

Preceptor Practice Brief

Topic: Implicit Preceptor-Student Power Dynamics

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Preceptor education typically focuses on essential preceptor roles and habits: designing a positive orientation, creating and facilitating learning opportunities, evaluating a student's performance, and delivering balanced feedback. Beneath the surface of these practices are nuanced considerations for deeper exploration. The first edition of the Preceptor Practice Brief begins with naming the inherent **power imbalance** present in preceptor-student relationships.

The reality is that preceptors always and invariably hold more power than students in the context of experiential learning (EL).



KEY CONSIDERATIONS & INSIGHT

First, recognize that power imbalance stems from the **roles** each person is assigned in the working relationship, not from individuals' personality types or beliefs about hierarchy. While students are responsible for their own learning experience, and ultimately their level of achievement and success, preceptors are responsible for assigning the student's **final grade**. Many students feel they have to keep their preceptor "happy" in order to be **successful**.

Consider how the implicit preceptor-student power imbalance might impact a student's sense of **autonomy** and **psychological safety, professional identity formation**, or even **patient safety** in the following scenarios:

- **Scope of practice:** A preceptor tells a student they trust them to complete clinical verification of prescriptions independently and unsupervised. The pharmacy is short-staffed, so they say it would greatly help out the team.
- **Site culture:** A preceptor tells a student that their site is a high pressure environment and that students may struggle to keep up. Jokingly, they say, *"If there ever had been concerns, no one mentioned it. It must not have been bad enough."*
- **Extraordinary generosity:** A preceptor invites the student to stay at their home or the home of a colleague or close friend, asks them to participate in personal gatherings outside of the practice site, or provides them with generous gifts.

In these scenarios, students may feel they have **no choice but to quietly comply** with every direction, request, or suggestion in the placement, even when unsure. Students may downplay concerns, withhold questions, cross professional boundaries, or complete tasks outside of their scope of practice, potentially leading to unsafe decisions that can harm patients and impact **your professional liability**. Instead, we want to create learning environments that foster professional identity development, including essential practice with **navigating ethical dilemmas** and **challenging conversations**.

REFLECTION & APPLICATION

Ask yourself:

- Could my words or actions be perceived to be **pushing boundaries** and placing students in uncomfortable situations even if my intentions are genuine?
- How can I foster a **culture** where questions, concerns, feedback, and appropriate boundaries are genuinely welcomed?

The Preceptor Practice Brief is a periodical from the EL Office designed to clarify expectations, share best practices, and support high-quality student learning experiences. Each edition highlights one or two timely topics. Drawing on patterns identified across evaluations, inquiries, and other data sources, each edition offers targeted insights and guidance to strengthen the learning environment and enhance preceptor confidence. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this Practice Brief, please contact us.