

# Scenarios with Suggested Responses

This handout contains six practice scenarios about sexualized violence and boundary violations that were composed by graduate students based on their experiences and observations.

After each scenario, information is provided on the context, possible responses, and self-care.

- **Context** considers the power dynamics in graduate student culture, such as departmental norms and expectations and structural factors, such as institutional policies, sexism, racism, and colonialism.
- **Possible responses** provide suggestions on how to respond to boundary violations, including direct responses to the perpetrator, discussing the incident with others, and seeking support from sexualized violence resources at the institution.
- **Self-care** offers ideas for self-care, including reaching out to others for support.

Questions and considerations to guide participants' discussions are below (also on slide 25):

1. The type of boundary violation and possible feelings it could bring up for the impacted person
2. The identities of the people involved including their positionalities, roles within the institution, and the power dynamics between the people. (How power dynamics may influence the impacted person's decision to respond and the type of response)
3. The various types of responses that the impacted person may take
4. The role the environment plays in the interaction and response. Consider if the interaction is in a private or public setting, on campus or off campus, in person or online
5. The culture within the institution, graduate program, and field of study



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# Senario 1: Inappropriate Comment Between Students in a Lab

Cedar is a master’s student taking a research course that involves 10 hours of lab work. The lab is supervised by Cedar’s instructor Dr. Blake, and the lab coordinator is Alex, a PhD student. Alex is well-liked in the department and known to be friendly and welcoming. One day when Cedar is preparing various solutions for a reaction, Alex comes over to observe and chat. After some small talk, Alex comments, “Wow, you have really steady hands! It took me years to develop such great technique. Those hands must be good at a lot of other things, too.” Alex then laughs and winks at Cedar.

## Context

This scenario suggests various academic power dynamics may be at play. It’s possible that the lab and department still have an “old boys’ club” attitude that tolerates inappropriate jokes and other boundary-crossing comments. Cedar could potentially be dependent on a reference letter from Alex for future education or job opportunities. Social factors are also very important. Given Alex’s popularity, people may ignore Alex’s behaviour while minimizing the impact of his behaviour on Cedar.

## Possible responses

**Direct response:** If Cedar is comfortable, she can express her discomfort with the suggestive comment and say she would prefer to keep things more professional. This type of response puts clear boundaries in place, ideally preventing such boundary-crossing comments from happening again. However, this type of direct discussion can make many people feel vulnerable and could lead to backlash or retaliation if Alex doesn’t take the comment well.

**Seek clarity:** Cedar could also ask Alex what he meant by the comment. This method can be helpful with microaggressions or other subtle comments as it forces the other person to state what they mean (such as in the case of sexist “jokes”).

**Discuss with other students:** Cedar could discuss the comment with other students in the lab. She might discover that other people had noticed similar comments or had felt uncomfortable with Alex in the past. Knowing this information would help her decide whether to discuss the incident with Dr. Blake or other supervisors.

**Discuss with instructor:** Cedar could discuss this issue with her course instructor Dr. Blake. However, he may side with Alex, who he has known much longer than Cedar. As well, Dr. Blake may discuss the incident with Alex, which could impact Cedar’s working relationship with Alex.



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**Seek guidance and support:** Cedar could seek guidance from the institution’s sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

## Self-care

Cedar can try to do things that give a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity she enjoys. She could also reach out to a trusted friend, an Elder, a counsellor, or anyone else who can listen and offer support.

# Senario 2: Professor Asks Out Post-Doc Researcher at Conference

Sam is a post-doctoral researcher who hopes to become a research professor in engineering. She has been looking forward to the annual engineering conference, where she will give a presentation and have an opportunity to network and engage with global colleagues. She is especially excited to hear Professor Alex, who is renowned for their contributions to the field. At the conference, Professor Alex introduces the speakers, including Sam, and then he stays and watches her presentation. Afterwards, Professor Alex congratulates Sam and praises her work. Professor Alex asks Sam, “Would you like to have dinner at my place afterward? We can continue discussing as I cook a mean steak.” Despite feeling initially enthusiastic, Sam hesitates, experiencing uncertainty about Professor Alex’s intentions.

