

UNIVERSITY of LOUISVILLE

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Washington University
c/o Jeffrey Kurtzman
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To whom it may concern:

I am writing about the practice of physical embraces between colleagues. I write from personal experience as a female faculty member who has taught at four universities.

Physical contact in the form of a congratulatory hug, friendly pat on the shoulder, arm loosely around the shoulder, or kiss on the cheek, is an acceptable practice in academic circles. Such an exchange is an appropriate response in various circumstances. In my own experience I recall that when I passed the dissertation defense I was congratulated with a handshake and a hug or kiss on one or both cheeks by all five members of my doctoral committee, all males. At the university where I teach several instances come to mind where senior male colleagues have embraced me when, following their solo or ensemble recitals, I have congratulated them.

Upon hearing about an award or fellowship, or having an article accepted for publication, are other times when I have received, or given, congratulatory embraces. These types of physical contact are appropriate between individuals of differing rank. In my own experience I can recall being embraced by, and giving embraces to, two department chairs.

Greeting colleagues one has not seen in some time at a professional meeting also often results in such exchanges. In my case, two weeks ago I read a paper at an international conference in Italy and was greeted by kisses on both cheeks by two senior scholars. And last week when I attended the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society in New York I was likewise hugged or kissed by five senior colleagues from other institutions (three male, two female).

I can recall seeing such exchanges between male colleagues, between female colleagues, and in some circumstances between faculty and students. In my own experience I remember three students for whom I had written letters of reference for graduate school, or otherwise helped with their studies, embracing me when I attended their senior and graduate recitals.

Personal circumstances are most certainly cause for such displays of warmth or concern. I remember well at a university where I taught previously when one female faculty member told colleagues individually she was pregnant that several male and female faculty and staff spontaneously embraced her. I also remember later, when she was quite pregnant, seeing two different male colleagues stop to feel the baby's pulse by putting their hands on her expanded belly. She took no offense--it was clear she knew her male colleagues were happy for her. At the same university when a male faculty member announced the good news that his wife was pregnant (we all knew they had been trying to conceive for years), several of us gave him congratulatory pats on the shoulder or squeezed his hand for a long time. And at the university where I now teach, I remember vividly being embraced by a colleague when we dealt with the news of another colleague's death.

There are of course some people, both male and female, who feel uncomfortable when they are touched by others or are otherwise shown collegial affection or concern. There was a letter in a newspaper advice column not that long ago from a female doctor who admitted that in social settings she didn't like to shake hands when she was introduced to people. The columnist's response, I believe, was that if she felt so awkward she could smile and nod her head in acknowledgment of the introduction, and then she should proceed to get on with the conversation.

If a person is bothered by collegial physical contact, whether it be a handshake or an embrace, it is up to that person to let the colleague who initiates the friendly gesture know that he/she doesn't like it even if the embrace is meant in a friendly way. It is totally unethical to not say anything at the time to the colleague and then a few years later to write (and still not even to write to the colleague) in an official statement that the embrace was bothersome.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan Parisi".

Susan Parisi
Assistant Professor