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Protection from Proposal Idea Scooping?

Year

1997

Description

This case discusses basic concerns about confidence in one's own ability to judge the merits of his or her work; the timing of research and proposal writing; honesty; trust between researchers; and trusting the integrity of colleagues in the scientific community.

Body

Dr. Susan Ness has been working diligently as a post-doctoral student in material science at State University for the last year. She has been developing a new material, which remains superconductive at higher temperatures than any other measured substance. Ness has almost completely expended her post-doctoral fellowship, but her sponsoring faculty member, Dr. Black, has indicated that he would like to submit a joint research proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for funding to support the costly final conclusive tests on the new material. Ness has not yet published or presented anything on her work, and Black wants to make her results known immediately. Unfortunately, she will not have an opportunity to present preliminary results publicly before the NSF proposal deadline she has targeted with Black.

NSF has indicated that superconductivity research is a top priority, and many people have applied for funding. Ness is aware of the competition yet is confident that they

have a very strong proposal. Ness and Black have divided the work; he is overseeing the project, and Ness is documenting the experiments. Ness clearly describes the methods she has developed to create the new superconducting material but then has second thoughts. Knowing that NSF makes use of peer review, Ness realizes that other active superconductivity researchers will read her proposal with much interest and may "steal" her ideas. The implications for her future career would be devastating.

Ness decides to introduce an error into the NSF proposal's otherwise flawless methods description. She believes that the deliberate error will be hard to identify and will prevent replication of the new material. Ness decides not to confide in Black.

Three months later, Ness and Black are awarded a prestigious $250,000 three-year grant from NSF. Black is thrilled and congratulates Ness for her outstanding scientific contributions. He suggests that Ness will have no problem job hunting elsewhere, but he says that he wants to extend an offer for her to stay at State University. The NSF review panel provides feedback to Ness indicating they intend to support her throughout her career and routinely destroys all proposals in their possession. Ness publishes her preliminary results and a clear error-free description of their method in a rapid publication journal and receives scientific acclaim.

Discussion Questions

1. Has Susan Ness done anything wrong? Why or why not?

2. Is Ness justified in doubting the confidentiality of the NSF peer review process? Is she justified in acting on this belief?

3. What, if anything, could Ness have done to protect her research proposal without introducing the error?

Now suppose the case continues:

Ness receives an E-mail from a graduate student at another university who is doing superconductivity research but has been unable to replicate her results. She discovers that the student knows her NSF proposal information, is unaware of Ness's

published research and is stymied by the error Ness introduced in the NSF proposal. If Ness references her published research, she feels it will become obvious to the student that she had introduced the error on purpose.

Discussion Questions

4. How could the graduate student have come to know of Ness's proposal methods?

5. How should Ness handle this situation?

6. Is Ness now justified in acting on her doubts about the confidentiality of NSF's peer review process?

7. If Ness admits to the inquiring graduate student what she has done, does that fulfill her ethical obligations?

Notes

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