

Professionals in the Academy

By Deborah Ware Balogh

It is the start of a new academic year; new faculty members and teaching assistants have arrived on campus to find an overflowing mailbox filled with messages and memos concerning meetings, new policies, and notices of deadlines (already!). The finishing touches on course preparation are being made, schedules are rapidly becoming filled, and undergraduates are dropping in to meet their instructors. Keeping names and faces straight feels like a lost cause, and finding a parking space seems as if it will become a daily emergency. New instructors are thrust into an unfamiliar environment and are feeling the pressure to learn and assimilate its customs quickly. Many new TAs discover that they have little experience from their undergraduate education to prepare them for their new roles in the academy. New faculty may also feel unprepared for their many roles. Some have never had complete responsibility for teaching a course, while others served as teaching assistants, but had little guidance for functioning autonomously as teachers. Others may have enjoyed careers in other academic or nonacademic settings, and find that they need to adapt their teaching skills to meet the demands of a very different environment.

Academic Freedom and the University Culture

What does it mean to be a professional in the academy? What is the nature of the academic culture at Ball State University? What are the values of the culture that new instructors need to know to be successful teachers here? Professionals in the academy place the highest value on the pursuit of knowledge and enjoy the opportunity to seek knowledge in their individual disciplines according to their interests.

Few professions permit this degree of autonomy, and this distinguishing feature of an academic career is often the primary lure for academicians. However, the professional latitude enjoyed by instructors is

accompanied by certain obligations and responsibilities. Like their counterparts at other institutions, instructors at Ball State University are guided by the principle of "academic freedom" that, broadly speaking, refers to the free pursuit and presentation of knowledge. Instructors are guaranteed academic freedom and have the responsibility to guarantee academic freedom to their students and their peers. For example, academic freedom occurs when:

- Members of the academy are free from institutional censorship, intimidation, or other pressures to conform to specific points of view;
- Competence is evaluated, not point of view;
- Instructors and students experience tolerance when their opinions differ from those of others, and all points of view are given the opportunity to be heard without penalty (such as a grade being lowered, or tenure being denied);
- Instructors have the opportunity to select the content of their courses and the manner in which this content will be conveying.

Academic freedom carries special responsibilities. Instructors have the responsibility to practice intellectual honesty; when presenting information to students, they ensure that material appropriate to the discipline is covered accurately and that controversies in the discipline are presented in a balanced and fair manner. Unsubstantiated criticisms of points of view in the discipline or the deliberate suppression or distortion of critical aspects of a topic interfere with students' access to education. Instructors also have the responsibility to express their opinions with care and discretion, and with respect for others. Freedom to express a point of view does not mean freedom to demean, ridicule, or be uncivil to others. Students have a right to freedom from intimidation, and misuse of power by their instructors.

In principle, academic freedom often appears obvious to instructors. Some, especially those new to the

profession, may not understand the complex ethical issues underlying the practice of academic freedom, and may not fully appreciate that its practice requires constant awareness of the tremendous impact faculty and TAs have on students. Maintaining an educational environment that ensures free inquiry involves concentrated effort, serious reflection upon one's teaching practices, and unyielding concern for the welfare of students. There are several resources on academic ethics that offer guidance in this area. The Ball State University Faculty and Professional Personnel Handbook (www.bsu.edu/it/faculty/handbook) contains information concerning the rights and responsibilities of instructors and students. There are also several books available that offer guidance concerning ethics and teaching (Cahn, 1994; Keith Spiegel, Wittig, Perkins, Balogh, & Whitley, 1993; Long, 1992; May, 1990; Payne & Charnov, 1987). Additionally, statements of professional ethics are provided by the American Association of University Professors (1987) and the National Education Association (1977-78).

Other Aspects of Professional Conduct

Most instructors are already familiar with basic aspects of professional conduct. Professional demeanor and behavior involve maturity, honesty, dependability, collegiality, fairness and integrity, and respect for others. It is also understood by most that willful misconduct, neglect of duties, and insubordination have no place in the academy. In fact, Ball State University, like most other institutions, has specific policies concerning some types of unprofessional behavior that are detailed in the Faculty and Professional Personnel Handbook (www.bsu.edu/it/faculty/handbook). Some of these policies are discussed in University Policies and Teaching of the present volume.

