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Perceptions Of Consensual Sexual Student-Faculty Relationships

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PERCEPTIONS OF CONSENSUAL SEXUAL STUDENT-FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Bachelor of Science, Louisiana State University, 2018

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Perceptions of Consensual Sexual Student-Faculty Relationships

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Abstract

Consensual, sexual relationships (CSRs) involving university faculty members and students are not uncommon (Richards et al., 2014). Given the increased attention of sexual harassment on college campuses, a number of universities have implemented CSR policies that generally fall into three categories: total ban, limited ban, and discouragement. Despite the intention of these policies,—the prevention of sexual assault and harassment—they have been criticized for being vague and too general (Bellas & Gossett, 2001; Jafar, 2003). Examining student perceptions can provide insight into university culture and inform policymaking. To this end, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions stemming from a 2 (romantic dyad: male professor/female student vs. female professor/male student) x 2 (student status: undergraduate vs. graduate) between-subjects factorial design, asked to read a vignette, and respond to a series of questions designed to measure perceptions of CSRs, those involved in them, and the policies that concern them. It was hypothesized that perceptions of CSRs involving a female student would be viewed significantly more negatively than the relationship involving the male student. This was anticipated to especially be the case when the female student is an undergraduate student as opposed to a graduate student. Results did not support the hypotheses. Reasons for null findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Perceptions of Consensual Sexual Student-Faculty Relationships

Consensual sexual relationships (CSRs) involving college faculty members and students have always existed (McKay et al., 2007; AAU, 2020). Relationships of this nature also have stereotypes associated with them. Many assume the people involved in a CSR consist of a “lecherous, male faculty member” and a vulnerable female student (Skeen & Nielsen, 1983). While this dyad is most often showcased in media or publicized assault/harassment cases on college campuses, such relationships can be legitimate, loving relationships. Moreover, no evidence has been found to suggest that these stereotypes exist outside of laboratory settings and, in fact, often involve female faculty members and same-sex relationships (Skeen & Nielsen, 1983; Jafar, 2003; Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Stereotypes notwithstanding, CSRs involving students and faculty raise important issues relating to power imbalances and consent.

With issues of consent and sexual harassment becoming more widely acknowledged within both academic and public spheres, student-faculty intimate relationships have come under increased scrutiny. In an effort to prevent the exploitation and sexual harassment of students by faculty members, the majority of universities have adopted policed responding to these relationships (Richards et al., 2014). Despite this, policies vary considerably across the nation in terms of the restrictions of CSRs. Given the increased scrutiny, it is important to examine how both CSRs and the policies concerning them are perceived. These perceptions are important in terms of understanding factors that influence how CSRs are viewed which, in turn, can influence the development of university policies.

Considerable debate surrounds university policies aimed at CSRs. On the one hand, it has been argued that intimate relationships between a college faculty member and a student have an inherent power imbalance because of the authoritative power a faculty member has at a

university (Young, 1996). As such, students are not in a position to fully consent. On the other hand, others have argued that CSRs, just like the people involved in them, are unique and must be treated as such (Jafar, 2003). Regardless, it is generally acknowledged that students are, to varying degrees, vulnerable.

Largely neglected is an examination of student perceptions of these relationships. Such insight may be valuable in terms of informing university policy. Knowledge of perceptions of CSRs will allow administrators in charge of developing policies aimed at such relationships to more accurately determine the type of policy that best reflects both student and university values. Moreover, examining student perceptions may help identify biases that can ultimately influence how these relationships are responded to within academia and the larger community.

Sexual Harassment & Title IX

In order to properly understand the debate surrounding CSRs, it is important to note that there are many different forms of such relationships (Ei & Bowen, 2002). In a general sense, relationships between students and faculty members can range anywhere from a casual friendship to a more professional relationship to an intimate relationship. Arguably, the most acceptable form of CSR is when the student is graduated, no longer (or was never) in the faculty member's program or class (Kress & Dixon, 2007). While this is certainly a reasonable place to draw the line on what is acceptable and what is not, many university policies do not distinguish between a relationship of this nature and one where a faculty member dates a current student or advisee (Ei & Bowen, 2002).

Given the sensitive nature of these relationships as well as misconceptions surrounding consent, estimates may underreport prevalence and incidence rates (AAU, 2020). Sexual harassment claims brought forth by students against faculty may be difficult to establish

especially if a previous sexual relationship existed. Recognizing that student-faculty CSRs can lead to sexual harassment claims, most institutions have implemented policies that place limits on these relationships (Carrillo et al., 2019). These policies are aimed at minimizing institutional liability. This is also done to prevent sexual harassment and institutional liability (Richards et al. 2014; Sullivan, 2004).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a Federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities. Title IX states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” This federal civil rights law covers all students and staff in any educational institution or program that receives federal funding, including colleges and universities. Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex can include sexual harassment which includes an unwelcome sexual conduct, such as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Evidence suggests that rates of sexual harassment on college campuses are particularly high ranging from 18.9 – 41.8% (AAU, 2020). Surprisingly, a large portion of these claims suggest that faculty harassment of students is widespread. In fact, a 2016 review of United Educators' (UE's) higher education claims involving student allegations of sexual harassment and assault against employees revealed that 50% of the alleged perpetrators were faculty members. Claims that such relationships were consensual can complicate these investigations. Although faculty-student CSRs have historically been viewed as “private matters” and largely ignored by administrators (Richards et al. 2014), recognition of power imbalances between faculty and students, acknowledgement of sexual harassment, and fear of institutional liability

have led most universities to incorporate policies relating to CSRs (Carillo et al., 2019; Richards et al. 2014; Sullivan, 2004).

