

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Post-Doc Blues"

Commentary On
Post-Doc Blues

This case offers an interesting angle on relationships within a lab and at the same time an opportunity to examine relationships between labs in the competitive environment of science. The very presentation of the case reveals some of the complexity of relationships within scientific research groups.

The title highlights a post-doc, Sarah Bringham, a member of Dr. Julius Martin's lab. She may be harmed if a graduate student in the same lab, John McGovern, accepts the offer to join Dr. Chen Wang's lab after graduation. In Wang's lab, it seems, McGovern will have an opportunity, perhaps an obligation, to take up research problems very similar, if not identical, to those Bringham investigates in Martin's lab. McGovern might take advantage of his knowledge of Bringham's research to move ahead of her. Interestingly, although the title represents Bringham's perspective, the case is presented from McGovern's perspective. Absent from the scene altogether and playing no role in the unfolding situation is the lab director, Martin, who perhaps is a remote adviser.

Despite McGovern's close relationship with Bringham, we find him concentrating on his opportunity, without thinking about the consequences for Bringham. He ignores Martin as well. He seems not to consider the fact that the latter has control over the data produced in his lab through his funding. If McGovern were to turn his attention to his current circumstances, as he should, he might see the need to discuss Wang's offer with Martin and Bringham before he responds to Wang.

McGovern should inform Martin of any offer, surely any offer he finds tempting. Martin reasonably expects to hear from McGovern about any offer involving research and data in his lab. Because funding awarded to Martin's lab supported McGovern's graduate research, he owes Martin a full account of the offer, as a matter of reciprocity and fairness, as well as courtesy. Martin is owed that information even if

he has been a remote adviser. In addition, it would be prudent to inform Martin because McGovern might benefit from Martin's assessment of the opportunity.

Martin should not be left in the dark, unable to protect his and the post-doc's interests in the success of research in his lab. He should have an opportunity to help McGovern in his career move. Furthermore, McGovern needs Martin's permission to take any data from the lab. If McGovern is not aware of that requirement, both he and Martin are remiss. At the outset of McGovern's research, Martin should have made clear the status of data collected in the lab. If he failed to do that, McGovern should have asked him about ownership of a graduate student's data or somehow informed himself.

Finally, by handling the offer unilaterally, McGovern would close off the possibility of turning the offer into a gain for himself, Bringham, Martin and the lab. Openness and discussion, on the other hand, would allow consideration of arrangements from which all might benefit.

McGovern's friendship and close research relationship with Bringham form the basis of his duty to talk with her about Wang's offer. He must confront the prospect that in going to Wang's lab he might have to exploit his involvement in Bringham's work - to her detriment. Ethically speaking, he is not permitted to disregard her interests and treat his involvement in Bringham's research merely as a means to his own advancement. If McGovern finds the offer tempting, he should raise the question with Bringham and Martin of how to protect Bringham's interests.

Out of discussion among the three of them might come the prospect of collaboration with Wang's lab. The fact that Wang has shown some data to McGovern and is interested in McGovern's previous research suggests the option is worth exploring. Each lab director has already learned something valuable about research in the other lab. That development, as well as features of the research, may prompt Martin and Wang to consider collaboration. Whether collaboration is a realistic prospect depends on details of the circumstances and on the personalities involved, especially the lab directors.

In any event, Martin, McGovern, and Bringham must consider how to deal fairly with the information they have received about Wang's work. Is simply appropriating the information to advance Bringham's work like taking advantage of information gained in reviewing a proposal or an article? Would Martin, McGovern and Bringham want

their own research treated in that way? These are questions they should consider. It seems that they must work out some kind of cooperative arrangement to avoid either lab's taking unfair advantage of the information gained from McGovern's application for a post-doc position. This aspect of the situation adds complexity to the effort by Martin, McGovern and Bringham to protect Bringham's and Martin's interests while allowing McGovern to advance.

In the competitive environment of U.S. science, several research groups may simultaneously pursue very similar lines of research. The assumption that science benefits when research groups compete vigorously underlies funding practices in some government agencies. At the same time, scientists appreciate the benefits that collaboration can bring and the needs that arise for cooperation among competing research groups.

Working out cooperative or sharing arrangements in a competitive landscape demands care and tact. Even communication between competing groups requires thought and attention. In this environment, graduate students and post-docs need thorough orientation to problems and pitfalls if they are to avoid unfortunate blundering. That orientation should include focus on opportunities for collaboration with members of competing research groups and justification for any constraints on contact. This preparation is necessary to protect junior researchers from damaging encounters, to avoid fostering cynicism in junior investigators about practices in science, and to advance research.