

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "Too Much Help Is Not Enough"

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The author of this scenario quotes from Weil and Arzbaecher: The three major goals of research groups are "1) to get research done; 2) to get students trained; and 3) to acquire the funding needed to achieve the first two goals." The author suggests that Professor Morris may have acted to sacrifice the second of these goals in order to accomplish the first and possibly the third, and goes on to suggest that a discussion of this scenario should include a reflection of how these goals can be appropriately balanced and how inappropriate balancing can lead to unethical behavior.

I do not want to pick a fight with Weil and Arzbaecher, but I believe they have taken a very short-sighted view of university research. If they asked researchers what their goals are, they probably would have obtained the list above. That is what researchers are expected to say. But I suspect that probing and candid interviews with scientists that constitute a research group would have produced a far different list of goals. I suspect they would have listed their goals something like: 1) to win fame and recognition; 2) to discover new knowledge; 3) to do something beneficial for humanity; and 4) to have a rewarding career (with adequate compensation for doing interesting work).

Their job then, as opposed to their reasons for doing their job, would be to get the research done (so they can become famous, find new knowledge, and help others); train students (for the same reasons); and obtain funding (so they can continue their careers).

In that light, let us consider the actions of Professor Morris, who is clearly interested in getting this student, Johnson, to work on the project. Morris wants to be famous (an assumption based on extensive empirical evidence, but it could be challenged), discover new knowledge, do something beneficial (maybe) and have a great career. His student Johnson is his means to these objectives. He wants Johnson to finish so

that the research can be published and enhance Morris's fame. I suspect that he cares little for Johnson's welfare, except that the sooner Johnson can graduate and join a faculty somewhere, the sooner Morris's fame as the producer of many PhDs will be slightly improved.

What Morris apparently does not understand is that one very bad PhD student can destroy one's reputation for graduating many good ones. In a way, this situation will be a self-correcting. When the word gets out, Morris will have a hard time attracting new graduate students, and if the research Johnson and his ilk will do is bad, Morris will not be able to get the findings published and will have increasing difficulty getting research funds. This outcome is sometimes known as *Darwinian selection* in science.