

Opinions of Zagreb University Students on Professor-Student Dating

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Aim. To investigate what Zagreb University students think about professor-student dating.

Methods. We surveyed 500 students from ten different Zagreb University schools using anonymous questionnaires. Twenty-five female and 25 male students from each school were asked to assess professor-student dating as either acceptable, reckless, unethical, or shameful, and decide how severely such behavior should be punished, if it should be punished at all. Sex of the professor and student was irrelevant.

Results. Students were equally strict towards the student and the professor. They judged professor-student dating more strictly if dating started before the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor than if it started afterwards. More female than male students had no opinion on whether the professor should be punished. When dating started after the student passed the exam, male students judged the student's behavior more strictly than female students; if the dating started before, the Economics students were stricter and the Music Academy students milder than average in their judgements. In the case when dating started after the student passed the exam, students of the Faculty of Physical Education judged both dating parties more strictly, Political Sciences students were milder toward a professor, whereas more students of the Faculty of Philosophy thought that it should be punished. Most students with no opinion on punishing dating were found among Agronomy students.

Conclusion. Most Zagreb University students think that professor-student dating should not be punished and that both dating parties take equal responsibility for such behavior.

Key words: Croatia; faculty; interpersonal relations; sex behavior; sexual harassment; students; universities

The problem of discrimination is still one of the leading problems in the world today. One of its forms – sexual discrimination, is present everywhere, including schools, colleges, and universities. Therefore, education institutions, recognizing the risk factors for sexual harassment and sexually insulting behavior in their own milieu (1), are introducing educative and preventive programs (2) that would help them combat the problem. In some schools and campuses, such programs have already yielded results (3-5).

Professor-student dating is not an uncommon phenomenon in the academic world. Since it could be considered as a kind of sexual harassment (6), some universities have created a policy according to which they regulate and usually discourage such a behavior. Other universities have no written policies, but call upon professional ethics to regulate such relationships (7). The aim of our study was to investigate what the Zagreb Univer-

sity students actually think about professor-student dating, does the time when a professor and a student start dating – before the student passes the exam in the subject taught by the professor or within a month's time after he or she passes the exam – have any influence on students' opinions; whom they judge more rigorously – a student or a professor; are there differences in the students' opinions according to their sex; and does the students' choice of school and their future profession have any influence on their judgments.

Our survey results could help improve the regulations of the rights and obligations of students and professors and be useful in defining better the rules of adequate academic behavior.

Examinees and Methods

The Study

An anonymous survey was carried out during year 2000 among 500 students from ten schools of the Zagreb University: the Medical School, the School of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, the School of Agronomy, the School of Economics, the Law School, the School of Political Sciences, the School of Philosophy, the Catholic Divinity School, the Music Academy, and the School of Physical Education. We chose various schools to compose a sample of students as versatile with respect to their future professions as possible to represent best the academic community of Zagreb.

Students

We surveyed 50 students of the fourth year in each of ten schools. The fourth year is the final year in most schools. The students, 25 women and 25 men, were asked during a well-attended lecture to fill out the anonymous survey form. The first 25 women and 25 men who volunteered were surveyed.

Survey

Survey consisted of descriptions of ethically dubious situations that can happen in school. Some of them described the situation of professor-student dating, given that a professor and a student could be of either sex, as follows:

A professor and a student start dating *before* the student passes the exam in the subject taught by the professor. What do you think about the *professor's* behavior?

A professor and a student start dating *before* the student passes the exam in the subject taught by the professor. What do you think about the *student's* behavior?

A professor and a student start dating within a month's time *after* the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor. What do you think about the *professor's* behavior?

A professor and a student start dating within a month's time *after* the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor. What do you think about the *student's* behavior?

The answers offered to describe the professor's or student's behavior were: acceptable, reckless, unethical, or shameful. The second question asked should the professor/student be punished, and the answers offered were: yes, no, and I do not have an opinion on that. The third question asked how severely should the dating be punished, and the answers offered were graded from 1 (the mildest punishment) to 10 (the most severe punishment). This question was answered only if the answer to the second question was affirmative, ie, if the student thought that professor-student dating should be punished.

