

# What is the Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Addressing Student-Instructor Relationships?

From the Courage to Act Unsettled Questions Series



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#IHaveTheCourageToAct



# Land Acknowledgement

This work is taking place on and across the traditional territories of many Indigenous nations. We recognize that gender-based violence is one form of violence caused by colonization that is still used today to marginalize and dispossess Indigenous peoples from their lands and waters. Our work on campuses and in our communities must center this truth as we strive to end gender-based violence. We commit to continuing to learn and grow and to take an anti-colonial and inclusive approach to the work we engage with. It is our intention to honour this responsibility by actively incorporating into our work the [Calls for Justice within Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

# About Possibility Seeds

[Courage to Act](#) is a national initiative to address and prevent gender-based violence at Canadian post-secondary institutions. It is led by Possibility Seeds, a social change consultancy dedicated to gender justice, equity, and inclusion. We believe safe, equitable workplaces, organizations and institutions are possible. Learn more about our work at [www.possibilityseeds.ca](http://www.possibilityseeds.ca).

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## To reference this document, please use the following citation:

Paskaran, L., Eerkes, D., & De Costa, B. (2022). *What is the Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Addressing Student-Instructor Relationships? Courage to Act: Addressing and Preventing Gender-Based Violence at Post-Secondary Institutions in Canada.*

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### **Funding Acknowledgement:**

“What is the Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Addressing Student-Instructor Relationships?”, a project by Possibility Seeds, was graciously funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada



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## Introduction

Except where public scandals have erupted, PSIs have historically remained relatively neutral on the question of addressing personal relationships between instructors<sup>1</sup> and students. However, over the past few years, student advocates have been asking PSIs to address the problem of personal sexual or romantic relationships between instructors and students (“student-instructor relationships”). At present, while there are PSIs that do not address this issue directly, some PSIs have categorized these relationships as a conflict of interest; a few others have implemented an outright ban. This lack of clarity creates ambiguity and raises some important questions about consent,<sup>2</sup> power, and the role of PSIs in addressing student-instructor relationships.


### Why is this an Unsettled Question?

Currently, there is no consensus on the question of what role PSIs play in addressing student-instructor relationships. The first point of contention is whether there can be consent in such relationships. While there are examples of happy and successful couples who were once in a teaching/learning relationship, some argue that when that teaching relationship exists, the student is far too reliant on the instructor to be able to give consent. They maintain that the position of power over the student’s academic progress, reputation, and/or career opportunities entails an implied threat that instructor support could be withdrawn should the student not consent to a relationship, or if a relationship sours over time. In other words, the student may perceive that their continued academic and professional success is contingent on consenting to or remaining in a relationship. Allegations of this kind of abuse of power have been brought forward to PSIs decades later, once a former student no longer feels like the instructor can harm them or damage their career.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, “instructor” refers to any person in a teaching relationship at a post-secondary institution. This is defined broadly to mean anyone who has a direct or indirect ability to affect a student’s academic progress, funding or career opportunities.


<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this discussion, we use the Courage to Act [definition](#) of consent: “Consent is an everyday practice that is required before engaging in different types of interactions, including sexual relations. Consent must be voluntarily given by all parties. Consent must be informed, on-going, enthusiastic, withdrawn at any time, specific and is required before each interaction. It is important to note that any type of sexual activity without consent is sexualized violence.”



The second significant barrier to addressing the issue is the debate over the PSI's role in regulating personal relationships. To what extent is it appropriate for a PSI to determine who their employees can be in a personal sexual or romantic relationship with? What is their authority to enforce this? And what other control might the PSI try to exert, once it is involved in its employees' personal life choices? Some would argue that, as an employer, the PSI is not entitled to manage or regulate the private lives of its employees. While most agree that sexual relationships between instructors and students are inappropriate, there is significant debate about whether and how the PSI should be involved at all. There are exceptions in situations of clear abuse of power, for example, when an instructor presents a *quid pro quo* arrangement or makes comments about how the student has to rely on them for continued success. However, failure to define the role of PSIs in student-instructor relationships and the meaning of consent places the burden on students to come forward to report any abuse, leaving them feeling vulnerable and unsupported – and in these cases where the instructor has the real or perceived power to end or affect a student's academic or career progress, such a report is highly unlikely.

