



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Communism of Science

Year

1999

Description

Discussion of who owns data, fairness in a lab and doing controversial and difficult work.

Body

Michael has been a graduate student in a PhD program in molecular genetics for six years. He has labored on his thesis, working 16 hours a day for most of that time. His experiments have been arduous. The topic is controversial, is as most of the work in this laboratory, with Michael's work at the center of the controversy. Unfortunately, because the topic is difficult and contentious and because journal editors' opinions are entrenched, students' work is seldom published. A requirement for completion of the PhD in this program is the acceptance for publication of one paper before graduating.

Mary, an even more senior student in Michael's laboratory, has yet to have a paper accepted for publication. Mary has also worked diligently, and is frequently reminded by members of her graduate committee and the department chair that she has yet to publish. The adviser for the laboratory, Dr. Well, is well regarded by the faculty for his thoroughness and amiability. He is bright and has worked very hard to push the envelope in the field. He has several students less senior than Mary and Michael and several post-docs. Dr. Well is concerned for everyone in the laboratory, but especially for Mary, who has most advanced the state of the science

but who has yet to publish. There is no tradition of students passing work - or the communism of science - in his laboratory, and he does not want to start now.

Dr. Well is also under pressure for Mary to graduate, and he feels that she should receive Michael's work to use for her thesis. Dr. Well strongly suggests to Michael that he should give Mary his own experimental results and manuscript drafts for her to complete and publish and to use as her thesis.

Discussion Questions

1. What should Michael do?
2. Is Dr. Well's suggestion unethical? In what way?
3. If Michael turns over his data and drafts to Mary, what are the possible negative consequences to Michael, Mary, Dr. Well and those working in Dr. Well's laboratory? What if he does not?
4. What should Mary do if she receives Michael's data and manuscript drafts?
5. Should departmental policy be amended to allow Mary to graduate without publication? Are there negative consequences for changing departmental policy?
6. If students were aware that their data might be transferred to more senior students and post-docs, would that affect your assessment of the fairness of Dr. Well's suggestion?
7. If Michael turns over the data and drafts, who is accountable for the data if it is published?

Notes

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Case Study / Scenario

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Topics

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