

What Price Romance?

Love affairs between students and teachers can be a risky business

It's taboo," says a recent University of Massachusetts graduate, "almost like incest." Pepperdine University adjunct Prof. Allen Weiner agrees: "Students are forbidden fruit." There you have it, from both sides. Teacher, thou shalt not sleep with thy students; students, thou shalt not seduce thy teachers.

So go the proscriptions—yet student-teacher sex remains a troublesome reality. It's perhaps only natural that true love often runs its course in the wake of passionate intellectual exchange; in an ideal world, it shouldn't really matter, as long as both parties consent. But can there be a truly consensual relationship when one party holds most of the power? At the very least, asks J. Claude Evans, assistant professor of philosophy of Washington University in St. Louis, "How could you grade somebody you're involved with?"

Given the surreptitious nature of student-teacher romances, it's difficult to estimate just how often they occur. But there are a few scattered indications that it may be more frequent than generally thought. A University of Missouri, Columbia, study published in 1986 found that male professors had made passes at nearly one-third of the female psychology grad students. One in six students said she had had sex with a faculty member, who was usually a research adviser; in 28 percent of those relationships, the student felt coerced. The frequency of homosexual relationships, meanwhile, can only be surmised—but some gay teachers, sensitive about fears they will convert the young to their sexual preference, say they're extremely cautious about involvement with students.

Now that sexual harassment has become a more actionable complaint (box), some schools are trying to outlaw student-teacher sex. For the most part their efforts have fizzled. Last spring the University of California system rejected a ban that would have forbidden faculty from "engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship with a student under circumstances which compromise student-faculty relationships." Another failed attempt, at the University of Texas, Arlington, would have made any romantic involvement with a student a "serious breach of professional ethics for faculty." In the view of Robert King, dean of the College of Liberal



ILLUSTRATION BY BARRETT ROOT

'Almost like incest': The extracurricular taboo

Arts at Texas, Austin, adopting such prohibitions "would be about as effective as having a policy against sin."

Folks view the matter differently in the City of Brotherly Love. At the University of Pennsylvania, the faculty adopted sweeping measures in 1985 to curtail student-teacher dating. Sexual relations between student and teacher were deemed "inappropriate." The policy second-guesses the lovers: "What might appear to be consensual, even to the parties involved, may in fact not be so." If teacher and student have sexual relations while the faculty member is teaching the student, any complaint of sexual harassment will be presumed valid. The statement concludes ominously: "any teacher enters at peril into sexual relations with a student."

Like a wormy apple, the official responsibility for intrascholastic love affairs most often lands on the teacher's desk. Students, younger and presumably less

experienced, may be immensely flattered by attention from a respected authority figure and unable to differentiate gratitude from attraction. On the other side of the lectern, professors argue that they, too, can be manipulated. Peter Favaro, who teaches psychology and computer science at New York's Hofstra University, says he's propositioned about once a year by females who say they would "do anything for an A."

Jennifer admits to flirting first. "I'd always been intrigued by the idea of dating a professor," she says. Jennifer, a recent graduate of UT, Austin, was fond of her liberal-arts professor's "sexy" voice and even his paunch. She began smiling at him across the room, and he smiled back. They finally went out for drinks with another student-faculty pair. That night they kissed. After 10 minutes, the professor broke off the embrace—and the relationship. Recalls Jennifer: "He said, 'The first thing is, I don't know you very well. The second thing is, you're a student. I'd be too influenced. I have to give you a grade at the end of the semester'."

'Dirty old professor': Whether an adventure

lasts 10 minutes or one term, social pressure can be tremendous. "I fear hearing, 'That dirty old professor, he's out dating students,'" says a University of Houston professor. Kathleen Kupper, a UCLA graduate who married her thesis adviser, remembers her mortification in front of her peers: "You get downcast eyes and giggles."

The professional penalties can be far more severe. Jonathan Hird, women's cross-country coach at Brown, says he was "not rehired" for a part-time position at the school apparently because he dated one of his athletes. Three years later, after she married him and graduated, Hird was offered a full-time position. "The athletic director as much as told me that he was happier when she and I got married," says Hird.

Sometimes love does find a way, but the Hirds are probably lucky exceptions. Steve Brackney, a student at Houston who married his Spanish instructor, says, "It's not