The primary relationship between instructors and students at the PSI is a teaching relationship, and the primary responsibility rests with the instructor to preserve the integrity of that relationship. Students attend PSIs in order to learn and earn a degree; instructors are there to teach, guide, supervise, advise, mentor and, in some cases, ease the student's path into a career. A sexual or romantic relationship with a student interferes with the integrity of the teaching relationship, and could affect the learning environment and teaching relationship with all of that instructors' students. This kind of conflict is different from the more typical examples of conflict of interest, such as research funded by an organization with a stake in the outcome, or receiving gifts while in a decision-making capacity. The reason sexual relationships between instructors and students require specific attention from the PSI is twofold:

1. They undermine the integrity of the teaching relationship, and therefore, of the educational environment; and
2. They may be conducive to sexual harassment and violence as a result of a real or perceived abuse of power.



In June 2022, Courage to Act convened an expert panel to begin a national conversation on this issue to consider the intersections of power dynamics, consent, and conflicts of interest. This paper shares key themes that arose out of that panel, outlining the issue from the perspective of PSIs, instructors and students and offering four recommendations for PSIs to manage the issue and minimize harm.

A key theme that emerged from the panel was the need to build bridges among all community members on this issue. Panelists acknowledged that there is often a disconnect between how PSIs, instructors, and students view the issue, but that there are opportunities to align their interests to protect the safety of the community. The recommendations made in this paper offer opportunities for PSIs to build bridges by recognizing where community and institutional interests align.

## Recommendations

The expert panel recommends that PSIs:


- *Develop a clear standalone statement of expectations*
- *Provide education and training for instructors*
- *Empower students and staff to set clear boundaries, access supports, and report policy violations*
- *Follow through when made aware of any conduct that undermines the teaching relationship*

## Methodology

To capture the nuanced conversation and ideas around student-instructor relationships, Courage to Act invited an expert panel with a range of perspectives on the issue to share their knowledge, lived and professional experiences.

The panel was made up of 6 experts, including a student, frontline worker, educator, campus gender-based violence investigator, faculty member, and faculty association representative. The expert panel participated in an online 90-minute collaborative question and answer session facilitated by members of Courage to Act's Reporting, Investigations,






and Adjudication (RIA) working group. Panelists were provided a brief backgrounder outlining the issue and given guiding questions ahead of time to prepare for the session.

Following the session, the audio was transcribed and coded using process coding. Process codes captured the action attached to the ideas presented in the facilitated session. After coding the transcript, themes were drawn from the resulting codes and organized into an outline that supported the writing of this paper. The initial draft was shared with the expert panel and members of the Courage to Act team to ensure key points were accurately captured and addressed, and a final draft was reviewed by the expert panel and the Courage to Act Advisory Committee before publishing.

## Section 1: Institutions

In order to understand the role of the PSI *vis a vis* the personal lives of its employees and students, the expert panel first needed to define the PSI's primary interests in relation to the interactions between instructors and students and the associated risks. They identified that the primary obligation is to ensure a safe learning and working environment for its members, conducive to the teaching relationship; they noted that a failure to do so constitutes a risk to institutional reputation and prestige. By providing a clear standalone statement that outlines the PSI's position on personal relationships between students and faculty, supporting students and instructors, and making a commitment to respond appropriately in instances that constitute an abuse of power or that undermine the integrity of the teaching relationship or educational environment, the PSI can meet its obligation and mitigate the related risks.

