

By Erin Heller, a PhD student in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation and 2018 Diversity Scholar.

### **Tough love vs. academic bullying**

- **Side One (Student X):** Student X is a new PhD student in the department. Student X's Master's Faculty was very encouraging and supportive of Student X, always providing feedback in a positive light. Student X's new PhD Faculty (Faculty X) is a tenured faculty member who is known for his/her/their "non-coddling" approach to mentorship. When Student X submits a paper draft to Faculty X, Student X is upset and alarmed when Faculty X is unhappy with the draft and has numerous major edits for Student X to incorporate. Faculty X does not sugar-coat his/her/their suggestions and simply states that he/she/they expect(s) better work next time. Being accustomed to more hand-holding and a different mentorship style, Student X complains to the department head that Faculty X is emotionally abusive and hyper-critical.
  - **What are your thoughts about Student X's experience?**
  - **If you were Student X, how would you feel? What outcomes would you want to see happen?**
  - **Why do you think Faculty X acted in this way?**
  - **What actions do you think could be taken to address Student X's concerns?**
  - **Who do you think the student could talk to in order to get perspective on Faculty X's actions?**
  - **What do you think would be some possible outcomes if Student X talked to other students in the lab about their experiences with Faculty X?**
  
- **Side Two (Faculty X):** Faculty X is known for his/her/their intense approach to mentorship and treats all of his/her/their students the same. Faculty X believes that "tough love" is the best way to help students reach their full potentials and that there is always room for improvement. Faculty X provides constructive feedback to Student X on a report that is due. Since this is Student X's first paper within the lab, Faculty X has a lot of comments about the paper and tells Student X that the quality of work for even a draft needs to improve.
  - **What are your thoughts about this situation after hearing Faculty X's side?**
  - **If you were Faculty X, how would you feel if you were approached with this student's concerns?**
  - **Have your opinions on how the situation should be handled changed since hearing side 2? If so, how?**
  - **What do you think could be done in the short term to resolve the immediate tension and what would have to change long term in order to create a working relationships between Student X and Faculty X?**
  
- **Case Study 2: Final Thoughts**
  - **How does this case resonate with your experiences at Virginia Tech?**
  - **What level of support would allow you to move forward in a positive direction?**