

Crossing the line

A Camosun student's story of sexual harassment

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One of the great things about attending a postsecondary institution is the possibility of building relationships—even friendships—with instructors.

Gone are the honorifics and teacher surnames expected in high school, and in their place are first names and the opportunity to learn from, and connect with, adults who share your academic passions.

Lindsay (not her real name) has attended Camosun's Interurban campus for the past three years. When one of her male instructors took a special interest in her during her first year, she was flattered.

"He's really intelligent and I felt that he had a lot to offer me as far as my interests went, and he seemed like a really nice guy," she says.

At first it was a formal student/teacher relationship. "You know how it is with professors; it's not a personal relationship, you don't tell them about what you did over the weekend," says Lindsay.

But then one day while they were corresponding by email about an assignment, the instructor wrote some things that Lindsay felt had inappropriate sexual connotations.

"I was pretty upset about it," she says. "I felt uncomfortable being in class anymore, and I skipped class for a couple of days because of it."

Lindsay decided to get an outside opinion on the matter and made an appointment at

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Camosun's counselling center.

"[The counsellor] said that she couldn't see how what he had said could be taken in a sexual way," says Lindsay. "I felt dumb for making such a big deal about it, and I felt dumb for missing classes and taking what he said the wrong way."

After speaking with the counsellor, Lindsay returned to class. "If anything, [the counsellor's comments] made me feel like I could safely be friendly with him," she says. "After I realized that I had blown everything out of proportion, I felt more comfortable talking to him in a less professional manner. More like a friend."

All was well—for a while. Lindsay built a friendship with her instructor and enjoyed his classes. He sometimes remarked on her looks or gave her other compliments, but Lindsay assumed he was just being friendly.

"I wanted to be his friend," she says. "From my perspective it was never a sexual thing."

Struggling with self doubt

One day between semesters, Lindsay received a long email from her instructor that she again felt contained inappropriate sexual connotations.

"At first I thought there were sexual innuendos in the email, but I thought back to the first time that I had blown things out of proportion and thought I was probably just reading too much into it," she says.

She decided to show the email to some friends anyway. "They all thought it was inappropriate and very sexual in nature," she says. But Lindsay wasn't convinced.

"Because I felt I had overreacted the first time, I refused to believe it. I defended him a lot to all of them," she says. "He was a friendly guy. I thought that any sort of weird sexual thing that was in there was done by accident."

So, despite her friends' suggestions that she file a sexual harassment complaint with the college, Lindsay enrolled in another of his classes and remained friendly with her instructor.

But she felt that things had changed since her instructor had sent her the email. "Things became strangely awkward, like he had trouble looking me in the eye all of a sudden," she says.

It wasn't until a few weeks into the semester that Lindsay once again began to feel uncomfortable with some of the things her instructor was saying to her.

"He said a couple of personal things to me which kind of put me on my guard a little bit," she says. "He told me he was looking for something to make him feel young again, that sort of thing."

Then one day Lindsay went to her instructor's office after class to get help with an assignment. Although he didn't explicitly offer to trade grades for sexual favours, he insinuated that she would receive special consideration in class in exchange for some of her time.

"He definitely gave me the impression that I could have slept with him if I'd wanted to," she says.

A moment of clarity

Lindsay says she was shocked at her instructor's insinuations and she finally realized her instructor was after more than friendship.

"The ball just finally dropped," she says. "It made me feel awful. I started to see it from my friends' point of view. It was almost like a lightbulb coming on in my mind."

But Lindsay still didn't want to file a complaint. "I really didn't want him to get in trouble," she says. "I've never wanted to get him into any trouble. After everything that he wrote to me and said to me, I still think he's a good person . . . just lonely."

Lindsay also felt she was partly to blame for the situation. "I wasn't an innocent party," she says. "I'm in my mid-20s and I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. If anything, I encouraged the friendship. I could have stopped it early on if I hadn't been so naïve to his intentions; if I had followed my first instinct."

Lindsay dropped the instructor's class, losing the cost of registration, and has avoided enrolling in any of his classes since, although their paths sometimes cross.

"We both just say 'hi,' avoid eye contact, and walk away from each other," she says. "He's made absolutely no attempt to contact me since I dropped his class. At least I was old enough and strong enough to put a stop to it. It would have been a lot worse had it happened to a girl who was younger and didn't have the strength to end it there."



Tracing it back

Chris Balmer is the chair of the counseling department at Camosun. He's surprised at the treatment Lindsay received from the counsellor she went to after the first time her instructor acted inappropriately.

"I'm shocked to hear this," says Balmer. "I'm just dumbfounded that that happened. It's absolutely the opposite of what we say and what we do."

