

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "The Successful Side Business"

Commentary On
The Successful Side Business

I will comment on aspects of this case sequentially, in the order in which they are presented. Some of my comments will be about the ethical issues themselves; some will be about whether the case is plausible, clear, etc.

I begin with paragraph one. Although it is typically allowable for professors to engage in some work beyond their regular employment at a university, restrictions are usually imposed (perhaps a percentage of one's workweek). That in itself suggests that taking on additional work raises a yellow flag. It appears that Jones has not been monitoring himself well in this regard -- nor, apparently, has anyone else. This situation is an open invitation for trouble, particularly of the conflict of interest variety, as the case later bears out.

The case states that Jones gets a sabbatical to develop his business. That seems unlikely, unless the university has determined that it has some particular stake in this business. It would be good to spell out the understanding and why the university finds this arrangement agreeable. This detail might result in a somewhat different description of Jones's work on his business. If, however, Jones has been granted a sabbatical to work on something else but finds himself consumed with the establishment of his business, we have a problem of a different sort. Jones committed to doing one thing but ended up doing quite another. Another way to change the case would be to have Jones taking a leave of absence (without pay) from the university to set up his business.

Whichever way the case goes, I should think that some understanding would have been established in relation to Jones's advisees. The case seems to leave this issue completely unresolved, so it is difficult to determine just what obligations Jones has. (E.g., when I was beginning to work on my dissertation, the person I wanted as supervisor was about to take a sabbatical leave. He recommended that I select a

different supervisor, while volunteering to look at anything I might send him during his absence. I regarded this offer as an act of generosity on his part rather than an obligation. However, if Jones has already assumed the role of dissertation supervisor, he has an obligation, which requires him, at the very least, to help Jim get appropriate supervisory help.)

It isn't entirely clear how Jim got himself tied into Jones's outside work. Has the department sanctioned this arrangement? Why? With what understanding? I think we need more background on Jim's circumstances. Perhaps both the department and Jones are misusing Jim.

Is there something special about Jim being in his seventh year? If I read the case correctly, he had already put in five years of graduate work before Jones took his sabbatical. Isn't that an unusually long time to spend in a graduate program without having gotten further along on one's dissertation? Is there a suggestion here that Jim may not have been applying himself as well as he should (in which case Jones may have some doubts about how serious Jim is about completing his thesis soon)? Or is it a typical timeline for science Ph.D.s? I think the case will be strongest if there is no suggestion that Jim has been setting an unusually slow pace.

The answers to the questions in paragraph three really depend on how we are to understand the first two paragraphs. However, assuming that at this point Jim's circumstances are clarified and Jones is shown to be negligent in providing Jim with the supervision he needs, Jim certainly is justified in seeking help from someone else in the department. Maybe Jones would regard Jim's talking with Smith as an attack on his (Jones's) authority. But that would not be a reasonable conclusion for him to draw (assuming he even knew about the conversation). I take it that Jim would first simply express to Smith his concerns about not being able to progress with his thesis, both because of Jones's demands on his time and Jones's inaccessibility. Whether Smith is the person Jim should talk to depends on whether Jim feels comfortable discussing such a delicate matter with him. Maybe Jim should talk with someone else first. If there is no one Jim feels he can talk to, that would be most unfortunate and might signal that something is wrong with the department itself. In any case, Jim needs to talk with someone, and he should summon up the courage to do it. If the entire department is a mess, what does he have to lose? If Jones is the only problem, there should be a solution (unless Jim is not a good candidate).

I think the questions in Part 2 are quite good, especially if some of the questions I have asked about Part 1 are cleared up. I wonder, however, how readers will understand the statement that Jones's recent grant application was denied. Just how is that supposed to bear on Jim's circumstances? If the grant had been awarded, would Jim have been supported by it (or would Jones have selected someone else)? I think it would be helpful to say a bit more about this point.

A lot is packed into this case, and the issues raised are important. My main concern is that readers need enough information to focus clearly on what is going on as they consider the ethical issues.