First and foremost, PSIs have an obligation to maintain a safe working and learning environment for every member of their community. A statement that clearly outlines the PSI's stance and protocols to manage or respond to student-instructor relationships signals to members of their community that the institution is invested in their safety at school and at work. The institution's commitment to a safe environment for its students, instructors, and employees, free from sexual violence, must be made through an intersectional lens



and incorporate in any public communication on student-instructor relationships that marginalized communities experience sexual violence at a disproportionate rate.<sup>3</sup>

Risks to reputation can arise when a PSI does not meet its obligation to maintain a safe working and learning environment, from rumours about predatory instructors, or from public criticism about how the institution handled a particular situation. Additionally, where student-instructor relationships continue unchallenged, there may be a perception that students who agree to enter personal sexual or romantic relationships with their instructors will get preferential treatment. For the PSI, upholding academic integrity and the fair and objective evaluation of students is also a significant reputational issue and contributes to the perceived value of the degree or certification.

The PSI, like any other workplace, will be a place where members of the community meet romantic partners. Relatedly, like any other workplace (many of which already have fraternization policies), there will be legitimate resistance when the employer oversteps into employees' private lives. While attempted control of its employees' personal relationships may be seen as egregious overreach, the integrity of the educational environment is very much the business of the PSI.


While the panel believed that these relationships should be discouraged, they pointed out that blanket prohibitions of any personal relationship between faculty and students will be unlikely to stop relationships from forming and could encourage individuals to hide their relationships. Where this is the case, the PSI will have limited ability to become aware of and address the harm that results. This places institutions at a far higher risk that will only continue to damage their reputation and decrease the safety of their members. Therefore, a more nuanced approach to the issue is recommended.

## Clear Standalone Statement

When preparing a statement on student-instructor relationships, PSIs should consider defining the teaching relationship clearly and broadly, to include teaching, tutoring, supervision, assessment, advising, and any decision-making over a student's academic progress or career opportunities. Other individuals, such as those with authority over

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<sup>3</sup> In [Students for Consent Culture's](#) research project, [Open Secrets, Power and Professors](#), survey respondents made numerous references to systems of oppression, including and but not limited to: racism, sexism, ableism, classism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia.



enrolment, housing, funding, or access to programs or necessary support should also be considered to be in a teaching relationship with students because they may have a direct or indirect ability to affect a student's progress or success, either positively or negatively.

In addition, it is crucial that the statement names the individuals and groups to whom it applies. When defining the scope of a statement on student-instructor relationships, institutions should consider the makeup of their community. "Students" should be inclusive of undergraduate and graduate students, dual credit students, high school IB (International Baccalaureate) students, learners in experiential learning programs or courses, apprentices, and any other individual in a learning arrangement. "Instructors" should include teachers, professors, visiting scholars, contract and/or part-time instructors, lab or course coordinators, supervisors, advisors, supervisory committee members, tutors, technicians, program directors, those who make decisions or advise on student funding, and any other individual who, by virtue of their position or area of study, has the ability to influence a student's program, progress, or career opportunities. Graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and student employees may fall into both categories at one time or another. PSIs should take care to acknowledge these dual roles in their definitions and be clear about the responsibilities and expectations related to those roles.


These definitions allow for precarious workers, particularly contract teachers and instructors of marginalized identities, to be adequately included in the PSI's stance on student-instructor relationships. In addition, they dispel the notion that instructors and students are homogenous groups and acknowledge the diversity of the community and the complexity of the issue. In providing this clarity, institutions also strengthen their commitment and responsibility to maintaining a safe working and learning environment free from sexual violence.

Clear expectations on maintaining the integrity of the teaching relationship will empower students and help instructors to manage boundaries with their students and to protect themselves and students at the same time. A standalone statement can begin to establish these expectations by defining the teaching relationship and asking whether the integrity of any teaching relationship is intact, and if this relationship has an impact on the integrity of the educational environment. This impact is an important indicator of power and privilege that permeates romantic relationships within the PSI space. Given the wide range of student and instructor demographics and roles, and the different institutional contexts,

this impact varies in nature and must be evaluated case-by-case. The following questions provide further guidance on how to assess this impact:

