



# Whistleblowing - Professional Relationships (RCR Role Plays)

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## Description

One of nine role play scenarios developed by Michael Loui and C. K. Gunsalus. This page, on suspected data mismanagement in a research lab complicated by uncomfortable personal relationships, includes the summary, real story, and handouts to be given to various participants. *The full role play instructions with discussion guidelines are included in pdf format.*

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## **Role-Play Summary**

This role-play focuses on a whistle-blowing scenario involving data management issues in a research lab, complicated by uncomfortable personal relationships. Whistle-blowing involves raising concerns or allegations of wrongdoing or misconduct. There is an obligation for whistle-blowers to do so in good faith, which means based on reasonable belief or facts. Suspecting that someone has engaged in research misconduct is one of the most difficult situations researchers face. This is especially true when relationships are strained for other reasons.

If you have the suspicion of research misconduct, the possible consequences for all involved can be serious. To handle the situation responsibly and in the best possible manner for your career and the other people involved, you should move deliberately and carefully.

Universities are required by the federal government to have procedures for protecting whistle-blowers against retaliation and for reporting misconduct. Inform yourself not only of the formal rules (see your university's policies) but you should also inform yourself of the informal rules for having a dispute in a professional manner while protecting yourself and your career. See the paper on how to report research misconduct and still have a successful career afterwards (Gunsalus, 1998). Also, any paper discovered to have incorrect information should be retracted and errata should be issued for the benefit of other researchers.

## **Real Story**

In the first meeting, the department head didn't really listen to all the student's concerns and sent the student to talk personally with Professor Barton. The student did not do this because of reluctance and fear. It was only when a departmental business person noticed the discrepancy in actual personnel versus the staffing being charged to the grant that the department head became more involved. The department head called the student back in and learned the full extent of the student's concerns. At that point, the department head asked the graduate studies adviser in the department to interview each student in the group individually and discovered that other students had similar concerns.

Although there was tremendous concern about doing so, the department head

eventually initiated an academic integrity inquiry, which resulted in an investigation. Professor Barton was found to have fabricated research results and resigned rather than go through the end of the process. The findings were reported to the federal funding agency. The students in the lab were all placed with other advisers and completed their degrees, although the intervening period was difficult for all.

## **Whistle-blowing Resources**

Gunsalus, C. K. (1998). How to blow the whistle and still have a career afterwards. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 4, 51-64.

[University of Illinois Office the Vice Chancellor for Research](#)

[Office of Research Integrity](#)

## **Department Head Role**

*What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.*

You are the head of a science department. Two years ago you recruited Dr. Barton to your department to enhance its prestige. A full professor at age 39, Barton serves on several prominent national committees. Barton has a wonderful sense of humor and contributes to the collegial environment in the department. Barton brought substantial funding to the department and has received further grants since arriving. Barton now has a large laboratory with many graduate students and has a reputation for devoting a lot of time to students. You have heard that students are often invited to Barton's home for dinner.

A relatively new graduate student has made an appointment to see you. Your administrative assistant told you that the student seemed upset and asked for a copy of the university's misconduct policy. You are especially concerned because the student is coming to see you after only a short time on campus. You hope that this is not another student who complains about minor matters. These students take an inordinate amount of your time and energy.

You plan to see whether you can persuade the student to focus on research work. You have a standard talk to direct students' attention back to their research.

Although you expect that the student will complain about a minor problem, you take your job as department head seriously. Because you are responsible for the department's reputation for integrity, you must make an accurate judgment about the student's situation. If the student does bring forward a legitimate issue or wants to make a formal complaint, you will have to act on it. However, because you know most of these issues turn out to be minor, you are hoping to avoid this.

#### **Department Head Role-Play Notes:**

- Dr. Barton is an important and valuable member of your department
- In the past students have complained about minor matters
- Dr. Barton has a reputation as a good adviser
- You need to balance the various interests involved whenever you handle student complaints

Plan for your meeting:

- Write questions that you will ask the student
- Follow-up questions that you might ask
- Questions that the student might ask you, and your answers

#### **Student Role**

What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.

You are a relatively new graduate student, and you were pleased to receive an assistantship in the laboratory of Dr. Barton, a young star in your field. You are flattered by Barton's interest in your work. You have often gone out for a drink to talk about research with him, and other students have frequently participated in these discussions.

A few months ago, Barton invited you to dinner on a Saturday evening. You were surprised to find that you were the only guest. After dinner, Barton said that he would like to "get to know you better" because you had much in common. Barton wanted to discuss a particular problem in his personal life, but that topic made you uncomfortable. Because you worried about a change from a purely professional relationship to a more personal one, you deflected the conversation to work-related topics. For the rest of the evening, you and Barton talked only about work.

Subsequently, however, Barton asked you to do other things with him privately. To avoid Barton, you began to distance yourself from the lab.

You recently saw a paper published by Barton that included a graph based on one of your experiments, but the graph did not fit the data you had obtained.

Devastated by a possible mistake, you checked and rechecked your records and calculations. You are positive that the published material is wrong. Because of recent personal interactions, you are uncomfortable asking Barton about the graph.

You have also noticed that on an interim report to a funding agency, Barton claimed that there were four lab technicians working on your project. For the time you have been in the lab, there have been only two technicians.

When you attended your department's annual ethics training event, you learned that you can discuss these problems with the department head. You have made an appointment with the head.

#### **Student Role-Playing Notes:**

- You are really concerned about the accuracy of the published draft and the interim report
- Dr. Barton's interest in you has strained your professional relationship
- You are concerned about how you will appear to the lab
- You do not want to upset or accuse people needlessly

Plan for your meeting:

- Write questions that you will ask the department head
- Follow-up questions that you might ask
- Questions that the department head might ask you, and your answers

#### **Starting the Role-Play**

**Department Head:** Hello ... You asked to have a meeting with me?

**Grad Student:** Yes ... I think that you are the person I am supposed to talk to ...

**Department Head:** I do handle a number of issues in my role as department head ... What exactly are you worried about?

**Grad Student:** Well, I have some concerns about the work in Dr. Barton's lab ...

**Department Head:** There is some great work being done in that lab ... sometimes work in graduate school is a little different than you expect coming in ... Has that been the case for you?

**Grad Student:** It hasn't been exactly like I expected ... but my concern is about some of the results that I have seen published ... they are not the same as what I have found in the lab work for the project ...

**Department Head:** Small oversights happen fairly often in research ... What did Dr. Barton say that you should do about this?

**Grad Student:** I actually haven't talked to anyone else about it yet ...

**Department Head:** This sounds like a matter that should be handled within the lab ... Dr. Barton should be able to help you out with any issues ...

**Grad Student:** I don't really feel comfortable with Dr. Barton right now ...

## **Observer Role**

- Read both roles.
- Watch the interview and take notes.
- If the conversation appears to be stopping early, encourage discussion on topics that still haven't been addressed.

What is the student trying to convey?

What is the department head trying to achieve in this meeting?

Did the student "read" the signals from the department head well? What cues did you see?

Did the department head "hear" the student well? What signals of this were there?

What questions do you think could/should have been asked that were not? What do you think could have been said that was not?

## **Contributor(s)**

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## **Rights**

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## **Resource Type**

Case Study / Scenario

## **Parent Collection**

Role-Play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research

## **Topics**

Collaboration

Fabrication

Mentors and Trainees

Research and Practice

Research Misconduct

Whistleblowing

## **Discipline(s)**

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences

Life and Environmental Sciences

Research Ethics

## **Publisher**

Online Ethics Center