



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Seminar

Year

2001

Description

This case discusses the ethical use of ideas garnered in a graduate faculty seminar and also explores the potential conflicts that arise in an open discussion of ideas.

Body

Every Friday afternoon, the faculty and graduate students in the Department of Paper Engineering meet in the conference room for a seminar, where a presentation and open discussion of new ideas take place. At one of these meetings, Bill Phillips, a graduate student, gave a presentation on his partially completed master's thesis. The topic was a new test method he was developing for measuring water penetration into a paper substrate. After the presentation, an open discussion evolved among the faculty and graduate students about the issues surrounding water penetration and the procedures involved in performing the test. Every time the discussion progressed toward additional benefits or future applications for this test method, Tom Ackley, another graduate student, politely steered the conversation in a different direction, focusing the discussion more on the technical design and proposed means for validating the method.

Ackley, a graduating doctoral student, had realized the great potential in expanding this test method from studying water interaction to actual ink interaction with paper. Upon graduation, he entered his new career as a product development engineer in the research facility for Trees-R-Us Paper Company. He wanted to make an

immediate contribution to the company and decided to refine Phillips's test method according to the insights he had gained during the seminar. He had to make several refinements, but ultimately Ackley perfected the test method for use with inks instead of water. His company encourages publication of novel findings and new techniques. Ackley published the paper as sole author describing the new test method.

Discussion Questions

1. Is Ackley's participation in seminar ethical or unethical?
2. Was it appropriate for Ackley to utilize information discussed in seminar to develop his own method without consulting the originator of the idea?
3. What would be the impact of Ackley's accepting a job as a professor at another academic institution, instead of entering industry?

Notes

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