- *Is the instructor in a position of influence over the student's academic and/or career advancement? In other words, are the instructor and the student in a teaching relationship? Some questions to consider include, but are not limited to:*
  - *Is the instructor a direct supervisor of or on a supervisory committee for the student?*
  - *Is the instructor responsible for giving the student a mark on an assignment or in a course?*
  - *Does the instructor have the ability to influence a student's application and/or acceptance to a graduate program, for example, by writing a reference letter or allowing them to register in a specific course?*
  - *Are the instructor and the student in the same department or related departments in the case of interdisciplinary fields? How much would that increase the odds that they are or could be in a teaching relationship?*
  - *Does the instructor have any influence over funding decisions for the student?*
  - *Does the instructor have access to, or influence over, employment and academic opportunities for the student?*
  - *Is the instructor a renowned scholar within the field of study the student is currently in?*
- *Is the instructor living up to their obligation to ensure academic integrity, including fair assessment of all of their students and/or equitable opportunities for academic achievement/career advancement?*

Panelists also discussed the PSI's role in addressing student-instructor relationships where no teaching relationship exists. There was a divide between those who believed that any relationship between a student and an instructor would raise issues of consent that warranted the PSI's involvement and those who believed that it was necessary to first establish that a teaching relationship exists in order to prevent overreach into the personal lives of its students and staff. However, while the expert panel did not reach a consensus on this point, it is important that the PSI decide for itself what its stance will be and clearly articulate it in its standalone statement on student-instructor relationships. Because of the varied perspectives, this stance must come from deep, meaningful engagement with the



campus community, including students, to determine what is most appropriate in their specific context.

It is important to consider that PSI contexts can differ significantly, in size, demographic makeup, instructor-student ratios, and type of interactions between instructors and students. For example, instructors in some professional programs could be future employers to their students or have significant influence on students' careers. In contrast, when two people are from different departments and fields of study, there is minimal crossover regarding academic and career opportunities and therefore no interference in any teaching relationship. However, as noted above, the teaching relationship should include other factors that speak to an unequal power dynamic, such as where an instructor holds a position of prestige within the institution that could be used against a student in a more precarious position. This necessitates a nuanced understanding of student-instructor relationships as they pertain to the questions above and the power dynamics that exist between them.


Any institutional statement of expectations should be situated in the specific context of that PSI. A small institution with many close community connections may decide, appropriately, to ban all student-instructor relationships. On the other hand, in a large institution with thousands of staff and students, multiple disciplines and disparate programs, most of the students and instructors will never cross paths or be in a teaching relationship. In that context, a blanket ban may be an example of employer overreach into the private realm. In all cases, the teaching relationship and the integrity of the educational environment should remain the focus for the PSI.<sup>4</sup>

## Responsibility to Act

While best practice is to avoid these relationships, when a student-instructor relationship arises, either through disclosure by one of the individuals in the relationship or from a third party, the PSI, as employer, must act. In the absence of clear guidelines and accountability, the burden has typically been on students to manage their own situations, often without much assistance or support. The PSI should make it clear that the onus is on the instructor, as an employee of the institution, to maintain the integrity and safety of the teaching

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of pre-existing relationships, the PSI must consider managing the conflict of interest that arises in a teaching relationship.




relationship. *Specifically, the decision to enter a student-instructor relationship must begin with acknowledging the power dynamics, ensuring that the student consents to the relationship, and include working with the PSI to sever the teaching relationship.* Where an instructor fails to do so, the PSI must take steps to remove the instructor from the teaching relationship. Such measures could include, for example, assigning a different instructor to teach the course, or implementing an alternative supervisory structure.

Because the instructor is responsible for ensuring that their personal choices do not interfere with the integrity of the teaching relationship, any consequences of a breach must also rest with the instructor. In other words, it should not be the student who is disadvantaged or put in a position where they need to withdraw from a class or program. Wherever possible, the conflict should be addressed with minimal impact on the student's academic program. While at times it may be easier to simply move the student into a different program or area of study, no action that affects the student's program or progress should be undertaken without the student's consent.

