



UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Title: Personal Relationships Policy

Effective Date: August 1, 2024

Issuing Authority: Provost and Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance

Responsible Officer: Associate Vice President for Human Resources

Statement of Policy

All Mercer University employees are expected to recognize the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest between their professional responsibilities and their personal relationships. There is a power imbalance between employees who exercise academic or supervisory authority over students and between employees when one employee has direct or ultimate administrative responsibility over another. Romantic or sexual relationships between supervisors within the management chain and subordinates or between employees and students may pose risks not only to the individuals involved in the relationship, but also to co-workers, other students, the department, or Mercer University as a whole. Similarly, scenarios where an employee has direct influence over a relative's employment or education may present a conflict of interest.

Mercer University is committed to fostering an environment where students and employees can be objectively supervised, instructed, and evaluated. To ensure equal treatment and avoid potential conflicts of interest, favoritism, exploitation, harassment, or professional standard breaches, employees are prohibited from engaging in certain consensual relationships and are required to disclose such relationships as set forth below.

To Whom the Policy Applies

This policy applies to all employees and students of Mercer University.

Definitions

As used in this policy, the following terms have the meaning specified below:

Employee: Any faculty (including, but not limited to, regular, visiting, or adjunct), any individual who has an appointment at the University, and all regular and temporary staff, including student employees.

Student: Any person pursuing academic studies at the University, including, but not limited to, any person currently enrolled, previously enrolled, or who is reasonably anticipated to seek enrollment at a future date, or a person who has applied to or been accepted for admission.

Intimate Relationship: Any relationship, past or present, which is romantic or sexual. The relationship may or may not involve physical contact and may include relationships conducted via electronic communications, such as text or social media platform. Such relationships also include dating, amorous communication, brief encounters and one-off occurrences.

Relative: Any person currently or previously related by blood, law, or marriage including but not limited to a spouse, parent, child, sibling, and guardian.

Academic Authority: The ability to impact the academic status of another through means that include, but are not limited to, teaching, grading, advising, mentoring, evaluating or supervising research; participating in decisions on academic status; managing teaching assignments; participating in decisions on academic funding; writing a letter of reference or otherwise recommending for admission, employment, fellowships or awards, or related matters. Academic Authority is intended to be construed broadly.

Supervisory Authority: The ability to impact the employment status or assigned duties of another, by direct or ultimate administrative responsibility, through means that include, but are not limited to reviewing, auditing, or evaluating work, or taking part in discussions or making recommendations concerning career progress, assignments, compensation, bonuses, benefits, discipline, termination, or related matters. Supervisory authority is intended to be construed broadly.

Policy and Procedures

Relationships Between Employees and Students

Mercer University employees shall not engage in or pursue an intimate relationship with any student where the employee has the potential to exercise academic or supervisory authority over the student, even if both or all parties in the relationship believe the relationship is consensual. In cases where an intimate relationship existed before the student's enrollment or employee's status, the Mercer University employee must immediately disclose the relationship to the appropriate academic dean and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources.

Mercer University employees shall not exercise academic or supervisory authority over any student who is a relative and must disclose such potential conflicts of interest to the appropriate academic dean and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources.

The academic dean and others within the academic administration chain, as needed, will work in collaboration with the Associate Vice President for Human Resources to evaluate the disclosed relationship and the potential conflict of interest and determine and monitor an appropriate academic or supervisory plan.

Relationships Between Employees

Mercer University employees shall not engage in or pursue an intimate relationship with another Mercer University employee within the same management chain where one has supervisory authority over the other. In cases where an intimate relationship existed before employment or promotion, the employees involved in the relationship must immediately disclose the relationship to their direct supervisor and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources.

Mercer University employees may not hire or exercise supervisory authority over a relative within the same management chain where one has supervisory authority over the other. The related employees must disclose the relationship to their direct supervisor and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources.

The direct supervisor and others within the management chain, as needed, will work in collaboration with the Associate Vice President for Human Resources to evaluate the disclosed relationship and the potential conflict of interest and determine and monitor an appropriate supervisory plan.

Disclosure

On the date when Mercer University implements this policy, any Mercer employee with a pre-existing relationship as defined in this policy must immediately disclose the relationship to the appropriate academic dean or direct supervisor and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources. All such disclosed relationships and potential conflicts of interest will be evaluated and an appropriate academic or supervisory plan will be determined and monitored.

Any member of the Mercer community who has reason to believe there is an employee in violation of this policy is encouraged to report the concern in good faith to the Associate Vice President for Human Resources for evaluation. Employees involved in a relationship as defined in this policy who fail to disclose the relationship will be deemed in violation of this policy and will be subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination.

This policy prohibits taking adverse action against any individual who reports (or is perceived to have reported) concerns under this policy or who cooperates with or participates in any investigation related to this policy. However, conclusively and deliberately making false and/or malicious accusations or providing false evidence is prohibited and may be grounds for disciplinary action.

This policy is not intended to address harassment or allegations of nonconsensual sexual misconduct. Please see the University's [Sexual Misconduct Policy](#) for the policy and procedure regarding concerns of sexual misconduct and for definitions related to consent and other applicable terms.

Appeal

Employees shall have the right to appeal the decision regarding an appropriate academic or supervisory plan to the Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance or the Provost as indicated by their management chain. The Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance or the Provost must receive a written appeal within ten (10) calendar days after the receipt of the written notification of the decision being appealed. All materials that the employee wishes to include in support of their appeal must be turned in at the same time as the notice of appeal to the Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance or the Provost.

The Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance, the Provost or their designee may request additional information if they believe such information would aid in their review of the appeal.

A decision by the Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance, the Provost or their designee will be made within a reasonable time and the Associate Vice President for Human Resources and all impacted parties will be notified in writing of the decision. The decision of the Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance, Provost or their designee is final. If an appeal is not filed within the appeal period, the original decision becomes final and is not subject to any review.

Related Policies

[Sexual Misconduct Policy](#)