students: Plain Language Guidebook for Instructors and Staff helps the King's community think about and build healthy relationships among instructors or staff members and students.

This Guidebook is a plain language version of [***Cultivating Healthy Relations with Students: A Faculty and Staff Guide***](#). You can find the full Guide on the King's website or click on the link. Plain language documents are easy to understand and use.

This *Plain Language Guidebook* does not replace the full Guide. It's a quick and easy way for instructors and staff to find and use the most important information in the longer document.

Key words

Boundary — In this guide, we use the word “boundary” to describe a limit or rule about what is acceptable or comfortable in a relationship between students and instructors or staff members. Boundaries can be physical, emotional, or digital. Sometimes boundaries are obvious or explicit, like “generally speaking, professors should not date students,” and sometimes they are a matter of good judgment, like “staff members should not tell inappropriate jokes to students.” Boundaries are important for healthy relationships and personal well-being.

Relationship — The way any two or more people are connected, and how they behave toward each other. We can have many kinds of relationships, including personal, professional, and social.

Instructor — Any person who teaches and/or supervises the academic work of students at King’s. This includes professors, faculty fellows, people who teach in limited-term roles, guest lecturers, teaching assistants, and writing coaches.

Staff member — Anyone employed full- or part-time by King’s who is not an instructor.

Student — Anyone enrolled in or living in residence at King’s College, including:

- exchange or study-abroad students;
- students learning on King’s campus but enrolled at another school, such as Dalhousie;
- students from other universities living in residence at King’s;
- student employees; and
- high school students learning on campus as part of a specific program or event.

Why are these guidelines important?

King’s is proud to have a close-knit working and learning environment. Students benefit from the support that healthy relationships with instructors and staff members can bring. These relationships can lead to personal and professional development, lasting collaborations, and friendships.

Instructors and staff members at the University of King’s College play many roles for students: they teach, mentor, support, assess, and supervise. Great conversations among students, instructors, and staff members are important to research, teaching, and learning.

Sometimes, the close-knit environment at King’s can also lead to challenges. We need guidelines to help us build relationships that have healthy personal and professional boundaries.

Boundary-crossing behaviour can harm students, staff, and instructors. Students can suffer psychological harm that affects their school work and success. Instructors and staff members can suffer psychological and social stress, as well as damage to their reputations, when they are accused of harassment or other misconduct. You'll find more about boundaries later in this Guidebook.

We all want King's to be a safe, engaging, and fun place to learn and work. As trusted adults on campus, instructors and staff members can become some of the most important people in a young person's life. We all have a responsibility to build and model healthy boundaries when we relate to students.

We must recognize the influence instructors and staff members have on students, and cultivate our relationships with students with respect, professionalism, and personal integrity.

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines:

- apply to all instructors and staff members.
- work with the King's [Code of Conduct](#), the [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy](#), and the [Policy on Conflict of Interest](#). You can find these on the King's website or by clicking the links.
- don't replace or take priority over any rule or process in those policies. If any guideline doesn't match up with the policies, we will review it.

How you use these guidelines will depend on:

- your role in the University,
- the program level of students,
- the professional or social relationships you may already have with students,
- the types of students in your program and how your classroom or program works, and
- professional relationships that may go beyond the classroom or program during and after a student leaves the University.

Use good judgment and ask questions if you need support or information.

What if I don't know what to do?

For faculty and instructors:

- Talk to a faculty colleague, your program Director, or the Vice-President.
- Talk to the Sexual Health and Safety Officer, the Equity Officer, the Student Support Advisor, or the Accessibility Officer (Click [here](#) for contact information).

For staff:

- Reach out to your supervisor or the Manager of Human Resources.
- Talk to the Sexual Health and Safety Officer, the Equity Officer, the Student Support Advisor, or the Accessibility Officer (Click [here](#) for contact information).

For students:

- Reach out to the Director of your academic program or one of the student support staff.

For everyone:

- Check the *Code of Conduct, Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy, and Policy on Conflict of Interest*.
- Check the Student Support Directory (Click [here](#) for Student Support Directory).

Guidelines for Healthy Relationships with Students

Teaching, supervising, and supporting students means spending time with them in the classroom, online, in the office, and in the community. It's important to have healthy boundaries in all these situations. Sometimes these boundaries are obvious and come naturally. Others are harder to figure out.

As instructors and staff, we have more authority than students do. We are responsible for the quality of our relationships with students. The consequences of crossing boundaries with students are also our responsibility.

It's our job to make sure relationships and interactions with students are appropriate and healthy. Students should never be put in a position where they have to drop a class, stop using a program, or miss out on opportunities because they don't feel comfortable or safe with an instructor or staff member.

Positive relationships with students are important and rewarding. The following guidelines will address both exceptional and everyday situations to help you to maintain professional boundaries and healthy ways of relating to students.

