Mentoring

Role Play:

This role play involves a faculty mentor who must somehow deliver the news to a good-natured student that s/he is not PhD material; a trusted colleague who helps the mentor decide on a good approach; and the hapless student who has long been unwilling to see the handwriting on the wall

Roles:

Faculty Mentor

Doctoral Student

Trusted Colleague

Character Description:

Faculty Mentor

You are working with a pre-doctoral student. She is in many ways an ideal person. She's collegial, shows up to work on time, works long hours, meets deadlines, and gets along well with others. Everyone likes her. No one would want to offend her, least of all you.

There is just one problem: she does really poor work. In contrast to her considerable social skills and dedication to becoming a PhD scientist, she does not really have the kind of intelligence, insight or skill that makes for good science. Her experiments often need to be re-run by someone else. She is a poor writer and makes a lot of data entry errors. You and others have confronted her about these problems in the past. When you do so, she readily admits that her work is not great and apologizes profusely.. You cannot help but feel bad when you criticize her. She will sometimes even work longer hours to remedy things. However, she shows no signs of improvement.

After a year of mentoring, you have come to believe that she will never finish her PhD and is not really suitable for ongoing work as a scientist. Yet you are reluctant to tell her this. It is painfully obvious to you that all she ever wanted to do was be a research scientist. Every time you talk yourself into broaching the topic, her response has been that she will try harder. It goes against your every inclination as a faculty mentor to deliver a message that fails to recognize someone’s strengths and that destroys their sense of efficacy. However, your student is just not cut out to do doctoral-level science.

Character Description:

Doctoral Student

You are a PhD student, entering your second year of coursework. You are the individual who is struggling. You chose your mentor mostly because you learned from other students how wonderful she is to work with and how involved she is with the research personnel. Unlike other senior faculty members in the department, she is compassionate, approachable, and involved. She enjoys helping her students develop professionally inside and outside the program. You believe you are in a great working and learning environment. You are determined to prove to everyone that you are cut out to be a scientist despite all evidence to the contrary. Even though you struggle with conducting experiments according to established protocols, you work extra hard to compensate for your shortcomings. Since coursework is extremely challenging for you compared to other students, you spend more time studying but feel like it will all pay off in the end when you finish the doctorate. Your comprehensive exams are next summer.

Your mentor has spoken with you on various occasions about your work being inadequate. You know you are spending countless hours redoing your work, but rather than give up, you simply re-double your efforts. you believe your strong work ethic is improving your skills and knowledge as a junior scientist. You trust your mentor to guide you past this rough patch.

Character Description:

Trusted Colleague

You are a Trusted Colleague to the Faculty Mentor. You have been friends with her for a long time. You’ve heard her lament the lack of progress in one of her PhD students before. You think it’s time your colleague confront this hapless student about moving her out of the graduate program into a different role where she can be effective.

The following are the kinds of questions an insightful confidant might ask:

* What are the specific attributes that make this student unfit for a research career and how can you explain them to the student in an objective (but compassionate) way?
* What do you think will happen if you don’t intervene now? Are you really being kind by delaying the inevitable?
* Does she know what the job market would be like for her?
* Does she know what it would be like to have her teaching and research evaluated as she approaches a tenure decision, if she gets that far?
* What university resources have you been involved with to try to help rectify this student’s deficits or to meet her needs?
* Are there relevant career paths that she could pursue with the training and aptitude she has?
* How will you balance your mentor responsibilities to your other pre-doctoral students?

*Scenario One*

As a long-time faculty member, you call on your wise friend (Trusted Colleague) to come over to your office to help you think through this problem.

*Trusted Colleague*:  “Hi, how’s it going?”

*Faculty Mentor*: “Fine, fine”

*Trusted Colleague*: “You don’t sound like it”

*Faculty Mentor*: It’s one of my trainees. She works so hard, but she’s just not cutting it. When I talk to her, she recognizes the problems I mention, but that just makes her apologize and work harder. I don’t think she is capable of completing our degree program, but I don’t have the heart to tell her point blank. I’ve tried to hint at it several times, but she seems to ignore the possibility and grows more determined. She says her mother told her that she can do anything she puts his mind to.

*Trusted Colleague*: How do you respond?

*Scenario Two*

The Faculty Mentor has arranged for her struggling Pre-doctoral Student to drop by her office at a time when they will be alone for a private talk.

*Student*:  “Hi, you wanted to see me?”

*Faculty Mentor*: “Yes, thank you. I wanted to talk to you about your future plans. How do you feel things are going for you in the lab and the degree program?”

*Student*: “Great. It’s hard work, but I love it and I love the people. It’s what I want to do with my life”

*Faculty Mentor*: How do you respond?