As an added benefit, clarity about the consequences for an instructor who enters a romantic or sexual relationship with a student with whom there is also a teaching relationship may very well have a preventative effect.

## Section 2: Instructors

Student-instructor relationships have shifted over the decades from being considered a normal part of the academic culture to a subject of significant debate. There are, for example, calls to ban all relationships between students and instructors on the one hand, and arguments for no interference in personal relationships on the other. For some, keeping student-instructor relationships unregulated means viewing students as adults with agency and the right to choose their relationships, rather than as vulnerable victims to be sheltered or protected. More importantly, however, proponents of silence on the issue believe that the PSI, as an employer, has no business interfering in the private lives and personal relationships of its employees. They argue that it is a slippery slope to even greater interference and that it constitutes unacceptable overreach. However, there was consensus among the panelists that this type of thinking can normalize harmful practices, including sexual violence masked as a romantic relationship. Panelists agreed that there is




a need to move beyond expectations that normalize personal sexual and romantic relationships between instructors and students, including what they referred to as a problematic “old school” mentality.

Most instructors are aware of the problem and work hard to maintain the integrity of the teaching relationship. For those who continue to believe that student-instructor relationships are acceptable, part of “shifting the needle” and challenging this thinking is to acknowledge that even though power in relationships is dynamic, an instructor, by virtue of their position, will always be in a position of power when they are also in a teaching relationship with that student. For that reason, the onus must be on the instructor to set and maintain boundaries. Until and unless the professional relationship is over, and in some relationships that may never be the case (a graduate supervisor, for example, can have influence over a student's career for life), one can never guarantee unconditional consent.

The key point for instructors to understand is that *any time a student could potentially believe that assessment of their work, support for their academic achievement, funding, or career opportunities are contingent on a romantic or sexual relationship, there is no consent.* And when an instructor’s decisions, assessment, or assistance to a student might be influenced by their personal relationship with that student, they are in a conflict of interest – one that undermines both the integrity of the teaching relationship and academic integrity. Importantly, this can also affect the teaching relationship with students who may feel uneasy or unsafe, because of their knowledge of an instructor having relationships with other students.

When this is the case, it is the instructor’s responsibility, regardless of who initiates the relationship, to correct the conflict and maintain the integrity of the teaching relationship. They can do this by:

- refraining from entering any romantic or sexual relationships with students;
- recusing themselves from the teaching relationship with a specific student; or
- being prepared for the institution to step in and manage the teaching relationship.



Furthermore, instructors should be aware of the possibility that, on future reflection, the student may come to understand that they, as a student, gave consent under duress, and were unable to recognize it or faced any number of barriers to reporting it at the time.


Ambiguity in PSI policy and lack of clear information as to how student-instructor relationships will be addressed leave instructors, as well as students, vulnerable. They may be unsure, for example, how best to respond to a student who signals interest in initiating a relationship, or where to seek advice when they learn of a student-instructor relationship. It is important for instructors to have:

- clarity on the definition of consent and how their own positional power (whether or not they feel like the one in power) affects a student's ability to consent to a relationship;
- clearly defined expectations for their behaviour, such as refraining from student-instructor relationships, declaring any personal relationship as a conflict to be managed, recusing themselves from committees and other roles where decisions are made about the student, and so on;
- a clear sense of consequences for breaching PSI expectations; and
- information about who to contact for information or support on the issue.

Clarity is especially helpful for those precarious workers, particularly contract teachers and instructors of marginalized identities. It calls on the community to understand that addressing student-instructor relationships is not a matter of simply protecting vulnerable students from predatory instructors. It is important to acknowledge that instructors may also experience harm from other members of the community, including students. For example, one of our panelists raised the fact that queer faculty members and staff are often subject to hypersexualization by peers, co-workers and students alike, prompting queer staff to take extra precautions to ensure their safety on campus.

