

Carl O. Hilgarth's Commentary on "Request From a Former Student"

Commentary On
Request From a Former Student

I

Prof. Nice, in deciding how to respond to Jason Smart's request, should have the following questions:

- Why is he requesting a copy of the final research report after losing interest in and leaving the project?
- Does his contribution to the research project merit his receiving a complete copy of the research report?
- How was my research project associated to the related area he is now working in?
- How will seeing the report and how things worked out help him?

Without further information about Jason's graduate work, these considerations and the fact that the research was essentially done by Nelson Nice suggest the professor write Jason and express an interest in his current graduate work, inquire who his graduate research advisor is, and how the results of his research project will help. He should include an abstract of the report and summary of the results. If Jason is serious about his work, he will respond.

II

Even though Prof. Nice was not anxious to share the report with Jason Smart, was disappointed with the results of the research, and unhappy with Jason's performance on the project, he responded as many of us probably would. He sent Jason a letter pointing out that although the research was now complete, it did not turn out as he

had hoped, that he had no plans to do further work in the area, enclosed a copy of the report, and wished him well. Several years later Prof. Nice finds out that Jason used the report as his Master's Thesis -- adding some a couple of introductory paragraphs, a concluding section, and an updated bibliography, but not acknowledging or citing his work.

Were I Nelson Nice, my first reaction would be to assume academic misconduct -- plagiarism. However, before acting, it's important to check things out. Since Jason's project was in a related area it might have been based on my research and used what he did as my undergraduate assistant as the starting point. I would contact Jason, cite my report, the fact that it appeared without any reference in his thesis, and ask him how this happened. Perhaps he duplicated my laboratory work with different results, especially since he added new introductory paragraphs, a conclusion and an updated bibliography. It would be interesting to hear what he would say. A call and a "little shop talk" with his graduate faculty advisor is also appropriate to confirm Jason's explanation. I may find his impropriety in not citing my research to be an oversight on his part, perhaps due to my reluctance to share my research report because of the "disappointing results." On the other hand, I might find that his research was legitimate and might provide a new perspective to my research causing me to reconsider my decision not to do further work in this area. Under either of these conditions, my resolution would be to request that he amend his thesis to cite my prior work, even if that work led to a different conclusion.

Or, I might find that he is still immature and impatient with laboratory work and write-ups and used my report as a short-cut. At worst, academic misconduct -- plagiarism -- could be the case. If this is what happened, my action would be to discuss this with the faculty at the institution that granted Jason his master's degree, citing as the reason to investigate his alleged academic misconduct the fact that his master's thesis contained my research report of work done at the institution where the student was an undergraduate laboratory assistant. I would have to present the documents, correspondence, events, and circumstances through which the student received a copy of the report. The institution granting Jason his graduate degree would be responsible for the investigation under their student code of conduct, and I would have to abide by their finding.

To decrease the chances this situation occurring, whenever someone requests a copy of your research, only send copies of published papers, or refer them to the

appropriate journal. In other instances, to protect work you haven't published, send an abstract and a summary of the results.