



## **Case Studies on Advising and Mentoring**

The following case studies have been developed and assembled as resources for discussions within as well as across departments. They are intended to

- Stimulate active faculty discussions of advising strategies and experiences
- Prompt reflection on the complex issues that arise in graduate student advising
- Enable programs to identify areas for improvement in their advising structures
- Support connections to campus resources that support advising and students

The case studies are organized into five categories or themes in advising and mentoring. Some case studies may fit in multiple categories.

- I. Defining and aligning expectations
- II. Fostering timely and effective communication and feedback
- III. Supporting professional development
- IV. Promoting equity and inclusion
- V. Addressing time management, stress, and life events

Case studies include questions to guide discussion and reflection. The prompts ask how faculty mentors/advisors should intervene and communicate. It is also helpful to consider, when relevant, how a director of graduate study or department chair might be involved and what structures or resources exist that may help the student, faculty member, and department navigate questions and challenges that arise.

Programs should feel free to adapt the case studies to their own settings and research environments, particularly since many of the same underlying issues arise across the disciplines, even if they may take different forms in a laboratory and a seminar.

For additional suggestions regarding using case studies in faculty discussion, please consult the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs in the Graduate School.

## I. Defining and aligning expectations

A. Anne has impressed all of her professors since her first year in the program, and she successfully passed the department milestones. When Anne reaches the semester to complete her dissertation prospectus, her progress halts. She continues reading but fails to move the proposal for the dissertation beyond a vague list of themes. Her professor suspects that Anne is having difficulty juggling teaching and the new demands of dissertation writing. She recommends a tutor in the writing center to Anne. Anne rebuffs her and misses all their agreed upon deadlines. Her advisor then begins the conversation about possibly taking a master's instead of a PhD, underscoring that some people critique scholarship brilliantly but do not necessarily want to create it. Alternatively, her advisor suggests more regular meetings and the submission of shorter pieces of writing until the proposal comes together. Anne complains to the department chair and other professors that her advisor is not sympathetic enough to her creativity and is too controlling to advise her on her project.

- What are the main issues raised in this case?
- What might be productive next steps for this student and for her advisor?
- What might the DGS or the chair do to help resolve this situation? The department has recourse to the use of unsatisfactory progress or warning, but the advisor opposes this strategy, suggesting that the student may need time off teaching instead, to focus more on her work in conjunction with a peer editor.

B. Veronica is a first-year graduate student who is doing a semester rotation in Dr. Martin's laboratory. She met with Dr. Martin in August to plan out her first semester before he left for a trip. Dr. Martin advised her to split her experiments with the lab technician who could take over experimental steps while she was in class and studying or in ethics training. He stressed that for this semester, since it was her first year and first rotation, her focus should be on completing coursework and ethics training rather than generating data. When Dr. Martin left for his trip, he thought that they were on the same page. In spite of what had been discussed, Veronica proceeded to run lengthy experiments on her own without help from the technician; she spent long nights in the lab - completing experiments, before starting on her course readings and papers. Mid-way through the semester, senior graduate students had been noticing empty coffee cups, a blanket, and a pillow on Veronica's desk. They tried to get her to take breaks and talk with them about how she was faring in her first year, but she refused to do so. Lab members share their concerns about Veronica with Dr. Martin when he returns from his trip. He assumed Veronica was doing well, at least in her course work. He hadn't received any messages from her DGS that would signal otherwise. She had been sharing data with him on the experiments she had planned for the semester. He was impressed at her progress thus far, though he did remember telling her to coordinate with the technician on the experiments, to focus on courses, ethics training, and adjusting to graduate

school life. He wasn't expecting all these experiments to be completed by mid-October. Dr. Martin is concerned about Veronica. [Also Category 5]

- If you were Dr. Martin, how would you approach the situation with Veronica?
- How should Dr. Martin address the concerns of the lab for Veronica's well-being?
- How should Dr. Martin address the situation with regard to clarifying expectations for academics but also for her wellbeing?
- What resources can you recommend to this student?