In general, minimizing the risk of unprofessional behavior involves reliance on two basic principles:

1) maintaining concern for the welfare of students, and 2) selecting teaching strategies and policies that do not harm students. When instructors use these principles to guide their conduct and are in the habit

of reflecting upon their choices as teachers, they are more likely to behave in a manner consistent with the values of the academy. Specific reminders and guidelines for teachers' professional and ethical conduct are listed below. Some of the suggestions offered here are described in more detail in later chapters of this handbook. Additionally, Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993) offer a comprehensive discussion of the ethical implications of these and other aspects of the professional conduct of teachers:

- **Select and enforce classroom policies that are fair** to all and that establish appropriate classroom decorum. Avoid policies that are unduly rigid or designed to exploit power (e.g., a "lockout" policy for students who arrive late or no make-up exams even when unavoidable circumstances occur) as a way of establishing authority.
- **Demonstrate, by example, the importance of what takes place in the classroom.** Arrive on time and be prepared to use class time meaningfully.
- **Respond to inappropriate student behavior directly**, but with discretion. Deal with this type of behavior in a private conversation with the student, outside class. If it is absolutely necessary to deal with problem student behavior during class time, do so without embarrassing or humiliating the student.
- **Remember that students form impressions of instructors based on content and style of instruction.** Keep in mind that content that is delivered in an offensive manner or that disparages (even humorously) colleagues, other specialties, or the work and views of others is unprofessional, and undermines students' respect for the discipline as well as the instructor.
- **Abide by contracts made with students** in the course catalog description and the course syllabus.
- **Consider the ethical implications of nontraditional course assignments**, films that are explicit or deal with sensitive issues, required role-playing or personal disclosure from students, unusual or deceptive classroom demonstrations, and animal demonstrations before employing these teaching strategies. Use caution-some

teaching techniques may unintentionally harm students or cause them distress.

- **Provide regular opportunities for students to demonstrate progress**, and provide meaningful and timely feedback concerning strengths and deficiencies.
- **Maintain objectivity when evaluating all students**-each has strengths and weaknesses. Take steps to prevent evaluating "favorite" students differently than less-favored students or those whom you clearly dislike, e.g., grade exams blindly.
- **Maintain an expectation for academic honesty** in the classroom, and enforce policies concerning academic dishonesty.
- **Acknowledge the contributions of others in scholarly and creative works** including the contributions of students to such works.
- **Be accessible to students outside class**. Schedule office hours on a regular basis and be available to students during these times.
- **Limit social interactions with students** to those that involve activities related to students' professional development (e.g., attendance at a professional meeting or a department-sponsored gathering for an invited speaker).
- **Avoid dual-role relationships and conflicts of interest** in interactions with students (e.g., loaning money, accepting gifts, tutoring for a fee, asking personal favors, counseling on nonacademic problems, romantic relationships, etc.).
- **Leave students out of conflicts with colleagues**.
- **Proceed cautiously when a student requests help with a conflict with another instructor**. Offer problem-solving advice rather than impressions of the other instructor.
- **Maintain confidentiality concerning students' records and in interactions with students and colleagues**. Protect the identity of students when discussing student problems with other instructors. Do not share private information concerning other instructors with students or peers.
- **Exercise caution in behavior outside the classroom and in the local community**. Be a role model for good citizenship, use good judgment,

and avoid behavior that compromises the reputation of the department or the University.

- **Demonstrate respect for diversity among students and colleagues**. Create an atmosphere of inclusiveness in the classroom.
- **Do not accept outside employment or consulting opportunities that interfere** with fulfilling obligations to the University.
- **Arrange for adequate classroom coverage** when expected or unexpected absences occur.
- **Become familiar with the ethical standards** of the discipline and uphold them.
- **Acknowledge when a personal problem or psychological impairment interferes with classroom performance** or results in the inability to fulfill teaching obligations. Seek the advice of the immediate supervisor or the department chairperson, and seek psychological assistance from a therapist.
- **Maintain the integrity of the profession by becoming involved when colleagues engage in ethically problematic behavior**. Approach the suspected offender to discuss concerns. Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993) offer suggestions for dealing with the unethical behavior of colleagues.

