

Student-professor sex not black and white issue



LIA SALICCIA

In a rule-crazy society such as ours, even love can be legislated.

Or can it?
I'm talking about rules that have been popping up on college campuses all over the country — Harvard, Amherst, Stanford and Oberlin, for example. The rules, in essence, tell professors that boinking their students is a big no-no. Hesitating to use childish, blunt phrasing as I have done, the policy-makers call these rules "non-fraternization."

Welcome to the 1990s, a time when everyone agrees that power inequalities exist, but nobody agrees on how to solve them. Hence, the policy-makers go crazy and try to legislate everything from the nature of a freshman-to-freshman sexual encounter to who a professor can boink.

I've got mixed feelings about fraternization policies. (Columnists generally aren't supposed to have mixed feelings because that would fail to substantiate

the popular media trend of portraying every issue in black and white terms, but let's do it anyway.)

On one hand, the policies exist to protect potential sexual harassment victims. In the university context, a male professor — reinforced in his power role by his tenure, his maleness (which gives him access to the "old boy's network"), and by the sheer amount of work and experience which allowed him to get there — could use his position to get what he wants from female students — namely, sex.

In turn, the female student feels inferior to such a pillar of academia, and she feels she cannot turn away his advances because it may jeopardize her decidedly more tenuous position.

If she is a former victim of sexual abuse, she may be carrying around feelings of inferiority already that, when played upon by the professor, compel her to accept his advances. Rules against fraternization would hold a professor accountable for his actions, especially if the harassed says it was harassment and the harasser says it was just a boink.

Here's an example of a professor who is so full of himself that he does not even see his own chauvinism or potential for manipulation: "I have been the subject of advances from male and female students for 25

years. I've had them come at me right and left. I've had people take their clothes off in my office. And there is a particular kind of student I have responded to.

"I am not defending Don Juanism, you know, sex for grades and so forth. But there is a kind of student I've come across in my career who was working through something that only a professor could help her with. I'm talking about a female student who, for one reason or another, has unnaturally prolonged her virginity. Maybe there's a strong father, maybe there's a religious background. And if she loses that virginity with a man who is not a teacher, she's going to marry that man, boom.

"And I don't think the marriage is going to be very good. These relationships ... can be quite beautiful and and genuinely transforming. It's very powerful sexually and psychologically, and because of that power, one can touch a student in a very positive way."

That passage, from Amherst Professor William Kerrigan, offends me on a variety of levels. First, the notion of the helpless female who will be trapped in a sexually and mentally unsatisfying marriage unless a professor (a real man) can show her the way with no strings attached is archaic and sexist.

Second, the idea that an edu-

cated female student would prolong her virginity for a college professor (coupled with a mental picture of the professors I know) is rather hilarious.

Third, the idea that any one man can presume to know what women want in the bedroom has been proven wrong in countless bedrooms around the globe.

But there is a flip side to this issue. Let's assume that not all professors who want to boink their students are pigs. What if a legitimate, equal, caring and discreet relationship evolves between a professor and a student? What if those two are happy? Do the bureaucrats have a right to intervene?

I am willing to believe that there is that one-in-a-million case where a professor and a student are happy together, with no harassment involved. Sexual harassment by law is "unwanted sexual attention." So if both parties want it, it seems unfair to make laws to tell them they just can't sleep together.

Also, legislating this type of romance leads to the assumption that female students are powerless against the advances of a professor. In some cases they are, and in some, they have a choice. In a decade that claims, among other things, to be empowering to women, maybe it's time to advocate choices — namely, the choice to tell a harasser to go to hell. But a rule cannot differentiate

between the two choices.

What's most wrong about making this type of rule is that it doesn't treat the root of the problem. It is an attempt to save a university's butt from costly lawsuits.

It's like telling a child they can't eat sugar but not why sugar is bad for them. It's putting a band-aid atop a gushing social wound. It's the easy way out for an administration that doesn't want to develop a comprehensive sexual harassment policy that conforms to federal policy and involves speedy, reliable means for complaint, investigation and just punishment.

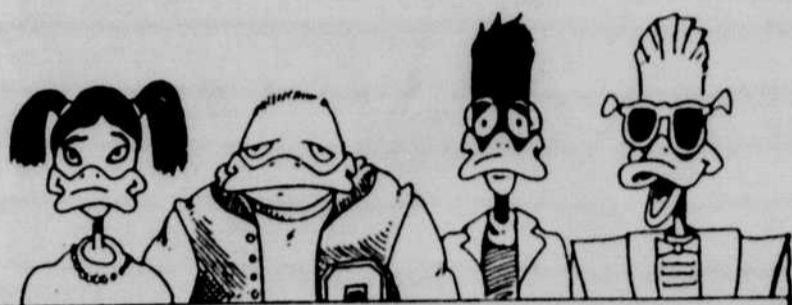
It's probably a bad idea for a woman to sleep with anyone who has exercisable power over her. Yet, by that definition, women shouldn't sleep with men at all. So I'll try again. It's not a good idea for women to become involved with their male professors, their bosses, their psychiatrists, their lawyers or their doctors if the relationship poses a threat of power inequality, especially if the power inequality can be used against them.

Men who use positions of power over women to get a quick boink should be held accountable for their deplorable actions and be fired.

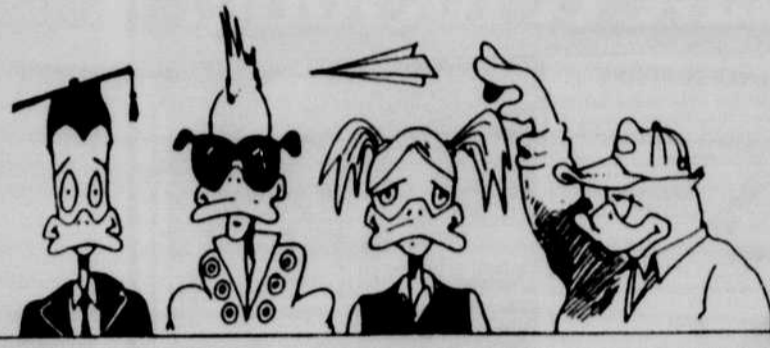
Lia Saliccia is a columnist for the Emerald.

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