

Student-professor relations should be prohibited

By Mary Birmingham and Sandra Newman

The official stance taken by administrators at the University, including University President Myles Brand, is that "consensual" intimate relationships that occur between professors and students are private matters of no concern to the University. We disagree.

Students' success is heavily dependent on the approval of their professors. Professors influence the granting of graduate teaching fellowships. They have significant psychological power, as students are dependent upon them for validating their intellectual achievements, in fact, for validating their intellect. Professors can influence a student's social environment and can be effective in creating a positive academic environment or an alienating one. And finally, professors' power extends beyond the campus in the form of the letter of reference.

When sex between a professor and a student occurs, generally at least two related power relationships merge and amplify — teacher-student and male-female. Race may also be a factor. The gender powers (including the power to abuse), which men in general exercise over women, is enhanced and exemplified by the bureaucratic and professional power they exercise within the academy. Without both education and restriction, this combination of gender and hierarchical powers can become disastrous.

Research done by P. Rutter, author of *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* (1989), indicates that most men who engage subordinates sexually, habitually do so. Several departments at the University have at

least one such "predator" sort. These professors prey upon particularly vulnerable students, routinely taking advantage of women from other cultures, incest victims, rape survivors or relatively unsophisticated young women. Such students place an extreme amount of trust in professors with their psychological, social and intellectual development. Taking sexual advantage of this "transference," as it is defined in psychiatric practice, has been uniformly upheld by courts as "malpractice or gross negligence" (*Corgan v. Muehling*, 1991). No such legal restraints have been placed upon college professors. In many universities, including this one, professors remain "officially" free to abuse their students under the auspices of "freedom" and ignorance of the abusiveness of the power they exercise.

High administrators at the University continue to ignore the power imbalance between students and professors and argue that "consensual" relations should not be regulated because they are private, and because a professor cannot be expected to be aware of a student's vulnerability or history. However, well-published research has shown that as much as one-third of the female population has been raped and one-fifth has suffered incest prior to college age, so any reasonable person should expect there to be more than one person in a given classroom who has suffered such assaults.

Under such circumstances, if a student capitulates to a professor's persistent demands, this should *not* qualify as "consent."

Professors who regularly violate a student's trust and deference, and the University administration that allows that to

continue, refuse to recognize the difference between anxious, fearful capitulation (giving in) to demands and genuine consent, just as a rapist refuses to recognize the difference between "yes" and "no." The fact that some professors lack this understanding should provide a strong argument for officially prohibiting sexual relations between students and professors. Instead, it is used as a reason to excuse the exploitation of students.

The dominant argument against a non-fraternization policy is that sexual relationships are a "private matter." However, men's right to "privacy" is not a justifiable defense against charges of abuse and exploitation of women. Domestic violence, date rape and sexual harassment can no longer be hidden behind a veil of men's "privacy." Access to young women's bodies is not a perk to be made available under the name of "academic freedom" and "privacy."

While the most convincing argument against restricting intimate professor-student relations is the apparently successful marriages that do, on rare occasions, result from such relations, such arguments pale when measured against arguments in favor of a reasonable non-fraternization policy. First, if a woman does consent to relations with her professor, the relationship violates a professional ethic long recognized in business. Such relationships present a conflict of interest and fairness. Even if the relationship is one of love rather than exploitation, it is improper so long as the professor is in a position of authority over that student.

There is no apparent reason why such intimate relations cannot be postponed until the student-professor relationship is

dissolved. Therefore, the slippery slope argument, claiming that efforts to protect one group of women from unwanted advances will unjustly limit the freedom of others to voluntarily engage a particular professor in a relationship, is not a sound argument.

In the absence of more compelling arguments against a non-fraternization policy, and considering the abuses against women that occur regularly on this campus, there is no justifiable reason for the administration not to implement a policy prohibiting student-professor relations.

Businesses, government, and now universities are being held legally liable for the appropriate maintenance of the power relationships that their institutions create. Restrictions upon abuses of the power are the administration's responsibility. Current conditions require a responsible pro-active response, rather than an incompetent reactive response. University administrators need to follow the lead of their counterparts at Tufts University, Humboldt State University, Oberlin College and others, who have recently placed restrictions upon relationships between faculty and the students whom he or she "instructs, evaluates, supervises or advises." Under these conditions, Tufts' policy claims, "Voluntary consent by the student ... is suspect." It seems universities are now having to face what businesses have been trying to face for several years. It's time for a change.

Mary Birmingham is a graduate student in philosophy at the University. Sandra Newman is a former University philosophy student, who is now a graduate student at another university in the Midwest.

Exercise your brain with

COLLEGE BOWL



If you know four students (or if you are four students), sign up now to compete with other wild and crazy adventurers in **College Bowl**, the *varsity sport of the mind!* It's an exciting game that tests your knowledge in everything from literature to science, from music to film. Two teams with four players each square off in fast-paced rounds dedicated to making you look either extremely intelligent or extremely embarrassed. You might end up representing the University of Oregon regionally and even nationally! So, get a team up (name it anything you want — the wilder the better) and exercise your brain!

Register: October 25th-29th. All dormitory teams sign up with your RA, everyone else sign up at the EMU Rec. Center, or call 346-3711.

Preliminary Rounds: Wednesday, November 3rd.

Campus Finals: Wednesday, November 10th.

Cost: \$3 per person or \$12 for a team.