Sexual or romantic relationships between instructors or staff and students

Sexual or romantic relationships or activity between instructors or staff and students are not okay; they violate the professional standards of King's and should be avoided.

The King's community believes that romantic or sexual relationships between an instructor or staff member and a student goes against the mission, spirit, and culture of the College.

These relationships can seriously harm everyone involved:

- If a student could reasonably think that assessment of their work, support for their academic achievement, funding, or career opportunities depend on a romantic or sexual relationship with an instructor or staff member, there is no consent.
- When an instructor or staff member's decisions, assessment, or support for a student or their work might be influenced by their personal relationship with that student, they are

in a conflict of interest. This undermines the integrity of both the teaching relationship and their own professional reputation.

- These relationships can affect relationships with other students who are aware of them and feel uncomfortable or unsafe as a result.
- The King's *Policy on Conflict of Interest* and the *Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy* do not ban personal, intimate relationships between instructors or staff and students. Bans can force these kinds of relationships underground and make them even more dangerous. Instead, King's **strongly discourages these relationships** and has put protections in place to reduce the risk of harm.

Meeting or socializing with students

Casual gatherings, conversations, and off-campus events are an important part of the King's experience. Balancing healthy boundaries with creating a close-knit community is key.

When we spend time with students, in formal (in class or office hours) or informal settings (gatherings, celebrations, class excursions), we should:

- Set the right tone. Be clear that your relationship with students is always professional and respectful, even when the meeting is non-academic and/or taking place off-campus.
- Make sure the location for the meeting or event is safe and appropriate. For example, is it easy for students to leave and/or get home on their own? Is it all-ages for students who are under 19?
- Bring another instructor or staff member along if the event is organized by students. Think about how long or how late you will stay.
- Avoid "playing favourites" with students.
- Be mindful about meeting with students alone. You'll find more about this later in the Guidebook.
- Always hold in-person classes, programs, exams, seminars, thesis presentations, or other gatherings on campus or in other public spaces (like a library, museum, or community organization) — not in homes, restaurants, or bars.

Don't serve alcohol other than at licensed receptions. When alcohol is served:

- Make sure students are safe. Students must be of legal age to drink alcohol (19+), and should not feel pressure to drink no matter how old they are.
- Serve food and non-alcoholic drinks.
- Ensure that alcohol is being served responsibly so no one drinks too much.
- Model responsible drinking yourself.

Communicating with students

Students like to get to know instructors and staff as people. When we are warm and approachable, we put students at ease and make learning more engaging.

It's important to know what to share and what not to share with students. Take care when you share personal details or political views. Avoid talking about program meetings or your attitudes toward colleagues.

Oversharing personal information or opinions can blur boundaries and make students uncomfortable. Oversharing is also unprofessional. It can hurt students' academic success and their sense of stability and safety on campus. It can also lead to rumours and affect relationships among students and colleagues.

Social media can make it difficult to draw a line between the personal and professional. You may want to:

- Choose different platforms for different social and professional circles.
- Set up separate accounts for personal and professional purposes. For example, set up a Facebook group that doesn't allow students to access your personal page.
- Check your privacy settings. Decide who can see and share posts, photos, and other information.
- Before posting, ask yourself, "Would I say this in the classroom or workplace?" If the answer is no, don't post it.

Supporting students

We meet with students in our offices to talk about academics and other things going on in their lives. Instructors and staff can support students in many ways. Keep in mind:

- Unless the conversation is private, keep an open-door policy. If the hallway is noisy, or the student needs confidentiality, take steps to make sure you both feel comfortable and safe. For example, place the student's chair close to the door, or make sure the blind is up in any interior windows.
- Online office hours may be more accessible for some students.
- Get to know student supports on campus and keep the information handy.
- Respond to students' needs by giving concrete and specific advice. Refer students to other supports if you need to, or bring in other supports.
- Healthy boundaries are important for everyone's comfort and safety. Strike a balance between caring for your students and sharing responsibility for their well-being with other support people on campus.

Giving students a drive

Use your good judgment. What might seem appropriate and helpful in some circumstances might not be in others.

Money and gifts

You might mean well, but lending money or giving gifts to students crosses a boundary. If a student is in need, refer them to the financial awards page on the King's website and encourage them to apply for emergency funds.

Gifts from students should be modest. Kindly but firmly refuse gifts that are too generous, or offer to donate them.

Conclusion

The Relating to Students: Plain Language Guidebook for Instructors and Staff is meant to help you make good decisions and set healthy boundaries with students.

Remember, if you don't know what to do in a situation:

- Connect with a faculty colleague, your program director, or the Vice-President.
- Talk to the Sexual Health and Safety Officer, the Equity Officer, the Student Support Advisor, or the Accessibility Officer ((Click [here](#) for Student Support Directory).
- Reach out to your office supervisor or the manager of Human Resources.
- Check the King's *Code of Conduct*, the *Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy*, and the *Policy on Conflict of Interest*. You can find these on the King's website or by clicking the links.