

Teacher-student relationships

by **Jeremy Sloan**
Collegian Staff

In any classroom, students should be evaluated by the quality of their academic performance alone. For this reason, universities pay attention to the relationships between students and faculty. The evaluation of a student's work should not be colored by the personal preferences of an instructor.

Penn State has a legitimate interest in these relationships. A sexual relationship between student and instructor will almost certainly affect the academic relationship between the two. Hence, most, if not all, universities consider such relationships a serious breach of ethics. And rightly so.

However, Penn State policy goes further, frowning upon almost all personal relationships between faculty and students. The intentions of these policies are admirable, but perhaps the policies themselves go too far.

As an institution, Penn State can be cold, clinical, and maddeningly bureaucratic. In my

experience, friendships with professors make college more personal - less of a gristmill and more of an education.

Can we reach a compromise that allows students and faculty to interact, if they so choose, but still protects students from favoritism? In my experience, yes.

Over the Christmas break, I spent an evening with three friends. I brought a bottle of wine, and over an excellent dinner we talked, told stories, and laughed. We talked until two in the morning. One of the three is a Behrend student and, the other two are instructors at the branch campus I attended last year. What bothers me most is that I cannot feel safe using their names in print.

Our evening together would be considered a breach of policy and ethics by Penn State. Inexplicably, the glass of Scotch I drank before dinner and the wine I drank with the meal compound the offense.

I was of legal drinking age, but that does not seem to matter. Apparently the instructors present

and the University would have been liable had my student friend or I been involved in an auto accident, never mind that we were both sober and alert during the short drive home.

This issue of liability branches into an entirely different problem, but it also touches upon a central question: must an instructor at Penn State always act as an agent of the University when dealing with students?

In an academic environment, instructors certainly act as agents of the University. But in a social environment, must instructors continue to do so?

Current Penn State policy removes the practical need for an answer to this by distancing the students from faculty. However, this distance, this gap, may itself hamper the learning process.

At this point we should ask whether or not a student and an instructor may have a friendship which does not erode the educational standards within the University. I believe that it can be so.

At Behrend, I learn. That is my full-time occupation.

Whether or not I personally like or dislike my instructors remains secondary to the question of whether or not they teach well. I have taken classes in which I found the instructors to be enjoyable, but unable to teach effectively. Likewise, I have taken classes in which I did not like the professors but I learned from them.

But there have also been times when my interest in class material has been matched by an affinity for the professor teaching it. Occasionally, I have come to consider my instructors as friends, and have kept in touch during the semester and after classes ended.

Have these friendships affected the evaluation of my coursework? I do not believe so and this is why: those instructors with whom I have built friendships have in common a deep love of teaching and a strong sense of ethics. If anything, I think that those professors have consistently come to expect more from me as a student.

I have not expected special consideration from these

instructors. Rather, I would be upset to find that I had been treated unfairly. I would lose part of the respect which drew me to them in the first place.

When I spend time with these friends I consider them just that, friends. If I run into a professor at a bar or restaurant, and sit and talk for a while, I do not expect that conversation to affect my grade.

Can such a standard be maintained? That, of course, depends upon the individual students and instructors involved. Some instructors cannot frankly. Other students and professors simply have no interest in one another outside the classroom.

But are a few unethical instructors reasonable enough to justify a policy which, while outside the classroom, completely isolates faculty from students? I do not believe so. Certain types of testing remove all chance of favoritism, and an honest instructor evaluates performance, not preference.

A university in which students and faculty cannot build friendships seems a cold, lonely place.

The idiot box

by **Dave Barry**
Syndicated Columnist

As a parent as well as a human being, I am deeply concerned about all this violence and sex and nudity on television. Especially the nudity. Why can't they put it on earlier? A lot of us parents are asleep by 9:30 p.m. Why can't they show nudity when WE'RE watching? They could feature it in programs that children never watch, such as the network news. ("Good evening, I'm Dan Rather." "And I'm Connie Chung." "And I'm Bambi.")

No, seriously, I am deeply concerned about TV sex and violence, and so is the U.S. Senate (motto: "Working Hard For You To Re-Elect Us"). Leading the way by courageously holding press conferences is Sen. Paul Simon, who has a special stake in this issue because he receives TV signals directly via his ears, which are like satellite dishes, but bigger. (And before I get an angry letter from the Association of People With Unusually Large Body Parts, let me state that I, personally, find this attractive.)

