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How Much Help Is Too Much?

Year

2002

Description

This case discusses issues of faculty's responsibility as a mentor and advisor to graduate students.

Body

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The Department of Chemistry at Anywhere University (AU) has established a number of requirements for the Ph.D. degree, including successfully completing several courses, engaging in original research and publishing the results, and passing a number of cumulative exams. These exams are given three times a semester and cover the four major areas of chemistry. In order to meet the requirement, students must pass exams in more than one area. It is the department's policy that the topic and the identity of the faculty member preparing the exam remain secret until exam time.

Part 1

James is a graduate student who is just completing his second year in the AU chemistry program. When he first enrolled in the program, the requirements for completing the Ph.D. were explained to him.

James decided to join the research group of Dr. Brown, a senior member of the department and chose a project that Brown said would produce results and not be difficult. Although James did not like the project, he began the experiments and continued them on Brown's assurances of results.

Now two years into his graduate career, James has completed the required courses for his degree, but has failed to pass a single cumulative exam. Seeing that one of his students is in trouble, Brown decides to aid James on the exams. As a faculty member Brown knows who will be giving the upcoming exams. Brown begins to suggest to James exactly which articles and books would be helpful in preparing for the exam, a clear violation of departmental procedure. Over the next year James is able to score well on all of the exams he takes and completes his requirement. Although many of the departmental faculty and students are aware of this situation, no one challenges Brown.

Discussion Questions

1. What are advisers' responsibilities when they see that students are struggling? What are the responsibilities of the student? The department?
2. How much help should Brown (or any professor) provide? What determines the appropriate level of help when a student is struggling?
3. When faculty or students are considering complaining about unfair or unequal treatment, what issues should be considered in determining a course of action? Are any issues specific to the faculty? the students?

Part 2

Three more years pass, and James is finishing his fifth year in the program. James has put in long hours and worked hard, but his experiments have failed to yield reproducible results. Brown and James meet to discuss his impending graduation. During the meeting Brown reminds James that he needs to publish in order to complete the departmental requirements. As the meeting progresses, James indicates his lack of interest in continuing the project. Brown concludes that it is time that James finished and moved out of the lab, but he realizes that James cannot graduate without assistance. Therefore Brown decides that he will add James's name to a paper that he (Brown) is writing based on data collected by an undergraduate. Although James has not contributed in any way to this research, he agrees to the plan.

Discussion Questions

4. What are the criteria for authorship?
5. Is James's effort in a failing project sufficient reason to include him on the manuscript? Why or why not?
6. Brown encouraged James to begin the project initially. What is his responsibility when the project fails to yield reproducible results?

Part 3

Once the article is published, James begins to write his dissertation. Although the literature portion of the dissertation is his own, the research chapters are simple expansions of the paper to which his name was added and which he has studied thoroughly. At his defense, James makes his presentation and is asked to leave the room while the committee discusses his accomplishments. During this discussion, the members of the dissertation committee conclude that James has not completed the minimum requirements for the degree (i.e., conducting and publishing original research). However, many of the committee members are friends of Brown. With some lobbying, the committee decides to award the degree to James.

Discussion Questions

7. What are the dissertation committee's responsibilities? Did James's committee fulfill these responsibilities?
8. What are the expectations of a person with a Ph.D.? Does James meet these expectations?
9. What are the consequences, if any, of awarding James the Ph.D.?
10. What alternatives are/were available to the dissertation committee?

Part 4

After his graduation, ABC Chemicals hired James to work on drug discovery. While James was interviewed like every other candidate, the strength of his recommendations secured him the position. After only six months, however, it was clear that James was incapable of completing even the simplest research tasks. He has cost the company time and resources by failing to complete his experiments. One of ABC Chemicals' senior scientists, Dr. Georges, is a former student at Anywhere University. Georges decides to call his former adviser; after a brief conversation, he learns the story of James's graduate training. Incensed that AU would award James a Ph.D., Georges immediately calls the department chair as well as the dean of the graduate school threatening to inform the American Chemical Society (ACS) if some action is not taken. Fearing a loss of certification, the dean sends a memo to the chair indicating that he should "take care of the problem."

Discussion Questions

11. Should James's Ph.D. be revoked? Can it be revoked? Would revocation of his degree undermine the assumption that the faculty will be fair and impartial in their evaluation of students?
12. What, if any, action should be taken against Brown? The other sources of James's letters of recommendation?
13. Should the journal to which the paper was submitted be alerted that James's name was added to the paper inappropriately?

14. Should the ACS be alerted to this incident, or should Georges wait until he hears from the chair about what will be done? What criteria could be used to determine his course of action?

15. What alternatives are/were available to Georges?

16. Should ABC Chemicals develop a new company policy to ensure that recently hired employees are competent?

Notes

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