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The Bob Bailey Case

Author(s)

Kenneth D. Pimple
M.J. Beabeau

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Description

A case study from the 1995 "Moral Reasoning in Scientific Research: Cases for Teaching and Assessment." Bob Bailey is a graduate student whose research is not going well. When the supervisor of his lab forms a romantic attachment to another graduate student, Susan, Bob wonders if she is getting preferential treatment from their advisor and also worries about how the relationship might affect Susan's future career if things go badly.

Body

Part I

Bob Bailey is a fourth-year graduate student in the lab of Professor Peter Martin, and he is not very happy. His research has not been going well recently, and he attributes his troubles to the romantic relationship that Martin has established with another graduate student, Sarah Stern.

Stern is also a fourth-year graduate student in Martin's lab. Both she and Bailey officially joined the lab at the end of their first year of graduate study. Unlike Bailey,

Stern has consistently made excellent progress in her research.

Martin is known for running a productive, highly respected, and collegial lab. During the summer after her third year, Stern was surprised but happy to find her collegial rapport with Martin blossoming into a romantic relationship. Although they tried to be as discreet as possible, it was soon common knowledge among the other four graduate students in Martin's lab that he and Stern were "an item." By now, in December, the once-collegial atmosphere has become strained.

In particular, Bob Bailey is starting to show his resentment. He is growing resentful of Stern's research success and the favoritism that he perceives Martin is showing her. Since September, the Martin lab has submitted abstracts to three meetings, and Stern is the first author on all of them. Of the grad students in the lab, Martin has offered to send only Stern to this year's three big meetings in their field. For each, Stern will be traveling and staying with Martin. Last year, Stern went to two of these meetings, and her expenses were covered by Martin's grants. Although Bailey is Stern's contemporary, he has yet to attend a scientific meeting.

Bailey's jealousy and resentment are, however, balanced by genuine concern for Stern. They have been friends since they started graduate school together (though nothing more than friends), and Bailey fears that if Stern's relationship with Martin were to end, this could jeopardize Stern's work in the lab and, in turn, her future career.

It is just before winter break. Bailey has tried to work up the nerve to talk to his friend Sarah or to confront Martin, but he doesn't think there would be any point to it. He doesn't think either of them is thinking clearly, and he thinks that bringing up his complaints and his worries would just make them angry. He is considering taking his complaints about Martin and his worries about Stern to the department chair.

Should Bailey bring his concerns to the department chair? Why or why not?

Part II

After break, Bailey does schedule an appointment with the chair of the department to report his complaint and concern. Bailey finds that the chairperson, David O'Donald, does not know anything about the Martin-Stern romance. O'Donald asks Bailey if he believes that Stern was pressured into this relationship with Martin, or if Stern is unhappy with the situation. When Bailey answers in the negative, O'Donald,

who is on Bailey's thesis committee, shifts the topic of the conversation to Bailey's current troubles with his research. After ten minutes, Bailey leaves O'Donald's office pondering. O'Donald's parting words were, "Well, I don't think there's anything to be concerned about with Stern and Martin. They're adults. If some problem arises, let me know, and I can have a chat with Martin. In the meantime, get some work done."

Should O'Donald adopt the "wait and see" approach that he proposes? Why or why not?

Notes

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