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Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe

By Laura Kipnis

You have to feel a little sorry these days for professors married to their former students. They used to be respectable citizens—leaders in their fields, department chairs, maybe even a dean or two—and now they're abusers of power *avant la lettre*. I suspect you can barely throw a stone on most campuses around the country without hitting a few of these neo-miscreants. Who knows what coercions they deployed back in the day to corral those students into submission; at least that's the fear evinced by today's new campus dating policies. And think how their kids must feel! A friend of mine is the offspring of such a coupling—does she look at her father a little differently now, I wonder.

It's been barely a year since the Great Prohibition took effect in my own workplace. Before that, students and professors could date whomever we wanted; the next day we were off-limits to one another—*verboten, traife,* dangerous (and perhaps, therefore, all the more alluring).

My Title IX Inquisition

What's the good of having a freedom you're afraid to use?

Of course, the residues of the wild old days are everywhere. On my campus, several such "mixed" couples leap to mind, including female professors wed to former students. Not to mention the legions who've dated a graduate student or two in their day—plenty of female professors in that category, too—in fact, I'm one of them. Don't ask for details. It's one of those things it now behooves one to be reticent about, lest you be branded a predator.

Forgive my slightly mocking tone. I suppose I'm out of step with the new realities because I came of age in a different time, and under a different version of feminism, minus the layers of prohibition and sexual terror surrounding the unequal-power dilemmas of today.

The fiction of the allpowerful professor that's embedded in the new campus codes appalls me.

When I was in college, hooking up with professors was more or less part of the curriculum. Admittedly, I went to an art school, and mine was the lucky generation that came of age in that too-brief interregnum after the sexual revolution and before AIDS turned sex into a crime scene replete with perpetrators and victims—back when sex, even when not so great or when people got their feelings hurt, fell under the category of life experience. It's not that I didn't make my share of mistakes, or act stupidly and inchoately, but it was embarrassing, not traumatizing.

As Jane Gallop recalls in *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), her own generational *cri de coeur*, sleeping with professors made her feel cocky, not taken advantage of. She admits to seducing more than one of them as a grad student—she wanted to see them naked, she says, as like other men. Lots of smart, ambitious women were doing the same thing, according to her, because it was a way to experience your own power.

But somehow power seemed a lot less powerful back then. The gulf between students and faculty wasn't a shark-filled moat; a misstep wasn't fatal. We partied together, drank and got high together, slept together. The teachers may have been older and more accomplished, but you didn't feel they could take advantage of you because of it. How would they?

Which isn't to say that teacher-student relations were guaranteed to turn out well, but then what percentage of romances do? No doubt there were jealousies, sometimes things didn't go the way you wanted—which was probably good training for the rest of life. It was also an excellent education in not taking power too seriously, and I suspect the less seriously you take it, the more strategies you have for contending with it.

It's the fiction of the all-powerful professor embedded in the new campus codes that appalls me. And the kowtowing to the fiction—kowtowing wrapped in a vaguely feminist air of rectitude. If this is feminism, it's feminism hijacked by melodrama. The melodramatic imagination's obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what's shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students' sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing.

I've done what I can to adapt myself to the new paradigm. Around a decade ago, as colleges began instituting new "offensive environment" guidelines, I appointed myself the task of actually reading my university's sexual-harassment handbook, which I'd thus far avoided doing. I was pleased to learn that our guidelines were less prohibitive than those of the more draconian new codes. You were permitted to date students; you just weren't supposed to harass them into it. I could live with that.

However, we were warned in two separate places that inappropriate humor violates university policy. I'd always thought inappropriateness was pretty much the definition of humor—I believe Freud would agree. Why all this delicacy? Students were being encouraged to regard themselves as such exquisitely sensitive creatures that an errant classroom remark could impede their education, as such hothouse flowers that an unfunny joke was likely to create lasting trauma.

Knowing my own propensity for unfunny jokes, and given that telling one could now land you, the unfunny prof, on the carpet or even the national news, I decided to put my name down for one of the voluntary harassment workshops on my campus, hoping that my good citizenship might be noticed and applauded by the relevant university powers.