## Context

It’s important to acknowledge the influence of academic dynamics in this scenario. Sam’s future career, perhaps beyond academia, may hinge on connections fostered during the conference or other collaborations that might rely on Professor Alex’s endorsement. These power dynamics play a key role. Unfortunately, too often, people give more consideration to a professor due to their established reputation and ignore or minimize the student’s feelings. Sam has doubts about Professor Alex’s motives but is partly reliant on him as he has the network of connections that Sam requires.

## Possible responses

**Direct response:** If Sam feels comfortable addressing the situation directly with Professor Alex, she can express her discomfort with the suggestive comment. By communicating the need to maintain a professional context, Sam would establish clear boundaries and ideally prevent future boundary crossings. However, such direct conversations can potentially lead to discomfort and ongoing issues if Professor Alex does not respond positively.

**Seek clarity:** Sam could choose to seek clarity from Professor Alex. She might ask, “Could you provide more context for the dinner invitation? I value maintaining a professional atmosphere and would like to ensure our interactions remain aligned with that.” This approach encourages Professor Alex to offer additional information without immediately escalating the situation. If Sam decides that she does want to meet with Professor Alex, she could suggest a more public meeting place.

**Discuss with a mentor or colleague:** Sam could share the situation with a trusted mentor or colleague. This strategy could be especially useful if Sam is uncomfortable discussing the issue with Professor Alex directly.



**Discuss with conference attendees:** Sam could inquire if the conference organizers have sexualized violence policies and seek guidance. If there were witnesses among the conference attendees who overheard the conversation, she could approach them to serve as potential witnesses if formal reporting becomes necessary. This approach allows Sam to handle the situation prudently, ensuring that boundaries are upheld while preserving professionalism within the conference environment.

**Seek guidance and support:** Sam could seek guidance from the institution’s sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

## Self-care

Sam could try to do things that give a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity she enjoys. She could also reach out to a trusted friend, an Elder, a counsellor, or anyone else who can listen and offer support.

## Senario 3: Inappropriate Comment by a Professor

Tylor is completing a master's degree in biochemistry. Her supervisor, Professor Edwards, often makes uncomfortable comments during their one-on-one meetings. During one meeting, Professor Edwards says, "You know, if you do well and I'm happy with your performance, you can transfer to the PhD program." Tylor responds, "I think I'm not quite ready to do a PhD at this point." Professor Edwards responds, "Oh? Well, what are your plans after graduation, then? Going back to your country and finding a rich husband? It shouldn't be hard for you." Tylor feels uncomfortable but stays quiet. Noticing her silence, Professor Edwards says, "I'm just joking! Lighten up!"

### Context

Graduate students like Tylor often must navigate the power dynamics of needing the support of their supervisor, both for their thesis and then for references, while also wanting to set boundaries and responding to violations of those boundaries. As well, a comment like "lighten up" is an example of a person minimizing the impact of their words.

### Possible responses

**Direct response:** Tylor can tell Professor Edwards that the comment made her feel uncomfortable and disrespected. Tylor can stress the importance of professionalism and the need to set boundaries for future interactions. The conversation might go something like this: "Professor Edwards, I wanted to talk to you about something that has been bothering me. During our previous conversations, some of your comments were inappropriate and made me feel uncomfortable. I believe it's essential to maintain a professional and respectful environment for everyone in the office."

**Change supervisor:** Tylor can talk to the department's dean about changing supervisors. This choice presents challenges. Finding a suitable replacement supervisor within the department might be difficult and could potentially cause delays in Tylor's academic progression and anticipated graduation date.

**Seek guidance and support:** Tylor could seek support from the institution's sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

### Self-care

Tylor can try to do things that give a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity she enjoys. Tylor could reach out to a trusted friend, an Elder, a counsellor, or anyone else who can listen and offer support.