Institutional Policies

Policies concerning CSRs generally fall into one of three categories: total ban, limited ban, and discouragement (Mack, 1999). The aim of most of these policies is to protect their students through the prohibition or discouragement of CSRs. In light of sexual harassment concerns, most universities have adopted policies related to CSRs. However, if every CSR was exploitative or manipulative, the existence of these policies should arguably prevent such relationships from occurring. As is the case with any other law or policy: there are people that will keep doing whatever it is that the law or policy prohibits. When this happens, it can lead to increased secrecy surrounding the relationship which can often lead to exploitation—usually on the student's part (Richards et al., 2014).

CSR Total Ban Policies

This form of policy bans any and all forms of CSRs especially those where one party has an unequal power imbalance over the other. It is argued that CSRs undermine the atmosphere of trust and professional ethics that are fundamental to higher education institutions (Mack, 1999; Richards et al., 2014). As such, included among the universities that adopt total ban policies are Yale, Duke, Northwestern, and Harvard Universities. The University of Michigan also changed its policy to include all undergraduate students, postdoctoral students, non-degree students, and anyone that could “reasonably be expected” to be someone's student (Jackson. 2019). This change in the language used in the policy was intended to help cover all bases and prevent loopholes.

The institutional and potential professional authority faculty members have over students is often cited as the driving force behind choosing a ban policy over other forms of policies (Young, 1996; Richards et al. 2014). Consequently, even in situations where the faculty member does not have an evaluative or supervisory role over a student, they still have institutional power over that student (Jafar, 2003). As a result, all relationships of this nature are viewed as exploitative (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Universities also recognize that CSRs may negatively impact other faculty and students. Other faculty may feel obligated to treat a student in a CSR with their colleague differently. The presence of CSRs may also cause other students to feel that favoritism or unfair bias is being shown to those students involved in such relationships.

Total ban policies have been criticized for a variety of reasons including lack of student and faculty autonomy, disregard for pre-existing relationships, and ineffectiveness. Ban policies are often criticized as infantilizing students and taking away their autonomy (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Described as “legally problematic,” total ban policies arguably violate individual rights such as the right to privacy and freedom of association by attempting to control the personal lives of students and faculty (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Many students believe that while these policies are created to protect students and faculty, they are instead denying the importance of student perspectives and feelings towards the topic (Miller, 2015). Others argue those completely banning CSRs paints students—particularly female students—as perpetual victims who are not able to make decisions for themselves (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Whether female students are perceived as more vulnerable than their male peers remains an empirical guess and worthy of investigation.

Although it has been found that these total ban policies focus on unwanted sexual attention and power imbalances, they have been criticized for failing to account for consensual

relationships. (Jafar, 2003). Total ban policies also do not take into account pre-existing relationships nor relationships in which neither party has academic or professional contact with one another. Interdepartmental and pre-existing CSRs do not have inherent power imbalances or supervisory/evaluative roles and, therefore, would not fit the definition outlined in total ban policies. However, those involved in either of these forms of CSRs would be in violation of the policy and could face consequences from their institution despite there being no possibility for a conflict of interest or exploitation against the student.

Finally, total bans are also argued to be ineffective. During their interviews with faculty who had been involved in CSRs in the past, researchers Bellas and Gossett (2001) found that most were concerned that total bans would force such relationships underground and into secrecy, thus rendering the total ban policy ineffective. An atmosphere of secrecy could promote distrust among faculty and even administrators, thus making mitigation for potential problems impossible. Furthermore, Bellas and Gossett (2001) found that when a ban has been violated, faculty were concerned that their female or otherwise vulnerable colleagues would be more likely to face consequences. Policies banning student-faculty relationships do not actually prevent them from happening altogether (Kiley, 2011).

Interestingly, graduate students are sometimes excluded from these policies or have sections dedicated specifically to CSRs involving graduate students rather than undergraduate students. For example, Yale's policy states that CSRs between graduate students and faculty are only banned if there is a direct supervisory or evaluative role over the student (Richards et al. 2014). This distinction might exist due to the fact that age gaps are usually much smaller between graduate students and faculty (Richards et al. 2014). The institutional power faculty have over undergraduate students differs significantly from that of graduate students. As a result,

undergraduate students could be especially vulnerable to coercion. After dealing with a case of alleged assault between a professor and an undergraduate in 2014, Northwestern University adopted a total ban policy for all undergraduates. Stated in the policy itself, Northwestern's reasoning is as follows:

When undergraduate students are involved the difference in institutional power and the inherent risk of coercion are so great that no faculty member or coaching staff member shall enter into a romantic, dating, or sexual relationship with a Northwestern undergraduate student, regardless of whether there is a supervisory or evaluative relationship between them.

Northwestern University's policy is one of many that bans CSRs between undergraduate students and faculty members but excludes graduate students. In this case, the policy requires that any CSRs between a faculty member and a graduate student must be reported to the department chair to determine any potential conflicts of interest. The University of Pennsylvania followed suit with a highly similar total ban policy with exceptions for graduate students in 2018 (Elegant, 2018).

