Mentoring
Cases Studies for Phil 7570, Spring 2007
Prof. Bryan Benham

Included below are eight case studies related to mentoring issues. You are not expected to cover each case in
detail, but should pick out cases that are most relevant or interesting to you.

Case 1: Advice about Mentors
(Contributed by Bryan Benham)

You are a second year graduate student in the PhD program. Even though it is early in your graduate career, the
department advises all students to select a supervisor for the beginning phases of your graduate research. Asking
around, several fellow-graduate students give you some advice. Angel recommends that you pick the supervisor
with the research expertise in an area you are the most interested in; you should pursue those questions you are the
most interested in, otherwise the three or four years of graduate school will be unbearable. Barbarosa tells you it
doesn’t matter whether the supervisor’s research is of interest to you. You should select the most famous professor
because in the end you will need a job and that requires letters and the benefits of associating with well-known
individuals. You can always pursue your interests later. Correl suggests that you pick someone you feel comfortable
working with, otherwise you will be left on your own and that makes graduate work that much more difficult.
Guidance is the most important thing in a supervisor. And lastly, Devon explains that it doesn’t really matter who
you choose. Pick someone and see who works. You can always change supervisors later. It’s really no big deal.

Discussion Questions
1. Whose advice do you think is most helpful? Least helpful? Why?
2. Are there some other considerations, not included, that you should think about? Why are they important?
3. What was the single most important criteria you used or will use to select a supervisor?

Case 2: Rejection
(Contributed by Rachel Hayes-Harb)

You are entering your third year of the PhD program and you have not yet selected a dissertation advisor. There is
one professor who does research in your field of interest and with whom you would like to work with, but when you
ask her to be chair of your committee, she declines, saying that she already has too many students and too much on
her plate. There is no one else in the department with similar research interests.

Discussion Questions
1. What is your first reaction? What should you do? What are your options?
2. Is it reasonable to wait year (or more) until the professor is more likely to be able to take you on as a
dissertation advisee? If so, what would you do in the meantime?
3. Should you change your topic of interest for the dissertation so that you can finish with another advisor in a
reasonable amount of time? Why or why not?
Case 3: Personality and Dissertations  
(Contributed by Rachel Hayes-Harb)

You have selected an advisor and have been working with this person closely on research that is very interesting to you and that you hope will be the topic of your dissertation. Unfortunately, you are finding that the two of you do not get along well personally, and you are worried about your ability to write a dissertation with this person.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your options? Which is the best option?
2. Should you try to work on your personal relationship with this professor so that you can write a dissertation with this person?
3. Assuming you can find another professor to act as your dissertation advisor, should you have this other professor, with whom you have personal conflicts, on your committee?

Case 4: Unequal Treatment?  
(Contributed by Bryan Benham and Rachel Hayes-Harb)

Professor Huffandpuff serves as dissertation advisor for two students, Sam and Moon. Sam is a hard working graduate student with a good grasp of the topic area and methodology required for his dissertation research, but has made only marginal success. Sam continues to work in hopes of eventually developing a career in an academic institution as a researcher and teacher. Moon, on the other hand, is a brilliant student who promises to contribute a very original and potentially influential dissertation. However, Moon feels slighted by Professor Huffandpuff because she spends considerably more time helping Sam than helping Moon with her own research questions. Moon asks Professor Huffandpuff why she treats Sam and herself unequally. Professor Huffandpuff answers that it is nothing personal, but because Moon doesn’t plan to continue on in academia she feels more time should be spent developing Sam’s skills so he can get a teaching job.

Discussion Questions

1. Is Moon being treated unfairly? Should it matter what your goals are after completing the dissertation?
2. Consider an alternative explanation: Professor Huffandpuff thinks Sam needs more help because he just needs more attention in order to finish his work. Moon works independently and doesn’t seem to need the additional attention. Assume that both Sam and Moon plan similar futures after the dissertation. Is this fair?
3. Is it ever permissible for the advisor to treat his or her advisees differently?

Case 5: Selective Job Opportunities  
(Adapted from Francis Macrina. (2001). Scientific Integrity: An Introductory Text with Cases. 2nd ed. ASM Press.)

Professor Eastwood frequently receives letters that announce junior-level positions for scientists. Sometimes Eastwood posts the letters on the departmental or laboratory bulletin board. Other times he distributes them to faculty or postdoctoral fellows using a routing list. On occasion he directly gives a letter to a postdoctoral trainee. Drs. Smith and Jones are currently postdoctoral trainees in Eastwood’s lab. Dr. Jones discovers that Dr. Smith has applied for a job at a prestigious university. In a subsequent conversation, Dr. smith tells Dr. Jones that Professor Eastwood provided him with a pre-advertisement letter inviting applicants to apply for the position. Dr. Jones confronts Eastwood and indicates that she is upset that she was not notified about this position. Eastwood asserts that his policy is to deal with such letters selectively. He states that he could not support Dr. Jones for the position in question so he did not provide her with the letter in advance of the published advertisement.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is Professor Eastwood’s stated policy ethical? Why or why not?
2. What responsibilities should a mentor have with regard to these matters?
3. If you were a postdoctoral trainee in the laboratory, what would your expectations be regarding these matters?
Case 6: Hard Choices  
(Contributed by Bryan Benham)

Sandra Yee is progressing nicely as a second year graduate student in the PhD program. She and her husband have been talking about having children in the next year or so. Sandra’s only serious concern is what effect this will have on her research and probability of finishing her dissertation. Her husband thinks they can work it out, even if it takes Sandra an additional year to finish. Sandra is uncertain. She is thinking of talking to her advisor about this situation, but has some reservations about broaching the topic with Professor Swineburn. Professor Swineburn is a good advisor and is very excited about Sandra’s potential. He promises to help Sandra finish her dissertation in a reasonable amount of time, but Sandra is worried that Professor Swineburn may not be as enthusiastic about her project if she becomes pregnant and needs to take off a year or more.