C. Grant is a second-year graduate student who has just joined Dr. Miller's lab, as her first graduate student and one of two people in her lab. In all of the labs he has been in previously, lab professors were mostly absent; post-docs and graduate students rolled into lab in the late mornings or sometimes in the afternoons as they wished, though still being surprisingly productive with experiments and subsequent publications. Grant, not a morning person, thought this "lab life" was perfect for him. During his previous rotation with Dr. Miller he came in after his morning classes, so his lab work never begun before 12pm. He thought that this semester he would just maintain the same schedule; he only had two classes a week that began after 4pm. Dr. Miller had been absent for part of Fall semester on leave when Grant began in the lab; they did not an official lab orientation meeting, yet. Coming back from leave, Dr. Miller notices Grant hasn't been coming in until after 12pm. She assumes that this is because of his class schedule but quickly finds out from his DGS that his classes are in the evening. Dr. Miller knows she needs to communicate with Grant soon, but she is overwhelmed with catching up with work having returned from leave. She prefers that Grant come in earlier in the morning to start lab work, to learn more techniques from herself and the post-doc (being a new faculty member Dr. Miller still trains lab members herself) and to optimize advising time before his classes.

- If you were Grant's advisor, how would you set up your first advising meeting?
- How would you communicate expectations while also respecting Grant's reasons for his lab schedule? Could there be other reasons for his adjusted lab schedule; how would you address these with sensitivity?
- More generally, consider how a new advisor would thoughtfully communicate expectations to a new graduate advisee and ensure there is mutual agreement over goals and expectations.

## II. Fostering timely and effective communication and feedback

A. Jason was accepted into the lab of Dr. Weaver, a well-known and well-funded researcher who collaborates with other teams both domestically and abroad. Jason felt lucky to be invited to get involved in several interesting projects. He worked long hours and volunteered to help other students and post-docs. Because Dr. Weaver traveled frequently, Jason had limited 1:1 meetings with him (averaging about one every 1-2 months) but he was learning a lot from the other team members so that mitigated the lack of face time with his advisor. During his second year, Jason sent a prospectus for his thesis to Dr. Weaver; after 2 months went by, he sent it again, asking explicitly for feedback. Three weeks later he got the document back with a few general comments. Jason proceeded to develop his ideas into a full proposal and sent it back to Dr. Weaver. After waiting 5-6 weeks, Jason asked for a meeting with Dr. Weaver. After the meeting was rescheduled a couple of times, they met and he was surprised to hear that Dr. Weaver was not enthusiastic about his topic, and strongly encouraged Jason to move in a very different direction. Jason left the meeting feeling mixed about this new research direction, but had to wait at least 3 weeks to consult with Dr. Weaver again due to an upcoming international trip.

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- How could have Dr. Weaver's initial communication with Jason been more constructive?
- Is there a reasonable length of time for feedback?

B. During the spring semester, Dana is preparing his dissertation prospectus. He and his advisor have a general agreement regarding the project's sources, scope, and methodology. His advisor subsequently ignores Dana's emails and his requests for a meeting to discuss questions and problems that emerged during the writing of the prospectus. When Dana has a full draft of the proposal, his advisor agrees to meet to discuss but she never shows up for the meeting. Finally, in the last days of the semester, they have a conversation and she offers comments that are negative in tone and that require substantive changes to the draft. Dana uses her verbal comments to revise the proposal accordingly. His advisor doesn't respond to any subsequent emails from Dana during the summer even though Dana is the first presenter scheduled for the department seminar in the fall. At that seminar, his advisor proves to be the most hostile critic, complaining most strenuously about the very revisions she had encouraged Dana to make in the first place. Dana leaves the seminar angry and informs another professor he has dropped her as an advisor. She is angered by this step and openly hostile toward the student.

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- Does the department have any process through which students may disengage from advisors with whom they can no longer work?
- Are there any measures to protect students from the potential fallout from the situation?

- How might this professor be advised regarding minimal standards of professional behavior toward graduate students?
- What is the role of the DGS and the chair in these scenarios?

