



## Boundaries of the Lab Head–Student Relationship

Dear Labby,

I am a third-year student and have a good relationship with my lab head, but she has started to ask me to do all sorts of non-lab things for her; it is taking some time away from the lab plus I wonder if I should be doing this. It started with picking up her dry cleaning (not taking it in—if that I would have contacted Labby sooner) and doing other little errands off campus. This concern I have crested when she asked me to go buy her a bathrobe when she went into the hospital for a procedure. (She lives alone and doesn't have family nearby.) I like my professor as a scientist, and am OK with her as a person, but these recent requests seem out of bounds and could even

harm our relationship. I know that she hasn't asked me to jump over the moon or do anything that would take days and days, but I still am left wondering: Is this right?

—*Errant on Errands?*

Dear Errant on Errands,

This is close to home as it happened to Labby as a student when my professor had a heart attack. He hadn't asked me to run any errands before, but he did during his hospitalization. Your case is different in that the initial request (dry cleaning) preceded any medical or other situation in which such a call for help might be warranted. Much hinges on the kind of relationship you and your professor enjoy. Labby's advice is to honor her requests while she is hospitalized or convalescing at home, this simply to follow the Golden Rule (do unto others as you'd have them do unto you). But you will want to bear steady watch over her future requests when your professor is back at work full-time, as we both hope she will be soon. If you see a return to her prior requests, you should sit down with her to discuss. You should explain that you feel uncomfortable because she's your boss and these are personal errands. You might say that you're happy to help when she's desperate, as you know she would help you. It is possible she is without other personal support, and you should be sensitive to that if it is indeed the case. But you are not her partner, nor intimate friend, nor should you be placed in that position. She may have much to offer you as a mentor, and you to her as a student. But there is the clearly etched boundary line between the professional and the personal, and it should not be crossed. ■

—*Labby*

Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.

## Got Questions?

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