RESEARCH ARTICLES

Faculty Perceptions of Appropriate Faculty Behaviors in Social Interactions With Student Pharmacists

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Objective. To determine faculty and administrator perceptions about appropriate behavior in social interactions between pharmacy students and faculty members.

Methods. Four private and 2 public colleges and schools of pharmacy conducted focus groups of faculty members and interviews with administrators. Three scenarios describing social interactions between faculty members and students were used. For each scenario, participants reported whether the faculty member's behavior was appropriate and provided reasons for their opinions.

Results. Forty-four percent of those surveyed or interviewed considered interactions between faculty members and pharmacy students at a bar to be a boundary violation. Administrators were more likely than faculty members to consider discussing other faculty members with a student to be a boundary violation (82% vs. 46%, respectively, $P < 0.009$). A majority (87%) of faculty members and administrators considered "friending" students on Facebook a boundary violation.

Conclusions. There was no clear consensus about whether socializing with students at a bar was a boundary violation. In general, study participants agreed that faculty members should not initiate friendships with current students on social networks but that taking a student employee to lunch was acceptable.

Keywords: faculty, students, social interactions, Facebook, behavior

INTRODUCTION

The accreditation standards for the professional program in pharmacy state that faculty members "must be committed to developing professionalism and fostering leadership in students and to serving as mentors and positive role models."[1] While much of the professionalism-building process occurs in the classroom and clinical setting, there are more subtle interactions that affect this process. Social networking and face-to-face meetings also provide opportunities for student pharmacists and faculty members to interact on a professional as well as social basis.

In a study of faculty-student interactions using focus groups, social interactions were found to have an impor-

tant impact on student performance, resulting in more motivated students who exert a greater effort in their studies.[2] The mere existence of a faculty-student relationship has an inherent social influence, defined as "a change in the attitude, belief, or behavior of a student resulting from the actions of another person."[3] As a more personal relationship develops, the faculty member may assume a dual role of teacher and friend, which necessitates defining and establishing boundaries. Such boundaries are the "limits that allow for a safe connection" and exist in order to protect the relationship.[4] Boundary violations have the propensity to impair the teacher role, diminish the trust of the student, and result in emotional harm.

When faculty members develop personal relationships with students outside the classroom, the potential for a boundary violation increases and is further complicated by the lack of a standard definition of appropriate boundaries. In a study evaluating perceptions of the propriety of faculty-student relationships among counseling

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teachers,[5] 127 faculty members (58% male) and 247 students (27% male) in 57 counselor-preparation programs were presented with 7 scenarios. The scenario addressing social interactions involved a young faculty member who socialized primarily with students. Activities involving students that were rated unethical included: hosting parties (32%), gossiping (98%), and becoming intoxicated (94%). In the scenario dealing with professors and students attending social events together, 62% of participants rated the activity as unethical. Among faculty members, women were more likely than men to rate this activity as unethical ($P = 0.002$).[5]

Non–face-to-face relationships have increased in popularity through social networking Web sites. Based on a 3-month ranking of Internet traffic, Facebook alone was the second most popular Internet site in both the United States and the world.[6] Facebook accounts for about 7% of search-engine queries and is linked to over 1 million Internet sites.[6] Students are heavy users of social network sites. In a study of 433 undergraduate students, 80% used one or more social networking sites, and 50% logged into their sites at least once daily.[7] With the growing popularity of online social networking forums, boundaries between students and faculty members may become even less clearly defined. While there are many potential benefits of friending between faculty members and students, there are also risks. Friending may result in a relationship that has other implications. An example offered by one professor: "How could you have given me a D? You're my friend on Facebook!"[8] More obvious risks include posting potentially damaging comments or photographs. Another editorial offers the following advice: "Just don't forget that what you say on Facebook is often flung far, and you should work to control, or at least be aware of, who your audience is."[9]

In another survey of 146 students and faculty members at a private midsized university in Tennessee regarding attitudes surrounding faculty use of social networking sites, over 75% of surveyed faculty members reported having students as social network friends. Students responded that they would be more likely to communicate with their professors if they already knew them through social networking, and a majority felt a stronger connection with their instructors because of social networking.[10]

Although there is evidence supporting the notion that personal faculty-student relationships foster learning, there is no consensus regarding the boundaries of these relationships. The objective of this study was to describe faculty members' and administrators' perceptions about appropriate behavior in social situations involving students and faculty members.

