The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. —Emerson

The importance of professional conduct within the academic community is self-evident, but what precisely is meant by the phrase is not. For “professional conduct” covers a multitude of situations. No single style or method of teaching guarantees it; a teacher may be appropriately professional whether meeting students at a café or in an office, whether by nature gregarious and sociable, or shy and reserved. Yet there are principles underlying the concept, that allow it to be honored when present and deplored when absent. In a university setting, professional conduct rests upon an enduring respect for fellow human beings and for the vocation of teaching, and recognition that a teacher’s powers and responsibilities must not be abused. These basic principles may be easier to appreciate abstractly than to apply while teaching.

The list that follows is designed to bring these principles into focus as a basis for discussion among and between faculty, teaching fellows, and other instructional support staff.

**Issues for Consideration**

- **Authority.** By virtue of their authority within the academic community, teachers not only have the power to influence thought and behavior, but also the concomitant responsibility to recognize the potential weight of their verbal and nonverbal expressions. As leaders in the classroom, teachers have the responsibility not only to impart the excitement of ideas and the challenge of academic debate, but also the importance of courtesy and respect in intellectual dialogue.

- **Fair Treatment of All Students.** Students should be treated even-handedly. Equity is not necessarily achieved, however, by treating all students in precisely the same way. For example, some students respond positively to hearty, well-intentioned criticism while others are discouraged by it. Some students welcome public comments about their work, while others are embarrassed by them. Genuinely evenhanded treatment of students depends upon making a conscientious attempt to recognize and appreciate such differences. Teachers (and students) should guard particularly against ethnic, religious, sexual, and other discriminatory stereotyping.

- **Interpersonal Relations.** The power teachers exercise over students to penalize or reward in the form of grades and recommendations requires caution in interpersonal interactions, and the need to avoid the kind of familiarity that compromises objective and fair evaluation of a student’s work. In particular, sexual advances towards or liaisons with one’s students are inappropriate, and violate University policy. Within these limits, however, intellectual mentoring and friendly interaction are important elements of the learning and teaching process.

- **Clear Communication.** Because the evaluation of students partly depends on their understanding of the requirements of a course, course heads should be clear in their articulation of expectations, assignments, and the rules of collaboration and citation. Providing written explanations of assignments and requirements reduces the risk of misunderstanding. Students have a right to expect prompt return of papers and exams and a clear justification of evaluation, just as TFs have the right to expect that assignments will be thoughtfully completed on time.

- **Classroom Engagement.** The classroom is frequently the site of intense intellectual debate—or, alternatively, unbearable silence. Maintaining an environment for a constructive contest between ideas and their supporting evidence is primarily the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers should be aware of any tendency to favor one mode of argument over another, in which only certain students thrive; of the importance of listening attentively and with respect; and of the significance of nonverbal clues (nods, frowns, gestures, etc.).
Services:

Criticism of Work. Comments should be directed at the work, not the person, and they should contribute to the refinement of both thinking and presentation. Peremptory dismissiveness is not appropriate.

Professors are responsible for the oversight of all grades given by teaching fellows.

Letters of Recommendation. Students depend on TFs for letters of recommendation. Honesty and fairness in responding to requests for recommendations is essential.

Advising. Access to advising should be offered and equally afforded to all.

- Confidentiality and Discretion. Teachers are privy to information (and opinions) about students that ought to remain confidential. Exceptions should be made only in cases of emergency, such as the threat of suicide or other harmful behavior, when confidentiality is secondary to a student’s welfare. Talking with colleagues or other students about confidential student information is inappropriate, as is any form of public embarrassment or shaming of a student.

- Collegial Conduct. Status differences exist within the teaching staff of every university. Awareness of the relative position of colleagues in the academic hierarchy may avoid placing them in awkward or compromising situations. The implications of making particular requests of one’s junior ought to be considered before making them; the right to refuse, for reasonable cause, without consequence, ought to be guaranteed every member of the community. Professional and research opportunities should be awarded with equity and fairness.

- Other Sources of Information:

Information for Faculty Offering Instruction in Arts and Sciences (The Office of the Registrar)

“Tips for Teachers: Sensitivity to Women in the Contemporary Classroom,” and “Tips for Teachers: Encouraging Students in a Racially Diverse Classroom” (Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Science Center 318)

Sexual Harassment and Unprofessional Conduct: Guidelines in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (Assistant Dean of the Faculty, University Hall 35)

“Students with Disabilities at Harvard” (Accessible Education Offices)

Office of Undergraduate Programs (617-495-4211) Videotapes of professional conduct sessions held at Bok Center Teaching Conferences are available for viewing at the Bok Center, Science Center 318.