



Thesis Advisor's Outside Interests Impair Mentorship

Dear Labby,

I am a fifth-year graduate student getting ready to defend my thesis. Unfortunately, for the past two years I have had such minimal contact with my advisor that I am feeling rather lost as to mentorship, although my thesis committee has been very supportive. The problem is that my advisor has started two companies and is usually there. (They are in a nearby technology park.) Even when he is here, he always seems distracted. The few times I have met with him in his office in the past two years his phone was ringing all the time and he took the calls. At lab meetings, which have become less frequent, he looks at his Blackberry more often than at what lab members have up on the screen. This all came to a head when I was scheduling my final thesis committee meeting leading up to my defense. My advisor's calendar was so crowded with company meetings that my meeting had to be scheduled for just a few days before my defense.

My advisor is a terrific scientist, but I really think he is not devoting enough time to his academic duties. I will survive; I got accepted into a wonderful lab for my postdoc, and its head has no companies. But I thought that if I aired this with you maybe a broader audience could be alerted and informed by your advice.

—Not Profiting

Dear Not Profiting,

This is a sad situation, but it sounds like you are going to be fine. Most institutions have rules that set forth the amount of time a faculty member can devote to outside consulting or related activities. Your advisor may be in violation of the institution's policy. But of course these rules do not, and cannot, address the "distraction factor," i.e., inattention to academic responsibilities (the lab, teaching, service, etc.) when on campus. Your Blackberry vignette is very telling and clearly conveys a conflict between your advisor's outside interests and his duties to the university.

You will soon be leaving and on your way to an exciting postdoc. At that time you should find an occasion to get the ear of your department chair and/or graduate school dean and convey your concern. You need not get into whether or not your advisor was technically in violation of institutional policy. Rather, you can simply indicate that you would have liked to have had more contact and mentorship after he started the companies. That message will be clearly received. You might go a step further and send the same message to the institutional official responsible for enforcing the faculty consulting policy. This latter step will ensure that an appropriate official looks into the matter and may prevent future members of your advisor's lab or of other labs at the institution from sharing your unfortunate experience. ■

—Labby

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