

*You want me to do WHAT??!! Sticky  
Situations in the Research Administration  
Environment*



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**The following scenarios are based on cases from the National Academy of Engineering, Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Research, Responsible Research: Cases.**

**Modifications were made so they are more applicable to research administrators.**

**Scenario I:**

Mark has been in a Ph.D. program for three years, but has made little progress on a dissertation because of the heavy demands of being a Teaching Assistant. This last year Mark has a NIH funded Research Assistant position in Professor Li's laboratory. During this time Mark has settled on a thesis topic and started to generate the cell lines and preliminary data to use for the thesis research. Tom is also a Ph.D. candidate in Professor Li's laboratory who has completed his dissertation.

One afternoon Mark comes into your office clearly distressed. Professor Li tells Mark to stop work on his thesis project and analyze some data that he needs for a consulting project. Mark doesn't need the money and would rather work on his project and confides to you the fear that refusing might jeopardize his RA position.

What would you do? How would you approach Professor Li?

## **Scenario II:**

You are the Research Administrator for a large laboratory with high-demand equipment used for multiple projects. To make things easier, you have implemented an on-line log for all machine use, enabling you to appropriately and fairly recharge research projects. If there is no external funding available, the user must provide a departmental account in which to charge usage.

Two Post-Docs, A & B, are roommates in an off-campus apartment, but are in different research groups within the lab you for which you serve as administrator. Post-Doc B did not attend the lab meeting today where you reminded everyone to be sure to use the On-Line Log for all machine use. When he arrives home, Post-Doc A complains to Post-Doc B about the rules and procedures you have implemented. He goes on to tell him how everyone at the meeting complained about the hassle factor and the slow response, but you reiterated how it was essential to provide accurate lab charges, that IT is modifying the system to make it faster, and everybody had to use it. Post-Doc A is concerned as the equipment recharge budget for the project he is funded on is running low, which could impact the test results needed for the competing renewal.

The two have the following conversation:

B: No big deal, just “work around” the system.

A: What do you mean?

P: Well, my K08 project is running low on research funds, and my mentor won't allocate additional funding. She said she would in the application, but you know how it is. She just suggested using the equipment less, which I really can't do. I figure if I occasionally “forget” to use the on-line log, I can save my project enough money so I don't run out of funding before the end of the project.

A: Great Idea!!! What's a couple of missed billings here and there?

You hear about this through the laboratory “rumor mill.” How should you handle this?

### **Scenario III:**

You are the Research Administrator of a large research center that trains undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral students. You handle pre- and post-award activities, along with human resources and payroll. The center's three faculty members are very driven and focused individuals who are not exactly compassionate when it comes to issues and situations outside the laboratory.

#### **Embedded Issues:**

- As you know, graduate training in science is an apprenticeship system wherein the apprentice trains best if the project is novel, interesting, challenging but feasible, and of some potential importance in the context of the field. Such projects are most often opportunities that do not stand still, i.e. there is usually competition or at least urgency in terms of the preceptor's program needs. How can that be balanced against the often complex goals of certain students or even unanticipated problems that can arise in anyone's life? What are the fairness issues vis-a-vis other individuals in the lab or training program?
- Some students and some preceptors have a negative prejudice (some probably have an envy and/or positive prejudice) towards MD researchers, students who want to pursue the possibility of completing their MD credentials, etc. Such prejudices are unfortunate in an environment such as this. An exploration is worthwhile.

### **Faculty A's Lab**

**Student 1** in Faculty A's lab has been cutting down his hours of work in the lab to study for the qualifying exams so that he can use the MD degree he earned in his home country, and enter a residency program in the US when he finishes the PhD. The work is suffering at a time when Faculty A was hoping to bring some very exciting experiments to closure and publication; there is stiff competition.

**Student 2** is another student, a PhD student with no MD degree, in the same lab. She is an advanced student, working very hard on an ongoing project, worried (aren't we all) about what kind of postdoc position will allow her to compete for a job someday.

### **Faculty B's Lab**

**Student 3** is a student in Professor B's lab. Student 3 is about to have a baby; her work has not slowed down very much during the pregnancy, but she tells Faculty B that she would like to take 6 weeks off after delivery to bond with the baby, and establish some sort of child care routine before coming back. Prof. B has two busy postdocs and another student as well as a technician. It is a fast moving lab.