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# Senario 4: Supervisory Committee Member Comes on to Student

Addison is a student in the Education department and is studying hard for their upcoming thesis defence. Ezra, a thesis supervisory committee member, invites Addison to their home to discuss Addison's thesis. Addison arrives and finds Ezra visibly intoxicated, with slurred speech and poor coordination. Ezra says, "Sorry, I had a bit too much to drink earlier. Let's sit down and talk." Addison is uncomfortable but says, "So, about my thesis, I am thinking of rewriting chapter five as it doesn't align with the new studies I have done." Ezra interrupts, "That sounds interesting, but you know, I've always found you attractive." Addison replies, "Thank you, but let's stick to discussing my thesis. The deadline for submission is close." Then Ezra begins to stroke Addison's hand and puts an arm around them.

## Context

The power imbalance between Addison and Ezra is a significant factor. Ezra holds a position of authority and influence over Addison's academic progress and future, which may have made Addison feel obligated to comply with the initial invitation despite feeling uncomfortable about going to Ezra's home. As well, Ezra's visible intoxication likely impaired their judgment and inhibitions, leading to inappropriate behaviour and a lack of awareness of the boundaries they were crossing or willingness to respect personal boundaries. Ezra's inappropriate behaviour shows a lack of professionalism in their role as a supervisory committee member.

## Possible responses

**Direct response:** Addison could say, "Ezra, I appreciate your willingness to discuss my thesis, but I must emphasize that I am here for an academic discussion only. Your behaviour and intoxication make me uncomfortable. I feel it's inappropriate for us to continue." Then Addison should leave as soon as possible.

**Seek support from peers:** Addison can talk to a trusted friend or colleague about the experience to process emotions and receive support.

**Discuss with supervisor:** Addison can discuss with their supervisor the option of removing Ezra from the committee if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe due to Ezra's behaviour.

**Seek guidance and support:** Addison could seek guidance from the institution's sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

## Self-care

Addison can try to do things that give a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity they enjoy. Addison could also reach out to a trusted friend, an Elder, a counsellor, or anyone else who can listen and offer support.



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# Senario 5: Undermining Behaviour by a Research Team Member

Robin, a young female astrophysics master’s student in her final year, has been tasked by her supervisor to mentor Greg, an older, male, first-year master’s student who has extensive industry experience. Robin starts to observe distinct behaviours from Greg that appear to be directed solely at her. During their one-on-one fieldwork, for example, Greg becomes inattentive and dismissive. Robin can’t help but wonder whether this is because of the age gap or her being the only female in the group. Despite her uncertainty, she brushes these thoughts aside as mere assumptions. Greg also starts to challenge Robin’s expertise in front of their peers by questioning her techniques, saying, “Just ensuring the accuracy of the data.” When Robin defends her approach by stating, “I extensively used this method for my project and am confident in my teaching,” Greg responds with a dismissive chuckle, replying, “Sure.”

## Context

Robin, an experienced graduate student and project lead, has a certain authority over Greg. However, Greg’s gender, age, and industry experience in the male-dominated profession might give Greg the confidence and assertiveness to dismiss Robin’s methods. The power imbalance between an older and more mature student and a master’s student working in a less gender-inclusive field may make Robin feel undermined, but it may also make Greg feel compelled to contribute and demonstrate something significant given his industry background. Ideally, both of their perspectives and expertise should be acknowledged and respected through appropriate dialogue.

## Possible responses

**Direct response:** If Robin feels comfortable, she could talk to Greg directly. By communicating the importance of maintaining a respectful and professional collaboration, Robin would establish clear boundaries and strive to prevent future conflicts. She could say, “I feel that some of your comments on my work are dismissive. Could you please elaborate on your concerns about the project methods? I believe an open conversation about our approaches could help us collaborate more effectively.” It’s important to note that direct conversations like these can sometimes lead to discomfort and ongoing tensions if Greg doesn’t respond positively.

**Seek clarity:** Robin could opt for a less direct approach to seek clarity from Greg. She could say, “I’ve noticed some differences in how our interactions have been. Let’s focus on the task at hand and ensure our discussions are based on the merit of ideas.” The aim would be to maintain professionalism, and ensure the mentorship relationship remains effective and mutually respectful.





