Writing, research, and ethics

The following are actual cases that graduate students, teaching assistants, and researchers have actually experienced at various universities. What are the ethical and practical difficulties involved? What about problems with writing and argumentation? Discuss what you would do in these situations, and what action you would take. How might you prevent such situations before they happen?

1. Giving credit

Ben, a third-year graduate student, had been working on a research project that involved an important new experimental technique. For a national meeting in his discipline, Ben wrote an abstract and gave a brief presentation that mentioned the new technique. After his presentation, he was surprised and pleased when Dr. Freeman, a leading researcher from another university, talked with Ben and asked him extensively about the new technique. After Ben described fully to him. Ben's own advisor often encouraged his students not to keep secrets from other researchers, and Ben was flattered that Dr. Freeman would be so interested in his work.

Six months later, Ben was looking through a journal when he noticed an article by Dr. Freeman, which described an experiment that clearly depended on the technique that Ben had developed. He didn't mind, and was in fact flattered, but when he looked at the references, Ben's name was nowhere to be found. Dr. Freeman took his idea without giving him credit.

2. Plagiarism

Mary, a second-year graduate student, is preparing the written portion of her qualifying exam. She includes entire sentences and paragraphs verbatim from several published papers. She does not use quotation marks, but the sources are suggested by statements like: “(see...for more details)”. The faculty members of the exam committee realized there were inconsistencies in the writing styles of different paragraphs, check the sources, and uncover her plagiarism.

Her plagiarism is brought to the attention to the graduate school dean (college head), who expels her from the program with the stipulation that she can reapply for the next academic year.
3. Career in the balance

Francine was just months away from finishing her doctoral dissertation, when she realized that something was seriously wrong with the work of a fellow graduate student, Sylvia. Francine was convinced that Sylvia was not actually making the measurements she claimed to be making. They shared the same lab, but Sylvia rarely seemed to be there. Sometimes Francine saw research materials thrown away unopened. Sylvia was turning in results to her thesis advisor that seemed to clean to be real.

Francine knew that she would soon need to ask her advisor for letters of recommendation for her job search. If she raised the issue now, she was sure that it would affect the recommendation letters. Sylvia was a favorite student of her advisor, but Francine also knew that if she waited to raise these issues with him, the question would arise as to when she first suspected the problems and waited. Both Francine and her advisor were using Sylvia’s research data for their own research, and if her results were inaccurate, both needed to know as soon as possible.

4. Responding to writing

Jan is a teaching assistant who teaches a writing course for undergraduate students. Her course emphasizes argumentation and expression of ideas. One of her most outspoken students, Trevor, likes to dominate class discussions, expound his very conservative viewpoints, and even challenge the teacher. In one of the writing assignments Trevor responds to an essay in the course readings about the politics of nuclear weapons and issues of American military dominance over other countries and cultures.

Trevor hands in an essay that is far more formal and elaborate that what the assignment required. Much of his argumentation of his very conservative political views are well developed. However, he also uses some subjective and emotional arguments, and even some racist arguments in his paper. Jan is understandably outraged by some of the views expressed, but must respond to the writing in a professional manner, grade it, and possibly have a conference with Trevor, which is normally done in the course.

References.

#1-3 are from On Being a Scientist; #4 is from Scenarios for Teaching Writing.