At the appointed hour, things kicked off with a "sexual-harassment pretest." This was administered by an earnest mid-50s psychologist I'll call David, and an earnest young woman with a master's in social work I'll call Beth. The pretest consisted of a long list of true-false questions such as: "If I make sexual comments to

someone and that person doesn't ask me to stop, then I guess that my behavior is probably welcome."

espite the painful dumbness of these questions and the fading of afternoon into evening, a roomful of people with advanced degrees seemed grimly determined to shut up and play along, probably aided by a collective wish to be sprung by cocktail hour. That is, until we were handed a printed list of "guidelines."

No. 1 on the list was: "Do not make unwanted sexual advances."

Someone demanded querulously from the back, "But how do you know they're unwanted until you try?" (OK, it was me.) David seemed oddly flustered by the question and began frantically jangling the change in his pants pocket.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" he finally responded, trying to make a joke out of it. I did want him to answer, because it's something I'd been wondering—how are you supposed to know in advance? Do people wear their desires emblazoned on their foreheads?—but I didn't want to be seen by my colleagues as a troublemaker. There was an awkward pause while David stared me down. Another person piped up helpfully, "What about smoldering glances?"

Everyone laughed, but David's coin-jangling was becoming more pronounced. A theater professor spoke up, guiltily admitting to having complimented a student on her hairstyle that very afternoon (one of the "Do Nots" involved not commenting on students' appearance) but, as a gay male, wondered whether *not* to have complimented her would have been grounds for offense. He mimicked the female student, tossing her mane around in a "Notice my hair" manner, and people began shouting suggestions about other dumb pretest scenarios for him to perform, like sexual-harassment charades. Rebellion was in the air. The man sitting next to me, an ethnographer who studied street gangs, whispered, "They've lost control of the room." David was jangling his change so frantically that it was hard to keep your eyes off his groin.

I recalled a long-forgotten pop-psychology guide to body language

that identified change-jangling as an unconscious masturbation substitute. If the leader of our sexual-harassment workshop was engaging in public masturbatory-like behavior, seizing his private pleasure in the midst of the very institutional mechanism designed to clamp such delinquent urges, what hope for the rest of us?

Let's face it: Other people's sexuality is often just weird and creepy. Sex is leaky and anxiety-ridden; intelligent people can be oblivious about it. Of course the gulf between desire and knowledge has long been a tragicomic staple. Consider some notable treatments of the student-professor hookup theme—J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*; Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*; Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*—in which learning has an inverse relation to self-knowledge, professors are emblems of sexual stupidity, and such disasters ensue that it's hard not to read them as cautionary tales about the disastrous effects of intellect on practical intelligence.

The implementers of the new campus codes seemed awfully optimistic about rectifying the condition, I thought to myself.

he optimism continues, outpaced only by all the new prohibitions and behavior codes required to sustain it. According to the latest version of our campus policy, "differences in institutional power and the inherent risk of coercion are so great" between teachers and students that no romance, dating, or sexual relationships will be permitted, even between students and professors from different departments. (Relations between graduate students and professors aren't outright banned, but are "problematic" and must be reported if you're in the same department.) Yale and other places had already instituted similar policies; Harvard jumped on board last month, though it's a sign of the incoherence surrounding these issues that the second sentence of *The New York Times* story on Harvard reads: "The move comes as the Obama administration investigates the handling of accusations of sexual assault at dozens of colleges, including Harvard." As everyone knows, the accusations in the news have been about students assaulting other students, not students dating professors.

The climate of sanctimony about

student vulnerability has grown impenetrable. No one dares question it lest you're labeled antifeminist, or worse, a sex criminal.

Of course, the codes themselves also shape the narratives and emotional climate of professor-student interactions. An undergraduate sued my own university, alleging that a philosophy professor had engaged in "unwelcome and inappropriate sexual advances" and that the university punished him insufficiently for it. The details that emerged in news reports and legal papers were murky and contested, and the suit was eventually thrown out of court.

