

Author's Commentary on "The Successful Side Business"

Commentary On
The Successful Side Business

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Part 1

The most salient issue raised by this case is the issue of who should profit from Jones's ideas -- whether the institution's investment in Jones is enough to justify receiving some (or all) of the profit from his business. A second -- not entirely separate issue -- is the appropriate use of university facilities (computers and phone lines, not consumable items) and time (leave) and the fact that the initial investment in Jones was by the college. As this case study was written, Jones is employed by a private college, but the issues would be even more complex if he worked for a state university. One might want to explore these issues when discussing whether it matters that public funds (a grant) supported Jones while he developed the program.

Jones's responsibilities to his institution are one issue, but he also has responsibilities to his students, which readers may or may not see as a separate issue. What Jones does on his own time is his business. But being a professor is not a 9 to 5 job with clear barriers between on and off time. Jones has a variety of responsibilities as a professor; readers' perceptions of and ranking of those responsibilities will greatly affect their answers to the questions posed in Part 1. Part of the problem is that Jones's priorities have changed mid-stream in Mark's graduate career, and the question arises as to whether or not these conflicts are being approached ethically. Jones's conflicts could become more entangled if the situation is allowed to progress without intervention; if BioProgram goes public, Jones also will have responsibilities to investors.

Mark also confronts some ethical issues. Does his responsibility for his own career conflict with his loyalty to Jones? He needs to remain in Jones's good graces for his future career success, yet he has to bring Jones's behavior up for review in order to graduate in a timely fashion; he is in a bit of a no-win situation. Mark's reluctance to disappoint Jones probably enters into his decisions as well, as he seems to get along well with Jones on a personal level.

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Part 2

The issues raised here are mostly issues of responsibility -- the responsibilities of members of the department to students on whose committees they sit, the responsibilities to the department for the students and for allocation of resources (Mark's stipend). Underlying these issues is the issue of explicit versus implicit assumptions -- those made by Mark, by Jones and by the rest of the department. Conflicting perceptions of responsibility among the parties in this case led to this ethical dilemma.

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