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From the Los Angeles Times

Professor makes a case for faculty-student romance

UCLA's Paul Abramson argues that colleges shouldn't restrict dating by consenting adults -- provided grades aren't involved.

By Larry Gordon

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In the volatile mix of academia and sex, UCLA psychology professor Paul R. Abramson says he is trying to light a torch for liberty.

Abramson is sharply criticizing his own employer and colleges nationwide that have adopted restrictions -- and, in a few cases, outright bans -- on romances between faculty and students.

Of course, sexual harassment should not be allowed and no one should supervise or give grades to a romantic partner, says Abramson, who has taught at UCLA for 31 years. But those concerns should not restrict the right of consenting adults to have a non-exploitative relationship, he argues in a new book.

The rights to romance and to choose whom to love are as basic as the freedoms of speech and religion, Abramson writes in "Romance in the Ivory Tower: The Rights and Liberty of Conscience" (MIT Press). A university that suppresses such a choice "tramples the very nature of freedom itself," he declares.

Readers looking for sexy material will be disappointed by his 172-page volume, unless they get turned on by constitutional law and copious references to Jefferson, Madison and the 9th Amendment. There are no steamy scenes of stolen kisses in library cubicles.

But the book has steamed some critics.

University leaders say anti-dating rules protect students, usually graduate students, who may feel their education is at risk when a relationship ends. As expected, the book has triggered a few smirky comments about its author, who teaches courses on human sexuality and whose previous writings tackled such topics as abuse and incest, the spread of AIDS and the history of sexual freedom.

Conservative critic Dinesh D'Souza called Abramson's constitutional arguments a "legal absurdity" and wrote in his online column that the UCLA professor "is certainly entitled to cruise the bars of Los Angeles if he wants to. I just think he should leave his copy of the Constitution behind."

Salon.com, in a blurb that set off a blistering online debate about the classroom and the bedroom,

suggested that Abramson might be "a campus Casanova in his own right."

To that, Abramson reacted wryly during an interview at his campus office. "I'm 57 and have three kids and two grandkids. If I'm the campus Casanova, then the campus has a lot of problems," said the professor, who has longish graying hair, a goatee and an earring.

Abramson concedes that his personal life was complicated in his 20s but says he has been a staid suburban soccer dad for the last two decades. Thrice divorced, he is married to a 51-year-old neonatal nurse who has never been affiliated with UCLA.

He points out that he has not had a romance with anyone at UCLA for 20 years, although he said he had serious relationships with two former undergraduate students nearly 30 years ago. One was 13 years his senior, and the other, whom he eventually married, was five years his junior. He met them in his classes but did not date them until later, he said.

Too many people have an unrealistic stereotype of campus love, he said. "The picture of it is the older professor and Suzie Coed. I'm sure such things happen, but the greater likelihood are people of similar ages, with similar interests, going for the same music and movies," like a 27-year-old assistant professor and a 24-year-old graduate student who later get married, he said.

Abramson's book began as a reaction to regulations adopted by the UC regents in 2003; they didn't ban such hookups but declared that professors should avoid romantic or sexual relationships with students for whom they have "or should reasonably expect" to have teaching or supervisory responsibility. That includes students interested in a subject within the professor's expertise -- a definition that Abramson finds overly broad. Sanctions range from written censure to dismissal.

The rules were adopted, amid some debate, partly in reaction to a sexual harassment allegation at UC Berkeley. Its law school dean, John P. Dwyer, resigned in 2002 after a student charged that he fondled her when she passed out from heavy drinking. The dean said the encounter was consensual.

The fact that the Dwyer case was cited to support the rules shows that campus leaders were more concerned about lawsuits than anything else, Abramson alleges.

"Eliminating civil liberties to punish a small number of transgressors is hardly the answer," he writes.

To allay legal fears, he suggests an alternative: All faculty and students would read and sign a release (a "love contract") that would warn about the power differences and favoritism that can arise from faculty-student dating. They then would promise, as in a medical release, not to hold the school responsible if the romance goes sour.

(Abramson previously raised that idea in a 2003 opinion piece in *The Times*. In his book, he recalls how a *Times* editor at the time accidentally forwarded, and then profusely apologized for, an internal e-mail memo jokingly calling him a "pervert.")

UC Santa Barbara political science professor Gayle Binion, who helped draft the 2003 UC policy when she headed the systemwide Academic Senate, said it was partly intended to shield UC from liability.

But more important, she said, most of the faculty thought it was "good policy" since students may consent to an affair but not grasp the potential consequences even if they sign a release. "If the

relationship goes awry, it is the student who is going to suffer," Binion said, citing instances of graduate students who then drop out.

Such relationships are "not terribly uncommon at the graduate student level," but probably less frequent and more "under the radar" now than during the free-wheeling '70s and early '80s, she said. Still, the rule "not only makes parents more secure when they send their kids to UC, it puts the faculty on notice," Binion said.

Abramson overstates his case about restrictions on freedom, according to Binion. Limits on dating are common in many workplaces, she said, and academia "is kind of late coming to it."

Since 2003, a handful of cases of possible faculty violations of the policy have been formally reviewed, according to UC spokesman Brad Hayward. No professor has been dismissed, although a few were disciplined with warning letters that are considered confidential personnel matters, he said.

So what do students think? Reaction is mixed.

Dianne Tanjuaquio, a vice president of UCLA's undergraduate students association, said she agrees with Abramson that the rules are too harsh in keeping entire departments off-limits. "We are adults at an elite university. Something as broad as that is very restrictive on our personal freedoms," she said.

But Oiyen Poon, president of UC's systemwide student association, supports the regulations, explaining that a teacher in the same department could harm a student's career even if they never shared a class. Without the rules, "those issues could get extremely sticky when a student is trying to earn a degree in a timely fashion," she said.

In 1995, the American Assn. of University Professors adopted a statement that calls sexual relations between students and faculty who supervise them "fraught with the potential for exploitation." Anita Levy, its associate secretary for academic freedom and tenure issues, said Abramson's arguments might find some support on campuses, but she doubted any rule changes nationwide would occur.

Abramson said he is often asked how he would react if his middle daughter, who is preparing for college, dated a professor in the future. "It's within the realm of possibility, but it's much more likely she would meet a 22-year-old teaching assistant," he said. "If that's who she wants to be involved with, that's who she gets involved with."

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