He expresses sincere regret that the situation had not been dealt with more productively. "I'm very sorry that this student was left with the impression that her feelings were invalid. I feel very badly for her," says Balmer. "If there has been a misjudgment or wrong assessment of the situation, if the right thing wasn't done, we would want to set that right."

Balmer says he himself would have handled a similar situation with a concerned student in a much different way.

"My first response is that if she felt she was uncomfortable about it, that's her reality, that's her experience. My first job is to support and validate, help her find a solution to the problem. If [a situation] feels not okay, then we need to work on how to change things to make it feel okay," he says.

Balmer maintains the counselling offices at both campuses are good places to go for help.

"It's a safe, confidential, private place where students can be assured they'll be heard, supported, given the right resources, and referred to other services that may be necessary," says Balmer.

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Looking for answers

So what are the proper codes of conduct for an instructor at Camosun? According to college policy, "Employees in teaching positions, or who have influence, input or decision-making power over a student's marks, academic interests or other matters, shall not become involved in a business or inappropriate personal relationship with a student for the duration of the professional relationship or evaluative role."

But what does Camosun do to make sure that all members of faculty are aware of this policy? When faculty members are hired are they informed specifically about appropriate codes of conduct in their relationships with students?

Denis Powers, Camosun's executive director of human resources, admits the college doesn't do a very good job of making sure its staff is aware of student/teacher relationship policies.

"To be quite honest, I think we probably could do a better job of that," says Powers. "For the most part, we rely on the employee knowing that there are appropriate actions in the workplace."

So what happens to a faculty member who has sexually harassed a student? Powers says it depends on the severity of the harassment and whether this was the employee's first complaint.

"I really like the way you look, would you consider going out with me on a date?" That would be inappropriate, but not serious," says Powers. "Offering to trade sexual favours for a mark, fondling or touching, that kind of thing, that would be serious."

Powers says there are a variety of ways in which a faculty member who had committed sexual harassment could be dealt with.

"If it was a less serious offense, we would look at education. In a more serious situation, perhaps a suspension or other disciplinary sentence," he says. "In order for someone to be terminated, it would have to be a fairly serious or repeated [offense]."

UVic is very clear on their policies. New faculty learn about appropriate faculty-student relations during their orientation. Also, deans and program directors discuss their expectations about professional conduct with their faculty members, says Maria Lironi, a UVic communications officer.

According to Ian Brindle, Camosun's manager of employee relations and legal services, there's only been one official sexual harassment complaint filed in the last five years.

Although he wasn't able to release the full details of the complaint, citing employee confidentiality, Brindle did confirm a student made the complaint against a faculty member.

Brindle also admits the college doesn't have an official system of keeping track of informal complaints about sexual harassment.

Hindsight is 20/20

When Lindsay looks back at the situation with her instructor, she wishes she had trusted her gut feelings and recognizes the inappropriate conduct for what it was—sexual harassment.

"I could have been nothing but professional, and I'm sure things wouldn't have gone so far," she says.

But regardless of her change in perception about the whole situation, she won't change her mind about filing a complaint.

"I really don't want him to get in trouble. What he did was enough to make me uncomfortable, but I don't feel it was enough to get him fired," she says.

The questions remain, however, how far this instructor would have gone if the situation was different and whether it could happen again.

And if he were to step even further over that line of appropriate conduct, what would Camosun College do about it?

A tangled web of complaint

So what can people do if they feel they've been sexually harassed at school? When Nexus first tried to find out where to make a sexual-harassment complaint, we went to the college's Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman directed us to College Safety. College Safety directed us back to the Ombudsman; then changed their minds and said they were the ones to talk to after all. We also tried Human Resources, who in turn directed us back to the Ombudsman.

After giving the three departments some time to sort it all out, we found out the best people to talk to would indeed be the Ombudsman, the designated faculty dean, College Safety, or someone from the Counselling Center. Seems like a lot of options, but here's where it gets confusing.

Students who decide to file an official complaint would have to fill out a Human Rights Complaint Form, which would then be submitted to . . . well, the form doesn't say. The form can be found online at <http://camosun.ca/about/policies/operations/o-5-human-resources/o-5.10.1.pdf> (good luck typing that one into a web browser).

So, the form would be submitted somewhere, probably the Ombudsman or someone in the human resources department, at which point a statement would be taken by the college's lawyer, Ian Brindle.

Brindle would then take the statement of the person who the complaint was filed against.

What happens after the statements are given is a little unclear, even though Human Resources director Denis Powers says there's "a lot of information on the student complaint process online."

After a quick search of the college's website, aside from some resource info located at camosun.ca/ombuds we couldn't actually find any specific information about how a student could issue a formal complaint of sexual harassment.

Come on, can't someone at the college just whip up a pamphlet or something?