



UNIVERSITY OF  
**KING'S**  
COLLEGE • HALIFAX

## I. Statement of Principles: Cultivating Healthy Boundaries

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## II. Guidelines for Healthy Relationships with Students

## Preamble

In May 2022 Janice Rubin and Elizabeth Bingham provided an [Interim Report](#) to King's as part of their Independent Review of Accusations of Sexual Assault Against Dr. Wayne Hankey. In this report they made 10 recommendations to ensure that King's provide a safe environment for all members of its community in accordance with the commitments it has made in its Sexualized Violence Awareness, Prevention and Response Policy.

Of those 10 recommendations, recommendation #7 reads as follows:

“7. We recommend that King's provide a forum for its professors to engage in deep reflection on their role as teachers and mentors in the context of a small, close-knit community, as well as on how they can maintain the highest standards of professionalism in their relationships with students. We suggest that the aim of this period of reflection should be a document that addresses appropriate boundaries between professors and students that supplements the Yellow Book, such as a Code of Conduct or a Statement of Principles.”

(The wording of this recommendation can be found on page 21 of the Interim Report with context from Rubin Thomlison's survey and interviews on page 10 and 11).

The [Final Report](#) of the Independent Review, released in March 2023, again calls on the King's community to reflect on appropriate boundaries between faculty members and students, and to develop a policy document that reflects the commitments of the university in that regard (“4. Contemporary Lessons of the Report,” page 47).

Throughout the 2022/23 Fall semester, a Faculty Discussion Guide was circulated to the teaching staff of all academic programs at King's (Foundation Year; Early Modern Studies, Contemporary Studies, History of Science and Technology; The School of Journalism, Writing and Publishing). Each of the program directors summarized the program-level discussions and communicated them to the Vice-President, who then drafted the following Statement of Principles and Supportive Guidelines for Healthy Boundaries at King's.

## Scope

These guidelines and statement of principles aim to be consistent with the University's *Policy on Conflict of Interest (POCOI)*, the *Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy (SVPARP)*, and the *Code of Conduct (CoC)*, and do not replace or take priority over any rule or process set out in those policies. Where there are inconsistencies, an effort shall be made to introduce greater consistency across all policies. Any remaining inconsistencies shall be highlighted for further work.

Whereas dynamics between instructors and students vary greatly depending on the level of the King's program in question (that is, Masters-level programs and instruction involve different,

and often more complicated, aspects than undergraduate programs do), the following guidelines create a general framework for conduct and engagement: instructors and program directors should adapt this framework to suit the character of their specific program. Aspects to consider include:

- program level,
- pre-existing professional or social relationships,
- typical student cohort,
- complex (and perhaps less predictable) power dynamics in the classroom,
- instructional settings and,
- the professional relationships that may extend beyond the classroom both during and after a student completes their degree.

These guidelines apply to staff employees of the College as well as faculty employees.

## Definitions

In the University of King's College [Sexualized Violence Awareness, Prevention and Response Policy](#), an **Instructor** is defined as "A person on campus whose role is to teach and / or supervise the academic work of students. This includes those who teach within the classroom and virtual classroom, such as professors, faculty fellows, people who teach in limited-term roles, and those who serve in support roles, such as guest lecturers, teaching assistants, and writing coaches" (7).

Further, the [Policy](#) defines a **Student** as follows:

"In addition to individuals enrolled with the University of King's College the category of 'student' includes:

- (i) exchange or study abroad students;
- (ii) students who are learning on King's campus for a specific class but are actually enrolled primarily at another institution, such as a Dalhousie Student who is taking a King's class, or a student from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design or another school who is taking a King's class on a Letter of Permission;
- (iii) students who are in high school and are temporarily learning on our campus as part of a specific program or event, such as Humanities for Young People" (10).

## I. Statement of Principles: Cultivating Healthy Boundaries

As at other educational institutions, instructors at the University of King's College have many roles to play in relation to students: they teach, mentor, assess, and supervise students, and vibrant exchanges between instructors and students are essential to research, teaching, and learning. Those exchanges bring vibrancy to our academic community and can influence

personal and professional development, give rise to lasting collaborations, and, occasionally, can foster enduring friendships of great richness for all involved.

