I’m not your mother

I love being a mom and all of the joy and chaos that comes with balancing the tenure track with soccer games and Girl Scouts. However, I am a mom to two amazing girls—not an endless number of graduate and undergraduate students. I love being there for students, coaching them through their first presentation at a professional meeting or seeing the look on their face when their first-author paper is finally published after months or years of hard work. But I can only help them reach their full potential as their mentor—not their mother.

When I was a graduate student, my advisor made it clear that he was not my father. I got three hugs: when he attended my wedding, when I passed my qualifying exam, and when I had my first child a few months before graduating. He was extremely professional and made sure that our relationship was only that. (This was for my benefit, as in his day and age not all male advisors were professional with female graduate students.) His professionalism and constructive criticism truly prepared me for a competitive academic environment. This is roughly the model that I want to follow for my students, but my gender and our society’s gendered expectations keep getting in the way.

As a female faculty member in the earth and environmental sciences—a field in which women are grossly underrepresented—I am often seen as a “mom” in the department. Students expect me to take care of them, and when I provide advice or constructive criticism, it is often met with a defensiveness that students don’t exhibit toward male colleagues. So, what do you do when you don’t agree with your mom? You go to your dad or other parental figure. In this case, that father figure is the department chair. When my students have an issue with me, they frequently run across the hall to his office.

I have tried asking my graduate students what they would like me to do differently, but I haven’t yet been able to get any clear answers. What is clear is that my high expectations are inconsistent with my gender. I am expected to be nurturing and forgiving regardless of the circumstances—including when students don’t meet teaching or research expectations or expect edits hours before conference abstracts or grants are due, having missed earlier deadlines.

When students aren’t rebelling, sometimes they go to the other end of the spectrum and come to me to hash out personal issues—which brings its own challenges. I’m glad students in distress feel comfortable speaking to me so that I can point them to available resources and, when appropriate, take their situation into account when discussing their work and progress. But I don’t feel comfortable hearing about personal relationship issues or giving them a pat on the back every time they make a poor decision or don’t meet a deadline because they stayed out too late drinking on a weeknight. My expertise is in paleontology, not psychology.

I see and hear this from other female faculty members, too, as well as from teaching assistants: Students, male and female, expect us to be counselors. Female instructors are more often approached about personal issues that interfere with class work, which makes the student-teacher relationship more complex. If women aren’t sweet and compassionate and don’t bake brownies on students’ birthdays, we get penalized.

I love being an academic adviser. I make a point of fostering camaraderie among our research group by hosting dinners with my family and arranging lab events, including bluegrass concerts in caves and trips to wildlife parks. I keep in touch with my students long after they graduate, offering career advice, meeting them for lunch while in their home cities, and continuing to work with many of them on research projects.

But I also have a plea for my students, past, present, and future: Please don’t make me remind you to do the lab dishes, back up your data, or bring your pencil and notebook to our meetings. And please, don’t tell me about your most recent disagreement with your significant other. I’m not your mother!

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