C. George, a new assistant professor, was excited to have recruited a doctoral student to work with him on his research program on childhood lead exposure. Lisa had a wide range of research interests and spent several months learning about lead exposure in children; over time, she found she had a strong developing interest in parent-child interactions as they relate to asthma control. When George and Lisa meet to talk about research, George continues to discuss literature on lead exposure, and talks about developing a research proposal in this area. However, Lisa occasionally shares info about studies she has read about asthma control and is thinking about making this as a topic for her thesis research. When George invites Lisa to join him and a colleague to work on the lead exposure grant proposal during the summer, she delays responding because she would rather work with another faculty member who has projects focusing on childhood asthma. [Also Category 3]

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- How might have George started the conversation about research interests?
- If Lisa approaches you as her DGS for advice on how to respond, how would you guide her in this instance?

### III. Supporting professional development

A. Cynthia is an enthusiastic graduate student who has written a well-received seminar paper in the second semester of her first year. She has been encouraged by her professor in that seminar to submit the paper to a journal, and they have discussed several possibilities for submission. Cynthia's likely future advisor disagrees and urges her instead to dedicate the rest of the year (summer and fall semesters) to preliminary dissertation research, preparing for her qualifying exams, and writing grant proposals. Disappointed, Cynthia seeks out the advice of other professors in the department and finds that they divide pretty evenly between younger faculty encouraging publication and older faculty discouraging it.

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- Does the department have a consistent guideline for students regarding publications?
- Have faculty had a substantive discussion regarding how graduate students should balance the push for publication with progress through milestones and applications for research grants?

B. Andrew is a recent ABD who has thrived in his doctoral program. Because of the work location of his significant other, Andrew decides that after he completes his dissertation he will confine his job search to New York City. He is considering a variety of careers -- some outside and some inside academia. When he informs his committee, their reactions vary. His advisor, a senior scholar in the field, insists that the dissertation is not worth completing if these are Andrew's restrictions on his future job search. He advises him to leave the program and, if he figures out a career direction in NYC, to pursue an advanced degree in that area. Another committee member, newer to Brown, encourages Andrew to pursue his dissertation research rigorously and to get in touch with CareerLAB about his options, keeping an open mind about his future. A third member of the committee ignores Andrew's messages but confides to the other two professors that perhaps Andrew could complete a shorter and more limited dissertation, but that she personally won't be bothered with giving much input on such a project. With the other demands on her time, she might prefer to leave the committee altogether.

- What advice would be best for Andrew at this juncture?
- Are there other options that none of those involved have considered?
- Does the department have any policy or any procedures regarding this scenario for graduate students?

C. Jane, an accomplished graduate student in the last year of her program, is among the finalists for a tenure-track job at a well-regarded college in the Midwest. Her advisors and other department members have mentored her throughout the program and enthusiastically participate in her final preparations

for the interview. They are later stunned to learn that Jane was offered the job but turned it down without explanation to the search committee or to her advisor and other professors.

Since the academic field is a relatively small one, the department divides in opinion about how to view the implications of this scenario. Some colleagues believe that this negative decision on the part of the student reflects poorly on the program and its future graduates, and argue for more programming that would require doctoral students to reflect substantively on their future before they enter the academic job market. Students, in their view, shouldn't travel to campus interviews unless they are willing to accept jobs. Other colleagues are not convinced that such programming or conversations would help students navigate these decisions. Doctoral candidates have to travel to campus interviews to understand the full implications of accepting such a position.

- Are there other insights that a department might glean from such an experience?
- Is the attention to decision-making and reflections on career best handled by the department and if so, how?

D. A department with a proactive DGS and chair decide to sponsor a series of workshops on career diversity for PhDs and invite a number of speakers, including alums to campus. Attendance is poor to fair, although a core of students is enthusiastic and appreciate the opportunity. Some graduate students complain that they would do better on the academic job market if their professors were more attentive in their academic advising. Faculty enthusiasm is muted. Some professors discourage their students from attending, while others wonder whether the department resources could be better spent on other efforts.

- How might the DGS and chair proceed in the second year of this kind of programming for the department?
- What kinds of conversations might they pursue both with graduate students and with faculty?
- What modifications might they make in the second year of their efforts?

