

Hazardous Substances Role Play

National Center for Professional and Research Ethics

Advising Graduate Student Role

What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.

You have been a graduate student in your current lab for a few years. One of your fellow graduate students in another lab is pretty sure that their lab violates regulations about hazardous substances in a couple of different ways: first, there's an old closet that was converted (quietly, over a weekend) into more bench space. Second, the student's adviser told a post-doc to clean out a hood that was overflowing with old bottles and other junk. The student saw the post-doc take all the bottles out of the hood, put them in a box and carry them out. Given what you know about how to dispose of hazardous substances safely, none of the proper disposal steps were being followed. In addition, although many of the materials used by lab can be quite dangerous, no information is posted anywhere in the lab on emergency procedures. Your fellow student is concerned about what to do.

You've been thinking about your friend's dilemma with the hazardous substances problem. You agree that there's likely a set of violations here, and you think the ventilation and improper disposal issues could be really serious. You know your friend doesn't want to get anyone in trouble, and also doesn't want anyone to get hurt—or their work delayed because of fines or clean-up suspensions of work. Prepare some advice to give your friend.

Starting the Hazardous Substances Role-Play

Advising Student: Hey...

Grad Student: Hi...

Advising Student: Well, I've been thinking about what you've been telling me about this hazardous waste problem...

Grad Student: Yes... I know this can be serious from what I've heard... If the regulations and safety office were to find out we're not complying with the rules, it can lead to a very dangerous situation and serious consequences for the lab...

Advising Student: I agree... I think we should do something... Do you think your adviser cares about the issue?

Grad Student: Yes, I do think so... but for some reason, despite all of the training that we've had dealing with hazardous waste issues, it is not even given a second thought in our lab... I feel like the environment in the lab right now is not safe for someone to work in...

Advising Student: Maybe you should approach your adviser... Make sure you're not confrontational...but tell your adviser that you have a personal concern that needs to be discussed...

Grad Student: Right... I don't want to be in the lab and have something dangerous happen... it would be too late for me to say anything...I'd rather approach my adviser before something happened...

Advising Student: So, do you think your adviser is careless about this sort of issue?

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Graduate Student Role

What follows is an outline of your role. You will need to improvise to some extent – be creative but try to stay within the bounds of what seems realistic.

You have been a graduate student in your current lab for three years, and you really like it a lot. The lab techs, other students and post-docs are a good group to work with, the atmosphere is positive and supportive and you have a great relationship with your adviser. Your own project is going really well and you're very happy, even if you are working very long hours all the time. The only thing that worries you is how much of a mess parts of the lab are (not your bench or area). To put it nicely, your adviser is disorganized about everything but the ideas for the projects he's working on. His office looks like a tornado hit it and he misplaces everything he touches. The reason you're getting worried is that last year, in the required ethics training, one topic touched upon was regulations about hazardous substances.

You are pretty sure that your lab violates those rules in a couple of different ways: first, there's an old closet that was converted (quietly, over a weekend) into more bench space. You're guessing that the ventilation isn't very good, since it was originally a closet, and the training really hit on the importance for health reasons of ventilation issues. Second, your adviser told the post-doc to clean out a hood that was overflowing with old bottles and other junk. You saw the post-doc take all the bottles out of the hood, put them in a box and carry them out. Given what you were told in your training about how to dispose of hazardous substances safely, none of the proper disposal steps were being followed. In addition, although many of the materials in use in the lab can be quite dangerous, there is no information posted anywhere in the lab on emergency procedures.

You don't want to cause trouble. You also don't want to contribute to a situation where someone (including you) can get hurt, or the lab could get shut down or fined for violations. The consequences were really stressed in the training. You don't want your projects (or any of those in the lab) to be suspended or delayed. You're trying to figure out what you should do. Where can you get information? What might happen if you do nothing? What options do you have and what do you think you should do? You have been worrying about this and talking with your friend, a grad student in your department, but in another group. You are going to talk with your friend one more time to make a plan for what, if anything, to do.

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