



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

## Animals (RCR Role Plays)

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### Year

2009

### Description

One of nine role play scenarios developed by Michael Loui and C. K. Gunsalus. This page, on research with animals, includes the summary, animals resources, 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 scenario highlights ethical issues in reporting violations in a situation where extensive federal regulations and guidance apply. Specifically, the lab was using

animals in ways that violated its own protocol and included making unauthorized purchases of animals.

The driving issue in this scenario is how to handle the discovery that another lab might have violated these regulations. Labs often have a great deal of autonomy and faculty members may feel uncomfortable questioning the conduct of their colleagues. Professor Prenlen appears to be violating animal care regulations, and involving students in those violations. This creates a difficult situation for the graduate student who observes these violations as well as his or her adviser. The goal of the role-play is to engage students in thinking through the choices presented, resources for addressing them and alternatives for responding to the observed problems.

## **Resources on Animal Research and Care**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign policy governing the use and care of animals in research and teaching: <http://cam.illinois.edu/xi/xi-2.htm>

## **Professor 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 an assistant professor at a university doing research with animals. You run a lab with a number of graduate students working on a variety of projects. It is summertime, so things are somewhat less structured than during the school year.

You are preparing for a weekly meeting with one of your graduate students. This student has been a positive addition to your lab. The student not only does good work but also contributes to the social atmosphere in the department. This student, whom you know fairly well, has seemed somewhat distracted or worried lately. You want to ask questions to see if you can help; however you don't want to pry if it is a personal matter and therefore none of your business.

You have also noticed your student spending time with the extra-help undergraduate summer students in the lab next door. You intend to compliment this behavior because it is helpful to new people and encourages careers in research. At

the same time, you want to give some advice about not seeming too interested in the research. Your department is cordial, but each lab mostly functions autonomously. You and the other professors prize this autonomy. It has helped you accomplish some excellent research quickly and efficiently. The summer students work for your colleague, Professor Prenlen. This professor has a reputation for being unreasonably touchy about whether anyone is trying to “scoop” the lab. Because Prenlen is a full professor, you don't want to create any bad feelings between the two labs.

You hope to talk to your student about professional boundaries and how to be friendly without being perceived as nosy or meddling in the operation of other labs. Your goal is to help the student develop a better understanding of the professional relationships involved in this situation while encouraging the friendly and supportive relationship between the students.

### **Professor Role-Playing Notes**

- You appreciate what this graduate student contributes to the department
- Your department values the autonomy of each professor
- You want to protect your graduate student from any professional disputes
- Professor Prenlen is protective of research ideas

### **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

## **Graduate 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.

It is summertime, and a faculty member in your building, Professor Prenlen, has extra undergraduate student help for the summer through a special funding arrangement. You work in the lab next door to Professor Prenlen's lab. The labs share a common break room which has allowed you to meet these students. Over

the course of the summer, you have become friends with some of them. Through your interactions with the students you have learned that Professor Prenlen took these extra-help students with him to a local pet store where they purchased some guinea pigs. Professor Prenlen did this because of the short period of time provided by the special funding for the summer. The animals were put in unused cages in his lab. You have seen the guinea pigs in the lab while meeting the other students for lunch.

The summer students told you about the work they were doing in the lab, and how they care for the animals. One of them had named all the guinea pigs. You advised them that naming lab animals wasn't a good idea, based on your own experience, even though you know guinea pigs can be endearing. As far as you can tell, the animals are well cared for.

From your own animal research orientation and training you know that animals are not supposed to be in this part of the building. Even though there are leftover animal cages in Professor Prenlen's lab, animals should be kept in the approved animal facility on another floor in the building. It's also becoming clear to you that the summer students don't seem to be familiar with the approved protocol for working with these animals.

Your brother is a post-doc at another university, and he told you how someone across campus from him recently used animals without an approved protocol. As a consequence, every researcher at his university had to take new (boring and long) training for working with animals.

You are sure these extra-help students don't know the rules or protocols for working with these guinea pigs. This isn't really your business, and you certainly don't want to get anyone in trouble, but you are getting increasingly worried about this situation. What if people find out you knew about this and didn't do anything? What if someone finds out and all the people in your building have to be retrained, and people blame you for their wasted time? What if people become angry at you for being a tattle-tale, when this is none of your business?

You are having a difficult time coping with the anxiety and uncertainty from this situation. You have a routine meeting coming up with your adviser. You trust your adviser's judgment, but know that the preference in the department is to not interfere with another lab's work. If your adviser tells you not to worry about it, the

situation might become worse for you.

### **Graduate Student Role Playing Notes**

- You are concerned about how to handle the animal situation.
- The animals are well cared for, but you're pretty sure the animals should be in the central facility, not unused cages in the lab
- You don't want to get your new friends in trouble
- You don't want to cause trouble in the department
- You care about the regulations and possible sanctions for the department

### **Plan for your meeting:**

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

## **Starting the Role Play**

**Professor:** How is your lab work going today?

**Grad Student:** The lab work is going well... I guess...

**Professor:** That's good to hear... It seems like you are continuing your typically good work...

**Grad Student:** Thanks... I try...

**Professor:** I have noticed that you have been spending time with the summer students in Professor Prenlen's lab... It's good to see graduate students encouraging the careers of younger students...

**Grad Student:** They seem to be really excited about working on research with animals...one of them did the 'name all the guinea pigs' thing that new people always do...

**Professor:** Ah yes...until they all die for the first time... I remember those days... Has Professor Prenlen said anything about your involvement with the students?

**Grad Student:** Not to me... have you heard something?

**Professor:** No,... the reason I asked is that Professor Prenlen has been known to be overly protective of the lab... and you have seemed a bit distracted lately... I just want to make sure that there aren't any misperceptions... These kind of informal issues are actually really important in academic careers ...

**Grad Student:** Thanks for your concern... there actually is an issue that I am wondering about...

## **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 professor trying to achieve in this meeting?

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

Did the professor "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**

Use of Materials on the OEC

## **Resource Type**

Case Study / Scenario

## **Parent Collection**

Role-Play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research

## **Topics**

Animal Use

Collaboration

Mentors and Trainees

## **Discipline(s)**

Life and Environmental Sciences

Research Ethics

## **Publisher**

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