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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Too Much Help Is Not Enough

## Year

2002

## Description

This case discusses issues of advisor's responsibilities as committee members, their student's needs and obligations to them in the research process.

## Body

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## Part 1

Jill Johnson, a master's student, is preparing her thesis when one of her committee members is hospitalized. She approaches Dr. Wood, a tenure track professor who is new to the department, and asks if he would be willing to serve on her thesis committee. Wood indicates interest and asks about the timeline involved. Johnson reports that her thesis adviser Dr. Morris, a tenured professor who is the department chair, is hoping to stick to the originally planned meeting date for her prospectus meeting, which is in four days. Wood states that he will be attending a conference for the next three days and reminds Johnson that the department's policy requires that committee members have the manuscript at least two weeks in advance of a prospectus meeting. Johnson indicates that she would be willing to move the

meeting date and they walk down the hallway to Morris's office.

Upon hearing the dilemma, Morris asks Johnson to leave her office. Morris explains that she will let Johnson know what is decided. Wood indicates that he will not be able to give the manuscript his full attention before the Friday meeting date. Morris tells him that she has thoroughly assisted Johnson in writing the manuscript and that the paper would not take more than 30 minutes for him to read. When Wood insists that he will not be able to give a 60-page paper his full attention before Friday, Morris replies that Johnson really won't need much input. She states that Johnson really just requires a third committee member to sign off for approval of the project.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. How do the professional interests of Wood and Morris affect their actions and reactions in dealing with this situation?
2. What are the professional obligations of Wood? Morris?
3. Discuss possible concerns for Johnson, the student.
4. What might Wood's next move be?

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## **Part 2**

Wood insists on delaying the meeting until early the next week so that he will have time to read the manuscript thoroughly. The committee assembles for Johnson's thesis prospectus meeting. It is common practice for all committee members to review the paper's contents prior to the meeting and then make suggestions or revisions during the meeting. The committee discusses recommendations with the student and then either approves or disapproves the study. If the committee approves Johnson's study, it gives her the green light to spend the next semester or two working on the project.

Wood arrives at the meeting with a clear understanding of the study's methodology based on the well-written prospectus. Following Johnson's oral presentation, the committee members ask questions of her. Wood begins by asking questions to get

an idea of Johnson's general knowledge of the methods she proposed to use. When Johnson is unable to answer, Morris jumps in with a response.

Wood is concerned that, despite having written clearly about her study, Johnson appears unable to answer even basic questions about her protocol. Dr. Story, the outside committee member and a close friend of Morris's, also poses some basic questions to Johnson, and she responds in a similar fumbling, unsure manner. Morris is quick to interject answers each time Johnson is asked a question.

It is soon apparent that the study is truly Morris's and that Johnson cannot provide even basic explanations for the methodology or for the study itself. When the painfully long meeting ends, Morris and Story are ready to indicate in writing that the student can proceed. Wood is not convinced that Johnson has adequate knowledge of the study methods or the analysis to be used.

## **Discussion Questions**

5. What are the benefits of allowing Johnson to proceed? for the student? for Wood? for the committee?
6. Could anyone else potentially benefit?
7. What are the potential repercussions in allowing Johnson to proceed? for the student? for Wood? for the committee?
8. Could anyone else potentially be harmed?
9. Do you think Wood should sign off on Johnson's prospectus and allow her to proceed?
10. How much assistance is it appropriate for an adviser to give a student who is preparing a thesis?

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## **Notes**

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