

In With the Old, Out With the New?

In Fall 2015, you accepted Michael into the lab as a first year graduate student. He came to graduate school highly recommended with a great letter from his undergraduate research advisor who you knew as a post-doc. During the subsequent semester, you found that the student was far less-well prepared for graduate school and lab work than the student (or his undergraduate mentor) had let on. While he did well in his classes, methods he said he ostensibly “knew” from his undergraduate lab experience were a challenge for him on your projects. Michael has struggled to contribute effectively to the lab. He frequently comes to you with very basic questions, answers to which you thought he should know. While you would have preferred a student with more independence, you expect the situation might improve over time as he gains more experience and confidence. You begin to get frustrated with Michael’s slow progress toward independence.

In May 2016, a colleague in your department who works in a similar area leaves for another institution. His advanced graduate student Melissa opts to stay at your university. Melissa has done very well in your colleague’s laboratory but is only partway through her Ph.D. and likely has another 2-years of research left as she finishes her dissertation. You do not have the resources to support both Melissa and Michael in the lab. Your chair is pushing you to take Melissa since otherwise she may not have another lab to join. What do you do?

- Do you accept Melissa into the lab?
- Do you ask Michael to leave the lab and/or the program? Why or why not?
- What are your obligations to Michael?
- Does it matter that you know Michael’s undergraduate mentor?
- What are your obligations to Melissa?
- Is it appropriate for the chair to pressure you to accept Melissa into your lab even though that might have negative consequences for Michael?
- Are there factors left ambiguous in the case study that might influence you one way or another? What types of extenuating circumstances might influence your decision?