In brief: The two had gone to an art exhibit together—an outing initiated by the student—and then to some other exhibits and bars. She says he bought her alcohol and forced her to drink, so much that by the end of the evening she was going in and out of consciousness. He says she drank of her own volition. (She was under legal drinking age; he says he thought she was 22.) She says he made various sexual insinuations, and that she wanted him to drive her home (they'd driven in his car); he says she insisted on sleeping over at his place. She says she woke up in his bed with his arms around her, and that he groped her. He denies making advances and says she made advances, which he deflected. He says they slept on top of the covers, clothed. Neither says they had sex. He says she sent friendly texts in the days after and wanted to meet. She says she attempted suicide two days later, now has PTSD, and has had to take medical leave.

The aftermath has been a score of back-and-forth lawsuits. After trying to get a financial settlement from the professor, the student filed a Title IX suit against the university: She wants her tuition reimbursed, compensation for emotional distress, and other damages. Because the professor wasn't terminated, when she runs into him it triggers her PTSD, she says. (The university claims that it appropriately sanctioned the professor, denying him a raise and a named chair.) She's also suing the professor for gender violence. He sued the university for gender discrimination (he says he

wasn't allowed to present evidence disproving the student's allegations)—this suit was thrown out; so was the student's lawsuit against the university. The professor sued for defamation various colleagues, administrators, and a former grad student whom, according to his complaint, he had previously dated; a judge dismissed those suits this month. He sued local media outlets for using the word "rape" as a synonym for sexual assault—a complaint thrown out by a different judge who said rape was an accurate enough summary of the charges, even though the assault was confined to fondling, which the professor denies occurred. (This professor isn't someone I know or have met, by the way.)

What a mess. And what a slippery slope, from alleged fondler to rapist. But here's the real problem with these charges: This is melodrama. I'm quite sure that professors can be sleazebags. I'm less sure that any professor can force an unwilling student to drink, especially to the point of passing out. With what power? What sorts of repercussions can there possibly be if the student refuses?

Indeed, these are precisely the sorts of situations already covered by existing sexual-harassment codes, so if students think that professors have such unlimited powers that they can compel someone to drink or retaliate if she doesn't, then these students have been very badly educated about the nature and limits of institutional power.

In fact, it's just as likely that a student can derail a professor's career these days as the other way around, which is pretty much what happened in the case of the accused philosophy professor.

To a cultural critic, the representation of emotion in all these documents plays to the gallery. The student charges that she "suffered and will continue to suffer humiliation, mental and emotional anguish, anxiety, and distress." As I read through the complaint, it struck me that the lawsuit and our new consensual-relations code share a common set of tropes, and a certain narrative inevitability. In both, students and professors are stock characters in a predetermined story. According to the code, students are putty in the hands of all-powerful professors.

According to the lawsuit, the student was virtually a rag doll, taken advantage of by a skillful predator who scripted a drunken evening of galleries and bars, all for the opportunity of some groping.

Everywhere on campuses today you find scholars whose work elaborates sophisticated models of power and agency. It would be hard to overstate the influence, across disciplines, of Michel Foucault, whose signature idea was that power has no permanent address or valence. Yet our workplaces themselves are promulgating the crudest version of top-down power imaginable, recasting the professoriate as Snidely Whiplashes twirling our mustaches and students as helpless damsels tied to railroad tracks. Students lack volition and independent desires of their own; professors are would-be coercers with dastardly plans to corrupt the innocent.

Even the language these policies come packaged in seems designed for maximum stupefaction, with students eager to add their voices to the din. Shortly after the new policy went into effect on my campus, we all received a long email from the Title IX Coordinating Committee. This was in the midst of student protests about the continued employment of the accused philosophy professor: 100 or so students, mouths taped shut (by themselves), had marched on the dean's office (a planned sit-in of the professor's class went awry when he pre-emptively canceled it). The committee was responding to a student-government petition demanding that "survivors" be informed about the outcomes of sexual-harassment investigations. The petition also demanded that the new policies be amended to include possible termination of faculty members who violate its provisions.

There was more, but my eye was struck by the word "survivor," which was repeated several times. Wouldn't the proper term be "accuser"? How can someone be referred to as a survivor before a finding on the accusation—assuming we don't want to predetermine the guilt of the accused, that is. At the risk of sounding like some bow-tied neocon columnist, this is also a horrifying perversion of the language by people who should know better. Are you seriously telling me, I wanted to ask the Title IX Committee, that the same term now encompasses both someone

allegedly groped by a professor and my great-aunt, who lived through the Nazi death camps? I emailed an inquiry to this effect to the university's general counsel, one of the email's signatories, but got no reply.

