



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

## A Question of Mentoring Bias

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Description

A scenario designed to stimulate discussion about ethical aspects of the supervisor-trainee relationship and bias.

Body

You are a native-born American whose parents were born in Round-endia. You were delighted to receive a Research Assistant (RA) offer from Professor Blunt, and were unconcerned that Professor Blunt is a naturalized U.S. citizen born of a prominent family in Blunt-endia, a country with a centuries-old enmity toward Round-endia.

As with all his research advisees, Professor Blunt regularly meets with you to discuss research. Blunt has given you fair feedback on your work. By the end of the second year of grad school, you feel your research is on track.

You have begun to notice that Professor Blunt spends a great deal of time interacting informally in the lab and socially outside the lab with his several Blunt-endian students. When visiting scientists come to the lab, Blunt seems more likely to introduce his Blunt-endian students to the visitor than his non-Blunt-endian students. Professor Blunt also spends time in nontechnical "mentoring" career discussions with his other students, but discusses only technical work with you.

You feel that you are not getting as rich of a professional education as the Blunt-endian students with whom Professor Blunt seems more comfortable. In fact,

Professor Blunt seems even more formal and impersonal in his private dealings with you than with any of his other students. You suspect this may reflect the fact that you are the only Round-endian in the group.

What, if anything, can or should you do to address your concerns?

## Notes

Caroline Whitbeck introduced methods and modules for discussing numerous issues in responsible conduct of research at a Sigma Xi Forum in 2000. Partial funding for the development of this material came from an NIH grant.

You can find the entire sequence on the OEC at [Scenarios for Ethics Modules in the Responsible Conduct of Research](#). Some information in these historical modules may be out-of-date; for instance, there may be a new edition of the professional society's code that is referred to in an item. If you have suggestions for updates, please contact the OEC.

***This scenario can be discussed with variations to make race, rather than culture, the central difference.***

Contributors

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