As a result of this concern on the part of Sen. Simon and myself, I decided to attend this year's National Association of Television Program Executives

(NATPE) convention in Miami Beach. This is a major annual gathering of TV executives, who are wooed intensively by people trying to sell TV programs. The convention is held in a huge hall filled with flashy display booths featuring lavish buffets, costumed characters, models wearing outfits that would look skimpy even on much smaller models, and Personal Appearances by famous stars such as -- while I was there -- Wink Martindale, Ivana Trump, Captain Planet, Burt Reynolds and Mr. Food.

The purpose of the glitz is to lure TV executives into the booths; they are then taken into elaborately furnished back-room deal-making areas, where they talk business while sipping complimentary beverages containing a chemical that temporarily renders them so stupid that they will willingly purchase programs such as "The Best of Love Connection," which consists of reruns of astoundingly shallow people recounting their dates with other astoundingly shallow people.

I'm kidding about the stupidity, of course. The TV programming executives are SMART to purchase this kind of show. They are making Dumpsterloads of money, because we watch these shows.

WE'RE the idiots. Not that you'll hear THAT from Sen. Simon. He's not about to say: "If you don't like what's on, TURN OFF THE TV, YOU MORONS, and let the Senate deal with REAL issues such as whether federal health care should cover ear reductions."

No, he's not going to tell us that, and we're not going to stop watching these shows, which is why the TV executives are not going to stop buying them. The NATPE convention was full of purposeful, suit-wearing, briefcase-carrying people, frowning and talking -- in hushed, urgent tones suitable for discussing nuclear proliferation -- about shows such as "Biker Mice From Mars." This is an actual show. I hung around in the "Biker Mice" booth and eavesdropped as two intense TV executives discussed it while standing right next to two people costumed as enormous mice wearing Hells-Angels-style outfits.

"It's going to depend on the percentage," one of the executives was saying, as the giant mice waved to the crowd.

"Yes, but it has to be a separate financial entity," the other executive said. As if to emphasize this point, the giant mice bumped butts with each other.

"Biker Mice From Mars" is, needless to say, a children's show. Here are some of the other ones listed in the NATPE program directory (I am not making these up): "Clowns of Justice," "Chicken Minute," "The Yum Yums," "The Whimlies," "The Moo Family," "Goomer's," "Noozles," "Smoggies," "Bumpety Boo," "Scuddlemutt," "Dinky Dog," "Wowser," "Bubsy," "Mirthworms on Stage," "Rude Dog and the Dweebs," "High Narc," "Goshu the Cellist," "Basil Hears a Noise," "The Great Bong," "The Miraculous Mellops," "P.J. Funnybunny" and "Let's Make War."

Also you need to know that there is a nature show called "Wombats: Bulldozers of the Bush."

The highlight of the convention for me was when Mike Donovan, a college professor who also works for NATPE (at least until this column appears), showed me a tape of one of the greatest TV shows of all time: "Winky Dink." This was the first "interactive" TV show. You, the viewer, sent 50 cents to Box 5, New York 19, New York, and you got back a Magic Window, which was a piece of transparent plastic that you put on your TV screen. Then, under the direction

of Jack Berry, you used special crayons to draw lines on the plastic. (Or, if you were my sister and I, and you didn't have a Magic Window, you drew right on the TV screen and interacted with your parents later.)

After the lines were drawn, you and Jack Berry said the Magic Word "WINKO!" and the lines became part of, say, a bridge, which Winky Dink would use to cross a river.

("What always bothered me," said Mike, "was that even if you didn't draw the lines, Winky Dink still got across the river.")

As part of the nostalgia display, NATPE had a TV set up on the convention floor, playing old Winky Dink shows. Mike put a piece of plastic on the screen and gave me a marker. I drew the lines where Jack Berry told me to, producing a vaguely round object.

"OK, kids," said Jack Berry. "Let's say the magic word! One, two, three..."

"WINKO!!" yelled Mike and I, causing startled TV executives to whirl around and stare at us. Inside the circle I had drawn, goldfish appeared. It was a fish bowl! You don't get quality entertainment like that anymore. Which is probably just as well, because -- Sen. Simon, take note -- the fish were naked.