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Dear Jeffrey,

At your request I am sending you some observations on hugging in the academic workplace. I have never had reason to collect statistics on this, so the following is based on general impressions and recollections.

First of all, the frequency of the practice seems to be a function of many factors, among which: geography, ethnic and cultural background, and, quite markedly, discipline. It is definitely more common along the coasts (Boston, New York, Florida, California) than in the midland (e.g., Wisconsin), among Jewish-Americans and Italian-Americans than among Anglo-Americans, among French-Canadians than among English-Canadians; in the academic scene it is especially common in music, dance, and drama departments (as much in straight as in gay circles).

Personally, I have always found hugging a bit awkward, no doubt due to my growing up in a Dutch, Calvinist environment (even if as a Jew); in my family it was generally limited to immediate family and loved ones. Coming to America, I found the practice much more common. When someone else initiates it I try to respond immediately and warmly, and occasionally I initiate it myself, but I must confess that I still find it a bit uncomfortable. This does not in any way mean that I disapprove of the practice; the use of physical contact to express warmth and affection (without necessarily any erotic implications) is a natural and healthy impulse, if often suppressed in puritanical society.

As to situations that seem to call for the behavior, these would include meeting someone whom you have not seen for a while (if you want to watch a lot of hugging, just go to an AMS meeting), or congratulating someone on a special accomplishment, such as an extraordinary concert performance (post-concert Green Rooms also are full of it). You asked me specifically about the setting of a Chairman's office. I could see myself hugging a faculty member who came to tell me that (s)he had been awarded a terrific grant, and even, although less likely, a graduate student and advisee who received a Fulbright. A lot depends on the person in question and my relationship with them; in the case of a graduate student with whom I worked closely over a long period of time, and whose own behavior tends to be outgoing and demonstrative, it would be a natural act; with someone whom I do not know so well and whose own behavior is more retiring I would shy away from it. Paradoxically, although on the one hand the act is a spontaneous reaction of joy and warmth, its expression evidently takes into

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account a subtle calculation of the character of the other person, the mutual relationship, and the particular occasion.

It goes without saying that there many situations in which the behavior is definitely inappropriate. This would include frequent hugging without any apparent special warranting circumstances; hugging anyone whose response indicates discomfort; and any kind of behavior toward a student that might signal an overture to a sexual relationship. The latter can, of course, be a matter of interpretation (and misinterpretation) on either side; therefore erring on the side of caution is probably the best policy.

I hope the above is useful; to me most of it is obvious common sense, although my common sense is not necessarily common to everyone.

My very best wishes,

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Alexander Silbiger
Director of Graduate Studies