METHODS

Four private and 2 public colleges and schools of pharmacy conducted focus groups involving faculty members and personal interviews with administrators. Three scenarios illustrating different social situations were used during the focus groups and interviews. Each scenario was further clarified by the inclusion of various examples of student-faculty interactions. The scenarios were: visiting a bar after a professional reception (5 specific examples), friending on Facebook (7 specific examples), and taking student employees to lunch (4 specific examples). Approval for the study was obtained from each institution's review board prior to its initiation.

Sixty-nine individuals participated in the study. Six focus groups, one at each school, included a total of 52 faculty members. Personal interviews with at least 2 administrators at each institution were conducted. E-mail was used to contact potential study participants, and interested individuals were asked to reply. Small reminder posters were placed in the faculty and administrative areas of the schools, and a reminder e-mail was sent to individuals who indicated an interest in participating.

Data Collection

Subjects were asked to respond with their opinions about the propriety of the faculty member's behavior in each of the examples in the 3 scenarios. Faculty-member focus group sessions lasted approximately 1.5 hours, and personal interviews with 2 to 3 administrators each lasting about 1 hour. No follow-up was done.

Scenarios depicting typical student-faculty social interactions were posed to subjects, then each rendered an opinion as to whether the faculty member in the scenarios had crossed a student-faculty boundary and explained his/her reason for that response. Either an interview script or a question guide was used for all focus groups and personal interviews. In the focus group sessions, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; in the administrative interviews, the interviewer took notes. Demographics data obtained from the participants were not linked to any participants' responses in the focus groups or interviews.

Interview scenarios were centered on 3 situations: faculty members interacting with a group of students at a bar after a professional reception; a faculty member friending students on Facebook; and a faculty members taking a student to lunch. For each general scenario, additional context was added.

Data Analysis

Prior to the interviews, investigators developed a 34-category coding scheme for responses given during the focus group session regarding whether each scenario was

either appropriate or a boundary violation. One investigator developed more general themes, allowing us to collapse the 34 categories into 10. These 10 categories were reviewed and approved by the entire research team: no concerns, negative impact on relationship with student(s), legal issues, positive impact on relationship with student(s), violating faculty trust, perception/control of situation, unprofessional, depends on other factors, issues with alcohol, and other. For each scenario, participants reported whether they considered the faculty member's behavior appropriate or a violation of a faculty-student boundary, and the percentage of faculty members indicating that a violation had occurred was reported for all scenarios. Chi-square analysis determined association between type of school and percentage judging the behavior as a violation. Additionally, the number of responses in each category was recorded and the results across the 6 focus groups for each category were summed.

Results

Two-thirds of participants were nonadministrative faculty members and just over half were male. All participants had been in academia for an average of 10 years, over half (55%) were PharmD, and 31% were PhD. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1. For each scenario, the percentage of faculty members indicating that a boundary violation had occurred is reported in Table 2. The distribution of reasons cited by participants for 3 selected scenarios is reported in Table 3. These scenarios were chosen for inclusion because they are commonly encountered and/or were representative of the overall findings. All data from the survey are available upon request.

Almost half of the participants (44%) reported feeling that it was a boundary violation for faculty members to invite students to a bar (Table 2), and all participants agreed it was a violation for faculty members to discuss individual students with other students. Regarding discussion between students and faculty members about other faculty members, administrators were more likely than faculty members (82% vs. 46%, respectively, $P < 0.009$) and employees of public institutions were more likely than those of private institutions (100% vs. 33%, respectively, $P < 0.001$) to consider this a violation. Faculty members most often cited a negative impact on the relationship with students and legal issues as reasons for their responses. Regarding faculty members purchasing drinks for students, one faculty member commented that the faculty member is "using a power differential to encourage consumption of alcohol that they (students) may not otherwise consume." Both perception and control of the situation were viewed as issues: "Buying an intoxicating substance for students is

