Professional boundaries

Scenario 1: A student comes to your office hours to ask about how to start his research report for class. This student takes up most of the hour (your only office hour that week). He comes each consecutive week and you start to notice that the conversation shifts from the research report to more personal issues. When you address that you just want to talk about the research report, the student confides in you that he doesn’t have many friends in Ottawa and was hoping you two could spend some time together to get him acquainted with campus and Ottawa.

Scenario 2: You are TAing a graduate-level course. One of your friends is a student in the class. Due to this conflict of interest, you have arranged with the professor that another TA (or the prof) will do the grading for that particular student. You regularly have dinner with this friend. One day, over dinner, the friend starts complaining about how they are being graded in the course and is asking for your opinion.

Scenario 3: A student buys you a shot at a bar and insists that you do them together.

Scenario 4: A student sends you a friend request on facebook.

Scenario 5: A student shows up early to your office hours and brings you coffee and a muffin. The student stays late as well and starts asking you personal questions. After awhile you suspect the student is seeking you out romantically.

Academic Dishonesty

Scenario 26: You are marking an assignment and suspect some of the material has been plagiarized.

Scenario 27: You are marking an assignment and start to notice that it is highly similar to another student’s work. The instructions said students could work on the assignment together, but that they must write it up separately (in their own words). Most of the phrasing and sentence structure is similar. Despite some differences, sentence by sentence, they are making identical points.

Scenario 28: While proctoring an exam, you think you see someone cheating.
**Struggling Students**

Scenario 6: A mature student in your tutorial comes up to you after class and reveals that she has failed the midterm. When you go over the likely causes for the poor grade (e.g., insufficient preparation, confusion over content, test anxiety, etc.), she says none of these things happened. She assures you she studied a lot, quizzed herself, felt fine in the midterm, and then was very surprised by her grade.

Scenario 7: A mature student is trying to make an appointment with you to go over a test. He has confused the time and location of this meeting multiple times and so your final email to him mentions that the relevant information (e.g., office location) is on the course outline. When the student arrives at your office hours, he gives you a “life lesson” for 10 minutes about how rude your last email was and about how his life, as a mature student, is far more difficult than yours, and so he doesn’t have time to refer back to the course outline.

Scenario 8: An ESL student receives a failing grade on a heavily weighted assignment. He comes to your office hours and says that he didn’t understand the assignment because of a language barrier. He pleads that if he understood the assignment, he would have done much better. He feels that this is unfair.

Scenario 9: An ESL student asks you a question after tutorial and you cannot understand what he is saying. You ask him to repeat himself multiple times, but you still cannot get at the meaning of his question.

Scenario 10: A student attends your office hours almost every week and stays for most of the time, occasionally arriving early or trying to stay late. Sometimes it is difficult to manage given that other people are also waiting to speak with you. The student also emails you questions several times a day. You suspect the student would benefit from lengthier tutoring sessions (or perhaps they are doing fine with the material but appear to be insecure).

**Inappropriate Comments**

Scenario 11: You are reading a student’s writing assignment and she has addressed a rather serious situation (e.g., suicidal thoughts, victimization, committed an offence, etc.). It could be nothing, but you suspect that the student needs to talk to somebody.

Scenario 12: You are running a discussion group early in the term, when a student makes a joke about all irrational numbers being female. The comment gets a few smirks as well as several irritated looks. A female student begins to respond, when she is immediately cut off by the student with a ‘lighten up – it’s only a joke’ comment.

Scenario 13: A student bad-mouts the professor to you, saying that she is so unorganized and hard to understand that the student wishes you (the TA) were teaching the course instead.
**Trouble Student**

Scenario 14: A student comes to see you during office hours and insists he deserved a higher grade on an assignment. The student starts to become very angry and agitated. The student is much larger than you and has a very intimidating presence. The student is upset, standing up, and blocking your access to the door.

Scenario 15: You are about to leave your office for one of your classes when a student from the class you TA comes running up to you and rather irritably asks why you haven’t responded to her email. She reminds you that the assignment was due this morning and she ended up having to submit the assignment without the answer to her question. When you ask what time she sent the email, she indicated it was around 10:00pm the evening before.

Scenario 16: You have plans to meet a student at 5pm on a Friday. You wait in your office for 30 minutes and the student does not show up. You are angry because you had to turn down a social opportunity that evening in order to meet the student (or you made a special trip on campus for the meeting). Next week in class the student asks to arrange another meeting with you.

Scenario 17: A student has had a previous conflict with the professor of the course for which you are TAing. This has meant that you are the main contact/grader for this student, and unfortunately the student is doing poorly in the course. Days before the final exam, this student sends you a rather demeaning email that borders on threatening.

**Classroom Management**

Scenario 18: You are running a tutorial session for a course and a handful of students show up late. They are loud and not staying on task. After a few minutes you realize they have been drinking and suspect they are drunk.

Scenario 19: A student frequently makes condescending comments to you in class. For example, when another student asks a question, this student will jump in with their answer and say something to the effect of “you’re asking this question because the TA didn’t explain it properly. The answer is.....”. In front of the class, this student regularly accuses you of being unclear or not communicating expectations on assignments.

Scenario 20: Several students are routinely loud and disrespectful. While you are talking and/or while students are supposed to be working on an activity, these students are playing on Facebook, texting, talking to each other, leaving early, and generally not taking you seriously. Sometimes their behavior is disruptive to other students.
Dealing with Professor & Other TAs

Scenario 21: You are a new TA and are working in a course with multiple other “veteran” TAs. When it comes time to handle the marking, you realize that they have given you WAY more work than is fair.

Scenario 22: You believe another TA is marking far too harshly. In a stack of short-answer questions, you note that the TA has a class average of about 45% on the short answer questions she marked, whereas the average is about 65% on the questions you marked. You do not think the questions the other TA is marking are more difficult. In the next meeting with the other TAs and the instructor, you mention (without singling anyone out) that the low marks on the short answer may suggest that we (collectively) are marking too harshly. The other TA staunchly insists that the students are just stupid and deserve the low grades. The professor has previously expressed no interest in getting involved in the marking criteria.

Scenario 23: You are TAing a course that students find very challenging. Students frequently send email questions to all TAs. You are frequently on email and sympathize with students struggling in the course, so you do your best to respond (remembering how much you valued fast responses as an undergrad). You gradually notice that you respond to about 90% of student emails, though there are 4 other TAs. Even if you wait 24 hours after receiving emails to give other TAs a chance to respond, no one does. In a TA meeting, you raise the issue of striving to provide faster responses to students, but another TA strongly insists that students need to respect the TA’s schedule and they should not expect a response for at least a day or two.

Scenario 24: The instructor delegates numerous tasks to you (e.g., unexpected administrative tasks). Additionally, you find that marking and preparing for tutorials are taking more time than anticipated. It becomes quite clear that to complete your assigned tasks, you will work over the number of hours in your contract. The professor is disorganized and when you mention this issue, he claims you are being inefficient.

Scenario 25: You must mark short answer (e.g., one-paragraph) answers on an exam. The instructor provides no answer key or marking guidelines. The course you are TAing is not your area of expertise. The question appears to come from lecture material discussed in class and is not in the textbook (and attending lectures is not part of your TA duties). You email the instructor to say that you need some information on what was discussed in class related to this question so that you can prepare a marking key. The instructor does not respond.