An old taboo is new again on campuses - controversy over University of Virginia proposal to ban dating between teachers and students - Column

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In spring a young man's fancy may lightly turn to thoughts of love, but at the University of Virginia he proceeds at his own risk. Especially if the young man is not so young.

On the lush green campus, where coeds stroll among the daffodils and dogwoods, reading Shakespeare's sonnets, odes by Keats and the Federalist Papers, the Faculty Senate is debating a burning question:

Should professors, and particularly teaching assistants, known as T.A.'s, be prohibited from dating students?

The restriction would not be limited to students in a professor's class, but to all students.

Thomas Jefferson didn't have to worry about such questions (so far as we know) when he designed and founded the university in Charlottesville. Women weren't admitted until 1970. But the contemporary debate bedevils not only the student body, but many others as well. Professors and students are forging sexual relationships in increasing numbers.

A clue to the dispute may be found in the strict honor code established by students at the university in 1842. Students are expected to "have the moral fortitude to abide by the community's standards of moral conduct."

Moral standards on campus -- and off -- have changed since the hoary days of honor codes. So, for that matter, have "the community's standards of moral conduct." Universities used to be paternalistic. Dormitory living was mandatory, and schools maintained all manner of restrictions and curfews. Men were not allowed beyond the ground floor of a women's dorm. Coed dorms were unthinkable, and a professor who wooed a student was asking to be banished.

Student rebellions of the 1960s, and then modern feminism, changed all that. But now the Women's Concerns Committee at the university, which introduced the ban on sexual relationships between teacher and student -- even if consensual -- wants to turn back the calendar.

"We're not talking about sex," a coed, with her consciousness raised, told an interviewer for CNN. "We're talking about power. We're talking about an educational mission in college in which these students have left home for the first time for an educationally and psychologically safe place."

She's right, of course, and Mr. Jefferson would no doubt have agreed. But women students today can't have it all -- independence, personal responsibility, rights to privacy -- and then run to Big Daddy to punish the professor when a romance sours. The T.A.'s, some of whom are students themselves, often are only a couple of years older than the students.

When Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, his answer was, "That's where the money is." Students date teaching assistants because that's where they believe intellectual stimulation can be found.

Nearly all schools have rules governing romantic liaisons between teachers and the students in their classes. These rules protect a vulnerable student from being exploited and other students from having to compete against a teacher's pet. So far, so
In this age of harassment awareness, a professor with any "sexual smarts" is wary of the woman who says, "I'll do anything for an A." Women are not always the victims. Ever since Eve led Adam from the Garden of Eden, women have known how to lead a man -- even a professor from the cocoon of the ivy towers -- by book or by crook to just where she wants him.

In the 1930s, Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel immortalized the femme fatale who took advantage of the bumbling professor who foolishly fell in love with her (Of course, she was no student.) More recently David Mamet dramatized a mousy woman who exploits a professor's susceptibility to female vulnerability in his play Oleanna. In his scenario, it's the radical feminist who becomes the sexist terrorist.

Not so long ago, John Silber, president of Boston University, established new dormitory rules on his campus, restricting booze and bedding, banning overnight stays by visitors of the opposite gender. Many students said they felt they were being treated like children, but others were pleased, seeing the new rules as a return of morality.

Jefferson wanted students in his "academical village" at the University of Virginia to "drink the cup of knowledge and fraternize." But "fraternize" had a different meaning then. So did the pursuit of happiness, and so now the psychic risks that come with a college education.

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