

Karen Muskavitch's Commentary on "Today's Specials"

Commentary On
Today's Specials

Case Overview

The issues in this case are not unique to science. For instance, it was not unusual to wonder what one could do with a Ph.D. in English 20 or 30 years ago. At the time, a Ph.D. in biology was considered a virtual guarantee of a job at a university, but that is no longer true today, if it ever was.

The employment prospects for those holding doctorates in the sciences is a difficult topic for scientists at any level to broach, but it is one that faculty, students and post- doctoral fellows need to discuss candidly. This case could serve as a catalyst to open that discussion. Certainly the topic is no longer taboo: For one thing, it is hard to ignore. Many are finding it difficult to find jobs appropriate to their training, and some science Ph.D.s are completing three or more post-doctoral appointments before finding something more permanent. Twenty years ago, graduate students who leaned toward college teaching careers (rather than the expected, research university professorship) knew they needed to be quiet about their interest in teaching. Now many science departments offer graduate courses on how to teach college-level science, and job ads require teaching experience. Even the NIH, as well as AAAS and other scientific societies, have recognized that the traditional tenure-track position at a research university is not what awaits most of our graduate students, and they are making efforts to explore and educate scientists about other career paths.

This case forces us to consider the responsibilities and expectations of many with regard to employment after graduate school (including the scientific community as a whole, university science departments, individual senior scientists who train students, and the students and post-docs themselves). Do we see graduate training in the sciences as primarily education and inculcation into a profession, or as

preparation for future employment? The responsibilities one ascribes to each of the involved parties will tend to vary depending on one's perception of the primary role of graduate education in a scientific discipline.

In many ways, the issues in this case resemble the need for informed consent in research with human subjects, particularly the ethical mandate that we respect other people as persons like ourselves; that we respect their right to make their own decisions and direct the course of their lives. Along with giving people the freedom to choose, what is critical in this situation, just as in research with human subjects, is the information on which the decision is based -- its validity, completeness and clear communication.

Prospective graduate students need honest information about the current status of the academic job market as well as the availability of so-called alternative career paths. During their graduate work, they should be kept informed, offered opportunities to inform themselves and to get the training and experience that may be necessary for nonacademic careers. Faculty members need to keep up with the status of the job market and the concerns of their students. They need to talk about these issues with their students and post-docs, and to support them in considering and preparing for careers other than the traditional research university professorship. I assert that the responsibility for the gathering and exchange of information lies with both the science faculty and our students, but each student must be free to make his/her own decisions.

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Discussion Questions

1. If one considers Bowman to be a mature individual capable of making his own decisions, one must conclude that Hill's approach was paternalistic and inappropriate. In fact, he lied to Bowman. In addition to considering alternative ways in which Hill could have handled the conversation with Bowman, it would be beneficial to look at what happened in the faculty meeting as well. (Discussion of this point may be delayed; see Question 4.) Hill proposed that the department limit the number of students accepted for graduate study, and his suggestion was rejected. What are some other strategies he might have suggested? How could he have improved on his introduction of this topic at the faculty meeting? What are some other things that he might do within his department? In your discussion, be sure to note that from what we can tell

from the case, Hill is acting on limited information (his conversation with Jake at the restaurant).

2. Devorak has a lot of things she could discuss with Bowman. The question is what she should say in this phone conversation. She feels the tension of potentially conflicting obligations to herself, the university, Bowman and Hill. The possible topics range from the real reason for Hill's refusal to take Bowman on as a grad student, through the current job market, all the way to how she prefers to do her research and the pressures to get tenure. For each of these topics she could tell the complete truth, give Bowman an idea of what the situation is, lie or omit the topic from the conversation all together. In determining what she should say to Bowman, the most important consideration is what Bowman needs to know to make an informed decision at this time. Devorak need not disclose every detail about all of these topics, and some things may be better communicated later -- in a face-to-face meeting, perhaps, but at least after Bowman and Devorak get to know each other a little better. Recall that this is only their second phone conversation. We don't know how much time Bowman has before he must decide on other offers for graduate study, or if Hill and Devorak's department has set a deadline. However, it seems unlikely that Bowman and Devorak must decide on the best course of action today, in this phone call. Thus, Devorak should not lie to Bowman, but she should communicate to him the basic situation in her lab, and the possible problem with future employment, as far as she knows it. She should not discuss Hill (see Question 3). It would probably be best for all concerned if she gave herself and Bowman some time before definite decisions were made.
3. Devorak should not tell Bowman that Hill lied about his reasons for refusing to accept Bowman as a graduate student. This issue is between Hill and Bowman, and Hill needs to be given the opportunity to explain his actions and his reasons. She can and should urge Hill to explain the situation to Bowman, and she should discuss concerns about future employment with Bowman, but she should not presume to speak for Hill. These conclusions are based in part on professional loyalty, the fact that one faculty member tries to avoid interfering in the interactions between other faculty members and their students. The idea of autonomy is also relevant here. Hill was free to decide to lie to Bowman, and he should be free to decide how he wants to handle the consequences, unless failure to be honest with Bowman about Hill's actions threatens to harm Bowman. If Devorak discusses the job market with Bowman, not mentioning

Hill, potential harm to Bowman should be minimized, and Hill will be able to talk with Bowman later.

4. These questions are similar to the ones posed in the discussion of Question 1 regarding Hill's handling of the presentation of his concerns to the departmental faculty. An individual, faculty or student, can make a difference, but he/she needs to be savvy and well prepared, and then recruit others to the cause. A brain-storming session that includes the design and evaluation of action plans would be an excellent way to address these questions. Keep in mind possible involvement of other departments, the university as a whole and professional societies. Coming up with a plan of action for Hill and Devorak to follow in their department, or perhaps deciding on something that your discussion group will do to address the employment issue, would be a good way to conclude discussion of this case.