



Responsible Conduct in Research Case Study: On Being a Responsible Scientist

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Responsible conduct in science is more than simply a matter of following everyday ethical imperatives – not misreporting what actually happened in the lab, dealing honestly with colleagues, and so forth. Scientific responsibility arises because scientists play a special role, and that role brings obligations. (Kitcher, Responsible Biology, Bioscience, April 2004/Vol 54. No 4 pp 331-336, see attachment).

The Cucurbit Foundation has been a long-time supporter of basic research in the ecological sciences. However, a recent turnover of board members has led the Foundation to begin a re-evaluation of the goals and objectives of their multi-million dollar annual giving program. As part of this process, the Foundation has recruited scientific luminaries and other worthies into an advisory panel. The panel is charged with providing guidance on Foundation giving. The panel is told that the Foundation wants to continue funding science-related endeavors, but that the particular area or areas of science and the types of science (e.g., pure or applied research, scientific education, science and management, or science and policy) are entirely open issues. The foundation does not feel bound by its history of funding basic ecological research, but seeks a visible, distinctive, focused program fitting their general aim of “the betterment of the human condition through the advancement of science”.

Dr. Fundoik, theoretical ecologist, is one of the panel members. Not surprisingly, Dr. Fundoik thinks the Foundation should keep funding basic ecological science. Dr. Savem, conservation biologist, feels that the foundation should fund science that helps preserve species and habitats. Dr. Malar, a medical disease expert, believes scientific research in many tropical diseases is grossly under-supported relative to how many people die each year, and urgently deserves support. Dr. Knowsy considers the current state of scientific literacy in the US to be appalling, and that increasing scientific literacy is a critical need.

What sort of arguments would the above scientists be likely to use? Are their arguments defensible? How do these arguments relate to the general aim of the Foundation?

What are the obligations of the scientist panel members? To whom do they have these obligations?

What do you think the non-scientists on the advisory panel would say? How would an advisory panel member without a scientific background decide what areas of science should be the focus of the giving program?

Assuming that the Cucurbit Foundation it is an entirely rationale organization (i.e., not influenced by the pet preferences of board members), what scientific endeavors should the Foundation support and why?

Kitcher article, *Responsible Biology*

