

Perceptions of Appropriate Behavior Between Students and Advisors in Astronomy

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The relationship between student and advisor is a crucial one, providing positive development to both parties. For students, a good advisor is essential for learning scientific research techniques, navigating academic politics and expectations, and ultimately graduating and starting a career. For advisors, a good student provides the opportunity to expand one's research, build a scientific legacy and in many cases achieve promotion or tenure. However, the openness of academia and the need for close relationships between students and advisors can lead to grey areas of appropriate behavior which may be difficult to gauge for both parties. We have conducted a brief survey of astronomy researchers, academics and affiliates to examine how the perception of appropriate behavior varies according to gender, age and professional or personal status, using scenarios encountered by the authors in their roles as advisors and students. Here we report preliminary results of this survey, examining what differences exist in perceptions and what respondents said.

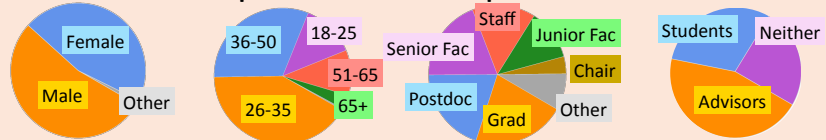
The Scenarios

- (1) An advisor tells a research student that s/he will have to stay at work late in order to complete a funding proposal that ultimately supports the student's tuition and salary.
- (2) An advisor occasionally gives a student gifts on her/his birthday or holidays.
- (3) After a conference dinner, an advisor wants to hang out with a research student and her/his friends because they seem like fun people.
- (4) An advisor, assuming that a student works at home in the evening, calls her/him on their personal phone after 10pm to discuss work-related or class-related issues.
- (5) An advisor observes that a student has noticeably lost or gained weight, and makes a comment to her/him about it.
- (6) An advisor insists on being seated next to a student during a long plane flight.
- (7) An advisor, trying to connect with a student on a personal level, asks about her/his current relationship or marital status.
- (8) An advisor friends her/his student on a social networking site, and comments routinely on personal pictures, posts, etc.
- (9) An advisor asks a research student to come over the her/his home or hotel room to discuss a research project.
- (10) An advisor routinely asks a student to join her/him for an informal lunch (just the two of them), and pays for the meal.

Fear and Loathing in Surveyland

Our respondents provided many honest and detailed comments, particularly in regard to ambiguities over context. Some comments were surprisingly negative (*"your questions suggest you just don't get it"*), made generally by men (9 of 11). There was also fear over the impact of this survey (*"this will make male advisors more unwilling to work with female students."*) we can't fully explain. Potential biases were pointed out, including *"heterosexual assumptions"*, even though every male-female combination was included. Fortunately, some did find this survey *"an extremely valuable and easily overlooked community service."*

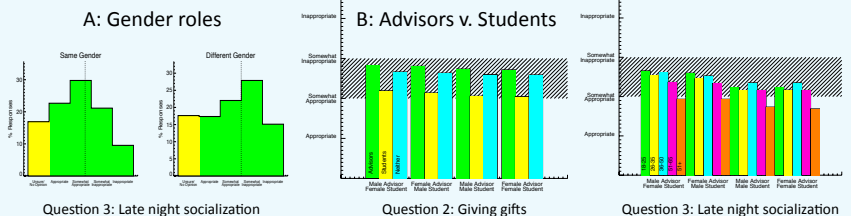
Implementation & Participation



The online survey was conducted from October 7-21, 2009, with a total of 564 respondents providing biographical data, ranking the scenarios at left in appropriateness level (and follow-on questions), and providing comments on how each scenario could be made "more appropriate". The pie charts above show the breakdown in gender, age, professional status and advisor/student role.

A Sampling of Results

In general, we found very little variation associated with the gender of the respondents, but the gender of advisor and student did make a small difference; same gender scenarios were viewed as more appropriate than different gender scenarios (A). Advisors consistently viewed the scenarios as more inappropriate than the students (B). Age variations were also common, with the youngest viewing scenarios as more appropriate - but not always (C).



A Student's Perspective



Universities provide rough behavioral guidelines, but in general academics are guided by our instincts. We set out to assess *general* perceptions about situations we have found ourselves in. What I came away with is that those polled found it difficult to remove the individual from a situation and even became perturbed that we thought these questions could be answered. While I don't think we saw any significant trend in perceptions of behavior I think we did discover a sensitivity among those polled that may point to 1) fear that we sometimes act inappropriately and 2) academic egoism that we can act any way we please as long as both parties appear comfortable.

An Advisor's Perspective



The scenarios may be ambiguous, but it is important to remember that we often assess the appropriateness of a situation (experienced or observed) without knowing the full context or intention. I was surprised that advisors generally viewed scenarios as more inappropriate than students, even when the latter got the short end of the stick (e.g., question 4). But this difference, and the negative and fearful comments, suggest the need for open discussions about appropriate behaviors, no matter how trivial the situations may seem. The broad range of responses indicates that we don't always share similar perceptions, and honest communication strengthens any relationship.