Statistical Analysis

Chi-square test was used for the statistical analysis of the distribution of the students' opinions on professor-student dating with regard to whether it started before of within a month's time after the student passed the exam. Chi-square test was also used for the analysis of the distribution of students' characterization of professor's/student's behavior as well as for the opinion distribution according to the students' sex. The distributions of answers of each school's students in relation to the distribution of answers all the surveyed students were analyzed with non-parametrical multinomial test. The statistically significant difference in the tests was set at $p < 0.05$ level.

Results

Professor-student dating was more acceptable if it started within a month's time after the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor (even 60.1% of the surveyed students assessed it acceptable, 23.2% assessed it reckless, 11.9% found it unethical, and only 4.8% saw it as shameful) than if it started before the student passed the exam (in this case, 30.5% of the surveyed students considered it acceptable, 32.5% reckless, 26.5% unethical, and 10.5% shameful). Consequently, students would punish professor-student dating statistically less often if it started after the exam is passed (only 3.8% of the students would punish professor-student dating, whereas almost 81.7% would not punish them; 14.5% had no opinion on that matter) than if it started before the student passed the exam (13.4% students would punish them, 64.1% would not punish them, whereas 22.5% had no opinion on that matter) ($p < 0.001$; Table 1).

The students were equally strict toward a professor and a student in both cases, whether the dating started before or after the student passed the exam taught by that professor (Table 2).

More female than male students had no opinion on whether a professor should be punished for dating a student, irrespective of whether the dating started before ($p = 0.035$) or after ($p = 0.045$) the student passed the exam. Also, male students judged the student who started dating the professor within a month's time after passing the exam more strictly than female students: 56.8% of male students considered the student's behavior acceptable, 23.2% reckless, 14.8% unethical, and 5.2% shameful, versus female students of whom 64.4% found the student's behavior acceptable, 24.4% reckless, 6.8% unethical, and 4.4% shameful ($p = 0.033$) (Table 3).

Answers of the students from some schools deviated significantly from the average distribution of answers of all surveyed Zagreb University students. For instance, in the case when a professor-student dating started before the student passed the exam, the Music Academy students judged both the professor's ($p = 0.002$) and the student's ($p = 0.021$) behavior less harshly, and in smaller percentage thought that the student should have been punished in that case ($p = 0.033$). On the other hand, Economics students had stricter opinion on both the professor's ($p = 0.027$) and the student's ($p = 0.012$) behavior (Table 4).

When a professor and a student started dating within a month's time after the student passed the exam, the students of the Faculty of Physical Education assessed both the professor's and student's behavior more strictly

Table 1. Students' opinions (%) on a professor-student dating according to the time when the dating started: *before* or within a month's time *after* the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor

Start of professor-student relationship	Opinions								
	Such a behavior can be assessed as:					Should the involved be punished?			
	acceptable	reckless	unethical	shameful	p^a	yes	no	no opinion	p^a
Before the student passed the exam	30.5	32.5	26.5	10.5		13.4	64.1	22.5	
Within a month's time after the student passed the exam	60.1	23.2	11.9	4.8	<0.001	3.8	81.7	14.5	<0.001

^aChi-square test.

Table 2. Students' opinions (%) on professor's/student's behavior in case of professor-student dating

Assessment	Opinions								
	Such a behavior can be assessed as:					Should the involved be punished?			
	acceptable	reckless	unethical	shameful	p ^a	yes	no	no opinion	p ^a
Dating before exam:									
Professor's behavior	30.2	30.8	27.6	11.4	0.543	14.8	64.0	21.2	0.337
Student's behavior	30.8	34.2	25.4	9.6		12.0	64.2	23.8	
Dating after exam:									
Professor's behavior	59.6	22.6	13.0	4.8	0.750	3.8	81.6	14.6	0.996
Student's behavior	60.6	23.8	10.8	4.8		3.8	81.8	14.4	

^aChi-square test.**Table 3.** Distribution of students' opinions (%) on professor-student dating according to their sex