On the surface, the distinction between undergraduate and graduate students in total ban policies appears valid. Graduate students are, arguably, less likely to overemphasize a faculty member's authority than undergraduate students (Schneider, 1987). At the same time however, unlike undergraduate students, graduate students have a greater reliance on faculty for professional references, academic recommendations, research opportunities, and committee memberships (Schneider, 1987). It may also be more difficult for a graduate student to drop a class or change advisors/committee members without severe consequences. This may be the case especially when research data is involved (Schneider, 1987).

CSR Limited Ban Policies

Unlike total ban policies, limited ban policies only prohibit CSRs where there is a clear supervisory or evaluative role. The primary motivation schools cite for implementing limited bans is avoiding favoritism and conflicts of interest—such as inflated grades, deadline extensions, and unfair extra credit opportunities—among students (Jafar, 2003; Mack, 1999). The potential for students to feel awkward or uncomfortable around a professor who has a history of dating students is great enough to warrant placing restrictions on CSRs (Mack, 1999). With a limited ban, the invasion of privacy is slight, only focusing on those relationships where the risk for exploitation is the highest. It also allows for professional and academic relationships to exist among faculty and students with less anxiety about sexual harassment charges (Jafar, 2003).

However, it has been argued that if the basis for adopting limited bans is preventing conflicts of interest, then any student taking a class taught by a family member should be subject to the same rules (Jafar, 2003). Limited bans have been criticized for assuming that students receive special treatment only if they are involved in a CSR with a faculty member (Jafar, 2003). Professors often develop social or professional ties with their students and to isolate and ban only sexual relations “reveals more about our attitudes and beliefs about sex than anything else” (Jafar, 2003).

CSR Discouragement Policies

This form of policy does not explicitly ban CSRs, but rather discourages both faculty and students from entering into such relationships. Such policies explicitly state that CSRs are not outright banned but caution both students and faculty against the unique issues that can arise as a result of these relationships especially with concern to conflicts of interest. Policies that

discourage CSRs are not as widely implemented but are generally better regarded because they allow students and faculty members to enter into such relationships without fear of consequences (Mack, 1999). Universities that implement a discouragement policy include UNC Chapel Hill, Columbia University, Boston University, North Dakota State University, and University of North Dakota (UND). UND's policy states:

The University of North Dakota discourages consensual relationships, i.e., amorous, romantic, or sexual relationships, between professor and students, staff and students, supervisors and subordinates, and students who have an authority relationship over other students. This policy is in effect when one individual has a control, power, authority, or responsibility position over another. UND expressly prohibits any form of sexual harassment of employees and students when a previous consensual relationship ceases to exist or such a relationship is rejected by one of the parties. If the parties do engage in a consensual relationship as defined above, the person in the authority position to report the relationship to his or her department head or supervisor immediately. Failure to report the relationship or any significant delay in reporting may be cause for disciplinary action. Documentation of the reporting and any subsequent actions taken by the department head or supervisor, such as advising the parties of the potential for sexual harassment charges if the relationship ends, is required.

Policies that discourage CSRs have been praised for being the least personally intrusive option for students and faculty alike (Jafar, 2003; Bellas & Gossett, 2001). This form of policy gives students and faculty the freedom to date who they want while also providing guidelines highlighting potential issues and requiring that any relationship where an evaluative or supervisory role exists be disclosed to the appropriate university leader. However, determining

this evaluative/supervisory role can prove difficult. For example, does the dean of a given college have enough institutional power over a student in a different college for their relationship to be considered inappropriate? Interdepartmental CSRs are often left out of the discussion as well. A CSR between a graduate student and a faculty member in the same department without a supervisory role can also fall under a gray area.

Purpose

Although CSR policies implemented by universities are intended to prevent the occurrence of sexual manipulation, exploitation, and assault perpetrated by faculty against students, these policies are often criticized as being vague, ineffective, and unnecessarily restrictive (Bellas & Gossett, 2001; Jafar, 2003). Moreover, there is concern that some individuals involved in CSRs may be differentially targeted and investigated under more restrictive policies (McArthur, 2017). For instance, women and other minority status faculty may be in an especially vulnerable position and thus more likely than their counterparts to be subject to disciplinary action if engaged in a CSR (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). With these concerns in mind, it is important to examine under what, if any, circumstances that CSRs are viewed as appropriate.

Recognizing that some university policies that ban CSRs do so only for undergraduate students, the graduate or undergraduate status of a student may also influence perceptions of the appropriateness of a CSR (Richards et al. 2014). Given the sensitivity of these relationships, accurate prevalence rates can be difficult to obtain. Estimates suggest between 17% and 26% with both male and female students being involved with faculty members (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). In light of stereotypes that portray women as helpless and weak (Deaux & Lewis, 1984)

female students may be perceived as more vulnerable and needing protection than their male counterparts.

An examination of student perceptions of CSRs can help influence university policies and impact university culture. Studying perceptions of CSRs can identify potential biases that may exist. This insight can help determine what information is relevant and important when determining the nature of university policy. Findings from this study can also be used to gain insight into how social support networks view such relationships. This can also provide an understanding of the impact CSRs have on university culture.

