

Quitting

Mentee Perspective

My name is Angela. I am a graduate student in Industrial Engineering. But I am leaving. I've decided to drop out of graduate school – for so many reasons. To begin with, my advisor, Professor Hernandez, told me that I would have to take lower-level courses because my preparation at a historically black institution was not up to par. I found out that none of the other students had to do this. I also had a series of very discouraging in-class experiences. I was hoping for rapport with the faculty, but none of my professors ever calls on me or asks me to answer a question. They seem surprised when I raise my hand to participate. I was even accused of cheating once when I got an A on an exam. And my grades are mostly lower than average, even though I work as hard as my peers. Also, I was always left out of social events with the other students in the department. It's hard to be black around here. I feel very isolated. Maybe in a few decades things will change, but I'm not going to stay around and be treated this way. I'm going to work in industry for a while. I'll be more welcome there.

Quitting

Mentor Perspective

My name is Professor Hernandez. I teach in the Industrial Engineering department at X University. One of my graduate students, Angela, sent me an email telling me she was dropping out of graduate school. I was surprised – this was the first I've heard that she was having problems and she always struck me as a bright student. I asked her to talk with me before she did anything official. Maybe we can work it out, whatever the problem is.

In the meantime, I took a look at her academic records. I was surprised to find that her performance was not outstanding. She took a course with me and did very well. But she received a number of B's in important subjects. I had her take some lower-level courses, too, to bolster her skills for the more challenging classes. She came from a historically black undergraduate college with a science program less rigorous than ours. I figured the additional foundation classes might help her succeed in our program.

I want her to succeed! I don't think our environment on campus is discriminatory. I'm Latin American, myself, and have never experienced discrimination here. But I imagine she might wish there were more women and African Americans in our department. I think it can feel lonely sometimes.

Gender Bias?

Mentee Perspective

My name is Gisele. I am a PhD student in Chemistry. I am having a hard time with my advisor, Prof. Smith. I feel like he responds to me very minimally. He is politely indifferent toward me. At first I thought maybe it was because I was new. But I've been here almost a year now and things are not getting better. In the lab, he picks clear favorites – and I am not one of them. I have never been given major responsibilities in the lab, and I feel like he treats me with kid gloves. He seems to interact more freely and easily with other students. I don't understand why he treats me differently.

By contrast, when I was an undergraduate, I got a lot of encouragement from my advisor. She supported my research and was genuinely interested in helping me grow as a scientist. My relationship with her was completely different – positive and transformative – which is probably what caused me to think that maybe I am not the problem here.

Last week I cautiously talked with the only other female graduate student in our lab. I learned that she also feels marginalized by the mentor – sort of invisible. We both feel passed over in terms of responsibilities and opportunities, and we're concerned about the long term impact this may have on our careers.

Gender Bias?

Mentor Perspective

My name is Professor Smith. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I run a chemistry lab at the university. This year I have ten grad students in my lab. They're excellent. Most have been with me for several years, so we know each other and I can trust their work. I took on one first year graduate student this year, Gisele. I don't know her very well yet. Unfortunately I've been too busy this year to spend as much time with her as I would like. I don't like to rely on her for major projects, since I'm not sure yet about her skills, so I tend to fall back on the students I know best, who have been in the lab longest and consistently demonstrated strong skills. It's also a plus that my more senior students don't need much instruction -- I know they'll understand without my having to spend a lot of time going over the basics.

Race and Culture Shock

Mentee Perspective

My name is Shaun. I came to this university because I got a full merit scholarship. I was looking forward to starting college in a new city, meeting new friends, learning. I ignored the fact that I would be among only 3% of black undergrads at this institution – that didn't sink in until I arrived.

I came from a high school that was diverse, and I'm really laid back and cool with whites, blacks, Asians, Latinos, etc. So this place was a shock. My major is mechanical engineering – it's full of white dudes. But what's weird is being in a lecture hall or a crowded dining hall and being the only African American in the room.

And it seems like white people here ignore blacks. I get the feeling that they avoid hooking up or being friends with a black guy or girl because that would make them an outcast with other whites. So on the one hand, I am ignored, which makes me feel sort of invisible. But on the other hand, I also feel conspicuous, like I stand out because I am different and out of place here. I feel like faculty treat me differently from white kids, and because there's so few of us here, so I feel pressure to represent all African Americans.

Since being at this college for a year and not seeing as many black girls as I would like, I realized that I'm also attracted to white girls, but it seems like white girls are not attracted to me. I'm 6' and fit, I'm not ugly. But here at college, I have yet to go to a party, out to a bar, or on a date. I usually go to the dining hall alone, get my food and come back to my dorm.

I've never felt as isolated as I do here. I miss hanging out with friends, and I miss diversity. It's lucky schoolwork comes easy to me, because my motivation has gone down the tubes. I don't know but it seems like I'm wasting my time at this school.

Through my program, I was assigned to work with a peer mentor. He's supposed to help me adjust academically and socially. I'm not looking forward to meeting with him.

Race and Culture Shock

Mentor Perspective

My name is Troy. I am a peer mentor for the First Year Experience program at my college. Each freshman in the program is assigned a peer mentor. I mentor five freshmen – I help them with time management and study strategies. I'm also supposed to help them adjust socially.

I try to do a good job. In some ways, I think I do. But I am concerned about one mentee in particular: Shaun. I've seen him a few times so far, and each time I see him he seems less happy. He's smart and likeable. His classes seem to be going okay. But it's like something is bothering him, and he doesn't open up to me.

Shaun is African-American, and I get the feeling he's used to a different environment. Our college is diverse in some ways, but the percentage of African-American students is low. I've thought about asking Shaun how he feels about this, but I worried that it might be insensitive or politically incorrect. Still, I can't help but wonder how this is affecting his "first year experience."

I am about to meet with Shaun. I want this meeting to go differently from our others. I want him to know that even though I don't share his experiences, I can empathize. I want him to know he can trust me.

“Everything’s Clear”

Mentee Perspective

My name is Dylan. I’m working with Prof X. While I would really like to continue to be involved in his research, I don’t know if he’s going to keep me on. The reason is that I think he’s really annoyed with me because I don’t understand his computational technique.

Prof. X explained it to me last week, and though I tried to pay attention, I must have been distracted at the time, since I couldn’t really follow either the logic or the steps in the technique. Prof. X didn’t know that it was a bad time to talk, so it’s not his fault. But I wasn’t very interested just then in learning this technique. I figured I could learn the technique later on. So I sort of let myself tune out what Prof. X was saying. When he finished explaining, he asked me if I had any questions. I said no, “Everything’s clear.”

Three days later, when Prof X asked me how the work using this technique was going, I had to reply that I hadn’t started because I don’t understand the technique. I could tell he wasn’t happy.

“Everything’s Clear”

Mentor Perspective

My name is Prof. X. I hired Dylan to assist with my research. I recently explained a computational technique to them. As I was explaining, Dylan nodded the entire time, like they understood every word I was saying. Since I know most students do this regardless, when I finished, I asked Dylan if they had any questions, and they said, “No.” Just to make sure, I asked Dylan if everything was clear. And Dylan again said, “Yes -- everything’s clear.” Three days later I asked Dylan how their work using this technique was going. Dylan replied that they hadn’t started because they don’t understand the technique.

I was really annoyed – not because they didn’t get it but because they didn’t tell me that they didn’t understand when I was explaining it to them!