Students' sex	Opinions								
	Such a behavior can be assessed as:					Should the involved be punished?			
	acceptable	reckless	unethical	shameful	p ^a	yes	no	no opinion	p ^a
Dating before exam:									
Assesment of professor's behavior									
Male	33.2	28.1	28.5	10.4	0.346	16.0	68.8	15.2	0.035
Female	27.3	33.7	26.9	12.4		13.6	59.2	27.2	
Assesment of student's behavior									
Male	34.0	29.2	27.6	9.2	0.097	12.8	68.0	19.2	0.070
Female	27.6	39.2	23.2	10.0		11.2	60.4	28.4	
Dating after exam:									
Assesment of professor's behavior									
Male	55.6	22.0	16.8	5.6	0.056	5.6	82.8	11.6	0.045
Female	63.6	23.2	9.2	4.0		2.0	80.4	17.6	
Assesment of student's behavior									
Male	56.8	23.2	14.8	5.2	0.033	5.6	82.4	12.0	0.061
Female	64.4	24.4	6.8	4.4		2.0	81.2	16.8	

^aChi-square test.

($p < 0.001$). Higher percentage of the Political Sciences students were milder toward professor's behavior ($p = 0.034$), unlike the students from the Faculty of Philosophy, who chose punishing both a professor and a student ($p < 0.001$) more often (Table 4). In comparison with students of other schools, the largest proportion of students who did not have any opinion on punishing a professor-student dating, irrespectively of when they started dating, were found at the Faculty of Agronomy. Therefore, the distribution of their opinions on punishing statistically differed from the total distribution of all the surveyed students (Table 4). The distribution of medical students' opinions did not vary from the average in any of the situations described (Table 4).

Since a very small percentage of the surveyed students were for punishing professor-student dating in all the described situations, a small number of students answered the question about the severity of the punishment. Therefore, these results were not presented.

Discussion

Our survey showed that the large majority of the surveyed Zagreb University students do not have unfavorable opinion on professor-student dating and just a small percentage of the students think that it should be sanctioned.

The greatest influence on the students' opinions has the time when a professor-student dating starts: students are stricter in their judgments when a professor and a student start dating before the student passes the exam in the subject taught by that professor.

It is found in literature (7) that professors cannot evaluate the work or performance of the students with whom they have or have had a sexual relationship. Most students believe that professors should not be allowed to date students enrolled in one of their classes, but could be allowed to date students who are not at that moment attending their courses (8). Moreover, some believe that many students who date their current teachers do so in hope that it will help them improve their grades in the given class (9), and those who complain most often are the classmates, claiming that there is unfair grading and favoritism (10).

However, in our research, even when a professor-student dating started before the student passed the exam in the subject taught by the professor, around two thirds of the surveyed students found it either acceptable or reckless, whereas only 13.4% of the surveyed students thought that it should be punished.

Surveyed students from the different schools of Zagreb University were equally critical toward both a professor and a student, ie, they thought that both parties were equally responsible for starting a relationship. On the other hand, as described in literature (9), such a situa-

Table 4. Distribution of students' opinions (%) on professor-student dating according to University Schools they attended

