Dear Labby,

I have good news and bad news. The good news is that in our lab we are already strategizing our attendance and preparing abstracts for the 2015 ASCB Annual Meeting. Maybe we’re early in doing so, but the Annual Meeting is a big event in our field and we want to be ready.

But then there’s the bad news. The head of our lab has already told us who can go and who cannot. Our lab consists of three graduate students, one postdoc, and the PI. He told us there is only enough money in the lab’s one grant to allow one student to attend, as well as the PI. OK. But then we were told that the one who will go is a second-year student who has no real story to tell so far and almost certainly will not get to give a talk, and maybe even his poster won’t be very much. The other two students, I and another, are close to finishing and have major stories (well, at least completed ones). Our PI argues that sending the second-year student will be extremely important for his career development at this stage and further claims that we other two are already “advanced” and “on our way.” (By the way, the postdoc is leaving the lab and is not interested in attending the meeting.) We two are very frustrated. I asked my advanced student colleague and she said we should do what many cell biology students do: ask Labby.

—Staying Home

Dear Staying Home,

Labby generally avoids advising on overall lab management but not when it affects students and their career development. Your PI’s argument seems noble at first blush. This second-year student may not have attended the ASCB Annual Meeting or any other major meeting before, and there can be no doubt that one’s first such experience is always memorable. That said, although your PI’s decision to seize this mentoring opportunity makes sense when viewed in isolation, there are other elements that logically should be considered.

First, your PI presumably would want the lab’s most advanced work to be presented at the meeting, whether as posters or, one hopes, as a Minisymposium talk. A key reason is the possibility (likelihood, in fact) that potential reviewers of his next grant application will be there and will see the presentation. (That may sound crass, but let’s face it, scientists need to be political sometimes.) That he has decided to elevate the second-year student’s attendance above this pragmatic consideration seems illogical.

Another point is that you and the other finishing student in the lab may be better positioned to leverage the career opportunities your PI cites. The second-year student will see the finest cell biology in the world as of December 2015, and might meet established scientists. But you and the other advanced student have well-developed thesis research projects that meet the “elevator conversation” criterion and may better enable you to take advantage of contacts you make at the meeting.

You and the other finishing student should both apply for ASCB travel awards to attend the meeting. Your PI will thus be made aware of your strong interest in attending, which might prompt him to change his mind and use the grant funds for you or the other finishing student, or at least to reassess his logic. And even if only one of the advanced students receives a travel award, your PI might send the other of you, and the second-year student could come in 2016. Labby is an optimist, as you can see.

—Labby