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Today's Specials

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Description

This case discusses two important, interrelated issues: ethical decision making between science faculty members and prospective graduate students.

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Part 1

Professor Steve Hill and his wife, Karen, had just sat down at their table and begun to study the menu.

"Hi, there. My name is Jake, and I'll be your waiter. Allow me to tell you about today's specials."

Looking up from his menu Dr. Hill looked as if he had seen a ghost.

"Jake, what are you doing working in this place?"

"Hey, Dr. Hill. Hello, Karen. Well the funding for my post-doc over at the research center was not renewed, and other employment options in academia have not come up. The mortgage company isn't very sympathetic, so here I am. I am trying to remain optimistic that something will surface, but I needed to pay the bills in the meantime."

"I must say that I'm rather surprised to see you here. You should have let me know you were going to be out of a job. Perhaps I could have been of some assistance," Hill replied.

"Well, I felt as if I had exhausted those connections after grad school, and I didn't want to seem as though I couldn't take care of myself," Jake explained.

After a fine meal and an exceptionally large tip, the Hills discussed the encounter as they headed home.

"I thought that once you got your Ph.D., a job was supposed to be waiting for you," Karen commented.

"Perhaps that's how it used to be, but not anymore. I had heard from some of my other students that the job market had become a bit saturated, but this really hits close to home. Jake was an excellent student!" Hill said.

Hill enjoyed an illustrious career as a marine ecologist. He had been a mentor to many students, the majority of whom went on to successful careers. He wondered, though, whether his research program had become a bit dated. Although other specialties had become more prosperous, he was reluctant to subscribe to them. He was always able to obtain funding and lure quality graduate students, making him a valuable and esteemed member of the faculty.

At a faculty meeting the following day, Hill spoke openly about the situation.

"Perhaps there might be a problem with an over-abundance of professionals in biology. Good students are having trouble finding jobs and I wonder whether we bear some of the responsibility. Perhaps the department should consider limiting the number of graduate students that are accepted."

"Now, Steve, you know the grad students are the bread and butter of the university. We should continue to recruit and take on the best and brightest, as long as we can bring in the funding with them. I don't want to hear another word about this," replied

Dr. Butz, chair of the biology department.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the department have a responsibility to devote resources to collecting data on the job placement of its graduates?
2. Should Hill raise this issue at the faculty meeting?
3. Should the department have a responsibility to make information on job placement available to prospective students?

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Part 2

Upon returning to his office, Hill learns that his latest pre-proposal has been accepted. Hill had promised a prospective student, Mike Bowman, that he would call him as soon as he got any information about the proposal. Having the proposal funded would allow Mike to be accepted into the graduate program at the university and work in Hill's lab. However, Hill is concerned about the future job prospects for Mike and is wary about taking on more students. He picks up the phone and makes the call.

"Hi, Mike. This is Steve Hill. I'm calling to let you know that I received some feedback about the proposal I had told you about. I'm really not sure whether I will receive the funding, and I think it is in your best interest to reassess your other options."

"That's too bad, but thanks for the consideration. Let me know if anything changes."

Discussion Questions

4. Was Hill's phone call appropriate, given that he intended to act with Mike's interests in mind?
5. How else might he have conveyed his message to Mike?

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Part 3

Later that week, Hill is stopped in the hall by Dr. Alice Devorak, a junior faculty member.

"I just received a phone call from a bright young man, Mike Bowman. He was inquiring about whether I had any interest in taking him on as a new student. He mentioned that he had been in contact with you as well, but that it did not look very promising. Can you tell me why?"

"He seemed bright, but his ideas and talents did not seem to be well aligned with my research program."

With a puzzled look, Devorak continued, "The interesting aspect of the conversation I had with him is that he somehow got the feeling that reason was related to the status of your latest NSF proposal. It was my understanding that you had received favorable feedback about the pre-proposal you submitted."

Hill decided to tell Devorak the actual circumstances surrounding his reluctance to take Mike as a student. Alice listened intently. At some level, she agreed with Hill's concerns. However, she also thought that Mike deserved to hear the real reason the Hill had turned him away. She planned to call Mike later and explain the situation. At that time, she would also explain that she was not in a position to take on any more students.

On her way back to her office, she ran into Butz, who requested a brief meeting with her regarding her upcoming progress report. Devorak met him in his office.

"Hello, Alice. Please sit down," Butz said. "I have been pleased with much of the work you have done in the years that you have been here. Recently, however, your production has dropped off a bit. I need to be up front with you that a great deal of your success in this department will hinge on your level of productivity. You have adequate funding, but you do not seem to be putting out enough manuscripts or bringing students into your lab."

Alice replied, "I appreciate the feedback. Part of my hesitation in taking on more students is that I enjoy being involved in the research, and not just writing proposals and manuscripts."

"Well, of course, I encourage you to stay involved in the research, but I really must emphasize the importance of raising your productivity. Your funding situation certainly has room for another student, and I would encourage you to follow up in that regard," Butz said.

Upon returning to her office, Devorak noticed the note paper with Mike Bowman's number. She had promised to return his call this afternoon. She picked up the receiver and dialed Mike's number.

"Hi, Mike. This is Dr. Devorak."

"Oh, hello. Have you made any decisions about taking on any new students?"

"Well. . . ."

Discussion Questions

6. What should Devorak say to Mike? What responsibilities does she have to the university? to Butz? to Mike? to Hill? to herself?

7. Would it be appropriate for Devorak to discuss Hill's reasons for not taking on Mike as a student?

8. Are individual faculty members in a position to affect the number of new Ph.D.'s entering their field? If so, is Hill's action an appropriate way to go about instituting a change?

9. Who decides whether such a change is needed?

Notes

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