



UNIVERSITY OF
KING'S
COLLEGE • HALIFAX

Cultivating Healthy Relations with Students
A Faculty and Staff Guide

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1. Context

1.1 The goal of *Cultivating Healthy Relations with Students: A Faculty and Staff Guide* is to support King's community as it reflects on issues arising in relation to boundaries between Instructors or Staff Members and Students, and to draw together resources on the issue that are dispersed throughout the University's various policy documents, including the [Code of Conduct](#) (hereafter, CoC), the [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy](#) (hereafter, SVPaRP) and the [Policy on Conflict of Interest](#) (hereafter, PoCoI).

1.2 The Guide was first developed in response to a recommendation from Janice Rubin and Elizabeth Bingham in the course of their two-stage Independent Review of Accusations of Sexual Assault Against Dr. Wayne Hankey. In their May 2022 [Interim Report](#) and again in their [Final Report](#) (from March 2023), Rubin and Bingham recommended that King's "provide a forum for its professors to engage in deep reflection on their role as teachers and mentors in the context of a small, close-knit community [...and] that the aim of this period of reflection should be a document that addresses appropriate boundaries between professors and students" (Interim Report, 21).

1.3 To that end, the teaching staff of all academic programs at King's as well as members of select University committees collaborated on the first version of the Faculty and Staff guide in 22/23. The document was first approved by Faculty in May 2023 and then by the Board of Governors in June 2023. The Board requested that the document be subject to an informal review after one year of implementation, and a more formal review process after two years. The current version is the outcome of the informal review.

2. Scope

2.1 These guidelines and statement of principles aim to be consistent with the University's [POCOI](#), [SVPaRP](#) and the [CoC](#) and do not replace or take priority over any rule or process set out in those policies. Where there are inconsistencies, an effort shall be made to introduce greater consistency across all policies. Any remaining inconsistencies shall be highlighted for further work.

2.2 The following guidelines often foreground relations between Instructors and Students, but they apply equally to those involving Staff Members (see below for definitions).

2.3 Instructors, Program Directors, Staff Members, and Directors of University Offices should adapt this framework to suit the character of their specific program or office. Aspects to consider include:

- program level,
- pre-existing professional or social relationships,
- typical student cohort of specific program,
- classroom dynamics and instructional settings,
- the professional relationships that may extend beyond the classroom both during and after a student completes their degree.

2.4 This Guide is meant to be representative, not exhaustive, and its overall aim is to encourage reflection and intentionality, not dictate comportment. In no sense does this Guide replace the exercise of personal judgement and responsibility; rather, it presupposes them.

2.5 If any Instructor is uncertain about what to do in any given circumstance, they should consider connecting with a faculty colleague, their program Director, the Vice-President, or the Sexual Health and Safety Officer, the Equity Officer, the Student Support Advisor, or the Accessibility Officer, as appropriate (Click [here](#) for Student Support Directory)

2.6 If any Staff member or Student has questions or concerns about the practices of healthy boundary-setting at the College, they should consult the policy books above and/or reach out to their office supervisor, the Manager of Human Resources, the Director of their academic program or one of the student support staff, as appropriate.

2.7 The University commits to a formal College-wide review of this documents every two years.

3. Definitions

3.1 Instructor: A person on campus whose role is to teach and / or supervise the academic work of students. This includes those who teach in physical or virtual classrooms, such as professors, faculty fellows, people who teach in limited-term roles, and those who serve in support roles, such as guest lecturers, teaching assistants, and writing coaches.

3.2 Staff Member: A staff member is anyone employed (full- or part-time) by the University of King's College whose principal appointments are not involved in teaching and/or supervising the academic work of students.

3.3 Student: In addition to individuals enrolled at the University of King's College, the category of 'Student' includes:

- (i) Exchange or study-abroad Students;
- (ii) Students who are learning on King's campus for a specific class but are actually enrolled primarily at another institution, such as a Dalhousie Student who is taking a King's class, or a Student from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design or another school who is taking a King's class on a Letter of Permission;
- (iii) Students from other universities living in residence at King's
- (iv) Students in their capacity as employees of the university
- (v) Students who are in high school and are temporarily learning on our campus as part of a specific program or event, such as Humanities for Young People.

4. Statement of Principles

4.1 As at other educational institutions, Instructors at the University of King's College have many roles to play in relation to students: they teach, mentor, assess, and supervise students, and vibrant exchanges between Instructors and Students are essential to research, teaching, and learning. Those exchanges bring vitality to our academic community and can influence personal and professional development, give rise to lasting collaborations, and, occasionally, can foster enduring friendships of great richness for all involved. King's is known for—and justifiably proud of—its unique and close-knit working and learning environment.

