

Defining the Relationship

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Dear Students: I think it's time we had the talk. You know, the one couples who've been together for a while sometimes have to review boundaries and expectations? Your generation calls this "DTR"—short for "defining the relationship."

We definitely need to define our relationship because, first of all, it is a long-term relationship—maybe not between you and me, specifically, but between people like you (students) and people like me (professors). And, second, it appears to need some defining, or redefining. I used to think the boundaries and expectations were clear on both sides, but that no longer seems to be the case.

The truth is, I wonder if college students today truly understand the nature of their relationship to professors. Perhaps their experiences with other authority figures—high-school teachers, parents, and bosses—have led them to make assumptions that aren't quite accurate. Or perhaps students are just not too thrilled with authority figures in general. That's always been the case, to some extent. But it seems to me, after 31 years of college teaching, that the lines have grown blurrier, the misconceptions more profound.

So I'd like to take a few moments to define the professor-student relationship. And if no one has ever put it to you quite this way before—well, that just highlights the need for a DTR.

And by the way, please keep in mind that I'm not trying to offend you or tick you off. I actually like you quite a bit, or I wouldn't even bother having this discussion.

I don't work for you. Students (or their parents), when they're unhappy with something I've said or done, occasionally try throwing this line in my face: "You work for me." They mean that by paying tuition and taxes, they pay my salary and I should, therefore, be responsive in the way they desire.

Let's dismiss that old canard right off the bat. Yes, as a professor at a state institution, I am a public employee. But that's precisely the point: I'm

employed by the college and by the public, not by any particular member of the public. My duty—to the institution and to the people of this state—is to ensure that students in my courses meet the standards set by the college's faculty and are well-prepared for further study and for life.

You're not a customer, and I'm not a clerk. Unfortunately, too many students have been told for too long that they are "customers" of the institution—which means, of course, that they're always right. Right?

Wrong. This is not Wal-Mart. You are not a customer, and I don't even own a blue smock. Our relationship is much more like that of doctor and patient. My only obligation: to tell you what you need to hear (not what you want to hear) and to do what I think is best (not what you think is best).

I'm not a cable network or streaming site. What you get out of this relationship is that you'll be better equipped to succeed in this and other college courses, and life in general. What I get is a great deal of professional and personal satisfaction.

Natives of today's social-media-fueled digital universe have come to expect that everything they want will be available whenever they want it, on demand. That includes, or ought to include, their professors. I mean, we have email, don't we? And cellphones?

Consider this official notice that I have opted out of the on-demand world. My office hours are listed on my syllabus. If for some reason I can't be in my office during those hours, I'll let you know beforehand if possible or post a note on my door. But I'm usually there.

As for email, yes, I have it and I check it often, but not constantly. I do have a life outside this classroom—a wife, kids, hobbies, other professional obligations. That's why I don't give out my private cell number. If you need me after hours, email me and I'll probably see it and respond within 24 to 48 hours.

I'm not a high-school teacher. A common refrain among first-year college students is, "But my high-school teacher said. . . ."

Those teachers did their best to prepare you for college and tell you what to expect. Unfortunately, some of their information was outdated or just plain wrong. For example, not every essay has exactly five paragraphs, and it's OK, in certain situations, to begin a sentence with "because." One of the main differences between them and me is that I'm not telling you how you're going to do things "once you get to college." This is college, and this is how we do things.

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Plus, because of something called “academic freedom,” which most college professors enjoy but most high-school teachers don’t, I’m not nearly as easy to intimidate when you think you deserved an A. I’m sure you (or your parents) would never dream of trying anything like that, but I thought I’d go ahead and mention it, just in case.

I’m not your boss. Please don’t misunderstand: I don’t take a “my way or the highway” approach to teaching. In my view, that’s not what education, and certainly not higher education, is all about. I’m here to help you learn. Whether you choose to accept that help—ultimately, whether you choose to learn anything—is up to you.

My role is not to tell you what to do, like your shift manager at the fast-food restaurant. Rather, I will provide information, explain how to do certain things, and give you regular assignments and assessments designed to help you internalize that knowledge and master those skills. Internalizing and mastering are your responsibility. I can’t “fire” you, any more than you can get me fired. But I can and will evaluate the quality and timeliness of your work, and that evaluation will be reflected in your final grade.

I’m not your parent. Some of my colleagues (especially among the administration) believe the institution should act “in loco parentis,” which means “in the place of a parent.” In other words, when you’re away from your parents, we become your parents.

I’ve never really subscribed to that theory, at least not in the classroom. I suppose there are certain areas of the college, like student services, that have some parental-like obligation to students. But as a professor, I don’t. And what that means, more than anything else, is that I’m not going to treat you like a child.

I’m not your BFF. When I first started teaching, I was only a few years older than many of my students. It was tempting, at times, to want to be friends with some of them. I occasionally struggled to maintain an appropriate professional distance.

Not anymore. I’ve been doing this for a while now—over 30 years—and I’m no longer young. (Sadly, I’m no longer mistaken for a student, either.) I try to be friendly and approachable, but if by “friendly” you think I mean “someone to hang out with,” I don’t. I regret that we cannot actually be friends.

That applies to virtual friendship, too. Even if you happen to track me down on Facebook, I will not accept your friend request. You’re welcome to follow me on Twitter, if you like, but I won’t follow you back. And I don’t do Instagram or Snapchat or, um, whatever else there is.

I’m not your adversary. Just because we’re not best buds, please don’t think I’m your enemy. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, if by “friend” you mean someone who cares about your well-being and success, then I guess I am a friend after all.

Yet there is always a degree of tension in the student-professor relationship. You may at times feel that I am behaving in an adversarial manner—questioning the quality and relevance of your work, making judgments that you perceive as negative. Understand that is only because I do want you to succeed. It’s not personal, on my end, and you must learn not to take it personally.

I’d like to be your partner. More than anything, I’d like for us to form a mutually beneficial alliance in this endeavor we call education.

I pledge to do my part. I will:

- Stay abreast of the latest ideas in my field.
- Teach you what I believe you need to know, with all the enthusiasm I possess.
- Invite your comments and questions and respond constructively.
- Make myself available to you outside of class (within reason).
- Evaluate your work carefully and return it promptly with feedback.
- Be as fair, respectful, and understanding as I can humanly be.
- If you need help beyond the scope of this course, I will do my best to provide it or see that you get it.

In return, I expect you to:

- Show up for class each day or let me know (preferably in advance) if you have some good reason to be absent.
- Do your reading and other assignments outside of class and be prepared for each class meeting.
- Focus during class on the work we’re doing and not on extraneous matters (like whoever or whatever is on your phone at the moment).
- Participate in class discussions.
- Be respectful of your fellow students and their points of view.
- In short, I expect you to devote as much effort to learning as I devote to teaching.

What you get out of this relationship is that you’ll be better equipped to succeed in this and other college courses, work-related assignments, and life in general. What I get is a great deal of professional and personal satisfaction. Because I do really like you guys and want the best for you.

All in all, that’s not a bad deal. It’s a shame more relationships aren’t like ours.