

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Ownership of Knowledge and Graduate Education"

Commentary On
Ownership of Knowledge and Graduate Education

This case raises issues about the responsibility of advisers to graduate students and post-docs, the responsibilities of those advised or mentored, research directors' management of power, ownership of ideas and grounds for recognition in the research group, and ease and frequency of communication. All of these issues have ethical dimensions. For example, communication is a practical necessity, but provision of regular channels of communication adequate to forestall damaging misunderstandings is an ethical requirement. Personal traits and personal relationships among members of the research group enter into the conduct of research. For that reason, the research environment should foster traits that facilitate cooperation and provide a milieu that prevents personal relationships from generating jealousy and suspicion.

The behavior of each of the three people in this scene raises questions. Susan's uncertainties about her research report due in two days lead her to consult a post-doc. Why does this consultation occur so close to the due date? Has Susan been active about getting feedback on her work? Has she been too easily discouraged from keeping Dr. Abrams tuned into her progress and problems? Has she made it a point to find out what's going on in the lab (e.g., with regard to proposal writing) and what kind of effort and success gain recognition? She should have exercised some initiative to find out what work is valued and rewarded in the lab.

That said, there are serious questions about Abrams' management of the lab, about whether she has worked to establish clear policies and adequate opportunities for communication. Graduate students should have a better sense about whether having the idea for the experiments is less consequential than carrying them out. In view of the collaboration between Jim and Susan to work out the model and their conflict about the idea for subsequent experiments, it does not seem that ideas are

"a dime a dozen" in this lab. Abrams' remark that she could have had the idea a year ago is unnecessarily hurtful. Where recognition and credit are at stake, Abrams should have clear enough ground rules so that she can be justifiably confident that the post-docs and graduate students can resolve their disagreements. Otherwise, she is at fault for not stepping in. Perhaps she has a duty in any case to remind them of the relevant ground rules.

The post-doc seems to have accepted his go-between role and worked out his own accommodation between his interests and those of the graduate student. This area is predictably sensitive, given both the post-doc's and the graduate student's need for recognition. It is not clear that Jim has reasonably accommodated Susan's interests, and it is even less clear that Abrams was justified in leaving it up to him to do so. Again, the verdict is different if clear ground rules are in place and Lisa has been passive about learning them. Her intense schedule notwithstanding, Abrams should see to it that grad students and post-docs have regular opportunities to get feedback on work in progress that is not ready to be presented as focused, finished work.

Ownership of ideas is a tricky concept; patents and copyrights protect only material embodiments of ideas. There are good reasons for this policy, as we can see from the disagreement between Jim and Susan about who had the idea first. There is a natural proprietary attachment to ideas, but it is difficult to make out who was first with an idea, especially in view of the dependence of one person's ideas on the ideas of others. It might be useful to shift from emphasis on ownership to credit and the basis for credit.