**Student 4** is one of Faculty B's other students. Student 4's wife had a baby last year; he's frantically trying to finish up, spends little time with his one-year-old, and is concerned with proceeding to the next stage of his career.

### **Faculty C's Lab**

**Student 5** is a student in Faculty C's lab. His work is providing the initial data for a revised grant application for his young mentor. A family illness occurs; the student announces in June that he wishes to spend the summer in California to spend quality time with a seriously ill father.

**Student 6** is an MD/PhD student who was planning a summer rotation in Faculty C's lab, and was going to work together with Student 5.

During a meeting with the faculty members, they express their displeasure with these students' lack of "focus on what's important," and ask you to find a way to terminate them. Faculty C also plans to turn the research over to Student 6, "she is a MD/PhD after all," and give Student 5 no credit for work accomplished as "punishment" for taking the summer off. How do you respond?

## **Scenario IV:**

I'm sure some of you have had to deal with this kind of laboratory drama.

### **This much is known to all the people in the scenario:**

An active research laboratory, under the direction of Professor Big, is investigating the cell and molecular biology of a new cytoskeletal protein that is specific to cardiac cells. The lab has two students, Who Me and Wiz, as well as two technicians, three postdocs, Huey, Dewey, and Lewie, and a clinical fellow, Heart. Heart is doing two years of research in preparation for a career in cardiology and related cell biological research.

The two students, Who Me and Wiz, are quite friendly with each other, and their work is going well, especially Wiz' work, although recently even Wiz had a few disasters. Who Me's work is also going well; she is working on the expression of the gene encoding the new protein, and provides useful clones to Dewey. Who-Me and Wiz get along well with most of the other people in the lab, but Huey has a terrible temper, and doesn't do a fair share of the common work (like radioactive disposal, cleaning up after himself, preps); also, there is a problem with Dewey's progress and a sense of uneasiness by some of the other members of the lab with Dewey. They have not, however, talked about it among themselves.

Professor Big is beginning to write a new paper on Dewey's work, and indicates that Who Me should be an author. Who Me indicates quietly that she doesn't really feel right about being an author on the paper, and Professor Big lets it go.

### **This is what some of the characters know:**

The real reason that Who Me doesn't want authorship is that she thinks that Dewey is such a careless worker that she is afraid that her name will be on a paper that contains many errors.

Dewey is well aware of his inadequacies in the lab, and is very jealous of how well other people's work is going. A few times recently, he messed up Wiz's experiments; finally, one night, Lewie happened to be there and saw the sabotage in progress. He asked Dewey what was going on, and got a sorrowful confession and promise from Dewey that he would never be dishonest or destructive in the lab again; Dewey begged Lewie not to tell anyone. Lewie did not tell anyone.

Of course, being the neutral third party that you are, all of the characters have come to your office at one time or the other to complain or just vent their frustration, because "Professor Big just doesn't care". "As long as we make him look good and the lab is productive, he thinks everything is copasetic." As the research administrator, should you be involved with solving these questions:

- If Who Me doesn't think Dewey's results are sufficiently error-free to publish, is she correct in keeping this view to herself?
- What might she do, depending on all the personalities involved?
- What would you do?
- Do you find it credible that a sloppy worker could go more or less unreported? Undetected?
- Should Professor Big be expected to sit down with Who Me and find out what Who Me's reason is for refusing authorship, lest it be known fraud or unexpressed rancor?
- What, if anything, should Lewie have done after he caught Dewey in the act of sabotage?

- What if he had not caught Dewey but only suspected - should he tell Wiz? The Professor?
- What should happen to Dewey? How is such an issue handled in your department?
- What if the culprit were Heart, who is about to assume a faculty position in which he both sees patients and does research? Would the obligation (or moral burden) to report increase?
- What are the risks to Lewie (the potential whistle blower)? Do those risks prevent whistle blowing in a case such as this?
- How much should Lewie worry about what Dewey might do next time, if not challenged more officially now?

On a less serious front what obligation does the Professor have to address Huey's temper tantrums and lack of participation in a fair share of lab duties? What would you suggest for lab situations in which one trainee seems to getaway with doing less of the "scut", sometimes just because they are a little hard to deal with?

What if Huey is very respectful with Professor Big, but is rude to one of the technicians and expects the technician to put up with lots of personal mess? Should someone else bring it to the Professor's attention? Should peer pressure prevail? What if Huey's pattern seems to have a sexist tone?