

Author's Commentary on "Today's Specials"

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This case is intended to have a two-fold utility. First, it provides a framework for discussion of ethical decision making between science faculty members and prospective graduate students. Second, it places the glut of graduate students in science, a topic that might otherwise be taboo, in a forum where both faculty and students can address concerns. The topic has been gaining in importance as more graduate students seem to be entering various fields, even as job opportunities seem to be scarce. The problem seems clear, yet the responsible parties are not as evident. The topic raises a variety of issues that may be difficult to discuss in an open exchange involving both students and their faculty advisers. Focusing on the case may allow them to address their concerns more comfortably and openly in a nonthreatening setting.

Because the case involves a variety of parties who have very different rights and responsibilities, it might be enlightening to discuss the case within the framework of relational ethics. Within this framework, each character (or group, institution, etc.) should be addressed in terms of the rights that they have (or should have) and their responsibilities to the groups with which they have a relationship. Ethical decision making by the various participants involves the balancing of all characters' rights, while honoring their responsibilities. In many cases analyzed in this way, a solution may be reached that maximizes the likelihood that responsibilities will be met. What may be most frustrating (and therefore interesting) about this case is that it may become evident that it is impossible for some of the characters to honor all of their responsibilities, and therefore a quick fix may not be apparent.

In this case, the main players are Steve Hill, Mike Bowman, Alice Devorak and Butz. The other, less obvious players might include the department faculty, the university, the scientific community, granting agencies and professional societies.

To highlight the importance of examining ethical decision making in terms of rights and responsibilities associated with an individual's relationships, I will briefly discuss some of Hill's decisions.

At a simplistic level of analysis, Hill has the following relationships, which are accompanied by specific responsibilities:

Relationship with: Mike Bowman

Responsibilities: To make an honest assessment of his potential in graduate school and beyond. To treat him fairly, without bias based on race, religion, etc.

Comments: Although these responsibilities may seem clear, it is not difficult to think of situations where Hill's responsibilities may actually infringe on Mike's rights. For example, perhaps one would argue that it was wrong for Hill to deceive Mike with regard to the status of his proposal; the correct action would have been to be honest from the outset. Therefore the right action for Hill would be to explain his misgivings and turn Mike down.

Perhaps, however, Hill sees potential in Mike and does not want to dissuade him entirely from science and graduate school, but instead wants to discourage his entering Hill's research program. Hill would have the best perspective on whether his research program was fruitful in terms of his graduate students finding employment. Although Hill's actions are paternalistic, perhaps he is in an appropriate position to act in such a way.

Relationship with: The department and university

Responsibilities: To maintain an active research program that brings both prestige and a consistent source of income to the institution. To mentor graduate students.

Comments: Although Hill's responsibilities to the institution are far more complex, this may be an appropriate starting point. The case explains that Hill has enjoyed a successful career and therefore perhaps his mere presence at the university affords the institution a source of prestige. Contrast this situation with that of Devorak, a junior faculty member. If prestige is gained through productivity and publications, how would her status in the department affect her decisions about staffing her lab?

Hill has received a favorable review regarding a pre-proposal he submitted. This response is a strong indication that his project will be funded. Assume that the

proposal has sufficient funding (and research needs) to support a new graduate student. Hill feels, however, that he has become disjointed from the science, and is not satisfied with simply writing proposals and manuscripts, while the graduate students and technicians carry out the research. (He shares Devorak's concerns.)

Although he knows that he could get the funding and add a graduate student, he does not feel comfortable with the situation, and therefore does not pursue the funding. Has he violated his responsibility to the university? Based on Butz's comments, he has clearly violated his responsibilities to his department. But what are Hill's rights? Is he in an autonomous position to decide whether he should take on the funding?

It is clear that when we fold in the university's relationship to its graduate students, the situation becomes exceedingly complex. If the university educates graduate students, is it appropriate to view them in the context of cheap labor? Does the university have responsibilities to the graduate students beyond that of education? Or do all of these questions lead back to the responsibility of the prospective graduate students to recognize the limitations in the job market and their role in the university system?

Of course, the case may be approached in many ways. In order to get a feel for the frustration of the participants, a relational framework seems to work well, however. The above analysis is merely a jumping off point. In order to fully explore the appropriate actions of Hill and Devorak, all of the relevant relationships need to be considered. It may be especially important to consider the role of the scientific community and the granting agencies. Remember that researchers' status in the community and with the various granting agencies relies heavily on their perceived productivity. Emphasis on quantity over quality may threaten the fabric of good science.