Author's Commentary on "Who Controls Where Information Will Be Published?"

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On the surface, this case appears to focus on a problem involving data presentation. However, if we look more closely, we can see that the disagreement between a major professor and his graduate student over how the master's project information will be shared with the general community stems from a more basic problem: poor communication.

This case addresses fundamental aspects of a student-mentor relationship. What is the mentor's academic responsibility to the student, and what is the student's role in this breakdown in communication?

It is not uncommon for large universities such as the one described in this case to be immense bureaucracies, filled with mounds of paperwork, extremely busy and overscheduled faculty, and students who find themselves thrown into a system fundamentally different from their undergraduate education. The questions posed after Part 1 direct the reader to consider the department's and faculty's obligations for new graduate student orientation. Additional questions concerning the student's role in this information exchange are equally important. After all, this is the student's education. Moreover, faculty generally view graduate students as highly responsible and self-motivated adults. However, the student may not ask the appropriate questions to garner information if he cannot anticipate the problem. In other words, an inexperienced individual such as a new master's student may not have the background to foresee potential difficulties.

It appears that the department and Dr. Lee should routinely provide written materials outlining departmental mores to all new incoming students. Perhaps the materials could also emphasize general expectations for both parties and the importance of a continuous dialogue between mentor and student.

In Part 2, we find that the graduate student spends an inordinate amount of time on

his master's thesis. When he finally finishes, he faces a disagreement with his mentor over the publication format of his research. There are several considerations here. 1) Who has the right to determine publication format; who has ownership of data? 2) How should the conflict be handled? Should a third party be brought in to mediate? 3) Does the department have a responsibility to assure that a graduate student makes timely progress and does an appropriate amount of work for his project?

Again, it seems that the department and faculty committee should address questions of ownership and appropriate size of projects at the onset of the student's research. It would also seem reasonable for the department to provide a system for the mediation of student/mentor conflicts.

Part 3 finds the student retaining ownership of his research, but damaging his relationship with his mentor. Changes in how information is presented with the advent of the internet pose new questions. Standard methods of citation, publication, and so on, are in the process of being established. However, questions of ownership and conflict resolution methods could be addressed prior to the formation of a dispute. If a conflict develops in spite of such preventive measures, it may be necessary to bring in a third party to mediate. With the help of mediation, a win-win solution might be found that would satisfy both parties. By refusing to reconsider his position, the student in this case may have lost his best avenue for professional advice and recommendations.

In other words, he won the battle only to lose the war.