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

Commentary On
The Slave Driver vs. the Lazy Student

1. Are Santiago's standards unreasonable? Is Patton's work ethic lacking?

It is difficult to answer these questions without further probing. Apparently, Santiago and Patton would answer each of these questions differently. Santiago: "My standards are reasonable; Patton needs to work harder." Patton: "Santiago's standards are unreasonable. It shouldn't take me another couple of years to have a publishable paper; my work ethic is fine."

Two strategies might help resolve these differences. First, a conversation between Santiago and Patton, in which they actually discuss their differences, might be helpful. The case presents no evidence of their having such a conversation. However, for this conversation to be helpful, it cannot simply be a confrontational meeting. Santiago questions Patton's dedication (too many vacations and extracurricular activities). Patton questions Santiago's motivation (she wants Patton around longer as an assistant because she does not seem able to recruit new assistants). If Santiago is right, Patton has little basis for complaint. If Patton is right, Santiago is exploiting Patton. A meeting in which they confront each other with their suspicions is unlikely to help them move ahead constructively (at least not together). However, a meeting in which they seek a meeting of minds on how Patton might best complete her degree program could have good results and might even dissolve their mutual suspicions.

Second, at this point Patton's thesis committee is involved; perhaps committee members can play a mediating role. The committee is convinced that Patton is a strong candidate. Perhaps a meeting involving Patton, Santiago and at least one other member of the committee could help put a more constructive spin on the situation. Given their mutual suspicions, Patton and Santiago may not be able to

move ahead without the mediation of others.

2. How could an institution prevent such situations? How can a department or institution encourage good adviser/student relationships?

As long as the basic communication about expectations and requirements is only one-to-one (adviser to advisee), such situations can easily occur. Meetings and workshops on program aims and requirements can help promote understanding among faculty and students alike. When students and faculty are left on their own to work out these matters one-on-one, it should be no surprise to find misunderstandings and suspicions. Does the department have any say about what reasonable standards are? Is there any discussion about how best to help students meet these standards? Are there candid discussions with students about how much work it takes to complete a program in a timely fashion? Are students fully informed about the publication restraints that accompany industrial collaboration?

3. What are Santiago's obligations to her students' careers?

I prefer to phrase this question somewhat differently: What are Santiago's obligations to help her students in the course of their degree programs? I would tie these obligations to the institution in which she is working, the quality of program her department is seeking to maintain, and the institution's and department's obligations to its students generally. Within that framework, Santiago has an obligation to provide opportunities and encouragement for Patton to do the best work she can. If Santiago does not want to publish Patton's work because she feels it will not benefit her own career, she seems to have things the wrong way around.

Santiago's basic question should be whether her standards are reasonable (and not just in her own eyes, but from the standpoint of her department), and whether Patton is satisfying them. If the bar is too high for Patton, what should be done? Perhaps the bar should be lowered. But departmental standards are for all students, not just for Patton. The question of reasonable standards should not be settled by Santiago alone, Patton alone or even Santiago and Patton together. Again, it is important that others be involved in the issue between Santiago and Patton.

4. What about the relevance of industrial collaboration to Santiago and Patton's work?

It is difficult to answer this question in the abstract. Certainly is it possible for researchers to become involved in industrial collaboration in ways that compromise their commitments to the university and/or their students. However, that problem does not require outright refusal to become involved in such collaborations. At the same time, students need to be fully informed about the limitations that will be placed on their own research should they join in such collaborations - and they should be informed about the implications of collaborative research *before* they agree to participate.