

BAE800

## Research Ethics Assignment

Dr. Elizabeth Goodwin was an associate professor on the University of Wisconsin Genetics Department, and was considered the rising star in her field. The granting agencies confirmed the outstanding work of this scientist; Goodwin held \$1.8 million in federal grants, 1.4 of which was awarded through the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In addition to her proven record in the lab, Goodwin was respected by her colleagues and students as an excellent mentor as she motivated her students and fostered their development through a supportive scholarly community.

The supportive community which Goodwin had built around her students and lab was not, however, immune to disruption. In October of 2005, Goodwin gave one of her students part of an NIH grant application which she had submitted in an effort to motivate the student. The student showed the application to another graduate student who was more familiar with the work with a startling finding- one of the figures in the application was mislabeled, falsified.

When the two graduate students informed the rest of Goodwin's research group with their findings, the tension was immediate. In the coming weeks, the students identified more fabricated figures in the document, raising many questions in their mind. Had Goodwin intentionally falsified the figures in the report to improve the chances of the grant receiving funding?, Or was it simply a mistake- were the figures place-holders inserted into the draft template to be corrected before submission? Regardless of the reason the figures in the document were incorrect, the ethical issue was clear: should the students report their advisor's misconduct or should they forgive her mistake and rally around the one who had cared for them and who held the key to their future success as scientists and professionals?

My initial reaction was to forgive Dr. Goodwin. After all, she was a reputable scientist, albeit a bit scatter-brained, who loved her work and wanted to see it succeed. Whether the mislabeled figures were an honest oversight or a lapse of judgment, we all make mistakes and are called to forgive others for their mistakes, right? And reporting her to the authorities could destroy this rising researcher's career, not to mention mine and the rest of the research team's. But the more I thought about the situation, the less comfortable I became with my forgive-and-forget attitude. Because Goodwin's decision to include the falsified figures in her application affected so many parties outside of herself and her research team- including, the department, university, her colleagues in genetics, granting agencies, and the scientific community- the way I chose to approach the situation could not simply be based on the outcome to myself and those closest to me. I also must consider the ramifications to the rest of the scientific community. Objectivity is one of the trophies of the scientific process; scientists (including Goodwin) are obligated to report what they find, not what they hoped they would find or what they think granting agencies want them to find. Allowing Goodwin's misconduct to go unchecked would compromise this foundation. In objectivity, not to mention possibly hindering legitimate research from receiving funding.

In addition to my obligation to the scientific community in which I work, simply averting my eyes from the situation would be counter to the character and integrity I want to grow in my own self, and I knew that I would always carry the baggage associated with continuing in Goodwin's lab as if nothing had happened. With this new resolve, I believed that the best next-step was to meet with Goodwin personally to confront her with the situation and listen to her side of the story. Goodwin's perspective, I believed, would help fill in the gaps in my own understanding of the situation and would be crucial in deciding where to go next.

Goodwin's reaction to the meeting did not rekindle my initial desire to simply brush the researcher's actions off as an honest mistake; Goodwin was visibly disturbed and repeatedly stated that she had messed up. Although I respected my advisor and was somewhat fearful for the outcome of my own graduate studies and future career, my decision to report Dr. Goodwin was solidified. The next step was deciding where to go with my report. I believed the head of the genetics department was the best person as it is his or her responsibility to ensure the integrity of the department and research conducted there is not compromised. Reporting to the department head was not a call for the public defamation of Dr. Goodwin, but rather that a comprehensive investigation of her actions be conducted.

Although my decision to report Dr. Goodwin's actions will forever impact both her life and the futures of her graduate students, including myself, I believe that I followed a proper code of ethics. I realized that my duty was not so much to protect Goodwin from the consequences of her actions, but to ensure that steps were taken to conduct an unbiased investigation of her alleged misconduct. The decision to bring actions like Dr. Goodwin's to light was difficult to make due to the potentially damaging short-term effects, but I believe that it resulted in the best long-term outcome for all parties involved.