

Fostering Independence

Case #1: *Launching an Independent Career?*

Dr. Klein is very excited about the grant proposal she is writing to NIH. The proposal builds upon research she has been conducting as a post-doc in the laboratory of Dr. Janco. She feels strongly that the proposal clearly describes the logical next steps in the project as well as relates the research to her previous research. When Dr. Klein meets with Dr. Janco to discuss the grant proposal, she is surprised to discover that Dr. Janco is less than enthusiastic about the proposal. Dr. Janco informs her that the proposal is too closely aligned with Dr. Janco's current work and its future direction. She says that the proposal needs to be reworked and focused on a different, more independent direction of research. Dr. Klein leaves the meeting frustrated, disappointed, and unsure how to proceed.

Guiding Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the main themes raised in this case study?
2. What could have been done to avoid this situation? What should the mentor do now? What should the mentee do?
3. How is independence redefined in a restricted funding climate and an era of collaborative research?
4. What if Dr. Klein's proposal describes research that is closely aligned with the project of a graduate student in the same research group? How can boundaries between the projects be established and how can ownership be clearly defined?

*Note: This case is taken from the mentee's perspective, providing mentors a slightly different lens.

Case #2: *Forced Guidance*

I am working with a graduate student this semester and I just can't seem to communicate effectively with him. I told him at the beginning of the semester that I thought we should have weekly meetings to talk about his progress, and he agreed. At our next meeting, I asked him to run through a list of the things he'd accomplished that week. He had no notes and seemed pretty unprepared for talking about his work in the level of detail that I expected. He's been canceling most of our meetings at the last minute – either he doesn't feel well, or he suddenly remembers an assignment for another class that's due the next day. I know that he's doing the work, because at the few meetings he keeps, he has a lot to say – but his progress on this project is very uneven, both in time taken and in quality, and I'm often forced to suggest that he redo crucial pieces. I fear these critical meetings leave him demoralized and less interested in accepting guidance from me, but I don't know how else to get him to understand that he needs my help.

Guiding Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the main themes raised in this case study?
2. What other issues might be at play in this case? What should the mentor's next steps be?
3. How can you determine if you are making assumptions about a mentee's ability based on their productivity or work style, especially if they differ from yours? What is your responsibility to "force guidance"?