

RCR Topic: Mentor/Trainee Relationships

Title: Frustrated Postdoctoral Fellow

Case: Jose came directly from his country for a postdoctoral trainee position. His signed, approved contract specified an 18-month position. For the first 6 months of his appointment, Jose thought everything was going well. He believed that he was successfully fulfilling all of his responsibilities to the project, and was not aware of any complaints about his work.

- After he had worked for 6 months, the primary investigator (PI) for the project asked Jose to sign a new contract. The new contract was designed to change Jose's appointment from 18 months to only 10 months. Jose did not understand the reason for this change, nor did he fully understand the paper work because the contract was written in English, his second language.
- Jose asked his PI to explain why the contract was being changed. He also asked the PI to help him understand the new contract. He expected his PI to be helpful because he regarded the PI as a mentor and they spoke the same language. But instead of helping, the PI just repeatedly asked Jose to sign the new contract.
- Jose was confused and angry. He had moved his wife and young child to MSU when he took the postdoctoral position, and they had a lease on an apartment to consider. Without the postdoctoral position, Jose could not afford rent.
- Jose contacted the MSU Postdoctoral Association for help. They offered to identify a person who spoke the same language as Jose who could help with possible language barriers, but Jose rejected this idea, reasoning that language was not a barrier with his PI. They also suggested that Jose seek help from the MSU Faculty Grievance Officer.¹ He tried contacting the Faculty Grievance Officer, but the help provided did not satisfy Jose. He thought he was getting the "run-around."
- Because his postdoctoral appointment would end soon, Jose decided to look for a new job. He asked for a recommendation letter from his PI. The PI chose not to write a letter.
- Jose is left without a job (postdoctoral position), no help from his PI to obtain a new job, and a difficult financial position for his family.

¹ The *MSU Faculty Handbook*

(<http://www.hr.msu.edu/documents/facacadhandbooks/facultyhandbook/>) includes topics on fixed term appointments and faculty grievance policies that could be useful in this situation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Was Jose required to sign the new contract? To what extent was his original employment contract for a postdoctoral position binding? Where should Jose have gone for help when he was first asked to sign a new contract?
2. Discuss the mentor/trainee relationship involving Jose and his PI. Assuming that this was a positive relationship at the beginning of the postdoctoral fellowship, what factors or events could have caused the relationship to erode? How might cultural differences influenced this situation? How might this problem have been prevented?
3. Discuss the power differential in this mentor/trainee relationship. What can trainees do in situations like this where the PI has far more power than the trainee?
4. To what extent could language barriers or differing cultural perspectives contributed to this problem? What responsibilities do mentors have to assist international students with these challenges? What resources are available to international students?