E. Xiao, a Chinese international doctoral student in engineering, is interested in a career in industry and plans to graduate in two years. Through connections he made at a recent conference, he has been offered a summer internship with a large corporation on a project related to his doctoral studies. He wants to take the internship, which starts in four months, but doing so would require putting his research project in his advisor's lab on hold for the summer. Xiao doesn't know how his advisor will react to this and fears losing his advisor's support if he pursues the internship. In addition to informing the advisor of the opportunity, the

student needs to request a letter of recommendation from the advisor in order to receive his visa. Xiao approaches you for advice on how to proceed.<sup>1</sup>

- Is the student's request reasonable?
- How should the student approach the advisor about the internship?
- As the advisor, how would you respond to the request?
- What questions or concerns about the internship would need to be addressed before you could be supportive of the opportunity?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from The Graduate College, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign handout: *Mentoring scenarios, with discussion notes & resources*, 2010.

#### IV. Supporting and promoting equity and inclusion

A. A female graduate student (Ellen) recently informed her advisor of her pregnancy. Ellen's advisor did not respond positively to the news and made comments about how she must not be serious about her studies. Ellen arranges a meeting with you, the Director of Graduate Studies, to ask for assistance in approaching this situation.<sup>1</sup>

- How can you respond as the Director of Graduate Studies?
- Are there ways that this discussion can go badly?
- What campus resources can help the student?

B. You are advising a first-year graduate student, Melissa, who has recently graduated from a small Historically Black College or University (HBCU) institution where the student was accustomed to small classes and individualized attention. Melissa visits you weekly during your office hours and wants to discuss her studies in great detail. You enjoy the conversations and think she has interesting points; however, you don't have the ability to spend so much time each week with the student.<sup>1</sup>

- How do you address this topic with the student?
- What assumptions might the student be making about the advising relationship based on her previous experience?
- In the future, how can you avoid a similar situation with a future student?

C. One of your advisees, Julian, seems hesitant to get involved in student social activities in the department/research group. When you approach him about this, he says he is not sure if he is liked and that he finds the dynamics in the group uncomfortable. He is the only student in the group from an underrepresented minority and says he finds it hard to connect with the group.<sup>1</sup>

- How do you approach this situation?
- What could you do to help the student?
- What campus resources could be of assistance to this student?

D. Last year I worked with a graduate student who has since left for a postdoctoral position. We all valued her input, and I think that she had a positive experience working with our research team, but there are a few questions that still linger in my mind. The student is an African-American woman. I wondered how she felt about being the only African-American woman in our research group. In fact, she was the only African American woman in our entire department. I wanted to ask her how she felt, but I worried it might be insensitive or politically incorrect to do

so. I never asked. I still wonder how she felt and how those feelings may have impacted her experience, but I could never figure out how to broach the subject.<sup>2</sup>

- What are the main themes raised in this case study?
- What might the advisor's intent have been in asking the question, and what might the impact be on the advisee?
- How might you react to this case differently if the advisee were the only openly gay graduate student in the department?
- How do you engage in such conversations based on interest without feeling or expressing a sense of judgment about differences?
- How do you ask without raising issues of tokenism?

E. Celia is a first-year graduate student and the only underrepresented minority (URM) in the graduate program's incoming cohort; she is also the fourth URM graduate student in the graduate program's history. Dr. Crane notices Celia is very quiet and is barely participating during small group discussions. She appears to listen to others and nods to acknowledge her engagement. When she does speak, it is almost always to agree with what others are saying. Dr. Crane did not expect to see this passive behavior from Celia in the seminar course. In fact, during her interview last February, Celia was excited, animated and fiery in talking about her research and the field; she was excited to challenge the field. When Dr. Crane confronts her in a one-on-one meeting (she is also Dr. Crane's first-year advisee), she shares that she is struggling with the readings and is apprehensive about the small group discussions that are part of the course. She has never been in this type of environment before and feels as though the other students who "always have something to say" are clearly more knowledgeable than she is: "After all, they have all come to graduate school with grant-funded research projects, from larger well-funded undergraduate institutions, and have traveled the United States and the world to study. The furthest I have traveled was to Rhode Island for grad school." She shares that she feels completely isolated in the program. She wonders why the program invited her to join; in her mind, it's clear she doesn't belong here and is not meant for graduate study.

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- How should Dr. Crane address Celia's concerns about the course and being here at Brown?
- What strategies might be employed to make this classroom experience more inclusive?
- What other concerns might also affect Celia's graduate experience? How might her background affect her graduate experience? How might the current departmental culture influence Celia's in this course?
- What are some ways you, your department, and the Graduate School can support her today (i.e. existing structures)? If no, structures exist, share your ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the case studies in *Mentor Training for Biomedical Researchers*, manual, part of the W. H. Freeman, *Entering Mentoring Series*, 2014.