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

	Total (N=69)	Private (N=46)	Public (N=23)
Type of respondent			
Administration	24.6	23.9	26.1
Faculty	75.4	76.1	73.9
Type of degree			
PharmD	15.9	8.7	30.4
PharmD + residency/ fellowship	40.6	37.0	47.8
PhD	23.2	30.4	8.7
PhD + post-doc	8.7	13.0	13.1
Other	11.6	10.9	0
Gender			
Female	44.9	43.5	47.8
Male	55.1	56.5	20.2
Marital status			
Married	82.6	82.6	82.6
Single	13.0	15.2	8.7
Divorced	2.9	2.2	4.4
Living with significant other	1.4	0	4.3
Academic Position			
Assistant dean/ associate dean/dean	14.5	19.6	26.1
Assistant professor	47.8	52.2	39.2
Associate professor	21.7	21.7	13.0
Professor	10.1	2.2	13.0
Instructor	2.9	0	8.7
Other	2.9	4.3	0
Age, years[a]	46.2	45.5	47.7
Years in academia[b]	10	8.8	12.5

[a] Age, range: total = 29-69 years ; private = 29-69 years; public = 29-66 years.
[b] Years in acaemia, range: total = 0.5-40 years; private = 0.5-40 years; public = 1-30 years.

a problem. Buying sodas would be okay." One faculty member indicated, no concerns "if bought for all."

Over half of participants (55.1%) considered conversations about faculty members who were not present to be a boundary violation. However, some commented that such conversations could be positive: "As we encourage rational discussion of teaching, I've engaged students about why they didn't like a teaching style." Other faculty members, however, had less positive opinions. "Faculty should encourage them to take it up with the individual professor if they have strong concerns about the professor, because what you are doing is attacking a colleague without them having the opportunity to refute or defend themselves. By listening you are encouraging the students to talk." Faculty members in these situations mentioned that they "can't dictate what

Table 2. Faculty Member and Administrator Judgment of Social Interactions As Violating Faculty-Student Boundaries

Scenario	Administration, % (N=17)	Percent Faculty, % (N=52)	Total (N=69)
Faculty and student interaction at bar following professional reception			
Faculty members invite students for drinks at bar	58.8	38.5	43.5
Faculty member buys students' drinks	88.2	90.4	89.9
Negative comments about faculty member who is not present	82.4	46.2	55.1
Faculty members discuss individual student's performance	100.0	100.0	100.0
Faculty members discuss feelings about other faculty with students	100.0	100.0	100.0
Use of Facebook by faculty			
Female faculty member "friending" students	82.4	86.0	85.0
Male faculty member "friending" students	78.6	88.5	86.4
Older faculty member"friending" students	82.4	88.5	87.0
Student"friending" faculty member(s)	54.2	64.4	60.9
Student gives personal advice to faculty member	94.1	100.0	98.5
Variation by faculty member gender	94.1	100.0	98.5
Variation by faculty member age	94.1	96.2	95.7
Faculty member asking employee student(s) to lunch			
Faculty member asks student research assistant to lunch	5.9	2.0	2.9
Faculty member provides transportation to restaurant	23.5	17.6	19.1
Different genders of faculty member and student	29.4	27.5	27.9
Group of students involved	10.5	0	3.6

students do and don't talk about," and "I usually listen to it, but I don't make any type of comments on it."

Irrespective of gender or age of the participating faculty members or students, the majority (87%) considered friending students on Facebook a boundary violation (Table 2). Faculty members at private universities were more likely than their peers at public universities to consider friending inappropriate (100% vs. 64.7%, respectively; $P<0.001$). Faculty member comments included: "[Friending] is inviting your students into your personal life [a boundary violation]." "If it was a professional site or LinkedIn, not sure about it; but if personal, no." "I'm an old fogey – you have a personal and professional life." Students friending faculty members was perceived as less of a violation because it was student-initiated. One faculty member said, "[the] younger generation see[s] Facebook differently. They will see Facebook as a bar and don't see it as an issue." The reasons cited for boundary violations are summarized in Table 3.

Few participants (2.9%) reported thinking that it was a boundary violation to take a student employee to lunch (Table 2). Even when the gender of the faculty member and student were not the same, only 28% considered it inappropriate and most faculty members either had no concerns or felt this would have a positive impact on the relationship.

DISCUSSION

A search of the literature revealed no other studies that examined pharmacy faculty perceptions of faculty-student boundaries in social situations. Professional receptions at national meetings where alcohol is served are one of the most common situations for faculty-student social interactions. Faculty members were generally accepting of interactions with students at university-sponsored receptions; however, 40% of faculty members considered it inappropriate to invite a group of students to a bar afterward to continue discussions. Faculty members reported feeling that there was little appropriate conversation that could occur in the bar and that friendships with students would make future assessment difficult.[4] Faculty members also were concerned about perceptions and consequences: how such a situation might look to other students or outsiders and what might be communicated thereafter about the situation and behavior. Faculty members had even stronger negative opinions about purchasing drinks and discussing other students or faculty members. Some expressed concern about the potential legal issues associated with purchasing alcohol for students as well as the impact of such interactions on their professional relationships with the students.[4] Introducing students to influential individuals outside the institution at social events involving both groups can be positive for many students, but faculty members should be careful to treat students equally and to avoid any behaviors that might be perceived as unfair.