**Discuss with peers:** Robin could discuss the situation with other students in the lab. However, if certain peers have a close association with Greg, they might unconsciously lean toward his perspective, dismissing the concerns. Additionally, if these discussions reach Greg, it could affect the rapport between Robin and Greg. Robin should evaluate these factors before determining whether seeking advice from mentors or peers is the most suitable course of action for this circumstance.

**Discuss with supervisor:** Robin could discuss the situation with her supervisor. The supervisor may advise her on how to handle the matter and point her toward useful resources for graduate students to discuss the situation objectively. However, Robin's supervisor could potentially view the situation through the lens of Greg's industry experience and dismiss the concerns as differences in approaches and personalities.

**Seek guidance and support:** Robin could seek guidance from the institution's sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

## Self-care

Robin could try to do things that give her a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity she enjoys. She could also reach out to a trusted friend, an Elder, a counsellor, or anyone else who can listen and offer support.

## Senario 6: Professor Outing a Student Online

It is the first day of the semester, and Blake is attending a required class on health policy that is held virtually. The call is being recorded so it can be posted on the course page following the class. During the session, Professor Smith asks each student in the class to introduce themselves with their name, pronouns, and academic program. Blake is wearing a necklace with beads in the rainbow colours of the pride flag. The professor draws everyone's attention to the necklace and asks Blake to share their experiences with gender and sexual identity. Blake's face flushes as they say, "That is quite a personal and sensitive topic for me. I'm not comfortable going into detail about it." The professor presses, "Sharing your lived experiences would really help your non-LGBTQ+ classmates design social programs that are informed and effective for other people like you." Blake shakes their head in refusal. Professor Smith expresses disdain for the hypervisibility of rainbow symbols and says LGBTQ+ people are merely attention-seeking.

### Context

In a sociocultural context where cisgender and heterosexual identities are the unspoken norm, individuals are presumed to possess these identities unless they openly identify or come out as something different. 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals often choose to express their identity authentically, even though it means potentially experiencing negative responses or discrimination. Pride flags provide a way for 2SLGBTQIA+ people to subtly disclose their identity, as well as recognize and connect with individuals who also share their identity. By drawing attention to the meaning of the necklace, the professor may have outed the student to the entire class. Doing so violates the student's privacy, autonomy, and potentially their safety. The recording of the virtual class and subsequent dissemination to the class raises concerns about the confidentiality of the student's personal and sensitive information. Also, in the classroom, power dynamics contribute to an expectation that students will respond to the requests of their instructor, especially when put on the spot.

### Possible responses

**Direct response:** Blake may choose to speak to the professor directly. A positive outcome would be the professor taking responsibility for their actions and taking steps to rectify the situation, such as offering an apology and enforcing classroom guidelines that would protect future students from experiencing the situation. However, it is also possible that the professor could react negatively. In this case, Blake may face a hostile learning environment and be singled out or receive biased grading.

**Survey feedback:** Blake could also report the incident anonymously through an end-of-year student feedback survey, but as this incident happened on the first day of the semester, feedback given in an end-of-year survey may be of benefit to students in the future but wouldn't necessarily be of benefit to Blake.



**Withdraw from course:** Blake could withdraw from the class, but depending on their degree plan and course availability, Blake may be forced to remain in the class to graduate on time. Withdrawing from the class could result in subsequent enrolment issues because of missing this course prerequisite. There's also the possibility that the next time the class is offered the same professor teaches it.

**Seek guidance and support:** Blake could receive guidance and information from the institution's sexualized violence prevention and education office. Staff can provide information and options, including how to request academic accommodations, where to seek emotional support, and how to file a report about the incident, if appropriate.

## Self-care

Blake can try to do things that give a sense of security, comfort, and control, such as meditation, going for a walk, reading a good book, or any other activity they enjoy. Blake can decide to reach out to a trusted friend, counsellor, or a 2SLGBTQIA+ support group.