

# Conquering barriers in professor/student relationships

By **RACHEL SHEPHERD**  
and **JOE RUGGIERO**  
Assistant Editor Staff Reporter

Ahh. A new semester. A fresh start. A clean slate. Yet, you are still worried. Your new calculus professor has a reputation for being a hard-hitter. You have heard it all: she is a tough grader, has a stringent class schedule and does not work well with other students. This is one of many things you face in a small school environment.

Fortunately, you can put the hearsay behind you because there may be ways to eliminate the professor/student barrier. Professors at Penn State Harrisburg demonstrate a willingness to help students on an individual basis in and outside the classroom.

"Students will talk," explained Kamini Grahame, assistant professor of community psychology and sociology. "Professors have a reputation before they begin a semester and that never really surprises me."

Grahame has discovered that, in her three years at Penn State Harrisburg, students will assess professors' teaching style and attitude and tell other students. She said it is important for students and professors to begin the semester with an open mind. But,

**"In high school, teachers appear to be at the other side of the glass wall and because of that you are afraid to approach a professor or ask questions."**

she admits that is tough because of the student/professor line that is drawn.

"In high school, teachers appear to be at the other side of the glass wall and because of that you are afraid to approach a professor or ask questions," said Billie Jones, assistant professor of English and writing.

Eliminating this barrier takes some work on both sides. Jones said she has seen two problem areas in the communication process between professors and students.

"Sometimes we don't make our expectations clear," she said. "It is absolutely the faculty members responsibility to clarify what the expectations are, but it is the students responsibility to seek that clarity."

Jones said the second communication problem lies in the professor's ability to be accessible, "in the way that they can act like a human being."

Brad Stump, elementary education, said he has encountered situations in which professors act as if they are superior to the students. "It comes down to conforming to [his or] her ideas or not doing well."

To solve this, Stump tried to meet the professor on middle ground. But often times, he said, students must conform to obtain the goals of the class.

"A professor-student social relationship can be beneficial if both parties can work together to achieve the goal," said Jones.

There are usually some indicators that students are not doing well, in which case, professors may approach a student. Low grades, as well as, lack of attendance and participation can be cause for an interaction to take place on behalf of the professor. Unfortunately, Jones said, if a communication problem exists, the responsibility lies on the student to act first.

Grahame said students at Penn State Harrisburg, show little interaction compared to other universities in which she has taught, although she said e-mail is

helpful in triggering that communication process.

"I encourage my students to talk to me," said Grahame. "But it is also important to develop a relationship with your advisor."

Your advisor can give you techniques for dealing with individual issues with the professor because they are more likely to know the professor and have seen these issues before.

Peter Kareithi, associate professor of humanities, said, as an advisor he feels some responsibility to assist his advisees with issues that may have an impact on their scholarship. He tries to initiate discussion between the student and the professor. It is his hope that his colleague will invite the student to discuss how to resolve the problem between them.

Sometimes the problem is not seen as a barrier between professor/student, but rather that professors and students can become too close.

"A teacher's social relationship with a student can sometimes cross the line," said Jones.

She lent the example of students drinking with professors. "Drinking together can be a problem because the openness goes farther."

Kareithi said that he treats students as individuals beyond the classroom in order to find ways to reach them in the classroom.

"There are risks to this approach," he said. "Some students may try to take advantage of a teacher's friendship."

He explained that some teachers may try to exploit a student's friendship and other faculty or students can misconstrue the friendships.

"Since the power relations between teacher and student favor the teacher, the teacher must figure where to draw the line between a friendship that facilitates learning and an unprofessional relationship," said Kareithi.

Grahame explained that it is not uncommon for students on a graduate level to be close to professors because of the detailed nature of their coursework.

"The professor and the student will work close together on research projects and other detailed work that students on the undergraduate level do not get the chance to do," said Grahame.

Jones emphasized that the student/professor relationship is symbiotic. "It is great to know that the teacher is learning and that the teaching is open to learning," said Jones.

Adriana Stroh, communications, said she has always found her profes-

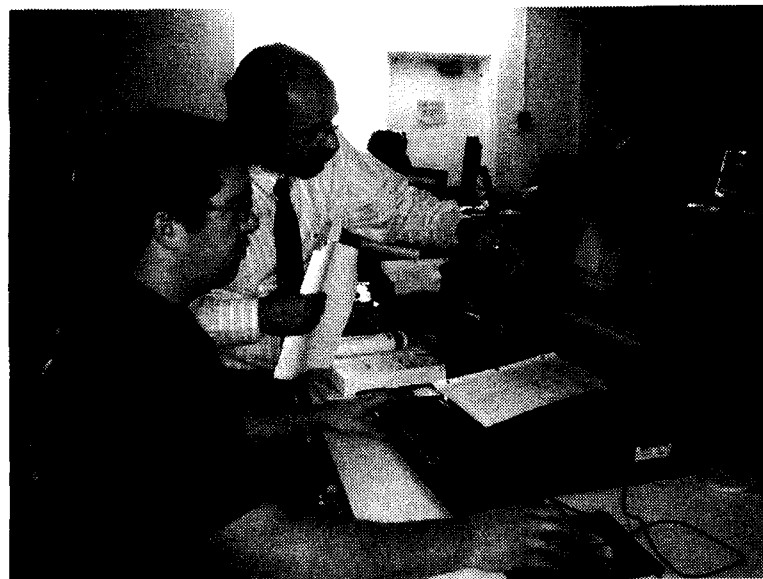


photo by Joe Ruggiero

**Mechanical Engineering Professor Masoud Tabatabai reviews Computer Aided Design (CAD) homework with Eric Ganolini.**

sors willing to take the time and answer any questions she has even outside of normal class time.

"Even if I can't make it to their office during their designated office hours, I have found that most of the teachers are willing to make some time and arrange a different time to meet with me," said Stroh. "From my experience at PSU Harrisburg, [the professors] care about the students and are willing to make time to help students out."

Kareithi said that traditional school of thinking supports the clear division of the lines of power between teachers and students. "I am not into that," he said. "I learned as much from my students as I teach them. I call my approach 'interactive learning.'"

## No Other Shipping Company Delivers More.

### PART-TIME HUMAN RESOURCES INTERN

In this position, you will be responsible for recruiting and attracting qualified applicants, staffing recruiting events & staffing human resources. You will work approximately 15 to 20 hours a week - two days in the community and one day in the UPS facility. This is a paid internship.

#### Qualifications include:

- High degree of integrity, professional demeanor, ability to work independently
- Demonstrated proficiency in all paperwork processes
- Strong communication, follow-up and interpersonal skills
- Possession of a high level of confidence in interacting with people
- Ability to effectively write and present information and respond to questions from groups
- Computer proficiency in PC platform, including working knowledge of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access
- Working knowledge of Human Resources and employment

UPS offers an excellent benefits package that includes medical, dental, vision, paid prescriptions, life insurance & more. For consideration, please forward resume to: UPS, Attn: Sara Kennedy-Yoder - HR, 1821 South 19th St, Harrisburg, PA 17104. E-mail: [sjkennedy@ups.com](mailto:sjkennedy@ups.com)

Equal Opportunity Employer