Social networking with students via electronic media also can be challenging. As social networking allows individuals to become more public about their private lives,

Table 3. Reasons Reported by Faculty for Faculty-Student Boundary Issues for Three Selected Scenarios[a]

Scenario Description	Administration	Faculty	Total
Faculty member buys students' drinks			
No concerns	3.7	3.1	3.3
Negative impact on relationship with students	37.0	23.4	27.5
Legal issues	18.5	18.8	18.7
Perception/control of situation	11.1	15.6	14.3
Unprofessional	0	9.4	6.6
It depends on other factors	11.1	1.9	11.0
Positive impact on relationship with students	0	4.7	3.3
Issues with Alcohol	7.4	7.8	7.7
Other	11.1	6.3	7.7
Students discuss individual, non-present, faculty member			
No concerns	13.3	23.0	2.2
Negative impact on relationship with students	23.3	2.7	8.7
Violating faculty trust	13.3	13.5	13.5
Perception/control of situation	6.7	8.1	7.7
Unprofessional	16.7	9.5	11.5
It depends on other factors	2.0	14.9	16.3
Positive impact on relationship with students	3.3	9.5	7.7
Issues with alcohol	0	5.4	3.8
Other	3.3	13.5	1.6
Female faculty "friending" students			
No concerns	8.8	3.1	5.2
Negative impact on relationship with students	61.8	6.9	61.9
Perception/control of situation	5.9	14.1	1.3
Unprofessional	2.9	3.1	3.1
It depends on other factors	11.8	6.3	8.2
Positive impact on relationship with students	2.9	1.6	2.1
Other	5.9	1.9	9.3

[a] General themes with zero responses by both groups were excluded from the individual scenarios.

faculty members will likely be placed in scenarios where boundaries will be questioned. This study reveals that attitudes vary among faculty members and administrators regarding social boundaries with students. Generally, faculty and administrators felt that it was not advisable to interact with students through social media, such as Facebook, but that such interaction was less inappropriate if initiated by the student rather than the faculty member. Although the professional networking site, LinkedIn, was not specifically addressed in this survey but was indicated by some participants as a more acceptable alternative.

Private university faculty members and administrators were more likely to consider friending on Facebook as a social boundary violation, while faculty members at public institutions expressed greater concern about the use of alcohol in interactions with students. The latter is likely a result of the party reputation associated with some large public universities and the efforts at some of those institutions to increase awareness about binge drinking and alcohol use in settings involving students.[11,12] One of the institutions included in this survey has a religious affiliation that could have impacted the faculty members' responses regarding this topic.

Although faculty members may sometimes find themselves in questionable social situations, there are no best practices guidelines for handling them. None of the participating faculty members and administrators was aware of a policy at their institution regarding appropriate behavior in social interactions with students. While an official policy may not be necessary, discussion about appropriate interactions with students among faculty members, especially junior faculty members with their chairs or mentors, is recommended to provide guidance and prevent potential problems.

There were several limitations to this study. Interpretation of the scenarios and responses may have varied among the participating institutions, leading to differences in results. Individuals participating in the study may not have felt comfortable expressing their true opinions in an

open discussion with peers and mentors; therefore, they may have expressed agreement with the majority opinion. Because of the small sample size, the results may have limited generalizability to a larger population. Individual responses were not correlated with demographic information; therefore, it is not possible to assess whether there were differences among responses according to characteristics such as gender, age, and academic rank. The average age of the participants in this study was 46.2 years and the average time in academia was 10 years. Future investigations should include a larger, more diverse group of faculty members to determine whether there are differences of opinion between older faculty members and their younger colleagues, who may be closer in age to the average student.

CONCLUSIONS

There were varying opinions among faculty members and administrators regarding the appropriateness of social interactions with students, such as whether socializing with students at a bar violated a faculty-student boundary. However, there was general agreement that faculty members socially interacting with students should not buy them drinks or discuss other students with them and should not initiate social network friendships with students, but that taking a student employee to lunch is acceptable.

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