Case Study: Mentoring Scott

Scott, originally from a small town in the deep south, got his undergraduate degree at a regional institution in his state. He is beginning his second year as a doctoral student at your prestigious research-intensive institution in Boston and is working in your developmental biology lab. You are initially impressed with Scott and his obvious love of science, and he appears to be competent in the lab. After a few months, though, you notice that Scott is staying in the background, and he has missed a couple of deadlines on a small section of a manuscript that he was assigned to write. The relationship doesn't feel tense to you, and you know you provide positive feedback. But you're starting to worry a bit.

One day, the school has a guest speaker for the STEM trainees who makes a presentation on professional development skills. You stand in the doorway to listen for a while. You notice that Scott is speaking up, and you pay closer attention as Scott says,

"...I mean I think, particularly now as a doctoral student, I feel that people are "smarter" than I am or have access to a broader range of vocabulary than I have, particularly around scientific conversations—just sort of ways of talking that transfer easier for them to the writing of grants and writing of manuscripts… It's been extremely challenging for me… particularly in the first year... I had felt like I was sort of out of my league. I wanted to quit... I guess kind of the determination to finish the degree has been more important, so it's really been about trying to learn to speak the way they do, to write the way they do, to act the way they do—really to assimilate myself in this particular culture that I now find myself in that's very different than how it has been since graduate school and undergraduate level."

This is news to you.

Take a couple of minutes to consider:
- What do you think is going on with Scott?
- What, if anything, can you do to mentor him?
- What should Scott do?
- What can the department or institution do?