



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Request From a Former Student

Author(s)

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Year

1992

Description

Nelson Nice is on the engineering faculty at State University. Three years ago he headed a research project that involved an undergraduate student assistant. At first Jason Smart was enthusiastic about the project. However, as time passed Jason grew impatient with the laboratory work and write-ups. Nelson Nice found that he had to do more and more of the work himself. Eventually Jason left the project before the work was completed.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

I

Nelson Nice is on the engineering faculty at State University. Three years ago he headed a research project that involved an undergraduate student assistant. At first Jason Smart was enthusiastic about the project. He certainly felt honored to be selected by Professor Nice as his undergraduate assistant. However, as time passed Jason grew impatient with the laboratory work and write-ups. Nelson Nice found that he had to do more and more of the work himself. Eventually Jason left the project before the work was completed.

One year later Jason, then a graduate student at another university, wrote to Nelson Nice and asked him if he would send him a copy of the final report of the work they had done together. Jason explained that he had matured considerably since his undergraduate days and was now working in a related area. "Now," he said, "I think I'm ready for more serious work. It would help me a lot if I could see how things finally worked out in the project."

Should Nelson Nice send the report to Jason Smart?



Nelson Nice was not anxious to share the report with Jason Smart. Disappointed with the results of the research, Nelson had turned his attention elsewhere. As far as he was concerned, the project was dead. He also had to admit to himself that he still was unhappy with Jason's performance on the project. However, he was impressed with Jason's acknowledgement of his earlier immaturity and his apparent desire to do serious work. So he decided to send it. He pointed out to Jason that, although the research was now complete, it had not turned out as he had hoped, and he had no plans to do further work in the area. However, he wished Jason well in his graduate work and hoped that this report might be of some help in giving him new ideas.

Several years later Nelson Nice discovered that Jason Smart used the report as his Master's Thesis -- adding only a couple of introductory paragraphs, a concluding section, and an updated bibliography. No reference to Nelson Nice appeared anywhere in the thesis!

What should Nelson Nice now do about this? Is there anything that he could have done earlier that might have prevented this from happening? What might he do in the future to decrease the chances that this sort of thing will happen?

Notes

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Case Study / Scenario

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Cases for Teaching Engineering Ethics

Topics

Authorship

Collaboration

Mentors and Trainees

Plagiarism

Publication Ethics

Research Misconduct

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Research Ethics

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences

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