To this end, the proposed study examines student perceptions of CSRs and their attitudes toward policies that regulate these relationships. In light of policies that vary as a function of student status (undergraduate vs. graduate), the proposed study varies the gender of both the faculty member and student as well as student status—undergraduate versus graduate. It is hypothesized that there will be a significant difference in how appropriate the CSR is viewed, depending upon the status of the student. It is anticipated that graduate CSRs will be perceived as more appropriate than undergraduate CSRs. It is also hypothesized that a relationship with a male faculty member is more likely to be seen in a negative light. While it is hypothesized that the CSR involving a female student will be perceived as more inappropriate than when it involves a male student, this is particularly anticipated to be the case when she is an undergraduate as opposed to a graduate student.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk recruitment system. MTurk participants received monetary compensation. There were a total of 398 responses to this survey.

After removing responses that were incomplete, completed under five minutes, or failed to respond correctly to the manipulation and attention checks, 114 responses remained. Participants determined to have completed the survey in under five minutes were also removed.

The present sample comprised of 59 men, 54 women, and one nonbinary individual. All participants were over 18 years of age ($M = 34.68$, $SD = 16.99$). Ethnic and educational backgrounds varied for the present sample. With regards to ethnicity, 52.6% of participants were White with Asian, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals making up the rest (26.3%, 8.8%, 8.8%, and 3.5% respectively). With regards to education, 36.8% of participants held a Bachelor's degree and 22.8% held a Master's degree with three participants holding Doctoral degrees. Of the participants still pursuing an undergraduate degree, nine were seniors, four were juniors, four were sophomores, and six were freshmen. Five participants chose not to answer this question.

Data Source

Participants were recruited using the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) system. MTurk is an online participant recruitment system which allows the general public to participate in research in exchange for monetary compensation. The site allows for a more diverse participant pool that is more representative of the general public (Buhrmester et al., 2011). The 'master workers' or workers who have displayed accuracy and consistency in completing studies, have shown to provide higher quality responses (Peer et al., 2013) and as such only master workers will be utilized for the proposed project. The transcripts and questionnaires will be presented on the Qualtrics website for the online participants. Qualtrics is a survey building system that allows for random assignment to one of the conditions of the study.

Materials

Vignette

Within the context of a heterosexual relationship, this study employed a 2 (relationship dyad: male professor/female student vs. female professor/male student) X 2 (student status: undergraduate vs. graduate) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of 4 vignettes written in the form of a student advice column. The student in the scenario writes into an advice column seeking advice on how to proceed with their romantic relationship with a former professor. They describe developing a friendship with their professor while taking their course. The student then describes continuing the friendship after finishing the course and eventually dating the former professor. They express concern about telling their parents about the relationship as well as what other students and professors would think if the student went public with the relationship. These concerns are why the student is seeking advice from the advice column (Appendix B).

Past research has suggested that a common stereotype of CSRs is the male professor/female student dyad (Skeen & Nielsen, 1983). Manipulating the dyad of the relationship made it possible to examine whether perceptions differ significantly between the stereotypical male professor/female student dyad and a female professor/male student dyad. In addition, research has suggested that despite being less likely to overestimate a professor's authority, graduate students usually rely more heavily on faculty members for academic advising and professional development (Schneider, 1987). The manipulation of student status provided valuable insight into whether CSR's involving graduate students are perceived to be less or more ethical than the stereotypical CSR involving an undergraduate student.

Questionnaires

Attitudes Towards Policies and Relationships. This 10-item scale asked participants to indicate their agreement to a series of statements regarding university policies on a scale ranging

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Two subscales were created for this measure: Policies and Relationships. Items were reverse coded, as necessary.

Policies. The items for this subscale measured participants perceptions of general statements about university policies regarding CSRs ($\alpha = .91$). These items include, “University bans against sexual and/or romantic relationships between undergraduate students and professors are necessary in order to protect students from being taken advantage of,” “University policies should ban amorous, romantic, or sexual relationships between professor and graduate students,” and, “University bans against sexual and/or romantic relationships between graduate students and professors are necessary in order to protect students from being taken advantage of.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of university policies concerning CSRs (Appendix C).

Relationships. The items for this subscale measured participants perceptions of the ethics and consensual nature of CSRs ($\alpha = .86$). These items include, “Student-professor sexual and/or romantic relationships are appropriate,” “There is nothing morally wrong with student/professor sexual and/or romantic relationships,” “Professor-student intimate relationships are unethical,” “An undergraduate student is capable of fully consenting to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor,” “Undergraduate students are adults and can make informed decisions to enter into a relationship with a professor,” “A graduate student is capable of fully consenting to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor,” and “Graduate students are adults and can make informed decisions to enter into a relationship with a professor.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of the ethical and consensual nature of CSRs (Appendix C).

Perceptions of Scenario. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with several statements regarding the content of the vignette on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The topics of these statements vary from the ethics of

the relationship itself to whether school authorities should be notified to whether the student and professor are equal partners in the relationship. Four subscales were created for this measure (Ethics, Power, Sexual Harassment, and Student Benefits) with an additional three subscales regarding student and professor motivation (Emotion, School, and Power). (Appendix E)

Ethics. The items for this subscale measured how ethical participants believed the described relationship from the vignette to be ($\alpha = .86$). Items from this subscale include, “The relationship is ethical,” “There is nothing harmful about this relationship” and, “There is nothing morally wrong with this relationship.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of the ethical nature of the described relationship (Appendix E).

Power. The items for this subscale measured participants perceptions of the power dynamics within the described relationship ($r = .61$). Items from this subscale include, “The professor holds a position of power over the student” and, “The professor is taking advantage of the student.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of the power dynamics in the described relationship (Appendix E).

