

Columbia University Case: The Business of Mentoring.

Susan Smith is a fourth-year biology graduate student at Paradise University. She is conducting her research in the lab of Dr. Frank Michaels, a well-respected lab director whose research focuses on DNA transcription. Susan's work has been conscientious but unproductive. She feels stuck and has tried to discuss this with Dr. Michaels, but he tells her to just keep working. "You'll get results eventually" is all Dr. Michaels ever tells Susan.

Recognizing that mentoring is of the utmost importance in the training of graduate students, the Biology Department at Paradise University has a policy that lab directors are to act as formal mentors for their trainees. Susan has therefore relied on Dr. Michaels and has not formed a personal relationship with anyone else in the department. She thinks that Dr. Michaels is not giving her the attention she needs because of his other activities. Dr. Michaels has a personal interest in computers and computer programming. As the instructor for the department's molecular-biology course, he develops a computer program that generates a video demonstration of transcription (DNA Whiz) and uses it to teach the class. DNA Whiz is a hit with the students and with other faculty. Realizing that the program has broad appeal, and that he has a talent for programming,

Dr. Michaels sets up his own business, BioProgram. He markets the program, and others he develops, commercially to faculty at other universities via the Internet, but he shares the programs with Paradise faculty free of charge.

In addition to Susan's concern that Dr. Michaels is not providing her with the guidance she needs, she often ends up answering calls to the lab about BioProgram and troubleshooting programs for Dr. Michaels' business. Along with research, exams, and work on her projected thesis, these activities have left Susan feeling overwhelmed. But she doesn't want to appear unwilling to help. Susan knows that Dr. Michaels, owing to his excellent reputation and his extensive contacts in the field, can be very helpful to her in securing a postdoctoral appointment. She also hopes that in the next year Dr. Michaels will arrange for her to make presentations within the department as well as at a national meeting.

In Susan's department, comprehensive examinations are given in part on a take-home basis. She has completed two drafts for one of her examinations, but it is being held up before approval by a particularly exacting member of the review committee, who has a reputation for unreasonable demands. She has shown her most recent draft to specialists in the field, who believe that her exam has earned well beyond a passing grade and cannot understand why it is being held up. When Susan discusses the exam with Dr. Michaels, in the hope that he will intercede in some way with the difficult faculty member, he refuses to get involved. "It is not my responsibility," he says.

To add to her feelings of neglect, Susan has not had a committee meeting to discuss her research in more than a year, and Dr. Michaels shows no signs of calling one anytime soon. Susan is quite frustrated and has thought of talking to Dr. Evelyn Chen, a more senior faculty member in the department and another member of her committee. Susan has seen Dr. Chen work with other graduate students, and Dr. Chen seems to take an active part in fostering their graduate work and careers.

Susan decides to talk to Dr. Chen, who suggests that Susan should have a committee meeting and initiates the scheduling of one. At the meeting, the other members of Susan's committee express concern about her progress; they believe that she is not likely to finish by the end of her fifth year, her expected completion date. Susan is upset, because she believes that she has been doing exactly what was asked of her by Dr. Michaels, assuming that her work would eventually lead to a thesis. Dr. Michaels points out to the committee that he never asked Susan to answer the phone or troubleshoot the programs, that Susan did those things by her own choice and in doing so drew time away from her thesis and exam work.

Susan decides that even at this point in her graduate education she is better off starting over in another lab. She asks Dr. Michaels for a letter of recommendation. He tells Susan that he can't write a strong letter, but he would be willing to describe her accomplishments, the coursework she completed, her time in the lab, etc. Susan schedules an appointment with the dean to discuss her graduate-student career and her timetable in working toward her degree.