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The Slave Driver vs. the Lazy Student

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Description

What should a graduate student do when she thinks her adviser is improperly delaying her dissertation project? This scenario explores the complicated surrounding adviser/advisee relationships.

Body

Eileen Patton, a fourth-year engineering student, has just been denied permission by her thesis committee to begin writing her dissertation. In general, the committee considered her a strong Ph.D. candidate with good classroom and laboratory performance, but found a surprising absence of abstracts and papers. Citing this lack of publication, the committee advised her to focus on her project for at least another year before meeting again.

Patton is frustrated. She feels that she is ready to begin the dissertation, and she thinks her adviser, Dr. Laura Santiago, is a slave driver who can never be satisfied. Patton's presentations at various biotech firms have been well received and have resulted in both research money and equipment, but none of her work has been published. Abstracts of her work presented at national conferences list her adviser's name as first and presenting author. Santiago has asked her write up her results on

many occasions, but she has told Patton she will not submit the work without the approval of the industrial collaborators who are sponsoring the work.

Patton knows her department usually requires Ph.D. candidates to have at least one first-author paper before a degree is granted. She feels her chances to graduate in a timely fashion and get a competitive position are severely diminished by her lack of publication. Patton and Santiago have experienced conflicts over Patton's numerous vacations and extracurricular activities, which Santiago regards as distractions and evidence of Patton's lack of dedication. In addition, Santiago has been unsuccessful in attracting new students the past two years, and Patton suspects she would like to delay her departure for as long as possible.

Santiago had an extremely successful post-doc and is the youngest person ever to receive a tenure-track position in her department. During her four years as associate professor, she has won numerous awards, and the head of her department has often publicly complimented her on her work ethic and commitment to research. Santiago's affiliation with various companies has attracted significant research funding and equipment that benefits her lab and the department as a whole.

Patton, her first graduate student, has been pushing her to submit manuscripts for publication. Santiago believes the work to date is good, but not enough has been done. If Patton would only focus on her work and put in more effort, Santiago is sure Patton could get more of the high quality data required. Santiago doesn't want to jeopardize her fine reputation and funding by submitting inferior manuscripts. If Patton wants to graduate sooner, Santiago feels she can either start working harder or try to graduate without publishing. If the committee requires it, Santiago is prepared to continue supporting Patton until the time is right to publish, which, she admits, may still be two or three years in the future.

Discussion Questions

1. Are Santiago's standards unreasonable? Is Patton's work ethic lacking? What are some possible "objective" criteria for determining when a Ph.D. has been completed? What, if anything, can the committee members do to resolve this conflict?
2. How could an institution prevent situations like this one? How can a department or institution encourage good adviser/student relationships?
3. Santiago does not want to publish Patton's work because she feels that publication will not benefit her own career. What, if any, are her obligations to

her students' careers?

4. Suppose Santiago's industrial collaborators do not want the work to be made public. How does that affect Santiago? How does it affect Patton? Does Santiago's relationship to industry have priority over her relationship to her students?

Notes

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