

Deborah Johnson's Commentary on "Mentor Support?"

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Mentor Support?

This seems a fairly straightforward case in which the professor, Dr. Edgar, is doing a terrible job of advising his student, Janet, and she has become the victim of his poor advice and his dishonesty. In analyzing this case, it may be helpful to consider what Dr. Edgar might say in his own defense and at the same time try to disentangle the ethical issues from the management issues.

What has Dr. Edgar done wrong? The case describes what seem to be a series of failures to fulfill his responsibilities to his student. He fails to make arranged meetings with her. He fails to give her timely feedback. Perhaps most important, he fails to give her the benefit of his knowledge when he sees a flaw in her design. Then, to save himself from the embarrassment of having approved a flawed design, he lies to his colleagues, telling them that he had told her about the flaw. Janet appropriately feels that she has not gotten the advice she needs and consequently, she has been put in a situation where she fails, i.e., the committee does not accept her proposal.

Dr. Edgar might defend himself by explaining that he is overloaded with work; he is trying to do a good job, but, he might admit, he is having a hard time managing all of his responsibilities. He might also argue that nothing has been lost since Janet can fix her proposal and resubmit it.

That is not, by any means, an adequate defense, but it is how Dr. Edgar might characterize the situation to minimize its meaning. The defense points to the entanglement of ethics and management. Because Dr. Edgar is doing such a bad job managing his responsibilities, his behavior crosses the line between poor management and unprofessional and unethical conduct. It is hard to say precisely when Dr. Edgar crosses the line; however, it seems clear that he is over the line when he fails to tell Janet about the flaw in the design. He compounds that wrong by

lying to the other members of the committee and refusing to take responsibility for his own behavior.

It should be noted here that trust is at the very foundation of the student-professor relationship. Education cannot happen unless students trust their professors and professors trust their students. Students must trust that professors give them accurate knowledge and that they design courses and give assignments that will lead to knowledge and skills the student will need. Students also must trust that the process by which they are evaluated will be fair rather than arbitrary. In parallel, professors must trust that students will turn in work that they have done (rather than someone else's work), that students will take their advice and respond to their suggestions and criticisms. Professor Edgar's behavior is reprehensible because it undermines that trust.

Part 2 of the case focuses on what Janet should do. Again the ethical and the management issues seem to be entangled. Several of the decisions that Janet must make are simply a matter of how best to manage her way through graduate school; others have to do with her responsibility to Dr. Edgar and future graduate students.

I do not think that Janet has a moral responsibility to Dr. Edgar to keep quiet about what happened, but I think her best interests lay in handling the problem delicately and in a way that doesn't undermine her reputation in the department.

I am not convinced that Janet is obligated to do something to protect future graduate students, although I think it is good for her to do something. I hesitate to recommend that she do anything because she can't be sure that Dr. Edgar has behaved similarly with other students. Even though a student has told her that something similar happened to him, the report is informal, and she has no way of knowing how bad the problem is. Going to Dr. Smith is a good thing for Janet to do because Dr. Smith is in a better position to investigate the problem and determine its severity. Not only is he in the best position to take action, it is his responsibility to do so. Of course, it is important to remember that Dr. Smith will have to give Dr. Edgar a chance to explain his side of the story. He cannot simply act on an accusation.

Ideally, Dr. Smith will keep his conversation with Janet confidential and will give her advice as to whether to continue to work with Dr. Edgar or to find a new adviser.