F. Bobby is a second-year international graduate student and non-native English language speaker. He currently serves as a teaching assistant for Dr. Brennan's courses. Students from the course have been having some difficulty understanding Bobby's speech during their discussion session. They share with Dr. Brennan that he sometimes rushes through explanations, which further jumbles what he is saying. Dr. Brennan knows that Bobby passed all of the English communication courses required for TAs in the department. When talking with Bobby, Dr. Brennan has never had a problem; but she agrees his accent is still rather heavy and when he speaks quickly he is hard to understand. Knowing that this course is the first course he has TA-ed in the United States, and in English, Dr. Brennan checks in with Bobby and shares some students concerns with him. In their meeting, Bobby candidly shared he has apprehension and anxiety about presenting in English and he is in need some practice. Though he knew his material, he felt that he still couldn't fully communicate as freely as he wished as a teacher. When Dr. Brennan asked him why he didn't bring this up sooner, he responded that he didn't want to seem incompetent.

- What are the main themes raised in this case?
- How might Dr. Brennan respond to and provide support to this student?
- What departmental and/or institutional interventions or structures are there to support this student?
- Are there any cultural factors that may have prevented Bobby from asking for help?
- Are there cultural norms in the department that discourage help-seeking?
- What may be the consequences to student and department if help-seeking practices are continually discouraged?

## V. Addressing time management, stress, and life events

A. Allecia Diaz was the first of her family to go to college and, after working in a well-known lab for a few years, she got into her first-choice graduate program. During her first semester, Allecia was seen as mature, professional, and well-organized. Concerns emerged during the spring semester; she seemed distracted when on campus, and was absent from lab more days than she was present. She was working on a paper but progress was slow, and in February Allecia failed to turn in a draft on the date promised. Her advisor Dr. Harrison assumed that more structure was needed, so she began to set very explicit expectations for products with specific deadlines attached. During their meetings, Allecia was enthusiastic about her projects and eagerly promised to get the work done. However, the pattern of failing to deliver kept repeating itself. Finally, after an extended stretch when Allecia was absent from the lab and had missed a deadline for a draft, Dr. Harrison called her in to ask if she was serious about her work. Allecia teared up and revealed that her mother was seriously ill, and she had been driving the 3 hours back home nearly every weekend for the last several months to help her family. She had thought it inappropriate to mention her family crisis, not wanting to acknowledge that her personal life was interfering with her graduate studies. She asked Dr. Harrison if she should withdraw from the program.

- What is the best course of action for this student for the immediate future?
- How can the DGS best advise her and what Brown resources can help support her?
- What policy changes might the department implement in order to avoid a repeat of the situation in the future, with another student?

B. Adeline is a third-year graduate student whose mother's health begins to deteriorate over the course of the fall semester. She has asked the chair of her qualifying exam committee if she might postpone her exams by one semester to attend to her mother's needs. Adeline is the first in her family to attend college and she finds it difficult to communicate with her professors about personal matters and how they affect her studies. Her committee chair lacks the emotional skills to recognize that the student is in distress and he insists she complete her exam at the end of the semester. Shortly after her exams Adeline's mother lapses into a coma from which it appears that she will never recover.

- What is the best course of action for this student for the immediate future?
- How can the DGS best advise her and what Brown resources can help support her?
- What policy changes might the department implement in order to avoid a repeat of the situation in the future, with another student?
- What specific kinds of training should professors with these limitations receive in order to help them recognize students in difficulty?

## Resources Cited

1. Handout. *Mentoring scenarios, with discussion notes & resources*, The Graduate College, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010.  
[http://www.grad.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/mentoring\\_scenarios\\_2010.pdf](http://www.grad.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/mentoring_scenarios_2010.pdf)
2. Pfund C., Brace C., Branchaw J., Handelsman J., Masters K., Nanney L. *Mentor Training for Biomedical Researchers*. Part of the W.H. Freeman *Entering Mentoring Series*. W.H. Freedman & Co., 2014.