

## Gender Equity Project Colloquia and Workshops

### Student and Assistant Management Topic Discussion and Activities

**Read:** *Supervising students* (Zacks & Roediger, 2004)

Covers teaching responsibilities you may have to students in your lab as well as the advantages and challenges of having student assistants versus non-student assistants.

*I was trained to do everything but run a lab!* (Barker, 2002)

Discusses how to identify the skills most PhDs possess for running a lab, the leadership skills a PI may find useful, and various ways of relating to people in one's lab.

*Development and management of university research groups* (Smith, 1986)

Offers general information about setting up and maintaining a program of research. Returning associates received this handout last year; if you need another copy please contact the GEP.

**Handouts:** *Leading vs. managing – They're two different animals* (SBA Online Women's Business Center, 1997)

Explains what distinguishes leaders and managers in business settings; the overarching themes may be helpful.

*What's your management action style?* (SBA Online Women's Business Center, 1997)

Describes the strengths and weaknesses of various management styles. Although it is aimed at small business owners, it may help you evaluate your management style.

**Activity 1 (complete before the workshop):** If, at the beginning of your work with a student, you discuss you and your student's expectations and responsibilities, you may be able to avoid some common management problems. Writing down everyone's expectations and responsibilities at the beginning of a project should help you determine ahead of time where expectations could be in conflict. By reviewing that document periodically, you should be able to address issues before they get out of hand. Use your own experiences to create a list of concrete expectations and responsibilities for a student or research assistant. (Keep in mind that this could be the basis for development of an independent study syllabus.) Please bring the list to the workshop and use it as a guide for the discussion.

(For ideas, look at the psychology website "Research Labs" section and read what faculty have listed on the "Student" part of their pages: <http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/psych/>)

### **Discussion**

Reflect on your experiences supervising students and assistants who are working with you or who have worked with you in the past. Also reflect on your own experiences as a graduate student and, if relevant, assistant. In a group of 4, discuss your experiences, using the questions below to guide your discussion.

- What are some of the challenges of working with undergraduate students? With graduate students?
- What are some of the advantages of working with undergraduate students? With graduate students?
- Is working with student research assistants different from working with non-student (e.g., paid or full-time) research assistants? How?
- Compared to student assistants, what were some of the advantages, if any, of having non-students help with your research? What are some of the disadvantages?
- What criteria have you used to choose the students who work with you? Have those criteria been effective?
- What expectations did you list for activity 1? Did you express those expectations clearly before accepting the student? If not, did the lack of specificity contribute to problems with the student or with his or her work?

As you talk with your group, try to generate helpful suggestions and strategies for working with students. Consider what advice you would give to colleagues who manage students and assistants. Report your ideas to entire workshop.

**Activity 2:** Working in a group of 4, discuss one of the work problems presented below. Be as specific as possible when discussing the problem and use the questions below to guide your discussion.

- What is the problem or setback? Why did it occur?
- Was it related to an existing set of issues or did it arise unexpectedly?
- What are the potential consequences of the problem for the research being conducted?
- What are the potential consequences of the problem for the students involved?
- What are the potential consequences of the problem for the researcher in charge?
- Could the problem have a long-term impact on the progress of the research being conducted?

After your group discusses the work problem, decide what the researcher in charge could have done differently either to reduce the negative effects of the problem or to avoid the problem altogether. As you do, consider the questions below.

- How will your alternative help the researcher become a stronger manager or supervisor?
- How will your alternative benefit the students working with the researcher?
- How will your alternative benefit the researcher?
- Will your alternative address the issues underlying the problem?
- Will your alternative help avoid a similar problem in the future?

Report your analysis of the problem and alternative to the entire workshop.

Work problems:

A. Students P and K are independently conducting unrelated but similar experiments for your project. You intended to have brief daily meetings with P and K to monitor their progress. But because they both did extremely well in a prior course with you and seem to be competent and responsible students, you have not supervised them closely. When you

finally check on their work, you are disappointed to discover that neither has made much progress beyond the initial steps required for the experiments. Although you did not give P and K definite deadlines for when their respective experiments should be completed, you had hoped to have data from these experiments before the end of the term. It is now clear that this will not be possible.

B. Student L, an assistant on your new research project, has been working well below your expectations, failing to complete some tasks and struggling with others. Although clearly a bright student and a hard worker, L seems to lack the basic skills necessary to perform the tasks you hired him to do. But, because you believe that L could eventually improve and has the potential to become a great help to your work, you are reluctant to ask him to leave. You devote some extra time to personally supervise L's work and you ask your other student assistant to help train L. After a few weeks of extra help and training, L has made little progress. You realize that L cannot handle the work you need him to do, so you ask him to leave. Unfortunately, as a result of the extra time you spent attempting to improve L's skills, you have missed an important IRB deadline. Further, you are now short-handed just as work for the project has begun to pile up.

C. You have been supervising Student J's independent study. Although you were not really interested in her idea and were extremely busy with your own projects, you agreed to work with her because she did very well in one of your advanced courses. You expected that J would work hard and require little supervision to complete her project. However, just before the course-drop deadline you discover that J has done very little work. You know that you will not have time to provide J with any help or supervision beyond your short weekly meetings. When you discuss with J the possibility that she may receive a poor grade for independent study, she is angry and surprised. She assumed that whatever work she decided to produce on her own would be sufficient to earn an A. When you suggest that she drop the course, J is distraught, explaining that she needs the course credit to graduate this semester. You are now in a difficult position; you do not wish to give J a poor grade, nor do you wish to force her to drop the course.

### References

- Barker, K. (2002). I was trained to do everything but run a lab! In *At the helm: A laboratory navigator* (pp. 31-38). Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Press.
- Smith, R. V. (1986). *Development and management of university research groups*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- United States Small Business Associations (SBA) Online Women's Business Center. (1997, May). *Leaders vs. managers: They're two different animals*. Retrieved November 1, 2003 from <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/manage/leading.html>.
- United States Small Business Associations (SBA) Online Women's Business Center. (1997, May). *What's your action management style?* Retrieved November 1, 2003 from <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/manage/style.html>.
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