King's is known for its unique and close-knit working and learning environment. Close working relationships between instructors and students are crucial to fulfilling the College's academic mission. As the Rubin Thomlinson Interim Report suggests, students, alumni, faculty, and staff greatly value learning and working in such an environment (6). However, the King's community has also learned that such relationships in a close-knit learning environment can pose challenges as well: specifically, without supportive guidelines, they can lead to boundary-crossing behaviors that can negatively impact both students and instructors. These negative impacts are varied in nature and fall along a spectrum of harm. For students, these can include psychological harm and diminished academic success. For instructors, they might include psychological and social stresses arising from allegations of harassment or other problematic conduct, formal investigation processes, and reputational damage.

King's instructors seek to cultivate a positive learning environment and a culture of both academic and social engagement. Furthermore, there is widespread recognition that healthy boundaries are an important aspect of the interactions they have with students, especially in the current climate of increased mental health challenges among young people and increased awareness of power imbalances that inform the social dynamics of the classroom and beyond.

King's instructors are highly conscious of their students' capacity to participate in a lively scholarly and academic community at the College, and they are also aware of the special responsibilities this kind of interaction brings. University instructors can become some of the most important people in a young person's life. This importance confers power and with it, both responsibilities and vulnerabilities. Safeguarding those relationships with students means cultivating an environment of trust and respect with the highest levels of professionalism and personal integrity.

## II. Guidelines for Healthy Instructor-Student Relationships

Teaching and supervising students involve interpersonal interactions in the classroom, online, in office hours, and less often, engagement in the wider community. As such, instructors are constantly being called upon to establish and uphold boundaries that safeguard the relation they have to their students. Some of these boundaries are self-evident in the institutional context of King's and we enact them quite naturally. Other times, we give serious consideration to questions involving the dynamics of interacting with students in all kinds of settings and situations.

As the person with more power and authority in the campus setting, the instructor is primarily responsible for maintaining the integrity and safety of the teaching relationship. Because the instructor is responsible for ensuring that their actions do not compromise the integrity of the

teaching relationship, the consequences of any boundary-crossing behavior must also rest with the instructor. This responsibility remains in place even when it is the student making overtures. In other words, a student should never be disadvantaged or put in a position where they need to withdraw from a class, program, or other academic opportunity because of a dynamic that developed between the student and an instructor.

The most extreme issue concerning boundaries with students is one involving sexual or romantic relationships or activity. However, there are other, much more typical boundary situations that frequently arise in the lives of most instructors in relation to their students. The goal of these guidelines is to address both.

## **Sexual or Romantic Relationships between Instructors and Students**

Sexual or romantic relationships between instructors and students constitute a serious violation of the professional standards and the overall mission of the College and should be stringently avoided. They have the potential to cause serious harm to the educational and employment experience of the individuals involved and those who work and study with them.

Any time a student could reasonably think that assessment of their work, support for their academic achievement, funding, or career opportunities depend upon a romantic or sexual relationship, there is no consent. And when an instructor's decisions, assessment, or assistance with respect to a student or their work might be influenced by their personal relationship with that student, they are in a conflict of interest – one that undermines both the integrity of the teaching relationship and their own academic integrity. Importantly, such relationships can also affect the teaching relationship with other students who are aware of the relationship and feel uncomfortable or unsafe as a consequence.

Students may have difficulty communicating freely that they do not want to be in such a relationship, or that they want the relationship to end, because of concern over the impact it may have on their academic progress. The King's *Policy on Conflict of Interest (POCOI)* is emphatic on the point of this difficulty, stating that anyone in a position of trust and/or authority should recognize that "an intimate personal relationship with a student may constitute, or give rise to a subsequent claim that the relationship constituted sexualized harassment" (*POCOI*, 7).

Two things are noteworthy here: first, that the King's *POCOI* does not *prohibit* or ban personal, intimate relationships between instructors and students (nor, for that matter, does the *SVAPRP*, 6). Mindful of the ways in which prohibitions or bans have the potential to further entrench the coercive nature of such relationships, the King's community has chosen to adopt the practice of strong discouragement and protective measures to reduce the risk of harm rather than an outright ban, across all of its policy documents.