Zagreb University Schools	Opinions								
	Such a behavior can be assessed as:					Should the involved be punished?			
	acceptable	reckless	unethical	shameful	p ^a	yes	no	no opinion	p ^a
Dating before exam									
You think that the professor's behavior is:									
Medicine	30	32	32	6	0.647	22	58	20	0.356
Engineering	24	34	34	8	0.562	10	56	34	0.076
Agronomy	34	20	28	18	0.257	12	52	36	0.038
Economics	20	26	30	24	0.027	20	58	22	0.546
Law	28	28	34	10	0.793	20	66	14	0.338
Political Sciences	40	30	22	8	0.444	10	78	12	0.116
Philosophy	24	30	32	14	0.731	24	58	18	0.184
Catholic Divinity	40	24	24	12	0.459	14	72	14	0.418
Music Academy	40	46	14	0	0.002	4	78	18	0.058
Physical Education	22	38	26	14	0.513	12	64	24	0.798
Total	31	31	28	11	-	15	64	21	-
You think that the student's behavior is:									
Medicine	36	26	30	8	0.578	16	60	24	0.669
Engineering	28	36	32	4	0.446	10	56	34	0.237
Agronomy	32	28	22	18	0.213	6	56	38	0.044
Economics	20	28	30	22	0.012	20	54	26	0.167
Law	32	36	24	8	0.970	14	66	20	0.781
Political Sciences	42	30	24	4	0.265	10	74	16	0.334
Philosophy	20	48	20	12	0.136	20	58	22	0.219
Catholic Divinity	38	28	22	12	0.587	12	72	16	0.416
Music Academy	36	48	16	0	0.021	2	80	18	0.033
Physical Education	24	34	34	8	0.505	10	66	24	0.908
Total	31	34	25	10	-	12	64	24	-
Dating after exam									
You think that the professor's behavior is:									
Medicine	72	22	4	2	0.156	0	92	8	0.132
Engineering	56	22	22	0	0.131	2	74	24	0.149
Agronomy	60	16	14	10	0.282	6	66	28	0.016
Economics	54	24	16	6	0.849	6	74	20	0.370
Law	70	22	6	2	0.306	0	92	8	0.132
Political Sciences	70	10	20	0	0.034	4	88	8	0.417
Philosophy	56	18	16	10	0.291	14	76	10	<0.001
Catholic Divinity	60	26	8	6	0.713	0	84	16	0.367
Music Academy	66	28	6	0	0.153	0	94	6	0.068
Physical Education	32	38	18	12	<0.001	6	76	18	0.542
Total	60	22	13	5	-	4	82	15	-
You think that the student's behavior is:									
Medicine	72	22	4	2	0.251	0	90	10	0.225
Engineering	58	26	16	0	0.283	2	74	24	0.136
Agronomy	60	20	12	8	0.696	6	68	26	0.039
Economics	56	24	14	6	0.850	6	76	18	0.524
Law	70	24	4	2	0.297	0	92	8	0.138
Political Sciences	72	14	14	0	0.113	4	88	8	0.436
Philosophy	56	20	12	12	0.114	14	76	10	<0.001
Catholic Divinity	60	24	10	6	0.980	0	84	16	0.365
Music Academy	68	26	6	0	0.259	0	94	6	0.072
Physical Education	34	38	16	12	<0.001	6	76	18	0.524
Total	61	24	11	5	-	4	82	14	-

^aProbability of obtaining the difference between distribution of answers of particular school and distribution of answers of all students (non-parametric multinomial statistical test).

tion involves an imbalance of power and potential conflict of interests, of which both parties should be, and probably are aware.

Our survey showed that students' opinions differ according to their sex. Indeed, it has been described in the literature that male and female students differ in their opinions on various sexually dubious situations (11,12) as well as in their personal experiences in that respect (12,13).

Our results indicate that there are actual differences in the opinions on professor-student dating between the students of different schools of Zagreb University (Table 4). It can be assumed that students of a particular school have different beliefs due to previously formed differences in their personal inclinations, and that their school and future profession have the additional influence on the differences in their opinions. However, our results did not show that the differences in students' attitudes to-

ward dating could be associated with specificities of the school they attend.

Many universities and schools have rules through which they regulate the behavior, rights, and obligations of students and professors (14-18). Considerable efforts were made to define precisely, through the statutes, what can be considered as a sexually dubious behavior at universities and to determine how to report and punish such a behavior (19).

Although the fact that students volunteered to answer the questionnaire could present a certain limitation to our study, the results revealed that the majority of Zagreb University students do not condemn professor-student dating. The attitude of majority is that such behavior should not be sanctioned and that both parties take equal responsibility in that situation. Of course, other positions taken toward this issue can also be found in the literature (20,21). The conclusions drawn from the results of this study may contribute to the more precise assessment of such behavior and, maybe, help in making amendments to the regulations of academic behavior at Zagreb University as well as universities in general.

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