Sexual Harassment. The items for this subscale measured whether participants perceived any aspect of the described relationship to be sexual harassment ($\alpha = .85$). Items from this subscale include, “The professor is sexually harassing the student,” “The school authorities should be notified,” “The professor is abusing their position of authority,” and, “Disciplinary action should be taken against the professor.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of the belief that aspects of the described relationship constitute sexual harassment. (Appendix E).

Student Benefits. The items for this subscale measured participants perception of potential benefits the student in the relationship might receive if they continue to pursue said relationship ($\alpha = .90$). Items from this subscale include, “Because of the student’s relationship

with the professor, the student will receive special treatment at school,” “Because of the student’s relationship with the professor, the student will receive school-related information that other students will not” and, “Because of the student’s relationship with the professor, the student will receive benefits that other students will not.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of the potential benefits the student could receive by continuing to pursue the described relationship (Appendix E).

Student Motivation: Emotion. The items for this subscale measured how much participants believed emotion to be a driving factor for the student in pursuing the described relationship ($\alpha = .73$). Items from this subscale include, “The student is in this relationship because of love,” “The student is in this relationship for excitement,” “The student is in this relationship for companionship” and, “The student is in this relationship for adventure.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of emotion being a driving factor for the student in the continuation of the described relationship (Appendix E).

Student Motivation: School. The items for this subscale measured how much participants believed school/academic performance to be a driving factor for the student in pursuing the described relationship ($r = .89$). Items from this subscale include, “The student is in this relationship to get better grades” and, “The student is in this relationship to do better in their program.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of academic performance being a driving factor for the student in the continuation of the described relationship (Appendix E).

Professor Motivation: Power. The items for this subscale measured how much participants believed power to be a driving factor for the professor in pursuing the described relationship ($\alpha = .84$). Items from this subscale include, “The professor is in this relationship to feel younger,” “The professor is in this relationship for power,” and, “The professor is in this

relationship to boost their ego.” Higher scores indicate a positive endorsement of power being a driving factor for the professor in the continuation of the described relationship (Appendix E).

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to indicate the gender of both the student and the faculty member, the student’s academic status, and the student’s age (Appendix D).

Demographics. Participants were asked to respond to a demographic form that asks basic background information including age, education, gender, and ethnicity (Appendix F).

Personal Experience. At the end of the demographics section, participants were asked if they personally knew anyone who had been in a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor. They were also asked if they believed they were capable of fully to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor. This item was measured on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (most definitely).

Procedure

Participants signed up through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online participant recruitment system which allows the general public to participate in research. The site allows for a more diverse participant pool this is more representative of the general public (Buhrmester et al., 2011). After signing up, participants were directed to Qualtrics, an online survey system, to participate in the study. Participants completed an electronic consent form, which provided them with information about the purpose of the study and the researcher’s contact information.

After obtaining informed consent, participants took an assessment to measure their attitudes regarding university policies. Once these sections were completed, participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions stemming from a between subjects 2 (relationship dyad: male professor/female student vs. female professor/male student) X 2 (student status:

undergraduate vs. graduate) design. Once they read the vignette, participants were given a manipulation check. Participants were then given a series of statements designed to measure their perception of the content of the vignette including the student, professor, and the relationship itself. Finally, participants were asked for demographic information such as age, education, ethnicity, gender, and marital status.

Analysis

A series of 2 (relationship dyad: male professor/female student vs. female professor/male student) X 2 (student status: undergraduate vs. graduate) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA's) were conducted. The dependent variables consisted of questionnaires measuring attitudes towards policies and perceptions of scenario.

Results

Attitudes Towards Policies and Relationships

Policies

A 2 (relationship dyad: male professor/female student vs. female professor/male student) X 2 (student status: undergraduate vs. graduate) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the ways in which participants viewed the policies meant to address CSRs. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, F 's < 1 , nor their interaction, $F(1,107) = 1.29$, *ns*, attained significance. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed positive attitudes towards policies that address CSRs, $t(113) = 8.22$, $p < .001$ ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.44$).

Relationships

A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the ways in which participants viewed consensual, sexual relationships between university professors and students. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, nor their interaction attained

significance, F 's < 1 . Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed slightly negative attitudes towards CSRs between university professors and students, $t(113) = -2.06$, $p = .042$ ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.35$).

Perceptions of Scenario

Ethics

A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the ways in which participants viewed the ethical implications of the relationship described in the vignette. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, $F(1,107) = 1.35$, *ns*, student status, $F < 1$, nor their interaction, $F(1,107) = 2.31$, *ns*, attained significance. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed slightly positive attitudes towards the ethics of the described relationship, $t(113) = 3.12$, $p = .002$ ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.65$).

Power

A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the ways in which participants viewed the potential power dynamics of the relationship described in the vignette. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, nor their interaction attained significance, F 's < 1 . Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed neutral attitudes towards potential power dynamics in the described relationship, $t(113) = -.85$, *ns* ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.77$).

Sexual Harassment

A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the ways in which participants considered the relationship described in the vignette a form of sexual harassment. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, nor their interaction attained significance, F 's < 1 . Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed slightly

negative attitudes towards the idea of the described relationship qualifying as sexual harassment, $t(113) = -2.60, p = .01 (M = 3.60, SD = 1.65)$.

