

Author's Commentary on "Seminar"

Commentary On Seminar

This case examines some ethical issues that arise from the open exchange and development of ideas that is essential for the continued advancement of science and engineering. Many departments host a seminar series as a method of broadening the knowledge base of their graduate students through exposing and discussing the work of other graduate students, post-docs and the faculty. These discussions encourage questioning and examination of the topics to improve the quality of the work of the presenter, as well as providing a forum for graduate students to gain confidence in questioning the work of others. However, a problem is associated with maintaining control of the ideas disseminated during seminar. Any idea presented can be taken and utilized for one's own gain without recognizing or acknowledging the originator.

In reading this case, one may be tempted to focus on the utilization of knowledge gained in a seminar session to promote one's career in industry, automatically assuming that Ackley has obtained his understanding in an ethical manner. In reality, the ethical question of Ackley's actions should initially center more on his acquisition of the information than how he ultimately used it.

A few inferences about Ackley are required to evaluate whether he is acting ethically. First, Ackley's apparent understanding of Phillips's work and ability to participate actively in the seminar seems to indicate that the two graduate students, Ackley and Phillips, are probably working on different projects within the same field of study, possibly having the same adviser. Unlike a graduate student whose main focus is elsewhere, Ackley understands the importance of this work and has a working knowledge from which to formulate more in-depth questions.

One hint of impropriety stems from the fact that Ackley has already accepted employment at Trees-R-Us Paper Company. That means that he may have an idea of the type of projects he will be working on and his new company's expectations regarding publishing and production of work. Ackley's exposure to the ideas and

insights from Phillips's presentation will give him an unfair advantage over the university for developing and patenting ideas extending from this work. This advantage stems from the dedication of time and resources Ackley will have available at a research lab over the university system, which relies on graduate students to perform most of the research over an extended time period.

The combination of Ackley's knowledge of the subject and his impending employment at a research lab performing related work indicates that his attendance at the seminar is unethical. Ackley should have excused himself from the presentation, citing potential conflict of interest. The department also should have been aware of the conflict and requested that he leave, or not attend, this particular seminar. Ackley's attendance is not unethical, however, if he alerts the department to the potential conflict of interest and the department still allows him to attend. Another option may have been to have Ackley sign a nondisclosure agreement before attending the seminar.

With the assumption that Ackley has obtained the knowledge in an ethical manner, the issue turns to his use of the knowledge. The question is whether the knowledge he gained at seminar is truly being shared for the further education of all, or does hypocrisy exist in the form that no one is supposed to actually use the information gleaned from these meetings? Most departments traditionally tout seminar as an opportunity to further one's knowledge; therefore, it is not an ethical violation for Ackley to develop the new test method at his new job.

Phillips's water-based test method was a starting point, and many modifications would be required for Ackley to establish the new test method. Ackley should be praised for his achievement as a scientist in developing the new test method. Any public or company publications should cite Phillips's master's thesis as the original idea from which Ackley generated his new test method, but unless Phillips or Phillips's adviser have consulted on the development of Ackley's method, neither deserves to be recognized as a co-author of Ackley's paper. Ackley's selection of this work, however, may be questionable, since Phillips's adviser probably would want to expand Phillips's work in this area. This possibility raises a quandary for any graduate student: How much of the different ideas and experiences they have been exposed to is free game for them to utilize and develop when they enter the workforce?

If Ackley had accepted an academic post at university, instead of entering the industrial sector, that would change everything. Ackley's academic position at a competing university should limit his use of the ideas and knowledge he was exposed to as a graduate student. It is debatable as to what ideas he may utilize to start his own research program, but clearly the use of Phillips's thesis work would be an unethical infringement upon a colleague's work at another university.

Seminar serves as a vital tool to expose graduate students to a variety of ideas in areas in their fields. Ethical questions will always arise as students graduate and take their knowledge to industrial research jobs or other academic institutions. The ethical use of the knowledge gained from seminar, as well as other graduate experiences, will always have to be determined on a case by case basis, since there is a fine line between impinging on another's idea and having original insights utilizing others' ideas.