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O, What a Tangled Web We Weave!

Year

1999

Description

This case discusses the need for clarification of what is expected of a mentor, an advisor or a supervisor to a graduate student, the differences between mentors and advisors and the need for improved communication between both parties.

Body

Bonnie Hogan, a doctoral student in the department of History and Philosophy of Science, is an active member of the Council of Graduate Students (COGS) at her university. She has a research assistantship with Dr. Todd Simpson, who is also her dissertation adviser. Ms. Hogan chose Dr. Simpson as her adviser because his research background was closely related to the topic on which she wanted to focus her dissertation. Although he offered helpful suggestions on her research, she was never able to develop the sort of relationship that with him that enabled her to discuss her long-term career plans and life goals. Due to his busy travel schedule, Ms. Hogan found it very difficult to schedule any time with Dr. Simpson, and impromptu meetings were impossible. When formal meetings were scheduled, he consistently interrupted their conversation by taking phone calls. In addition, Dr. Simpson frequently arrived late to scheduled meetings. Most of the feedback she did receive from him was in the form of written notes.

At the first COGS meeting of the year, Ms. Hogan met Dr. Maria Rodriguez, a faculty member from Molecular Biology. Although she is not an expert in the field of History

and Philosophy of Science, Dr. Rodriguez took an interest in Ms. Hogan's work. Over time, the two of them developed a rapport that made it possible for Ms. Hogan to begin to discuss the long-term issues that she could not discuss with Dr. Simpson. Dr. Rodriguez regularly scheduled appointments with Ms. Hogan and specifically arranged time to talk about Ms. Hogan's plans and goals for her future. Dr. Rodriguez also showed an interest in Ms. Hogan's work and suggested articles and books that are relevant to her dissertation topic. Dr. Rodriguez also contacted some of her colleagues who are interested in Ms. Hogan's research topic and arranged for them to meet.

Over time, Ms. Hogan and Dr. Rodriguez developed a mutually trusting relationship, and Dr. Rodriguez ultimately became her mentor. (For discussion of positive mentor characteristics, see Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy 1997, 8.) Although busy with her own teaching, graduate students and research in Molecular Biology, Dr. Rodriguez agreed to be a member of Ms. Hogan's dissertation committee. She made a point to meet with Ms. Hogan and helps her identify ways to continue her research with another adviser, Dr. Patricia O'Halloran.

Dr. Simpson hired Ms. Hogan as a research assistant to help him with the literature review and proofreading necessary for a book he has contracted to write. As she is proofreading a draft of Dr. Simpson's work, Ms. Hogan finds approximately four pages of text that have been directly plagiarized from another author. She recognizes that a section of his chapter is taken verbatim from an article she reviewed earlier in her literature review for Dr. Simpson. She confirms the plagiarism by comparing Dr. Simpson's work to a copy of the original article.

Ms. Hogan realizes that this chapter is a draft that has not yet been sent to the publisher. At first, she does not know what to do. If she confronts Dr. Simpson with this information, what might be the repercussions? She wonders if she will lose her assistantship and, more importantly, what effect this situation might have on her future career. After contemplating her choices, Ms. Hogan decides to bring the plagiarism to Dr. Simpson's attention, so that he can correct the draft before publication. When she shows him the article from which he plagiarized, Dr. Simpson tells her to "grow up and understand that this goes on all the time. After all, no one ever gets hurt."

Ms. Hogan is in a dilemma. She cannot in good conscience continue to work with Dr. Simpson, but she does not want to throw away six years of graduate work.

Ms. Hogan contemplates taking formal action against Dr. Simpson with the Intellectual Integrity Officer, but fears that would jeopardize both her research assistantship and her ability to finish her degree. Frustrated and ready to quit, Ms. Hogan decides to talk with Dr. Rodriguez about her situation with Dr. Simpson. Dr. Rodriguez listens patiently to Ms. Hogan and gives her useful feedback as Ms. Hogan explores and evaluates possible options open to her. Dr. Rodriguez remains supportive throughout the ordeal as Ms. Hogan tries to figure out the best way to handle the situation. She leaves the final decision to Ms. Hogan, which fosters a sense of self-sufficiency. Hogan decides not to take any formal action against Dr. Simpson, at least until she has her degree in hand. (For further discussion see Pimple 1995.)

Ms. Hogan approaches her department chair for permission to change advisers. When asked why she wants to change advisers, Ms. Hogan gives a vague and untruthful answer. The department chair agrees, and Dr. O'Halloran becomes Ms. Hogan's new adviser. Although Dr. O'Halloran is not presently doing research in Hogan's area, her degree in History and Philosophy of Science and knowledge of Hogan's topic fully qualify her. This step enables Hogan to salvage most of her graduate work and research and maintain existing relationships with other committee members from her department. Through Dr. Rodriguez's contacts and help, Hogan is also able to obtain funding for her research and ultimately finish her degree. Dr. Simpson remains a tenured professor in the department of History and Philosophy of Science, continuing to advise a cadre of graduate students.

Discussion Questions

1. What issues are associated with Ms. Hogan's wish decision not to blow the whistle against Dr. Simpson? She fears retribution, fears that all her work toward the dissertation will be jeopardized if she takes any action, fears future employability, fears that taking any action would have negative repercussions on her existing relationships within the department. Should these fears be the determining factors in her decision?
2. Does Ms. Hogan have other options (such as writing a letter to the dean of research) besides taking "formal action"? Why or why not?
3. What responsibilities must Dr. Rodriguez consider in deciding what to do with

the information about Simpson's plagiarism, which Hogan shared with her in confidence? It would be important to check your own institutional policies on this matter.

4. Did Ms. Hogan have an ethical or moral responsibility to tell the department chair the truth about Dr. Simpson when she asked for permission to change advisers?
5. Is it possible to have a "successful" mentor outside your field or discipline? Why or why not?
6. How might Ms. Hogan's actions have changed if Dr. Simpson's shortcomings were not egregious (i.e., plagiarism), but instead consisted of: repeated unprofessional behavior, such as having little (and poor) communication with Ms. Hogan; missing appointments and committee meetings; drinking alcohol during office hours; assigning inappropriate research projects; making gender slurs; skipping office hours; and generally creating a difficult research environment? Should this kind of unprofessional behavior be reported? If so, to whom?
7. How can Dr. Simpson be held accountable for unprofessional behavior? Does Ms. Hogan have a responsibility as a graduate student to report Dr. Simpson's unprofessional behavior? Would this action adversely affect her standing within the department? If so, how?
8. In light of the events presented in this case study, should Dr. Simpson advise graduate students? Why or why not?

Notes

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