The PSI is responsible for providing ongoing communications and education so that instructors understand the expectations set out in the statement, as well as the relationship between power, abuse of power, consent, sexual violence, conflict of interest,





and academic integrity in the context of their position within the PSI and student-instructor relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Once expectations and responsibilities are made explicit, instructors can begin to implement their own strategies to avoid situations that undermine the teaching relationship and draw clear boundaries, including, for example:


- Discussing the teaching relationship in class at the beginning of the term to set expectations from the outset;
- Including a link to the statement of expectations in their course outlines;
- Only meeting with individual students in the context of their posted office hours or other scheduled on-campus appointments;
- Graciously refusing social invitations that might blur boundaries or infringe on the teaching relationship;
- Reflecting on and adjusting, where necessary, their own behaviours to prevent misunderstandings or inappropriate interactions with students, particularly in social spaces such as campus pubs, parties, or private residences;
- Having conversations with colleagues when they witness or hear about inappropriate behaviours; and
- Making themselves aware of PSI services or resources in case they or their students need assistance.

## Section 3: Students

Who has the voice to stand up in this situation? This question steered the majority of the expert panel's discussion around consent and whether consent was possible in an environment where instructors are in a position of power. Some panelists believed that students may feel as though they are unable to say "no" simply by virtue of the hierarchy and power associated with different members of the PSI community. These panelists explained that even where an instructor does not have a direct role in a student's academic

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<sup>5</sup> A panelist highlighted the importance for the PSI to accommodate contract faculty in any education or training provided to or required of staff and faculty on this issue. As such, PSIs should consider providing fair compensation for any additional training that contract faculty must undergo.



and career trajectory, they may hold institutional, financial and social power that makes it difficult for students to refuse a relationship.

Others argued, however, that assuming students possess little to no autonomy in this situation is unfair and unrealistic. They believed that it is important to recognize students as capable and resilient agents of their own choices, and to acknowledge that their vulnerability might not be due to their own weakness, but rather is the result of ambiguous policies, dismissive attitudes about student-instructor relationships, students' position in a strict hierarchy, and a perceived lack of support or reporting options within the PSI. It is also important to acknowledge that neither students nor instructors are heterogeneous groups. Any policy decisions should be inclusive of people of all ages, cultures, genders, abilities, and classes – and not based on stereotypical conceptions of students and instructors.

Additionally, PSIs must be attentive to the harm that continues to happen in non-consensual student-instructor relationships while understanding that, like any other workplace, the PSI will be a space where members of their community meet romantic partners. Key to the discussion is ensuring that students understand consent and coercion, and creating the space for them to feel safe enough to articulate their boundaries. They need to be empowered and have the space to say “no” in a situation where they are uncomfortable, or feel they are being coerced into a relationship with a person who holds the keys to their academic success or career progress, particularly when they are worried that their refusal will result in some form of reprisal. Additionally, they need to know where to seek help or report when they feel pressured or believe they are being subjected to retaliation for saying “no.”

It is equally important that PSIs do not disproportionately rely on students to shoulder the burden of creating a safe learning environment, as has been the case in the broader context of addressing sexual violence and harassment on campus.<sup>6</sup> It is the PSI's responsibility to create, foster, and maintain that safe learning environment, ensuring students are not put in the precarious position of being subjected to unwanted romantic or sexual overtures from their instructors.

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<sup>6</sup> See, [Our Campus, Our Safety: Student Leaders' Action Plan for Institutions and Governments to Address and Prevent Sexual Violence on Campus](#).

## Whose responsibility is it to keep community members safe?

PSIs have typically avoided addressing student-instructor relationships by not acting unless they receive a formal complaint from a student. Student advocates have consistently challenged PSIs to do better and to recognize student-instructor relationships as a systemic issue to be addressed in order to prevent future harm. By not doing so, PSIs continue to place the burden for making change onto students without acknowledging that not all students have the resources to expend on advocating for sexual violence prevention and support on campus. Students cannot always commit to activism while enrolled in school; and student activists are not always full-time staff at their respective student associations. Additionally, not all student organizations are equipped to take up the advocacy resulting in varying effects for students across the country at different institutions. The obligation to provide a safe and supportive learning environment belongs to the PSI, not to students and, therefore, PSIs must take responsibility by moving toward institutional accountability.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, it is important that PSIs continue to listen to their students and maintain an open channel of communication to ensure that any policy or protocol decisions introduced at the institution meet student needs.