4.2 The King's community has learned that such relationships in a close-knit learning environment can also pose challenges: specifically, without supportive guidelines, they can lead to boundary-crossing behaviors that can negatively impact Students, Staff Members and Instructors. These negative impacts are varied in nature and fall along a spectrum of harm. For Students, these can include psychological harm and diminished academic success. For Instructors and Staff Members, they might include psychological and social stresses arising from allegations of harassment or other problematic conduct, formal investigation processes, and reputational damage.

4.3 King's Staff and Faculty seek to cultivate a positive learning environment and a culture of both academic and social engagement. Furthermore, there is widespread recognition that healthy boundaries are an important aspect of the interactions Staff and Faculty have with students, especially in the current climate of increased mental health challenges among young people and increased awareness of imbalances of authority that inform the social dynamics at play on our College campus.

4.4 Staff and Faculty are highly conscious of the capacity of King's students to participate in a lively academic and social community at the College, and they are also aware of the special responsibilities these kinds of interactions bring. University Instructors can become some of the most important people in a young person's life, and it is well-known that King's Staff take great pride in the quality of the supports and services they offer to students. The importance of Faculty and Staff roles confers responsibilities and it creates vulnerabilities. Safeguarding those relationships with Students means cultivating an environment of trust and respect with the highest levels of professionalism and personal integrity.

5. Guidelines for Relationships with Students

5.1 Teaching, supervising and working with and alongside students involve interpersonal interactions and engagement in many spaces: in the classroom, in residence, in program offices, online, in office hours, and less often, in the wider community. As such, Instructors and Staff Members are constantly being called upon to establish and uphold boundaries that safeguard the relation they have to their students. Some of these boundaries are self-evident in the institutional context of King's and we enact them quite naturally. Other times, we give serious consideration to questions involving the dynamics of interacting with students in all kinds of settings and situations.

5.2 As the person with more authority in the campus setting, the Instructor or Staff Member is primarily responsible for maintaining the integrity and safety of the teaching relationship. Because the Instructor or Staff Member is responsible for ensuring that their actions do not compromise the integrity of the relationship, the consequences of any boundary-crossing behavior must also largely rest with the Instructor or Staff Member. Exceptions exist, but generally, this responsibility remains with the Instructor or Staff Member even when it is the Student making inappropriate overtures. In other words, a Student should not be put in a position where they must withdraw from a class, program, or other academic opportunity because of a problematic dynamic that *developed between* the Student and an Instructor.

5.3 The most extreme issue concerning boundaries with Students is one involving sexual or romantic relationships or activity. However, there are other, much more typical boundary situations that frequently arise in the lives of most Instructors in relation to their students. The goal of these guidelines is to address both.

5.4 Sexual or Romantic Relationships between Instructors or Staff Members and Students

5.4.1 Sexual or romantic relationships between Instructors or Staff Members and Students could constitute a violation of the professional standards and the overall mission of the College. Such relations have the potential to cause serious harm to the educational and employment experience of the individuals involved and those who work and/or study with them.

5.4.2 Any time a student could reasonably think that assessment of their work, support for their academic achievement, funding, or career opportunities depend upon a romantic or sexual relationship, there is no consent. And when an Instructor's decisions, assessment, or assistance with respect to a Student or their work might be influenced by their personal relationship with that Student, they are in a conflict of interest – one that undermines both the integrity of the teaching relationship and their own academic integrity. Importantly, such relationships can also affect the teaching relationship with other Students who are aware of the relationship and feel uncomfortable or unsafe as a consequence.

5.4.3 Students may have difficulty communicating freely that they do not want to be in such a relationship, or that they want the relationship to end, because of concern over the impact it may have on their academic progress. The King's [POCOI](#) is emphatic on the point of this difficulty, stating that anyone in a position of trust and/or authority should recognize that "an intimate personal relationship with a student may constitute, or give rise to a subsequent claim that the relationship constituted sexualized harassment. Such relationships are therefore discouraged" (*POCOI*, 7).

5.4.4 It should be noted that, while the King's *POCOI strongly discourages* such relationships, it does not *prohibit* or ban them (nor, for that matter, does the [SVPaRP](#), 6). Mindful of the ways in which prohibitions or bans have the potential to further entrench the coercive nature of such relationships, the King's community has chosen to adopt practices of discouragement and protective measures across all its policy documents, to reduce the risk of harm rather than implement an outright ban. Therefore, the King's community wishes to state that romantic or sexual relationships between an Instructor or Staff Member and a Student is generally inconsistent with the mission, the ethos, and the culture of the College, is potentially harmful to the individuals directly and indirectly involved, and therefore should generally be avoided.

5.5 Meeting or Socializing with Students

5.5.1 Informal meetings, conversations and off-campus events involving Students and Instructors or Staff Members greatly enrich the experiences of teaching, learning and working at King's. Some such events and informal meetings are important extensions of the teaching mission: drop-in or scheduled office hours, visits to museums, attendance at artistic performances, and program luncheons for interested students are examples of such social events. As a rule, transparency and professionalism should be guiding principles.