Defining Professional Role Boundaries

Members of the academy at Ball State University have several roles: Instructor, scholar, administrator, advisor, student, colleague, supervisor, mentor, protege. Juggling the demands of these roles can be difficult, especially for new instructors who are close in age to the students with whom they interact. New faculty may find themselves supervising graduate students who are only a few years younger than they or who are substantially older! New TAs may also find combining their varied roles especially difficult when they are the same age as some of the undergraduates they supervise. Furthermore, instructors who are new to the community are aware that establishing new social relationships and sources of personal support takes time, and they may feel socially isolated and somewhat vulnerable.

At times the boundaries of the roles that new

instructors play become ambiguous. This can occur in the context of the faculty member or TA experiencing apprehension about his or her performance and how s/he will be evaluated by others. Insecurities about competence often affect the relationships new instructors have with students. Two characteristic ways that role boundaries can become impaired are by: 1) instructors who wish to be "buddies" with the students in their courses and establish social/personal relationships with them, or 2) instructors who inappropriately seek to distance themselves from their students by becoming authoritarian, withholding, and punitive. Although most instructors avoid engaging in either of these scenarios, each is worthy of some discussion, because if either occurs, students may be seriously harmed, despite the good intentions of the instructor.

There are several negative consequences that can occur when instructors establish personal relationships with students even when both parties are well-intentioned, believe the relationship to be consensual, and take steps to avoid the risks associated with such relationships (Blevins-Knabe, 1992). The student may develop an inappropriate dependency upon the instructor that impedes academic development. Thus, the danger exists that the social relationship will take precedence over the professional relationship, and the student's progress will suffer. Moreover, a student may begin to question his or her intellectual skills when involved in a social relationship with an instructor, wondering whether s/he is valued for academic ability independently of personal intimacy. Other students may perceive inequitable treatment and feel they are denied access to an equal amount of the instructor's attention. The instructor may lose objectivity when evaluating students or may be perceived by others to lack objectivity, placing the instructor's role and trustworthiness as a teacher and evaluator in jeopardy. Finally, the imbalance of power between the instructor and student may undermine the student's sense of freedom in the relationship, and s/he may feel that terminating or altering the relationship will have negative consequences for her or his career development (which may constitute sexual

harassment). Any of these circumstances can result in students being denied access to education.

An equally problematic situation occurs when an instructor becomes rigid and authoritarian. Often, instructors who fall into this pattern become pedantic, sarcastic, hypercritical of students, and excessively rule-oriented. They become defensive when students ask questions. Students in their courses begin to feel alienated because they quickly get the message that free inquiry and open dialogue are not permissible. Classroom climate rapidly deteriorates into a battle of wills between the instructor and the students, and this adversarial climate eventually destroys student motivation and interest. A vicious cycle develops—the instructor, sensing that her or his authority is not recognized by the students, reacts by becoming more authoritarian. This has the effect of further withdrawal by the students and additional attempts to establish authority by the instructor. By the end of the semester, both parties feel frustrated and cheated. Clearly, such circumstances are an impediment to student learning.

Most problems with role ambiguities are avoided by maintaining a clear sense of one's purpose in each role and the professional responsibilities that each role entails. Instructors who regularly reflect upon their teaching goals and practices, who are able to separate professional from personal motives, and who seek advice from peers when questions of possible conflicts of interest arise value the welfare of students, and thus, maintain clear role boundaries.

Working with Other University Personnel

Being a successful teacher involves building positive relationships with other members of the university community. In organizing and implementing their course objectives, new instructors discover that they need to interact with personnel in many different service areas—the Libraries, Computing Services, Academic Advising, the Registrar's Office, Educational Resources, etc. New instructors also learn

that they must become familiar with the needs of other departments, university administrators, and student groups.

Some instructors find that the procedures and traditions in place at Ball State are unlike those in place at their former institutions. Dealing with the unfamiliar may cause new instructors to challenge procedures rather than adapt to them. This can result in getting off to a bad start with personnel upon whom instructors rely for support services. Becoming accustomed to new rules, deadlines, and bureaucratic channels requires patience, determination, and an understanding that there are multiple ways to organize the functions, and to achieve the goals, of an institution. Seeking information and making requests in ways that express appreciation for the services provided and the complexities of a new system, acknowledging that one is learning the ropes, and planning for unforeseen obstacles may allow for an easier adjustment. .