The PSI has responsibilities to provide necessary supports to students and ensure students are knowledgeable about and able to access these supports. PSIs should consider:

- What supports exist? What supports are needed?
- Where can students go to talk through their uncertainty?
- Where can students go to report what feels like coercion or reprisal?
- What supports exist or are needed for instructors wanting to self-declare a relationship and recuse themselves from the teaching relationship with a student?

PSIs cannot derive the answers to the questions above without consulting with students and creating a collaborative environment where they can participate fully in identifying the issues, and the development, review, and improvement of needed education and resources. It is especially important that this consultation and collaboration center

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<sup>7</sup> Institutional accountability is defined in [A Comprehensive Guide to Campus Gender-Based Violence Complaints](#) as an administrative responsibility to: prevent harm before it occurs; accommodate involved parties after it occurs; address institutional gaps that enable harm; and design an action plan with benchmarks to remedy gaps and foster cultural change.

marginalized students who are impacted in unique ways, which means applying an intersectional lens and recognizing that a “one-size-fits-all” model of support will not be adequate.<sup>8</sup> By applying an intersectional lens, and fostering ongoing, open conversations and channels of communication, PSIs will build bridges and, ultimately, trust with students.

While it is necessary for PSIs to work with the students on their campuses to identify what specific supports are needed and ensure those supports are accessible to the campus community, PSIs should ensure they are giving students the education required to have a thorough understanding of consent, power, and coercion within the PSI context, as well as supports in all the areas of a student’s life that are impacted by sexual violence and harassment when needed. Furthermore, students must also be made aware of community supports that are available to them if they are uncomfortable accessing institutional supports.

Ultimately, the panel agreed that the lack of consensus on the issue is harmful and perpetually leaves students in a position without adequate support to navigate the issue. This generates a sense of urgency for PSIs to develop a comprehensive stance and support for students on student-instructor relationships.


## Bringing it all together

While we have separated the interests, needs, and responsibilities of the PSI, instructors, and students, the issue can only be effectively addressed by bringing them all together. Specifically, this looks like:

- the institution creating a framework and clarifying expectations through its institutional statement;
- the instructor setting and maintaining boundaries to protect the integrity of the teaching relationship;
- the PSI and the instructor working together to manage any conflicts of interest and/or interference in the teaching relationship without disadvantaging the student

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<sup>8</sup> See the Courage to Act [Knowledge Centre](#) for Resources for Gender Justice Advocates to Affirm And Support 2SLGBTQIA Gender-Based Violence Survivors on Post-Secondary Campuses; Resources for Gender Justice Advocates to Challenge Anti-Asian Hate; and Resources for Gender Justice Advocates to Challenge Anti-Black Racism.



when a student and instructor do consent to enter into a romantic or sexual relationship together;

- all students and instructors receiving information and support and having a trusted place to report inappropriate, problematic, or coercive relationships; and
- the PSI having trustworthy processes in place for when they learn about non-compliance, whether it arises from instructors abusing their power in an attempt to compel students into a relationship or putting themselves in a conflict of interest with their teaching duties and failing to manage that conflict.

An institutional statement lays an important foundation, but on its own will be insufficient to meet the interests of the PSI and its community members. The PSI also has a responsibility to support instructors to meet the expectations laid out in the statement, to support students when instructors do not meet those expectations, to provide both students and instructors with the information and resources they need, and to respond appropriately when necessary.