5.5.2 Office hours are an important time for students to discuss their academic progress, the details of assignments or assessments, or things going on in their lives. Many students entrust their Instructors with information about themselves that is not academic in nature, and many share personal experiences with their Instructors. Office hours are, in short, a time for Instructors to support students in many ways, and here too, there are a number of things to keep in mind:

- Whether the office door remains opened or closed during the conversation depends on several different contextual factors: the noise level in the surrounding area, the subject under discussion, and whether confidentiality/privacy is needed. Although the particular circumstances/context should guide us in every case, the default position should be an open-door policy. If the student asks to have the door closed, steps should be taken to ensure the safety and comfort levels of both the student and the Instructor; the Student's chair should be placed closest to the door, for instance.
- Consider conducting online office hours periodically to allow those Students who would prefer to engage in a more virtual consultation to do so.
- Be responsive to the Student(s), and at the same time, offer them guidance and direction so that the conversation has both structure and concrete outcomes.
- Healthy boundary-setting involves respect for both the Instructor's or Staff

Member's and the Student's levels of comfort and safety. Engage in a practice of balance: caring for Students and being passionate about your work does *not* mean you are solely responsible for their wellbeing.

- Familiarize yourself with campus supports and keep the contact information for [Student Supports](#) ready to hand.

5.5.3 In-person classes, exams, seminars, thesis presentations or other academic gatherings should always take place on campus or other public spaces (i.e. library, museum, community organization etc.) and not in faculty homes, restaurants, or bars. Alcohol should not be served in classes, seminars, lectures, or other academic events other than at licensed receptions.

5.5.4 When engaging informally with students off-campus, it is important to consider several different aspects of that engagement. What follows is a set of suggestions, by no means exhaustive but certainly representative of possible scenarios:

- Consider the appropriateness of the venue for the meeting or event.
- Will the choice of venue make it difficult for students to leave or get home on their own?
- Always prioritize the professional/institutional dimension of the interaction: the Instructor-Student or Staff Member-Student dynamic is always at play even when the meeting is non-academic and/or taking place off-campus.
- Is the meeting taking place with one student alone or will it involve a group?
- Strive to avoid the appearance of favoritism and/or the exclusivity of the interaction.
- If the event is being organized by students, consider bringing another instructor from your program along. You might also consider deciding in advance how long or how late you will stay.
- Where alcohol is available as part of a social gathering involving students, instructors and/or staff, measures must be taken first to ensure student safety and boundary-setting, and second to ensure compliance with regulations about serving liquor. These include ensuring that students having alcohol are of legal age, that students do not feel pressure to drink alcohol, that overconsumption is prevented and that food and plenty of non- alcoholic beverages are available.

5.5.5 Students greatly value when their Instructors share something of themselves as human beings rather than simply as experts of their scholarly field. These kinds of anecdotal interactions serve to alleviate feelings of intimidation or inferiority and introduce a degree of levity into the dynamics.

5.5.6 However, Instructors and Staff Members need to be mindful of the challenges associated with oversharing personal or other information (political views, the subject matter of program meetings, or their attitudes toward colleagues, for instance) with Students; oversharing can lead to confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the Student(s) regarding their role and the nature of the relationship, both of which can negatively impact the Student's academic success or their sense of stability and safety in the class. It can also lead to rumor and innuendo on campus, can compromise the Instructor's or Staff Member's commitment to the professional standards of the College, and complicate their relations to other students and their colleagues.

5.5.7 The ubiquity of **social media** in our lives can make it difficult to maintain a boundary between our personal and professional online engagements. Some helpful strategies:

- Some social media users choose different platforms for different social circles.
- Some platforms allow multiple accounts: for instance, Facebook users can set up group pages that don't grant automatic access to personal pages.
- Thoughtful use of privacy settings is a good use of your time! They help regulate who can see and share posts, photos, and other shared information.
- When posting on social media or writing work emails, it's always good to ask yourself, "would I say this out loud in the classroom?"

5.6 Supporting Students: Other Possible Scenarios

5.6.1 The context for whether to **give rides to a student** in an instructor's or staff member's car is important: Such an offer can be helpful and supportive or, depending on circumstances, it can be problematic. As with other possible scenarios, good judgement here is the key to safe practices and thoughtful engagement.

5.6.2 Lending money to a student or **giving personal gifts** to a student may stem from a desire to be generous and helpful. However, such gestures will almost always send a very mixed signal, both to the recipient of the gift or loan, and to other students and colleagues. Gestures of this kind should almost always be avoided; if a student has immediate financial need, they should be directed to the [Financial Aid page](#) on the King's website and be encouraged to apply for emergency funds.

5.6.3 Receiving personal gifts from students can also be problematic if the gift is more than a modest token of appreciation. When an instructor is the recipient of an overly generous gift, two good approaches might be to graciously but firmly refuse the gift or to offer to donate it to an appropriate organization.