

Conflicts of Interest Arising From Personal Relationships

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From time to time one hears of students or staff attracted to their teachers or supervisors, and vice versa. Sometimes this attraction leads to a sexual relationship. Occasionally one also hears of a senior or junior person who makes an implicit or explicit quid pro quo offer - or who is interpreted as having done so. Such situations involving a senior and junior person are always complicated. If they do involve a sexual relationship, they may, under MIT policy, represent a conflict of interest (and, of course, may represent harassment).

MIT does not have a blanket policy forbidding sexual relationships between senior and junior people in educational or work settings, but does have a policy obliging faculty and staff to avoid conflicts of interest and to seek advice about potential conflicts of interest. The policy includes statements that "Potential conflicts of interest of a particularly sensitive nature may arise out of sexual relationships, especially in the context of educational and employment supervision and evaluation... (and)... anyone with a personal interest that may have the potential for conflict with the interests and welfare of the Institute should seek advice and guidance..." (*Policies and Procedures 4.4*)

Several senior faculty suggested that I write this article, citing two reasons. One is to let people know what MIT's policy is on these matters. The second is to present examples of how such relationships may present problems for those involved, as well as for others in the workplace, classroom, or lab.

If you are asked for advice, you might wish to discuss the following ways in which a personal relationship might conflict with an individual's responsibilities as a teacher and/or supervisor:

- A student who is known (or thought to be) in a relationship with the supervisor may have his or her work evaluated differently by others in the field, since people sometimes attribute all good ideas or results to the senior person in the relationship.

- Sometimes the relationship causes the student to doubt his or her own abilities and performance – the relationship may actually undermine the self-confidence of the junior person.

- Recommendations and grades may become suspect or professionally inappropriate.

- Colleagues of either party may become uncomfortable and resentful and may complain, if they believe there is favoritism or if they are offended by some aspect of the relationship.

- Professional relationships may be permanently damaged. This is especially common with fellow students.

- The relationship frequently is known, even when the two people have been very discreet. Many relationships are first observed away from MIT, so career damage may occur in wider circles as well as within the community.

- A senior person needs to be clear about the difference between a junior person's "consenting" to sexual activity and that person's actual willingness to be involved. Junior people at MIT often mention that they are profoundly unwilling to say no to supervisors who have influence over their careers.

- Any person in such a relationship should consider that even willing relationships can lead to harassment complaints: for example, from peers of the junior person, or from one of the parties when a relationship breaks up.

- There are also sometimes-subtle problems of loss of respect and trust that should be considered by all senior people. For example, students who would like to consult a faculty member about work, or about problems of their own, sometimes report that they do not feel comfortable doing so if that person is perceived to be in a relationship with a student. (In fact, because these problems are so real, it is important to try to discourage gossip about the personal relationships of others.)

If someone finds that he or she is attracted to a student, a teacher, an employee, or a supervisor, it is possible to seek advice off the record (see *Policies and Procedures 4.4*).

There are often reasonable ways to avoid the conflicts of interest cited above. Most of us know happy marriages or long-term relationships that have resulted from people falling in love with someone who supervises or reports to them.

The basic guideline is this: People should find an orderly and timely way to disengage from the supervisor/supervisee relationship if they want to pursue the personal relationship. For example, a TA might hold off on asking out a student until the relevant course has ended. A responsible faculty member who is falling in love might work out some way to find appropriate alternate supervision for the junior person, or might wait until graduation to pursue the personal relationship. When approached in a timely fashion, department heads can often help to see that this happens in a supportive way for all concerned.

While people involved in a sexual relationship frequently seem unaware of effects on others at work or in the classroom, most faculty and staff I know take such matters very seriously. There are, however, a wide variety of opinions on these matters. For example, senior faculty and staff have recently expressed these thoughts to me:

- Both parties have an obligation to seek advice but it is mainly the responsibility of the senior person to avoid conflicts of interest and preserve the professional/educational relationship.

- "Consenting relationships" are private business and only private business.

- Relations between faculty and undergraduates are even more serious than those with graduate students; (some think they are never appropriate, even if there is no element of supervision).

- Some conflicts of interest that arise from sexual relationships with a supervisor are so serious that they cannot be managed – all such relationships should simply be avoided.

Perhaps readers of the *Newsletter* can help add to this discussion.♣

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