For the record, I strongly believe that bona fide harassers should be chemically castrated, stripped of their property, and hung up by their thumbs in the nearest public square. Let no one think I'm soft on harassment. But I also believe that the myths and fantasies about power perpetuated in these new codes are leaving our students disabled when it comes to the ordinary interpersonal tangles and erotic confusions that pretty much everyone has to deal with at some point in life, because that's simply part of the human condition.

In the post-Title IX landscape, sexual panic rules. Slippery slopes abound. Gropers become rapists and accusers become survivors, opening the door for another panicky conflation: teacher-student sex and incest. Recall that it was incest victims who earlier popularized the use of the term "survivor," previously reserved for those who'd survived the Holocaust. The migration of the term itself is telling, exposing the core anxiety about teacher-student romances: that there's a whiff of perversity about such couples, notwithstanding all the venerable married ones.

These are anxious times for officialdom, and students, too, are increasingly afflicted with the condition—after all, anxiety is contagious. Around the time the "survivor" email arrived, something happened that I'd never experienced in many decades of teaching, which was that two students—one male, one female—in two classes informed me, separately, that they were unable to watch assigned films because they "triggered" something for them. I was baffled by the congruence until the following week, when the *Times* ran a story titled "Trauma Warnings Move From the Internet to the Ivory Tower," and the word "trigger" was suddenly all over the news.

I didn't press the two students on the nature of these triggers. I knew them both pretty well from previous classes, and they'd always seemed well-adjusted enough, so I couldn't help wondering. One of the films dealt with fascism and bigotry: The triggeree was a minority student, though not the minority targeted in the film. Still, I could see what might be upsetting. In the other case, the connection between the student and the film was obscure: no overlapping identity categories, and though there was some sexual content in the film, it wasn't particularly explicit. We exchanged emails about whether she should sit out the discussion, too; I proposed that she attend and leave if it got uncomfortable. I was trying to be empathetic, though I was also convinced that I was impeding her education rather than contributing to it.

I teach in a film program. We're supposed to be instilling critical skills in our students (at least that's how I see it), even those who aspire to churn out formulaic dreck for Hollywood. Which is how I framed it to my student: If she hoped for a career in the industry, getting more critical distance on material she found upsetting would seem advisable, given the nature of even mainstream media. I had an image of her in a meeting with a bunch of execs, telling them that she couldn't watch one of the company's films because it was a trigger for her. She agreed this could be a problem, and sat in on the discussion with no discernable ill effects.

But what do we expect will become of students, successfully cocooned from uncomfortable feelings, once they leave the sanctuary of academe for the boorish badlands of real life? What becomes of students so committed to their own vulnerability, conditioned to imagine they have no agency, and protected from unequal power arrangements in romantic life? I can't help asking, because there's a distressing little fact about the discomfort of vulnerability, which is that it's pretty much a daily experience in the world, and every sentient being has to learn how to somehow negotiate the consequences and fallout, or go through life flummoxed at every turn.

Here's a story that brought the point home for me. I was talking to a woman who'd just published her first book. She was around 30, a friend of a friend. The book had started at a major trade press, then ended up published by a different press, and I was curious why. She alluded to problems with her first editor. I pressed for details, and out they came in a rush.

Her editor had developed a sort of obsession with her, constantly calling, taking her out for fancy meals, and eventually confessing his love. Meanwhile, he wasn't reading the chapters she gave him; in fact, he was doing barely any work on the manuscript at all. She wasn't really into him, though she admitted that if she'd been more attracted to him, it might have been another story. But for him, it was escalating. He wanted to leave his wife for her! There were kids, too, a bunch of them. Still no feedback on the chapters.

Meanwhile he was Skyping her in his underwear from hotel rooms and complaining about his marriage, and she was letting it go on because she felt that her fate was in his hands. Nothing really happened between them—well, maybe a bit of fumbling, but she kept him at a distance. The thing was that she didn't want to rebuff him too bluntly because she was worried about the fate of her book—worried he'd reject the manuscript, she'd have to pay back the advance, and she'd never get it published anywhere else.

