

Karen Muskavitch's Commentary on "The Extended Project"

Commentary On
The Extended Project

This case describes a tricky situation that is resolved well, but could have gone very wrong. The positive resolution was possible because all parties acted in a mature manner, communicated openly and respectfully with each other, and accepted responsibility as their obligations dictated.

Field studies -- especially long-term studies -- can be difficult and plagued with unexpected complications. Discussion of this case could help all those concerned with such studies to anticipate problems that might arise, both in experimental design and in interpersonal relationships, and how they might be resolved.

The actions of two characters in this scenario, Jane and Professor Maple, deserve further comment. Jane recognized the problem with determining the locations of the plots, welcomed others' suggestions (Anastasia's, for example), sought further information on her own (called Dr. Ilex), but then discussed the situation with Maple. She demonstrated an ability and willingness to act and make decisions independently, as a graduate student should, as well as to seek out information and advice when needed, also important for a grad student. When she could not arrive at a clear solution, she did not waste time worrying about the problems, nor did she minimize or walk away from them. Rather she presented them clearly and respectfully to Maple, along with her concerns about her graduate career.

Some graduate students in her situation might have just continued with the research hoping it would all work out in the end, or they might have made up some excuse for wanting to work on a different project with another professor. Others might have loudly accused Maple of lax supervision of previous students, incompetence, or even misconduct. Jane chose a better course of action: respectfully asking Maple what he thinks is the best thing to do while asserting her legitimate interests in completing her degree in a reasonable amount of time with a scientifically valid thesis.

Similarly, Maple responded to the situation very well. He did not dismiss Jane's concerns with some comment like, "Look, I've been doing field studies for longer than you've been alive. Who are you to question where I say the plots are, or my previous students' work?" Rather, he deliberated with Jane, and together they devised a plan to bring in a surveyor, a skilled third party, to mark smaller uniform plots so that Jane and her team could complete the final set of field measurements; arranged to gather measurements so that Maple would be able to evaluate possible amounts of error; and agreed on a research question for Jane's thesis work that was limited to data that she could evaluate and take responsibility for.

Maple, in turn, assumed responsibility for reviewing the data and conclusions that were derived from this study site over 40 years. Presumably he would inform the scientific community if he discovered significant errors that had the potential to invalidate previously published work. Determining what constituted significant error and how best to communicate this information to the scientific community would require judgment calls on Maple's part. His willingness to deliberate with a first year graduate student on the best way to complete his 40-year study suggests that he would make these decisions in consultation with others and in a manner that showed an awareness for his responsibilities to those who will refer to his publications, and a greater concern for the facts than for his pride - admirable characteristics in a scientist.