Student Benefits

A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the ways in which participants viewed potential benefits the student might receive as a result of being in the relationship described in the vignette. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, nor their interaction attained significance, $F's < 1$. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed neutral attitudes towards the potential benefits the student might receive as a result of being in the described relationship, $t(113) = -.61, ns (M = 3.9, SD = 1.75)$

Student Motivation

Emotion. A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the extent to which participants viewed the student's motivation for maintaining the relationship described in the vignette as the result of emotions. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, $F's < 1$, nor their interaction, $F(1,107) = 1.23, ns$, attained significance. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed positive attitudes towards the idea of a student's emotions being a motivating factor in maintaining the described CSR, $t(113) = 11.39, p < .001 (M = 5.20, SD = 1.12)$.

School. A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the extent to which participants viewed the student's motivation for maintaining the relationship described in the vignette as the result of school performance. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, student status, nor their interaction, attained significance, $F's < 1$. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed negative attitudes towards the idea of a student's school

performance being a motivating factor in maintaining the described CSR, $t(113) = -4.92, p < .001$ ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.94$).

Professor Motivation

Power. A 2 (relationship dyad) X 2 (student status) ANOVA was conducted on the extent to which participants viewed the professor's motivation for maintaining the relationship described in the vignette as the result of an unequal power dynamic. Neither the main effect for relationship dyad, $F(1,107) = 1.39, ns$, student status, $F < 1$, nor their interaction, $F(1,107) = 1.36, ns$, attained significance. Tested against the midpoint of the scale, participants endorsed neutral attitudes towards the idea of an unequal power dynamic being a motivating factor in maintaining the described CSR, $t(113) = .15, ns$ ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.68$).

Personal Experience

When asked if they personally knew anyone who had been involved in a CSR with a professor, 72% of participants responded with "no," and 27% responded with "yes" with one participant declining to answer. When asked to determine whether they believed themselves capable of fully consenting to a CSR with a professor, participants endorsed positive attitudes ($M = 4.63, SD = 2.01$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to measure perceptions of consensual, sexual relationships between college students and faculty. To accomplish this, a variety of questionnaires were developed designed to measure participant perceptions of several aspects of CSRs including ethical implications, student/professor motivations, power dynamics, and the university policies designed to address these relationships. It was anticipated that CSRs in which the relationship dyad consisted of a male professor and female student would be regarded more negatively than

the opposite dyad. It was also anticipated that CSRs involving graduate students would be regarded more positively than those involving undergraduate students. Results failed to support the hypotheses.

Overall, results did not report any differences in participant perception involving relationship dynamics. Relationship dyad had no effect on participant perception of CSRs. These findings contradict previous findings that suggest stereotypes associated with CSRs—such as the weak female student and the lecherous male professor—are regarded negatively (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). This particular stereotype is the one most often seen portrayed in media and is the dyad that typically comes to mind when discussing romantic relationships between students and professors. These results may reflect a more open-minded attitude towards the diversity of CSR dyads. In other words, perhaps people are becoming increasingly aware and accepting of CSR dyads within the context of heterosexual relationships. This could also be due to participants endorsing positive attitudes towards emotion but negative attitudes towards academic performance being the driving factor in the student's continuation of the relationship. This might suggest the idea that participants saw the student in the vignette not as a student but rather as simply a person in a relationship seeking advice. This finding could also suggest that participants see CSRs as more characteristic of a typical romantic relationship rather than a type of *quid pro quo*.

In addition, results did not support the hypothesis that CSRs involving graduate students would be regarded in a more positive light than those involving undergraduate students. These findings are at odds with previous research indicating that some CSR policies make special exceptions for graduate students (Richards et al., 2014). These exceptions are usually the result of believing that since graduate students are usually older and therefore more mature, they are

more able to accurately gauge the appropriateness of the relationship themselves (Schneider, 1987). Supplementing these findings are positive attitudes towards university policies. This could suggest that participants did not see a significant difference in CSRs involving graduate students rather than undergraduate students and, instead, support university policies that encompass all students.

Despite the fact that no significance was obtained with the ANOVAs, subsequent *t* tests against the midpoint on each of the subscales revealed significance. Interestingly, participants endorsed positive attitudes towards the ethics of the described relationship and negative attitudes towards the presence of sexual harassment within the relationship. In other words, participants supported the idea that the described relationship was ethical and did not feel like any part of the relationship could be considered sexual harassment. Conversely, participants endorsed negative attitudes towards CSRs in a more general sense. This would seem to indicate that when asked about CSRs in an abstract concept, participants felt more negatively. On the flip side, when presented with an example of a CSR (via the vignette), participants' perceptions change to be supportive of these relationships. Providing more context to these relationships seems to alter participants' perception of them. Perhaps making the described relationship appear more real to participants would allow for more insight into perceptions of CSRs. A way to accomplish this might be to force participants to place themselves within the context of a CSR. This could more accurately measure perceptions of these relationships.

Interestingly, almost three-quarters of participants claimed they did not personally know anyone who had been involved in a consensual, sexual relationship with a professor. This would suggest that the prevalence of CSRs is relatively low. This goes against findings that indicate that CSRs are not uncommon (Richards et al., 2014). However, it does reflect the taboo nature of

these relationships. Despite this, participants generally endorsed positive attitudes towards their own ability to consent to a CSR with a professor. In other words, despite most participants having very little experience with CSRs, most believed themselves to be fully capable of consenting to a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a professor. This would seem to suggest that participants are not as critical of CSRs both when they involve other people and when they could potentially involve themselves. However, endorsing such beliefs may be problematic because it obscures power dynamics that may be inherent in CSRs with faculty.