I'd actually once met this guy—he'd edited a friend's book (badly). He was sort of a nebbish, hard to see as threatening. "Did you talk to your agent?" I asked the woman. I was playing the situation out in my mind, wondering what I'd do. No, she hadn't talked to her agent, for various reasons, including fears that she'd led the would-be paramour on and that her book wasn't any good.

Suddenly the editor left for a job at another press, and the publisher called the contract, demanding a final manuscript, which was overdue and nowhere near finished. In despair, the author finally confessed the situation to our mutual friend, another writer, who employed the backbone-stiffening phrase "sexual harassment" and insisted that the woman get her agent involved. Which she did, and the agent negotiated an exit deal with the publisher by explaining what had taken place. The author was let out of the contract and got to take the book to another press.

What struck me most, hearing the story, was how incapacitated this woman had felt, despite her advanced degree and accomplishments. The reason, I think, was that she imagined she was the only vulnerable one in the situation. But look at the editor: He was married, with a midlevel job in the scandal-averse world of corporate publishing. It simply wasn't the case that he had all the power in the situation or nothing to lose. He may have been an occluded jerk, but he was also a fairly human-sized one.

So that's an example of a real-world situation, postgraduation. Somehow I don't see the publishing industry instituting codes banning unhappily married editors from going goopy over authors, though even with such a ban, will any set of regulations ever prevent affective misunderstandings and erotic crossed signals, compounded by power differentials, compounded further by subjective levels of vulnerability?

The question, then, is what kind of education prepares people to deal with the inevitably messy gray areas of life? Personally I'd start by promoting a less vulnerable sense of self than the one our new campus codes are peddling. Maybe I see it this way because I wasn't educated to think that holders of institutional power were quite so fearsome, nor did the institutions themselves seem so mighty. Of course, they didn't aspire to reach quite as deeply into our lives back then. What no one's much saying about the efflorescence of these new policies is the degree to which they expand the power of the institutions themselves. As for those of us employed by them, what power we have is fairly contingent, especially lately. Get real: What's more powerful—a professor who crosses the line, or the shaming capabilities of social media?

rit's not like I don't understand the appeal. Recently I was at a book party, and a much younger man, an assistant professor, started a conversation. He reminded me that we'd met a decade or so ago, when he was a grad student—we'd been at some sort of event and sat next to each other. He said he thought we'd been flirting. In fact, he was sure we'd been flirting. I searched my memory. He wasn't in it, though I didn't doubt his recollection; I've been known to flirt. He couldn't believe I didn't remember him. I apologized. He pretended to be miffed. I pretended to be regretful. I asked him about his work. He told me about it, in a charming way. Wait a second, I thought, was he flirting with me

now? As an aging biological female, and all too aware of what that means in our culture, I was skeptical. On the heels of doubt came a surge of joy: "Still got it," crowed some perverse inner imp in silent congratulation, jackbooting the reality principle into assent. My psyche broke out the champagne, and all of us were in a far better mood for the rest of the evening.

Intergenerational desire has always been a dilemma as well as an occasion for mutual fascination. Whether or not it's a brilliant move, plenty of professors I know, male and female, have hooked up with students, though informal evidence suggests that female professors do it less, and rarely with undergraduates. (The gender asymmetries here would require a dozen more articles to explicate.) Some of these professors act well, some are jerks, and it would benefit students to learn the identifying marks of the latter breed early on, because postcollegiate life is full of them. I propose a round of mandatory workshops on this useful topic for all students, beginning immediately.

But here's another way to look at it: the *longue durée*. Societies keep reformulating the kinds of cautionary stories they tell about intergenerational erotics and the catastrophes that result, starting with Oedipus. The details vary; so do the kinds of catastrophes prophesied—once it was plagues and crop failure, these days it's psychological trauma. Even over the past half-century, the story keeps getting reconfigured. In the preceding era, the Freudian version reigned: Children universally desire their parents, such desires meet up with social prohibitions—the incest taboo—and become repressed. Neurosis ensues.