Discussion Questions
1. Should Sandra talk to Professor Swineburn about her potential to become pregnant in the next year or so?
2. Who else might she talk to about this situation? What role should her mentor play, if any?
3. Is this even a concern that Professor Swineburn should be made aware of?
4. How reasonable is it for Sandra to expect to take a year off and then be able to complete her dissertation after having a child?

Case 7: A Tempting Offer  
(Adapted from Francis Macrina. (2001). Scientific Integrity: An Introductory Text with Cases. 2nd ed. ASM Press.)

Dr. Mitchell Conrad has received a grant from an industrial source to do basic research that has long-term implications for commercialization. A new graduate student, Michelle Lawless, has just joined his lab after completing one semester of graduate coursework. Dr. Conrad outlines several projects that can be pursued by Michelle in the industrially sponsored research program. Dr. Conrad indicates that there is a proviso listed in the industrial grant agreement which says that all material to be submitted for publication first be reviewed by the company funding the research. This review must always be completed within 120 days. Dr. Conrad points out that this presents only a minimal disruption to the normal publication process as compared with the unrestricted publication of material gathered under federal research grants. He also mentions that the positive aspects of working on this proposal include the fact that there is money in the grant for Michelle to travel to at least two meetings per year. Also, the grant application provides money for a personal computer that will be placed at Michelle’s lab station while she is working on the project. Dr. Conrad emphasizes that working on the project will likely give Michelle an “inside track” with the company should she want to pursue job possibilities there following graduation.

Discussion Questions:
1. Should Michelle agree to work on the project? Why or why not?
2. Michelle is a young scientist in training. In this scenario are Michelle’s best interests served by Dr. Conrad’s offer? Is there an underlying potential for serious conflict of interests in this matter? What are the competing interests involved?
3. Does it appear that Dr. Conrad is “hard selling” this research project to Michelle, and perhaps is pressuring Michelle to make this decision? If so, is this ethical?
Case 8: The Bob Bailey Case

Part 1

Bob Bailey is a fourth-year graduate student in the lab of Professor Peter Martin, and he is not very happy. His research has not been going well recently, and he attributes his trouble to the romantic relationship that Martin has established with another graduate student, Sarah Stern.

Stern is also a fourth-year graduate student in Martin’s lab. Both she and Bailey officially joined the lab at the end of their first year of graduate study. Unlike Bailey, Stern has consistently made excellent progress in her research.

Martin is known for running a productive, highly respected, and collegial lab. During the summer after his third year, Stern was surprised but happy to find her collegial rapport with Martin blossoming into a romantic relationship. Although they tried to be as discreet as possible, it was soon common knowledge among the other four graduate students in Martin’s lab that he and Stern were “an item.” By now, in December, the once-collegial atmosphere has become strained.

In particular, Bob Bailey is starting to show resentment. He is growing resentful of Stern’s research success and the favoritism that he perceives Martin is showing her. Since September, the Martin lab has submitted abstracts to three meetings, and Stern is the first author on all of them. Of the grad students in the lab, Martin has offered to send only Stern to this year’s three big meetings, and her expenses were covered by Martin’s grants. Although Bailey is Stern’s contemporary, he has yet to attend a scientific meeting.

Bailey’s jealousy and resentment are, however, balanced by genuine concern for Stern. They have been friends since the year started graduate school together (though nothing more than friends), and Bailey fears that if Stern’s relationship with Martin were to end, this could jeopardize Stern’s work in the lab and, in turn, her future career.

It is just before winter break. Bailey has tried to work up the nerve to talk to his friend Sarah or to confront Martin, but he doesn’t think there would be any point to it. He doesn’t think either of them is thinking clearly, and he thinks that bringing up his complaints and his worries would just make them angry. He is considering taking his complaints about Martin and his worries about Stern to the department chair.

Should Bailey bring his concerns to the department chair? Why or why not?

Part 2

After break, Bailey does schedule an appointment with the chair of the department to report his complaint and concern. Bailey finds that the chairperson, David O’Donald, does not know anything about the Martin-Stern romance. O’Donald asks Bailey if he believes that Stern was pressured into this relationship with Martin, or if Stern is unhappy with the situation. When Bailey answers in the negative, O’Donald who is on Bailey’s thesis committee, shifts the topic of conversation to Bailey’s current troubles with his research. After ten minutes, Bailey leaves O’Donald’s office pondering. O’Donald’s parting words were, “Well, I don’t think there’s anything to be concerned about with Stern and Martin. They’re adults. If some problem arises, let me know, and I can have a chat with Martin. In the meantime, get some work done.”

Should O’Donald adopt the “wait and see” approach that he proposes? Why or why not?