Author's Commentary on "Mentor Support?"

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At first glance, this case may lead the reader to focus on common practices between students and mentors. Traditionally, an adviser reviews graduate students' proposals before the proposal is presented publicly. Dr. Edgar did read and revise Janet's proposal, but he then failed to properly advise her and prepare her for the proposal defense. However, the ethical dilemma in this case is not only the one that Janet faces, but also the dilemma that Dr. Edgar faces.

This scenario was written with two goals in mind: 1) to promote discussion between graduate students and faculty on student-mentor relationships and 2) to encourage discussion between academicians about professional responsibility. Since this case involves two different issues, it would be useful to address each of these issues separately.

Student-Mentor Relationship

One common problem that arises between graduate students and their advisers is that the two parties fail to discuss their responsibilities and roles at the outset. Since both the graduate student and adviser have responsibilities to each other and to the other faculty, establishing rules at the beginning of the student-mentor relationship might avoid negative consequences for both concerned parties later.

Question 1 was written to encourage discussion of the responsibilities involved in the student-teacher relationship by focusing on Dr. Edgar's behavior toward Janet. Clearly, Dr. Edgar misinformed Janet about the seriousness of the proposal meeting. He also failed to inform the committee how he advised Janet. Dr. Edgar omits the fact that he gave the revisions to Janet just a few hours before the meeting and that he was even aware of the design flaw in an earlier draft.

Should Dr. Edgar own up to his responsibilities? Or is it Janet's responsibility to inform her committee about Dr. Edgar's late revisions?

How would the answer to Question 1 change if Janet were in her last year of graduate school? Or if her funding were cut off as a result of this meeting? Conversely, how would the reader's opinion change if we find that Janet is a student who does sloppy work? Is it still Dr. Edgar's responsibility to help Janet in her progress through the program?

According to a recent report produced by the Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, the mentor's primary goal or obligation is to further the student's education (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering and Institute of Medicine, 1997). Thus, Dr. Edgar not only has a responsibility to help Janet through the program, but he has an obligation (regardless of other commitments) to help her through. Graduate students and faculty advisers assume different roles within the department and the university, and these roles might conflict. In this case, Dr. Edgar is Janet's adviser, but he also is now an administrator at the university. His conflicting roles create time pressure in his life and take time away from each other.

The reader could be asked how this situation would change if Dr. Edgar did not have an administrative position. Certainly it would be easier for Janet and Dr. Edgar to work together because Dr. Edgar would have one less role at the university. But the reality is that professors have many roles. Oftentimes they have to spend less time on research and advising duties to complete committee or administrative work. Question 2 was written to encourage discussion about how the role of adviser should be maintained. Professors often accept new students that they do not really have time for and spend very little time with. Perhaps Dr. Edgar should not have accepted Janet and the new position in administration at the same time. Effective advisers are good listeners, good observers and good problem solvers (NAS et al., 1997). In addition, effective advisers keep in touch with each graduate and respects the goals and interests of good students. Thus, regardless of Dr. Edgar's new position, one of his responsibilities is advising graduate students, and he should assume this role with commitment and dedication.

Professional Responsibility

After learning that Tom experienced a similar situation, Janet decides that it is her professional responsibility to inform the department head of Dr. Edgar's behavior. Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7 all focus on this issue of professional responsibility. These questions were written to explore whether the consequences of Dr. Edgar's behavior (both for Janet and Tom) should influence Janet's decision to speak to the head.

The reader should consider whether Dr. Edgar is a tenured faculty member. If he is untenured, then Janet's decision can affect his future at that department. Should his mentoring abilities (or lack of abilities) affect his ability to obtain tenure?

In addition, Janet's decision will affect her own future. Most likely she will no longer be advised by Dr. Edgar, and she might eventually feel forced to leave the department.

Consider Dr. Edgar's position. What is it like to face your fellow faculty members after realizing your faults as an adviser? Should Janet give Dr. Edgar some consideration before approaching the department head? The answer to this question is, of course, yes. I am not arguing that Janet should behave altruistically or even that she should do unto others as she would have others do unto her. However, her position at the university is dependent on Dr. Edgar. So most likely she will ruin or, at the very least, damage her career by reporting Dr. Edgar.

A final position to consider in this case, in terms of professional responsibility, is Dr. Smith's position. As head of the department, is it his responsibility to look after Janet's concerns? If Dr. Edgar is untenured, is it fair to Dr. Edgar to bring this issue before the tenure committee? Dr. Smith's position is tenuous. Suppose he is elected by the faculty. Does he have the same responsibilities to the graduate students as he does to the faculty?

In summary, this case concerns two general issues -- the student-mentor relationship and professional responsibilities. With both issues, all positions and relationships should be considered before Janet can make a final decision. However, it is fairly clear that Janet must do something. She must find a way to protect her career interests and to address these issues without purposefully damaging Dr. Edgar's career.

References

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