These days the desire persists, but what's shifted is the direction of the arrows. Now it's parents—or their surrogates, teachers—who do all the desiring; children are conveniently returned to innocence. So long to childhood sexuality, the most irksome part of the Freudian story. So too with the new campus dating codes, which also excise student desire from the story, extending the presumption of the innocent child well into his or her collegiate career. Except that students aren't children.

Among the problems with treating students like children is that

they become increasingly childlike in response. *The New York Times Magazine* recently reported on the tangled story of a 21-year-old former Stanford undergraduate suing a 29-year-old tech entrepreneur she'd dated for a year. He'd been a mentor in a business class she was enrolled in, though they'd met long before. They traveled together and spent time with each other's families. Marriage was discussed. After they broke up, she charged that their consensual relationship had actually been psychological kidnapping, and that she'd been raped every time they'd had sex. She seems to regard herself as a helpless child in a woman's body. She demanded that Stanford investigate and is bringing a civil suit against the guy—this despite the fact that her own mother had introduced the couple, approved the relationship every step of the way, and been in more or less constant contact with the suitor.

No doubt some 21-year-olds are fragile and emotionally immature (helicopter parenting probably plays a role), but is this now to be our normative conception of personhood? A 21-year-old incapable of consent? A certain brand of radical feminist—the late Andrea Dworkin, for one—held that women's consent was meaningless in the context of patriarchy, but Dworkin was generally considered an extremist. She'd have been gratified to hear that her convictions had finally gone mainstream, not merely driving campus policy but also shaping the basic social narratives of love and romance in our time.

I t used to be said of many enclaves in academe that they were old-boys clubs and testosterone-fueled, no doubt still true of certain disciplines. Thanks to institutional feminism's successes, some tides have turned, meaning that menopausal women now occupy more positions of administrative power, edging out at least some of the old boys and bringing a different hormonal style—a more delibidinalized one, perhaps—to bear on policy decisions. And so the pendulum swings, overshooting the middle ground by a hundred miles or so.

The feminism I identified with as a student stressed independence and resilience. In the intervening years, the climate of sanctimony about student vulnerability has grown too thick to penetrate; no one dares question it lest you're labeled antifeminist. Or worse, a sex criminal. I asked someone on our Faculty Senate if there'd been any pushback when the administration presented the new consensual-relations policy (though by then it was a *fait accompli*—the senate's role was "advisory").

"I don't quite know how to characterize the willingness of my supposed feminist colleagues to hand over the rights of faculty—women as well as men—to administrators and attorneys in the name of protection from unwanted sexual advances," he said. "I suppose the word would be 'zeal.'" His own view was that the existing sexual-harassment policy already protected students from coercion and a hostile environment; the new rules infantilized students and presumed the guilt of professors. When I asked if I could quote him, he begged for anonymity, fearing vilification from his colleagues.

These are things you're not supposed to say on campuses now. But let's be frank. To begin with, if colleges and universities around the country were in any way serious about policies to prevent sexual assaults, the path is obvious: Don't ban teacher-student romance, ban fraternities. And if we want to limit the potential for sexual favoritism—another rationale often proffered for the new policies—then let's include the institutionalized sexual favoritism of spousal hiring, with trailing spouses getting ranks and perks based on whom they're sleeping with rather than CVs alone, and brought in at salaries often dwarfing those of senior and more accomplished colleagues who didn't have the foresight to couple more advantageously.

Lastly: The new codes sweeping American campuses aren't just a striking abridgment of everyone's freedom, they're also intellectually embarrassing. Sexual paranoia reigns; students are trauma cases waiting to happen. If you wanted to produce a pacified, cowering citizenry, this would be the method. And in that sense, we're all the victims.

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Correction (3/3/2015, 2:40 p.m.): This article originally stated that several lawsuits brought by a student at Northwestern University had been thrown out of court. Only one such suit was thrown out. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

Clarification (3/30/2015, 10:45 a.m.): This article originally stated that a philosophy professor at Northwestern University sued, among others, a former graduate student of his whom he had previously dated. It would be more accurate to say that he had dated her according to his complaint. The article has been updated to reflect this clarification.