Therefore, the King's community wishes to state in no uncertain terms that any kind of romantic or sexual relationship between an instructor and a student is inconsistent with the mission, the ethos, and the culture of the College, is potentially harmful to the individuals directly and indirectly involved and should be avoided.

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## Other Types of Interactions with Students

According to the College's *SVAPRP*, Sexual Violence includes "Sexual Harassment" (1). Sexual harassment is defined there as "a course of unwanted behaviors, communications, or remarks of a sexual nature and/or a course of unwanted behaviors, communications, or remarks based on gender in which the behaviors, communications, or remarks are unwanted" (9). The *SVAPRP* provides examples of conduct that would constitute sexual harassment.

It is important to note that sexual harassment can be a matter of perception: gestures, practices, or comments that an instructor may regard as simply unguarded, carefree, or joking may give rise to formal allegations that the instructor has crossed a line or transgressed boundaries in a disturbing way.

It should also be noted that, under the *SVAPRP*, the right to make a complaint or disclosure is not limited to the person who directly experienced the conduct but extends to those who witnessed the conduct or those who judge their living, working, or learning environment to have been negatively impacted by the conduct. The *Code of Conduct* is not as explicit on this point of third-party disclosures; it simply states that "any person may make a complaint regarding misconduct" (2). When streamlining these policies in the interest of greater consistency, the precision of the *SVAPRP* on this point should be adopted in the *CoC*, since ambiguity or vagueness about reporting, complaints, or expressions of concern can have negative consequences for everyone involved.

Because interactions between students and instructors can be challenging to navigate, and because missteps in those dynamics can be awkward and even harmful to everyone involved, the following supportive guidelines are meant to offer direction for those interactions. In no sense do these guidelines replace the exercise of personal judgement and responsibility; rather, they presuppose them.

## Meeting or Socializing with Students

**Informal meetings, conversations and off-campus events** involving both students and instructors greatly enrich the teaching and learning experience. The May 2022 Interim Report from Rubin Thomlinson stated that "In general, participants told us that they valued the unique,

close-knit environment at King's. Students and alumni told us that they had greatly benefitted from learning in this environment and that they had formed strong connections with peers and mentors during their time at King's. Faculty and staff similarly described close and supportive relationships with their colleagues and told us about the value of teaching small classes of students (page 6)." With this context, faculty must be mindful of what could be lost in the relation by drawing too-sharp a line between the social and academic spheres of engagement and interaction and seek to balance healthy and appropriate boundaries with cultivating this kind of "close-knit" community. A great deal of discretion is required in informal meetings and off-campus events involving an instructor and students, and context is paramount. Some social events are important extensions of our teaching mission: visits to museums, attendance at artistic performances, and program luncheons for interested students are examples of such social events. As a rule, transparency and professionalism should be guiding principles.

Therefore, when engaging informally with students, it is important to consider several different aspects of that engagement. What follows is a set of suggestions, by no means exhaustive but certainly representative of possible scenarios:

- Strive to avoid the appearance of favoritism and/or the exclusivity of the interaction.
- Always prioritize the professional/institutional dimension of the interaction: the instructor-student dynamic is always at play even when the meeting is non-academic and/or taking place off-campus.
- Consider the appropriateness of the venue for the meeting or event.
- Is the meeting taking place with one student alone or will it involve a group?
- Will the choice of venue make it difficult for students to leave or get home on their own?
- If the event is being organized by students, consider bringing another instructor from your program along. You might also consider deciding in advance how long or how late you will stay.
- Where alcohol is available as part of a social gathering involving students, instructors or staff, measures must be taken first to ensure student safety and boundary-setting, and second to ensure compliance with regulations about serving liquor. These include ensuring that students having alcohol are of legal age, that students do not feel pressure to drink alcohol, that overconsumption is prevented and that food and plenty of non-alcoholic beverages are available.

**In-person classes, exams, seminars, thesis presentations or other academic gatherings** should always take place on campus or other public spaces (i.e. library, museum, community organization etc.) and not in faculty homes, restaurants, or bars. Alcohol should not be served in classes, seminars, lectures, or other academic events other than at licensed receptions.

## Interpersonal Communication with Students

Students greatly value when their instructors **share** something of themselves as human beings rather than simply as experts of their scholarly field. These kinds of anecdotal interactions serve to alleviate feelings of intimidation or inferiority and introduce a degree of levity into the dynamics.