Developing Good Relationships with Department Staff

Establishing positive professional relationships with office staff members and technicians in one's department is particularly important. In most departments, office staff members and technicians complete work for several instructors and must constantly adjust priorities to meet short-term and long-term needs of department members. These staff members often

perform their duties in a common work area that is accessible to everyone. Lack of privacy, constantly shifting demands, and repeated interruptions often create a hectic, if not stressful, work environment. It is wise to keep in mind a few rules of common courtesy and respect when interacting with office staff:

- A technician's or an office worker's personal space includes her or his desk and adjoining work area. Instructors should respect this space as they would that of other colleagues. They should not borrow items, go through a staff member's desk, or use equipment without asking.
- It is wise to allow plenty of lead time when

equipment needs to be serviced or when tests, syllabi, correspondence, or manuscripts need to be prepared, and to avoid asking for such tasks to be completed on short notice except in emergencies.

- Instructors should avoid burdening office staff with tasks that can easily be done without staff help, e.g., returning a phone call, ordering a complimentary textbook, returning books to the library, delivering documents to other offices on campus, taking exams to be computer scored (or picking up the scored exams), scheduling meetings with students, etc. It probably takes less time to simply complete the task, than it does to explain what is needed to someone else. Requests for personal errands are completely off limits!
- Instructors should demonstrate respect for the multiple, and often immediate, demands placed upon office staff. When making requests, they should ask the staff member if s/he can interrupt work to respond to the request, or if the request should be made later. Also, office staff often do not have time to chat when instructors are taking a coffee break.
- Courtesy dictates that instructors carry on extended conversations with others outside the office worker's or technician's work area. These conversations are often distracting and may interfere with the staff member's ability to concentrate on completing the work of the department.
- Instructors should respect office staff members, breaks, lunch hours, sick leave, and vacation leave by making requests during regular office hours.

Concerns

In any occupational environment conflicts arise and misunderstandings occur among colleagues and between supervisors and supervisees. Most of these difficulties can be resolved through informal discussion between the parties involved, especially if both parties behave professionally and respectfully toward one another. In some cases, however, adequate resolution through informal means is not possible. This can occur when a power differential exists between the individuals involved, as in the case of a conflict

between a TA and a faculty member, or between an untenured assistant professor and a tenured full professor. Other types of conflicts are simply not resolved easily by confrontation between the two parties, e.g., an allegation of sexual harassment.

Most departments have designated committees or administrators who are responsible for working with instructors to resolve conflicts informally or for hearing formal complaints. Faculty typically consult with the department chairperson when difficulties arise; depending upon the outcome of this consultation, the matter may be turned over to a departmental committee for formal action. TA concerns are addressed more commonly through consultation with the graduate program director or coordinator, but TAs can also seek counsel with the department chair or departmental committees.

When a third party is consulted regarding a dispute, the most effective way to report the problem is by stating the history of the problem, recalling important facts, describing any efforts to resolve the problem, and presenting one's position concerning a satisfactory outcome. Speculating about the motives of the other party, making personal attacks or inflammatory remarks, conveying information from the "rumor mill," or bringing up prior tangential slights or transgressions is typically ineffective in making one's case or in achieving a satisfactory resolution of the problem. If the matter is sent to a committee for formal disposition, it is critical that the parties involved adhere strictly to the procedures for presenting their positions. These procedures were designed, in part, to maintain a professional and respectful climate for solving the problem. In addition, committees must make decisions based upon established rules and policies, and failure to follow the guidelines set forth by departmental governance can result in a complaint being dismissed or resolved in an unsatisfactory manner.

Occasionally conflicts must be resolved by higher-level administration or university governance. There is a clear "chain of command" for dealing with these cases-when department resolution is not possible or is

unsatisfactory to the parties involved, a college committee or the Dean of the college becomes involved in resolving the dispute. In rarer cases, the problem is taken up by university committees or the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. It is seldom the case that conflicts reach the level of the President's Office or the Board of Trustees, the last two internal levels at which conflicts can be resolved. Instructors are strongly encouraged to begin at the department level when difficulties arise, and to follow any procedures or due process guidelines set forth by department policies.