Author's Commentary on "The Slave Driver vs. the Lazy Student"

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The Slave Driver vs. the Lazy Student

This case is designed to highlight common conflicts between graduate students and their thesis advisers. The qualities of an effective adviser-student relationship and the responsibilities of students and faculty advisers are issues that often are not addressed until problems arise between students and advisers.

Patton should not raise questions about the research practices of her thesis adviser without thoroughly considering the possible consequences. Complaining about Santiago could be detrimental to Patton, especially given Santiago's good reputation. The reality is that students have to rely heavily on strong recommendations from their adviser and other senior faculty members. Patton needs to consider the fact that she may be perceived as lazy or as a troublemaker if she were to pursue a complaint against Santiago. Conversely, conflict with Patton could harm Santiago's reputation. Since the quality of the work in this case is not in question, Santiago's reputation probably would not be seriously affected. An institution that valued teaching might take a complaint against a young faculty member more seriously than a research-oriented institution, however.

Patton should first try to confront Santiago directly concerning graduation and publication of her work. A resolution between adviser and student is preferable to involving third parties. If Patton is not successful with Santiago's response, then she could discuss the situation with a senior faculty member who could be trusted to keep the conversation confidential. The department chair or director of graduate studies may serve such a function. In this case, the head of the department has considerable regard for Santiago, so involving him in the conflict may not be productive for Patton. However, the department chair will have no way of knowing about conflicts in his department if they are not brought to his attention. He may be able to help resolve the dispute despite his high regard for Santiago.

The issue of mutual trust is relevant in this case. Patton must trust that the process

by which she is evaluated will be fair and not arbitrary or biased. Santiago must trust her students to work honestly and diligently to make sufficient progress. Both must be open to suggestions and criticisms.

This case also deals with problems of perception. Each participant perceives the other as failing to fulfill her obligations. Santiago sees Patton as distracted by other activities and not dedicated. Patton perceives Santiago as one who cannot be satisfied and who can only benefit from delaying Patton"s graduation. She suspects Santiago's refusal to publish her work is a strategy designed to keep her in the lab until more students join. Who can determine whether Santiago has impossibly high standards? Is Patton lazy, or does she simply have more varied interests than her adviser? These questions don't have answers, but they highlight issues first year students should consider when choosing an adviser.

In this case, the committee may have to evaluate the quality and quantity of Patton's work and decide whether she can graduate without publication. Since she is Santiago's first student, there is no precedent to guide the committee. Perhaps the committee, with Patton and Santiago's input, can generate a checklist of things Patton needs to accomplish before graduation. Certainly the committee cannot force Santiago to publish anything.

Question 2 is meant to focus the discussion on ways an institution can contribute to effective student-adviser relationships. The best way to improve mentoring is to stress its importance by rewarding good mentoring. Currently most institutions focus on research, and faculty could be penalized for mentoring if it takes time away from research. The NAS recommends a number of measures to monitor mentoring performance. Institutions could track the progress of former students to provide information about the career experiences of graduates. Older graduate students could complete a faculty mentoring evaluation to assess the contributions of their advisers and other faculty to their research, scholarship and general education. A sample of this form can be found at the National Research Council's website. To stimulate better mentoring, the NAS recommends providing guidance to new faculty in the form of briefings, workshops, seminars or pairing with an older faculty member to serve as mentor to the new faculty member. Abuses of power can be monitored through departmental oversight, student evaluations, time-to-degree data and student performance. Such abuses can be included as data in tenure and promotion evaluations. In Patton's case, a discussion with the head of her department may make him aware of the need to institute some or all of the

recommendations mentioned.

The same report defines an effective adviser/student relationship as one that is characterized by respect, trust and understanding.(1) Good advisers are good listeners, good observers and good problem solvers. Advisers should respect the goals and interests of good students. Santiago has an obligation to help her students through the program to the best of her ability. She is not wrong for having high standards, but not everyone can have the kind of career she has had. Clearly, by refusing to publish Patton's work Santiago is not fulfilling her job as a good mentor. She is not helping Patton experience the process of publishing in the field, nor is she helping her student's chances of employment after graduate school.

Question 3 is meant to stimulate discussion about how much time a graduate student is required to be in the lab and how much is too much, i.e., when productivity drops or burnout occurs. Advisers and students must decide for themselves how many hours are required to complete a project. This demand will vary widely based upon personal preference and the nature of the project. A discussion about what is required of a student is advisable as soon as the student joins the lab or, if possible, before the student formally commits to the lab.

Question 4 is meant to add another dimension to the case. If Patton cannot present or discuss her work, furthering her career will be difficult. The impact of one's work is often a good gauge of the importance or relevance of the work. Failure to publish her data severely limits Patton's career potential. Santiago was not a good mentor because she did not keep her student's interest in mind when assigning Patton to the project. Santiago's responsibility is to anticipate such a situation and either avoid it or have alternative projects for her students that will produce publishable data.

- (1)National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering and Institute of Medicine. Advisor, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: On Being a Mentor to Students in Science and Engineering. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press, 1997.