However, instructors need to be mindful of the challenges associated with oversharing personal or other information (political views, the subject matter of program meetings, or their attitudes toward colleagues, for instance) with students; oversharing can lead to confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the student(s) regarding their role and the nature of the relationship, both of which can negatively impact the student's academic success or their sense of stability and safety in the class. It can also lead to rumor and innuendo on campus, can compromise the instructor's commitment to the professional standards of the College, and complicate their relations to other students and their colleagues.

The ubiquity of **social media** in our lives can make it difficult to maintain a line between our personal and professional online engagements. Some helpful strategies:

- Some social media users choose different platforms for different social circles.
- Some platforms allow multiple accounts: for instance, Facebook users can set up group pages that don't grant automatic access to personal pages.
- Thoughtful use of privacy settings is a good use of your time! They help regulate who can see and share posts, photos, and other shared information.
- When posting on social media or writing work emails, it's always good to ask yourself, "would I say this out loud in the classroom?"

## Supporting Students

**Office hours** are an important time for students to discuss their academic progress, the details of assignments or assessments, or things going on in their lives. Many students entrust their instructors with information about themselves that is not academic in nature, and many share personal experiences with their instructors. Office hours are, in short, a time for instructors to support students in many ways, and here too, there are a number of things to keep in mind:

- Whether the office door remains opened or closed during the conversation depends on several different contextual factors: the noise level in the surrounding area, the subject under discussion, and whether confidentiality/privacy is needed. Although the particular circumstances/context should guide us in every case, the default position should be an open-door policy. If the student asks to have the door closed, steps should be taken to ensure the safety and comfort levels of both the student and the instructor; the student's chair should be placed closest to the door, for instance.
- Consider conducting online office hours at regular intervals to allow those students who would prefer to engage in a more virtual consultation to do so.

- Be responsive to the student(s), and at the same time, offer them guidance and direction so that the conversation has both structure and concrete outcomes.
- Healthy boundary-setting involves respect for both the instructor's and the student's levels of comfort and safety. Engage in a practice of balance: caring for your students and being passionate about your teaching does *not* mean you are solely responsible for their wellbeing.
- Familiarize yourself with campus supports and keep the contact information for student support staff ready to hand.

The context for **giving rides to a student** in an instructor's car is important. Such an offer can be helpful and supportive if it's pouring rain and the student's route to or from campus is the same as the instructor's. It can be problematic if it involves a long-distance trip to a conference involving one student. As with other possible scenarios, good judgement here is the key to safe practices and thoughtful engagement.

**Lending money** to a student or **giving personal gifts** to a student may stem from a desire to be generous and helpful. However, such gestures will almost always send a very mixed signal, both to the recipient of the gift or loan, and to other students and colleagues. Gestures of this kind should almost always be avoided; if a student has immediate financial need, they should be directed to financial awards page on the King's website and be encouraged to apply for emergency funds.

**Receiving personal gifts** from students can also be problematic if the gift is more than a modest token of appreciation. When an instructor is the recipient of an overly-generous gift, two good approaches might be to graciously but firmly refuse the gift or to offer to donate it to an appropriate organization.

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The goal of this document—comprised of a Statement of Principles and Guidelines for Healthy Relationships with Students—is to give contour and direction to the issue of boundaries in the instructor-student relationship, and to draw together resources on the issue that are dispersed throughout the university's various policy documents, including the [Code of Conduct](#), the [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy](#) and the [Policy on Conflict of Interest](#).

If any instructor is uncertain about what to do in any given circumstance, they should consider connecting with a faculty colleague, their program director, the Vice-President, or the Sexual Health and Safety Officer, the Equity Officer, the Student Support Advisor, or the Accessibility Officer, as appropriate (Click [here](#) for Student Support Directory)

If any student or staff member has questions or concerns about the practices of healthy boundary-setting at the College, they should consult the policy books above and/or reach out to their office supervisor, the manager of Human Resources, the director of their academic

program or one of the student support staff, as appropriate.

The University commits to an informal review of the Statement of Principles and Guidelines for Healthy Relationships with Students every year, with a more formal College-wide review process to take place every two years.