



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Cooperation and Competition Between Two Thesis Students

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Year

2000

Description

A scenario meant to encourage discussion of the ethical issues that arise when one doctoral student is told to do work on a problem that another doctoral student has been already working on for quite some time.

Body

You are a doctorate student working in Professor ChunMun's group. Your thesis is project A which is closely related to project B, the thesis project of another doctorate student in the group, Garbanzo.

You have completed the experimental section of your project and are ready to move on to the computer modeling section of project A. During a meeting with your PhD thesis advisory committee, one of the other committee members after observing your experimental data results suggests that you perform protocol X to confirm your results. Protocol X that he has suggested you to perform is actually the main objective of Garbanzo's project B. Dr. ChunMun is present in the meeting but he does not tell you or the other members that another student has been working on

that project for more than a year but with no results. You are vaguely familiar with project B but are not aware that protocol X is a part of project B.

Garbanzo is the superuser of the Unix workstation which hosts the computer models belonging to both projects A and B. These programs have been written by another postdoc working in ChunMun's group and do not belong to Garbanzo. You have not had a chance to work with either of the models of project A or B. When you meet Garbanzo and tell him you would need the computer models related to protocol X transferred to your folder, he hesitates to do so and is very unhelpful. You are very surprised at his unhelpful behavior. He then asks why you are trying to move into somebody else's territory. Only then do you learn that protocol X is one of his doctoral thesis objectives. You apologize and tell him that you had not known his thesis objectives.

What can and should you do at this point?

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.

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Discipline(s)

Research Ethics

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