Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Ownership of Knowledge and Graduate Education

**Year**

1997

**Description**

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.

**Body**

## Part 1

Susan Moss is a third-year graduate student in the laboratory of Dr. Jocelyn Abrams, a successful and energetic researcher in a competitive field. Abrams has three post-doctoral fellows working in her laboratory, whom she relies on to train and assist her four graduate students. The laboratory holds weekly research meetings where people report their finished data and work in progress. Abrams stresses that the reports must be concise and focused primarily on finished work. Two days before Moss must deliver a research report, she tries to develop a model that describes a set of data, but she has difficulty synthesizing the information on her own. Because Abrams is often too busy to meet with Moss, she makes an appointment with one of the post-doctoral fellows, Jim Reynolds. Reynolds is very eager and helpful. Within

an hour, Moss and Reynolds have worked out a reasonable model, and Moss presents a successful report.

Two weeks after meeting with Reynolds, Moss is asked to review a portion of a grant proposal written by Reynolds and Abrams. As she is reading, she realizes that several of the proposed experiments are ones she had mentioned to Reynolds as the next steps in completing her thesis research. Moss tells Reynolds that the proposed experiments are directly related to her thesis, but he maintains that the ideas were his and that they will not interfere with Moss's project. Moss believes that the ideas were hers and that they are vital to her project, so she makes an appointment with Abrams. Abrams listens to Moss's side of the story, but she says that she does not want to get involved in personal conflicts between people in the lab and that Moss will have to work things out with Reynolds on her own.

# Discussion Questions

1. Does Abrams have a professional obligation to involve herself in the conflict between Reynolds and Moss?
2. Should either Reynolds or Moss have sole rights to the ideas generated from their conversation, or do the ideas belong to the laboratory as a whole?
3. What should Moss do to gain credit for her ideas? to determine whether she deserves credit for her ideas? to understand the perspectives of Abrams and Reynolds? Could or should she talk with someone else? If so, whom?
4. When do research ideas become part of the experimental process? at the conceptualization of individual experiments? at the design of specific protocols? at the execution of experiments?

# Part 2

After Moss confronts Reynolds about the proposal, Reynolds responds by saying, "Yes, I agree that you helped generate the ideas in the proposal and we would love for you to work on some of the experiments. If you complete them and include them in your thesis, then you have contributed to the research goals of the lab. It doesn't really matter who thinks of the experiments or who does the experiments, as long as they get done." Moss still feels that her ideas have been taken from her, and she

reports this response to Abrams. Abrams replies, "I could have thought of those same ideas a year ago. Ideas are a dime a dozen; it's the execution of the experiments that receives credit, and this you can certainly do."

# Discussion Questions

1. How do Reynolds', Moss's and Abrams' perceptions of "ideas in the lab" differ? How do these different attitudes affect the dynamics of communication in the laboratory?
2. What responsibilities do Moss, Reynolds and Abrams have to each other and to themselves to resolve this issue?
3. How could each person have responded differently to avoid conflict?

### Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 1, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1997.

### Contributor(s)

Brian Schrag

### Editor(s)

Brian Schrag

### Rights



### Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

### Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 1, 1997

### Topics

Collaboration

Intellectual Property and Patents
Mentors and Trainees

## Discipline(s)

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences
Engineering
Life and Environmental Sciences
Research Ethics

## Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics
Authoring Institution
Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)
Volume
1