

Author's Commentary on "Too Much Help Is Not Enough"

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This case was written for examination from several perspectives. It features four main players whose roles, obligations, and interests can be evaluated independently. Their interaction and effect on others also allows for discussion concerning ethical decisions. The roles of advisers with students, responsibilities of committee members, and student needs and obligations in the research process are among the issues to be highlighted.

Part 1

Johnson is in the difficult position of needing to secure another committee member in a short time period. She feels comfortable approaching Dr. Wood about serving on the committee but is quickly placed between the two faculty members who do not agree on the timeline. Johnson's agenda at this point is to form a committee whose members will agree to a meeting date so that she can proceed with her study.

Wood is willing to accommodate the added burden he will assume in serving on the committee. He is not willing to compromise his input by rushing the meeting and not allowing himself time to adequately review the written manuscript. As a new, tenure-track professor, Wood likely desires to do well in his position and does not want to be ill-prepared for a prospectus meeting involving Dr. Morris, who is the department chairperson. On the other hand, he wants to help the student and accommodate Morris by meeting her timeline.

Morris's agenda appears to be to keep the project moving. She indicates that she really isn't terribly interested in Wood's input. She is using her power over Wood and Johnson to keep the timeline in place.

In reviewing Wood's request for more time, the interests and obligations of each of the players can be brought out. Wood's feedback from Morris indicates that his rubber stamp is all that is really required. This feedback comes from her verbal statements as well as the fact that she expects him to read the manuscript in a very short time period. Wood has to weigh doing what seems to be best for himself and the student against displeasing his chairperson.

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Part 2

Wood decides to risk alienating Morris by insisting on more time to review the manuscript. In Part 2, he is again in the position of having to question Morris. In deciding how Wood should handle the dilemma of the prospectus meeting, he must carefully examine the benefits and potential harm to those involved.

Possible benefits

While Johnson may feel that she will benefit from proceeding immediately, Wood is considering how the student can move forward into the study when she appears to be so uncertain of what she is doing. She will be responsible for implementing the methods and analysis and will again be under the gun when she must defend her thesis. The easy choice for Wood might be to simply allow Johnson to proceed. After all, Morris is pushing for that and she will ultimately be Johnson's adviser on the project. If Wood were to think only of himself, his choice might be to sign off on the project.

Morris may potentially benefit from allowing Johnson to proceed if the project is completed in accordance with her timeline. The case does not specify a reason for her adherence to the timeline so we might speculate as to why she seems so insistent. Perhaps she has intrinsic reasons in wanting to finish the project in order to make a presentation or to submit a publication. Despite her tenure status, these considerations may be affecting her behavior. A more extrinsic reason might be that

she wants Johnson to graduate on time and feels that holding the project back will delay that. We can only speculate as to why Dr. Story appears willing to sign off on the project following the prospectus meeting. We do know that she and Morris are friends and collaborators on research projects. Is this relationship or the desire not to make waves enough reason to approve the project?

This portion of the case can be used to discuss Muskavitch's comment that "In the real world, people almost never have all the information they would like before they must make a decision concerning what to do next." (p. 3).

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Potential repercussions

In discussing the decision facing Wood, it is also useful to examine the potential harm that could come from his approving the project when he does not feel that the student has adequate knowledge. It is easy to contemplate many problems that could arise from Johnson being allowed to go forward with a project she does not seem to understand. She could struggle during the entire project or receive just enough help to complete it and then fail in her thesis defense. In addition to the obvious disservice to this student's effort to learn the research process, Morris's modeling of poor ethical choices is also potentially harmful to Johnson. According to Vesilind, "Students have their ethical antennae up. If we fail them, they will be poorly served by higher education." (Vesilind, 2000, p.170) If our goals in higher education are for students to learn from us, then we must realize that they will learn from all we do, not just those behaviors that we choose.

Another point to consider is the possibility that Johnson will be allowed to proceed without really understanding the project and Morris will somehow manage to get her through the project. At some point, Johnson may come to realize that she did not obtain the degree or complete the thesis on her own, but rather that she was allowed to slide through for the sake of convenience. If this realization were to occur, Johnson's accomplishment would be diminished in her own eyes. (Vesilind, 2000)

Wood's reputation, as well as those of the other committee members, could be at stake if they sign off on a project in which the student is inadequately prepared. The student's education and perhaps, her future research career could be jeopardized by this action. In discussing relationships in research labs, Weil and Arzbaecher

describe the three major goals of research groups as "(1) to get research done; (2) to get students trained; and (3) to acquire the funding needed to achieve the first two goals." (Weil and Arzbaecher, 1995, p. 73) Morris may have acted to sacrifice the second of these goals in order to accomplish the first and possibly the third. This point may lead to a discussion of the ways in which these goals can be balanced appropriately and how unethical behavior is sometimes reinforced (i.e., through publications, tenure and promotions). The fact that many pressures can be alleviated by unethical behavior is important. People who may generally be ethical and honest may chose a different path when faced with these pressures.

Another factor to consider is possible harm to subjects involved in the study. If Johnson were allowed to see or evaluate subjects without adequate knowledge of the procedures, these subjects could be at risk. In general, if this worst-case scenario were applied, it is possible that the lack of knowledge on the student's part could tarnish the reputation of everyone involved in the project.

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References

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