It is suspected potential mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants. The prolonged isolation and uprooting of people's everyday life in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to have significant negative effects on mental health and well-being (Kelly, 2021). These effects include increased rates of depression and anxiety which can lead to decreased cognitive performance. If participants were experiencing decreased cognitive performance that has been referred to as COVID-19 burnout, their ability to concentrate and think critically about the scenario being presented may have been impaired (Kelly, 2021). A way to combat this might be to include measures for depression or anxiety. Heightened scores on a depression or anxiety inventory could indicate that participants are experiencing burnout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, findings from the current study contribute to the idea that people do not have strong positive or negative opinions on CSRs. This would support the argument that each occurrence of a CSR should be treated on a case-by-case basis so that the unique dynamics of each relationship can be accurately determined and appropriately dealt with. This would also suggest that the type of CSR policy most aligned with this belief is the discouragement policy. By implementing this type of policy, students and faculty are made aware of the potential

conflicts of interest or unequal power dynamics of CSRs while also providing resources for those involved in a student/professor relationship that is exploitative rather than consensual. This would allow for increased student autonomy and puts less of a burden on professors to keep relationships with students purely academic. Furthermore, the implementation of a discouragement policy allows for the recognition of a diverse student body consisting of students of different ages and backgrounds. In other words, those in interdepartmental relationships, preexisting relationships, and unconventional students (those that are significantly older than average, part-time students, or online students) feel free to live their lives without the burden of a potential investigation into their relationship or lives.

With regards to future research, it would be beneficial to include same-gender relationship dynamics and interracial relationship variables to measure perception of CSRs when they consist of members of marginalized groups. Past research has voiced concern that vulnerable faculty members such as those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community or members of a marginalized racial group could be at greater risk for consequences if they are found to be in violation of a CSR policy (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Future research could also make use of confederates to potentially extract more honest answers from participants concerning their feelings about CSRs. Participants might feel more at ease if they are allowed to talk to another person whom they believe to be a fellow research participant instead of solely filling out numerous questionnaires. Additionally, efforts to make the example relationship from the vignette more realistic could have a positive impact on results. It is possible that participants would answer differently if they felt the relationship in question was real (or occurring on their local college campus) as opposed to thinking about it abstractly. Overall, adding more nuance to

future studies will lead to a better understanding of consensual, sexual relationships between college students and faculty.

Conclusion

Limitations notwithstanding, results do suggest that there is more to how people perceive consensual, sexual relationships between college students and faculty than heterosexual relationship dyad and student status. A lack of significant difference between both relationship dyad and student status might suggest participants felt that each CSR is unique and cannot be neatly and efficiently categorized. The only policy that aligns with this way of viewing CSRs is the discouragement policy. Giving students and faculty the autonomy to make their own decisions while still keeping them informed of potential risks associated with CSRs allows for a greater sense of community and trust between university administrators, students, and faculty members. The future of CSRs and how they are dealt with by university administrators will rely on future research examining how factors such as race and sexuality impact perceptions of these relationships.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

TITLE: Evaluation of Student Advice Columns

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Dr. Cheryl Terrance

PHONE #: (701) 777-3921

DEPARTMENT: Psychology

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have any questions at any time, please ask.

Approximately 400 students from the University of North Dakota (UND) will take part in this study. If you join the study, you will be asked to read a short advice column and respond to various questions regarding your perceptions of the situation it describes. The purpose of this research is to examine how people make judgements regarding sexual and/or romantic relationships.

Your participation in this study will last approximately 45-60 minutes. You may experience frustration that is often experienced when completing surveys. The scenario you are reading and some of the questions you will be asked may be of a sensitive nature, and you may therefore become upset as a result. However, such risks are not viewed as being in excess of "minimal risk." If you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, the UND Counseling Center provides services to UND students and for those that live on campus. You may contact them at 701-777-2127. The Counseling Department also operates a clinic that is available to the Grand Forks community and can also provide referrals. The Counseling Department can be reached at 701-777-3745.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because results will provide a better understanding of how people evaluate these types of incidents.

UND students may receive course credit for your time towards the psychology course of your choice in which you are currently enrolled. If you choose not to participate in this study, you may earn course credit in your course in other ways. Please ask your instructor, who will provide you with comparable assignments that you may choose to complete (e.g. writing assignments, participations in other research experiments, etc.)

You will not have any costs for being in this research study, nor will you receive monetary compensation. University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Study results will be presented in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by government agencies, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board. The only other people who will have

access to the data are the research investigators (Principle Investigator: Dr. Cheryl Terrance, research assistant) conducting the study.

No identifying information about participants will be reported or kept. Confidentiality will be maintained by storing your responses in a locked filing cabinet, with consent forms stored separately in a locked filing cabinet. Your name is not being collected. Coded data will be stored on a password protected computer in Dr. Cheryl Terrance's office. Data will be stored for a minimum of three years, after which it will be shredded.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty of loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

The researcher conducting this study is Dr. Cheryl Terrance. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research, please contact the principal researcher, Dr. Cheryl Terrance at (701) 777-3921 during the day. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

If you choose to continue this will indicate that this research study has been explained to you, that questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Scenarios are identical with the exception of manipulations for the relationship dyad (in bold) and student status (in italics).