The responsibility for the integrity of the teaching relationship is a shared one between instructors, who are responsible for setting and managing boundaries, and the PSI, which is responsible for educating its employees on power, abuse of power, consent and harm, as well as providing clear guidelines, expectations and mechanisms to address breaches. It is particularly important that the PSI and instructor work together to find solutions when the instructor has disclosed a relationship with a student, both to manage the resulting conflict of interest and to ensure a learning environment that is free from harassment and violence. Any adjustment must be made by the instructor, not the student, and should not affect the student's academic standing or progress. It should also be understood that an adjustment to the teaching relationship may affect other parts of the instructor's employment and will not necessarily be consequence-free for them.

Clearly, the best option for instructors is to avoid romantic and/or sexual relationships with their students. However, should an instructor and student choose to enter such a relationship, it is necessary for them to withdraw from the teaching relationship, possibly by stepping back from supervisory, funding and awards committees, having another instructor grade the student's work, or taking a leave or partial leave from teaching while the student is enrolled in their respective program. However, each situation is unique and an instructor withdrawing from the teaching relationship may still be disruptive to the

student's academic career, such as when the instructor is the student's graduate supervisor. As such, this process of finding solutions that address potential conflicts of interest and protect against abuse of power requires creative and collaborative problem solving between employer and employee. Importantly, it must take into account any impact the proposed solutions might have on the student's learning and/or working environment.

## Conclusion

After considering the perspectives and needs of students, instructors, and PSIs, the expert panel recommended that PSIs:

1. *Develop a clear standalone statement of expectations regarding student-instructor relationships, the primacy of the teaching relationship, and protocols to be followed where an instructor's conduct amounts to a real or perceived abuse of power and/or undermines the integrity of the teaching relationship;*
2. *Provide education and training for instructors that explicitly highlights the connection between the integrity of the teaching relationship and sexual violence, and places the onus on instructors to maintain a learning environment and teaching relationships free from sexual harassment or violence;*
3. *Empower students and staff to set clear boundaries and make available trauma-informed resources, supports and reporting options through educational initiatives and multiple communication channels;<sup>9</sup> and*
4. *Use adjustments, corrective or protective measures or, where appropriate, consequences for the instructor, not the student, to follow through when made aware of an abuse of power, sexual violence/harassment, and relationships that undermine the integrity of the teaching relationship, including reprisals for reporting.*

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<sup>9</sup> An example of a trauma-informed resource PSIs can provide is "Navigating Power Dynamics and Boundaries as a Graduate Student" by Courage to Act's Educators Community of Practice. This, along with other resources and tool for PSIs can be found on the Courage to Act [Knowledge Centre](#), a national repository of tools and toolkits to address gender-based violence at post-secondary institutions in Canada created by a national network of student leaders, survivors, frontline workers, legal experts, union leaders, and post-secondary educators, staff and administrators.



By implementing all four recommendations, the PSI:

- Provides clarity on where it stands on student-instructor relationships;
- Specifies how it will manage or address student-instructor relationships;
- Empowers students and instructors to set appropriate boundaries based on a shared understanding of consent and coercion, without fear of reprisal;
- Ensures help is available and accessible;
- Instills confidence that the PSI will respond appropriately when an instructor's conduct undermines the safety of the learning environment and/or the integrity of the teaching relationship, and particularly those situations in which a relationship is nonconsensual; and
- Contributes to a safer working and learning environment for all.

A clear statement of expectations, supplemented by education, support, and consistent actions in the case of a breach, increases safety in the learning and working environment, reduces reputational risk, and can be highlighted as a feature that increases the prestige of the institution. Furthermore, it reinforces the PSI's educational mission, and contributes to meaningful, vibrant teaching relationships. In addition to meeting the PSI's main obligation, a clear statement on student-instructor relationships equips students and instructors to make informed choices, access available advice and resources, and understand the role of the PSI in addressing the issue.

While this paper addresses student-instructor relationships specifically, the principles can be applied to the workplace (for supervisor-subordinate relationships), in residence halls (for resident-staff relationships), or in any hierarchical environment in which relationships might occur, but where power structures could affect the ability to give consent free from real or perceived coercion. Where the primary relationship is not one of teaching, the starting point should be a shared understanding about each employee's responsibility to uphold the integrity of the educational environment, regardless of their role.