

The Ethical Professor

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Gifts from Students?

(This happened to me - Jim Stramel - last term.)

At the end of Spring term “Rosanna” came by my office, as she had done so often during the semester. This time she was not seeking help with our Ethics class, but she had come to thank me for opening her mind to abilities and thoughts that she had not dreamed possible. And she had brought me a gift: a beautiful framed watercolor painting that she had done. She explained that it was purely a gift of gratitude for all the ways I had helped her, and that it wasn’t meant to influence her grade (her face and my history with her left no doubt about her sincerity) – and she *so* hoped I would accept it.

And there I was, suddenly caught in (small) moral or ethical dilemma: I wanted to accept the painting, knowing how much it meant to Rosanna to offer it to me and knowing how hurt she probably would be if I refused it. Yet, my professional duties require me to treat students fairly. I had not yet turned in the grades. On the one hand, I was convinced that I could completely separate the objectivity of my grading from receipt of the gift (indeed, I had already calculated her final grade). On the other hand, humans notoriously over-estimate our ability to be objective and unbiased. Further, the acceptance of one gift (and according to what set of rules or criteria?) sets a precedent which – even if there is in fact no improper influence – may create *the appearance* of favoritism or injustice. Lest one pooh-pooh “appearances,” I should think that a professor’s reputation for fairness would be among his or her most cherished assets. Moreover, the acceptance of gifts from students imprudently creates for others the opportunity to suspect or even allege some impropriety even when there is none.

What should I have done? What would *you* do?

Should one have a policy of no gifts, without exception?

Is it ever ethical to accept a gift from a student?

Below is the Academic Senate’s **Statement on Professional Ethics**:

STATEMENT ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS^[1]

Adopted 03/26/02

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As educators committed to student success and the advancement of knowledge, faculty members recognize our special responsibilities as teachers and counselors, scholars, colleagues, members of an academic community, and citizens. We carry out our professional duties honestly, fairly, and reflectively while showing respect for all persons.

AS TEACHERS/COUNSELORS faculty members

- develop and improve our pedagogical competence; this includes participating in professional organizations in order to maintain and improve knowledge and skills.
- motivate and guide all our students to achieve their full academic potential.
- keep current with changing college/university policies and standards and transmit accurate information to assist students in their educational planning.
- protect students' academic freedom and encourage tolerance and open-mindedness in the pursuit of learning, while modeling and fostering honest academic conduct.
- do not practice or tolerate intimidation, exploitation, harassment or discriminatory treatment of students.^[2]
- avoid favoritism, nepotism, breaches of confidentiality,^[3] and we try to avoid creating appearances thereof.
- avoid romantic or sexual relationships with students under our academic charge.
- do not allow our personal problems to diminish the learning/counseling environment.
- distribute and follow a comprehensive syllabus that is consistent with the course outline of record.
- assure that evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit.
- maintain accurate class records and inform students of progress in a timely manner.
- begin classes on time and productively use the allotted time.
- keep announced office hours and other appointments.

AS COLLEAGUES faculty members

- encourage and respectfully support our colleagues in all aspects of academic life.
- respect and defend the free inquiry of associates.
- strive to be objective and fair in our professional judgment or evaluation of colleagues.

- do not discriminate against or harass colleagues.
- accept our share of faculty responsibilities for the governance of our institution, including attendance at department meetings and participation in the Faculty Association and Academic Senate.

As MEMBERS OF AN academic institution faculty members

- seek above all to be effective teachers, scholars, advisors and counselors.
- observe the stated regulations of the institution, provided the regulations do not contravene academic freedom.
- exercise our rights and responsibilities to review and revise institutional regulations.
- do not allow the pursuit of subsidiary interests to compromise the integrity of our academic mission.
- duly consider the effect of a decision to interrupt or terminate our service upon the program and the institution and give due notice of our intentions.

AS SCHOLARS faculty members

- maintain currency in and uphold the standards of our discipline(s).
- influence the broader course of our profession by seeking and sharing knowledge and skills.

As members of our community faculty members

- have the rights and obligations of other citizens, but we measure the urgency of these obligations in the light of our responsibilities to our students, our institution, our field, and to our profession.
- avoid creating the impression of speaking or acting for the College when we speak or act as private persons.
- promote conditions of free inquiry in society and further public understanding of academic freedom.

^[1] This document is based on *American Association of University Professors and Academic Senate of California Community Colleges Policies*. The prior SMC Statement was a minor revision of the AAUP Statement. Both documents include much that is good, but we found them to be rather disorganized, and there were a number of points to add. We shifted from prose paragraphs to sections with bullet points to cut down on repetitive language and make it “punchier.” We tried to take a pluralistic approach rather than assume a single ethical tradition or perspective (e.g. Kantian duty ethics, or utilitarianism, etc.).

^[2] See: Title IX, Administrative Regulations, SMC’s Policy on Sexual Harassment (AR 3121).

^[3] See FERPA (Federal Education Rights and Protection Act).