THE STUDENT
HERALD



Student Advice Column

Hey guys,

So I'm looking for some advice on a complicated situation I am in. I'm a 22-year-old **female/male** in my junior year of *undergrad/graduate school* and I just started dating one of my former professor's **John/Amber**. He/She just turned 30 so he is a few years older than me. We have very similar personalities which is why we developed such a great friendship right away when I was taking his course. When I finished the class, we continued to hang out and, eventually, we started dating. We have great times, conversations and I am telling you the sex is amazing! Unfortunately, there are a few issues... First, obviously, s/he's a professor in the department that I'm majoring in. Even though I'm no longer in his/her class, he/she did tell the chair of his/her department about our relationship. Our school policy doesn't forbid student-professor relationships, but professors are required to report it if they're in a position of authority. So he/she did that, and that's not really the issue – I'm not in any of his/her classes. Part of the problem though is, I feel awkward around the other professors who know about us because I'm pretty sure they all talk - and not in a good way.



We try to avoid interacting on campus, which sucks because I'd like to be able to hold his/her hand or kiss him/her like people in normal relationships do. I'm also not sure my friends really approve of our relationship. They don't really say anything negative, but I get the sense they think it's inappropriate. I'm also not sure what my parents will think since I haven't told them yet, but we're starting to get pretty serious, so I'm thinking it's about time...

So, I need advice – what do I do? Do I stay in our relationship and see where it goes? I'm really into him/her and developing some pretty serious feelings and I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual. Or, do I just end it? Is it weird or inappropriate?

I'm not sure if my judgement is clouded by my feelings for her/him so your advice would be appreciated!

Thanks,

Cathy/Ryan

Appendix C

Attitudes Towards Policies

For the following questions, you will be asked to indicate your attitudes toward university school policies. For the purposes of these questions, **a student is at least 18 years of age or older.**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements using the scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

___ Student-professor sexual and/or romantic relationships are appropriate

___ There is nothing morally wrong with student/professor sexual and/or romantic relationships

___ Professor-student intimate relationships are unethical

___ An **undergraduate** student is capable of fully consenting to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor

___ University bans against sexual and/or romantic relationships between **undergraduate** students and professors are necessary in order to protect students from being taken advantage of

___ **Undergraduate** students are adults and can make informed decisions to enter into a relationship with a professor

___ University policies should ban amorous, romantic, or sexual relationships between professor and **graduate** students

___ A **graduate** student is capable of fully consenting to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor

___ University bans against sexual and/or romantic relationships between **graduate** students and professors are necessary in order to protect students from being taken advantage of

___ **Graduate** students are adults and can make informed decisions to enter into a relationship with a professor

Appendix D

Manipulation Check

1. Was the student an:

Undergraduate Student

Graduate Student

2. What gender was the student?

Male

Female

Unsure

3. What gender was the professor?

Male

Female

Unsure

4. Was the student 18 years of age or older?

Yes

No

Unsure

Appendix E

Perceptions of Scenario

The following questions ask for your perceptions of relationships described by the scenario. Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements using the scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

- The relationship is ethical
- The professor is sexually harassing the student
- The school authorities should be notified
- The professor is abusing their position of authority
- There is nothing harmful about this relationship
- Disciplinary action should be taken against the professor
- The professor holds a position of power over the student
- The professor is taking advantage of the student
- There is nothing morally wrong with this relationship

The following questions ask for your perceptions of relationships described by the scenario. Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements using the scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

Because of the student's relationship with the professor, the student will:

- Receive special treatment at school
- Receive school-related information that other students will not
- Receive benefits that other students will not

The student is in this relationship:

- ___ To get better grades
- ___ To do better in their program
- ___ Because of love
- ___ For excitement
- ___ For companionship
- ___ For adventure

The following questions ask for your perceptions of relationships described by the scenario. Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements using the scale:

- | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Strongly
Disagree | | | | | | Strongly
Agree |

The professor is in this relationship:

- ___ To feel younger
- ___ For power
- ___ To boost their ego

Appendix F**Demographics Questionnaire**

1. How old are you

2. What is your Gender?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender female
- Transgender male
- Gender non-conforming
- Other (please specify) _____
- Prefer not to say

3. Are you currently a student?

- Yes
- No

4. What is your current year of study/degree completed?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Bachelors
- Masters
- Doctoral

5. What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual (straight)
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Other (please specify) _____
- Prefer not to say

6. How frequently do you attend religious services?

- Twice or more per week
- Once a week
- At least twice a month
- At least once a month
- At least once a year

7. What is your religious affiliation?

- None
- Buddhist
- Christian
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Other (please specify) _____

8. Which of these options best describes your political beliefs?

- Strongly conservative
- Moderately conservative
- More conservative than liberal
- Middle of the road
- More liberal than conservative
- Moderately liberal
- Strongly liberal
- None

9. Which political party do you identify?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other (please specify) _____

10. What is your ethnicity?

- African American/Black
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Caucasian or White (Not Hispanic or Latino)
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Biracial or Multiracial
- Other (please specify) _____

11. Do you personally know anyone who has been in a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor?

- Yes
- No
- Decline to answer

12. Has a professor ever asked you out on a date?

- Yes

- No
- Decline to answer

13. Do you know anyone who has ever asked a professor out on a date?

- Yes
- No
- Decline to answer

14. Would you ever ask a professor out on a date?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

15. Do you believe you are capable of fully consenting to a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a professor?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all						Most Definitely