Early Career Members

Integrity and Ethics: Meeting the Career Challenges that Lie Ahead

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As you enter a career as a new faculty member or a young research professional, your new position will come with new ethical responsibilities. However, in conducting and disseminating the results of your research, you will be accountable to your faculty colleagues, to collaborators, to your students, and to the scientific community. Scholarship and innovation can continue only in an atmosphere of confidence, fairness, and trust. The days of the “lone wolf” brilliant researcher who succeeds on his or her own with little outside collaboration are long over. A successful career depends on you being able to trust your collaborators and know that they are honest in presenting their research, and they must have the same trust in your work.

It is almost impossible for any of us to complete a graduate program without encountering, either personally or relayed in the scientific press, an unethical academic or research situation. This is not because researchers are bad people. Rather, researchers are under a lot of pressures—deadlines, research competition, limited funding, student and departmental needs—that may tempt them to “cut corners” by borrowing an idea without proper attribution or straying from approved budgets without informing funding agencies. It is important that you, as a young research professional, acknowledge that such pressures or some combination thereof will be present throughout your career. It is a critical step to research success that you establish and abide by ethical guidelines for conducting scholarship, teaching, and research. This should not be an onerous exercise; most institutions of higher education have established guidelines for academic and research integrity that can be utilized as a baseline.

Guidelines for Academic and Research Integrity

What do I mean by “guidelines for academic and research integrity?” Although such published guidelines vary widely depending on the institution, I discuss below several general practices that are commonly incorporated into institutional guidelines relating to data storage and retention, publication authorship, and supervision of students and research personnel:

Raw research data pertinent to a publication should be retained for a minimum of five years after publication. Though this guideline may seem harsh to some, the inability to produce raw data has been highly problematic to researchers in several recent high-profile fraud allegations. In a perfect world, our research reporting would proceed in such a way that even the suspicion of fraud would be unlikely to arise. However, if it does arise unjustly, it is imperative that we have records in hand to prove that the allegation was misplaced.

An author submitting a paper should not include the name of a coauthor without that person’s consent. Each coauthor should be furnished with a copy of the manuscript before it is submitted and should be provided opportunity to incorporate edits to that paper. Any coauthorship of a manuscript should be offered to anyone who has clearly made a significant contribution to your research and teaching, and communicated that information to your collaborators and students.

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”

–Aristotle

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