



## Responsible Conduct in Research Case Study: Mentoring & Ethics

*Prepared by:*

[Dr. Maria Uriarte, Plant Ecologist](#)

[Dr. Holly Ewing, Ecologist](#)

[Dr. Valerie T. Eviner, Ecosystem Ecologist](#)

Chris is a postdoc at the lab of the promising young ecologist, Dr. Know. Pat is a graduate student in the same lab. Chris is a thoughtful, reserved and shy person who often has difficulties verbally articulating thoughts and ideas. Despite the shyness, Chris is a brilliant writer and a very thorough and creative thinker. In contrast, Pat is outgoing, extroverted and articulate. People often view Pat as somebody “going places”. Thanks primarily to Chris’s work; Dr. Know’s lab is on the brink of developing innovative theoretical perspectives and laboratory techniques that effectively link evolutionary processes to nutrient cycling in plant communities. Pat’s thesis is in fact a project within the framework generated from Chris’s ideas.

Dr. Know, Chris and Pat all go the Ecological Society of America meetings in New York City. At the meetings, they run into Dr. Vip, one of the leaders in the field and a member of the National Academy of Science, who wields enormous political influence over funding and publishing in the field of ecology. They discuss research and Pat does most of the talking. Dr. Vip is charmed by Pat’s easy, outgoing personality and impressed by the ideas they discuss. Chris seems paralyzed and adds little to the conversation. Dr. Know walks away to talk to a friend.

On the way back home, Pat tells Dr. Know that Dr. Vip had been asked to give a keynote address at an important conference next month. Dr. Vip cannot make the date and has asked Pat to deliver the lecture. In addition to exposure at the conference, Pat will be the lead author of a chapter that will be published in the conference proceedings book. The understanding is that the lecture and chapter will be based on the exciting work taking place at Dr. Know’s lab. Pat is thrilled at this opportunity of a lifetime! Dr. Know is also very excited because this conference will put the lab on the map in a big way. Dr. Know encourages both Chris and Pat to work together in writing the talk and chapters.

### QUESTIONS

Dr. Know: Dr. Know is torn about the best way to handle this situation. On one hand, Dr. Know is concerned about making sure Chris’ role is recognized. On the other hand, Dr. Know feels that Chris is a weak spokesperson for the lab’s work, and Pat would be much more successful at promoting the science the lab is doing, and bring positive exposure to all current and future students in the lab.

- How should Dr. Know handle this situation?
  - o What is the responsibility to protect vs. promote the different mentees?
  - o How can an atmosphere be created in the lab to promote different styles of science communication?

- Is there a responsibility to train Chris to become more effective at expressing ideas?

Pat: Pat acknowledges that the background framework was generated by Chris, but asserts independent ownership over the new exciting directions Pat's contributions have taken.

- What should Pat do?
  - How should Pat acknowledge Chris' contributions?

Chris: Chris is very torn. On one hand, Chris feels like collaborating with Pat on the talk and chapter is a great opportunity to promote the work, and the only way to be properly acknowledged for all of Chris' work. However, on the other hand, Chris feels scooped and is reluctant to divulge any more new ideas to Pat.

- What are Chris' best options?
- How can Chris balance collaboration with self-promotion?

Dr. Vip: Dr. Vip was not initially aware that these ideas originated from Chris, but is made aware of the situation. Dr. Vip feels sympathy for Chris' situation, but maintains that Pat would be the best speaker.

- What can Dr. Vip do to make the situation fairer? Is there an obligation to do anything at all?
- Dr. Vip would like to avoid this situation in the future, what are some possible actions that would accomplish this?

Institution: What is the institution's role in mediating this situation?

Overall issues for discussion:

- What are appropriate criteria for authorship?
- Does Pat's ethical obligation to Chris change if Chris has already published these ideas? Is there a point where an appropriate citation is sufficient, as opposed to collaboration/co-authorship?
- What are the obligations of both Dr. Know and Dr. Vip as mentors of their individual labs and the field in general?
- Someone obviously tipped Dr. Vip off to the situation. Was this warranted? Was this the most effective way to attempt to resolve the situation?
- What are the implications of if the "whistle blower" was Dr. Know, a colleague of Dr. Know's, a different student in Dr. Know's lab, or Chris?