

2026 Annual Ethics Cases: Academic Freedom, Taking Initiative

The Committee on Scientific Conduct and Ethics (CSCE) has prepared two cases for 2026 that deal with some important topics relating to academic freedom and what it means to take initiative in research at NIH. These include:

Case 1: Potential Suppression of Research Findings

Case 2: Taking Initiative

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Case 1: Potential Suppression of Research Findings

Dr. PI is a senior investigator at NIH who has been studying the carcinogenicity of Chemical X, a commonly used food additive, for more than 10 years. Two years ago, a professional cancer research organization wrote a position paper stating that Chemical X is most likely carcinogenic, based on studies for which all the associated data were publicly available. A government agency, which has access to both public and proprietary data, has published a safety assessment concluding that the chemical is unlikely to be carcinogenic. During a meeting with several lab members, Dr. PI discusses this disagreement between the professional organization and the government agency and how to help resolve it. The group comes up with the idea of conducting a meta-analysis and systematic review of published papers on this subject. After the meeting, Dr. PI asks a postdoctoral fellow in the lab, Dr. Fellow, to help with this project, who eagerly agrees. Dr. PI, working with the IC's Tech Transfer office, spends more than a year negotiating agreements with the key private funders of research on the chemical, whose proprietary data were used by the government agency in reaching their assessment. Dr. PI submits a Data Management and Sharing (DMS) Plan indicating that all scientific data except for the proprietary data will be shared, and the Plan is approved by Dr. PI's Scientific Director.

After 18 months, Dr. PI, Dr. Fellow, and two more junior fellows complete the systematic review and metanalysis and conclude that Chemical X is not likely to be a human carcinogen. They draft a paper reporting their results and submit it for manuscript review to their Branch Chief. Before the paper can be submitted for publication, it must be reviewed for regulatory compliance by the Branch Chief, on behalf of the IC's Scientific Director. The Branch Chief was on the committee convened by the professional organization that determined that Chemical X is most likely a human carcinogen and the Branch Chief's research group has published several papers independently demonstrating that Chemical X increases the risk of kidney and bladder cancer in transgenic mice. Two months have passed and the Branch Chief has still not approved Dr. PI's manuscript for submission to a journal, when typically, manuscript review is completed within a couple of weeks. Dr. PI emails the Branch Chief to ask what is causing the delay. A week later, after a follow-up email from Dr. PI, the Branch Chief responds that the manuscript cannot be approved because the study violates the 2023 NIH Data Management and Sharing Policy. The Branch Chief says that the paper can be approved only if the proprietary data are made publicly available at the time of publication. Dr. PI does not believe this to be an NIH policy requirement, and contacts Dr. Charles Dearolf in the Office of Intramural Research for confirmation. OIR confirms that there is no violation of the NIH DMS Policy, and Dr. PI shares this information with the Branch Chief, who still does not approve the manuscript. Frustrated, Dr. PI begins to suspect that the Branch Chief's delay is intentional and

considers whether a formal complaint of violating the NIH Academic Freedom Policy is warranted.

Discussion questions:

1. Did the Branch Chief violate NIH's Academic Freedom Guidance?
2. Who should Dr. PI contact for advice about how to handle this situation?
3. Does NIH's Data Management and Sharing Policy allow the kind of project that Dr. PI conducted; i.e., a project involving proprietary data that can't be shared publicly?
4. Does the Branch Chief's involvement on the committee that made a carcinogenicity finding constitute a potential conflict of interest to review the manuscript objectively? How should this be addressed? Who could Dr. PI contact about this issue?
5. What is the impact on Dr. Fellow's career if the Branch Chief does not allow the manuscript to be submitted? On Dr. PI's career?
6. Is it ever appropriate not to allow a manuscript to be submitted for publication?

[End of Case Study 1]

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Case 2: Taking Initiative

X is a second-year predoctoral fellow whose dissertation research involves a formal collaboration between an NIH principal investigator (PI A) and a PI at a local university (PI B). X's project focuses on preparing and analyzing zebrafish tissue samples following behavioral testing. The zebrafish colony, behavioral assays, and euthanasia procedures are maintained at the local university under PI B's approved animal protocol, while the downstream tissue analyses are conducted in PI A's NIH laboratory. X regularly moves between the two sites and is mentored by both PIs. At a recent graduate committee meeting, PI A encourages X to begin "taking more initiative" in shaping the direction of the project, emphasizing the importance of developing independence as X works toward defending a thesis. X leaves the meeting motivated, but somewhat uncertain about what "taking initiative" should look like. Inspired by the PI's encouragement, X begins reviewing the literature for ideas before a planned two-week vacation abroad later that week.

Shortly before leaving for vacation in a foreign country, X identifies in the literature a recently developed zebrafish behavioral assay that appears relevant and potentially complementary to their work. X learns that a lab near the vacation destination, led by PI C, has the necessary setup. X also realizes that a former lab member is currently a senior member in PI C's lab. Seeing an opportunity, X reaches out directly to PI C, making introductions and asking about the possibility of using the equipment while visiting the area. The email is brief and informal, but PI C responds positively, interpreting the request as part of a potential collaboration and assuming that X's mentors are aware of it.

While visiting PI C's lab, X performs the behavioral experiments on genetically modified zebrafish with the senior member (former lab member/colleague of X) of PI C's lab, seeing promising results and recording them in a paper-based notebook instead of the electronic lab notebook back home. X is aware that this new direction has not been discussed in detail with either PI A or PI B, but reasons that presenting promising pilot results will be more compelling than proposing a speculative idea. Upon the return trip to the United States, X brings some of the zebrafish tissue samples from the behavioral tests in a suitcase, planning to use them for analysis in PI A's lab.

After performing analyses at the NIH with the transported tissue, X begins to think about how the new findings might fit into a broader scientific story. Although X has

limited experience writing manuscripts and has not yet discussed publication plans with any of the PIs, X writes a rough draft of a paper combining existing and newly generated data. Hoping to merit first authorship, X shares the draft with all three PIs, who are also listed as authors on the paper.

The responses are mixed and unexpected for X. PI A is surprised to learn that zebrafish tissue were transported internationally and brought to the NIH and begins to consider which policies may have been violated. PI B, meanwhile, believes the new behavioral data diverge from the original goals of the project, that the new behavioral assay is not scientifically valid and that PI B's own lab should be the only source of behavioral data for the project. PI C is surprised and concerned that assays were performed in PI C's lab without PI C being informed or providing approval, and without the knowledge and approval of the other PIs. All three PIs question whether the collected data are sufficiently developed to support a manuscript and question X for keeping them in the dark about what they were doing and not following proper procedures. After reviewing X's data and notes, PI B complains that the record-keeping for the research conducted in PI C's lab is not sufficient for others to reproduce the findings. PI A complains that the tissue analyses are not usable because they do not link to any original raw behavioral data.

X is left trying to reconcile these differing reactions. X believed that these efforts demonstrated initiative and would lead to a first-author publication, but instead begins to question whether a career in research is achievable or even desirable.

Discussion questions:

1. Did X act appropriately in "taking initiative"? What could X have done better? What was a better way for the PIs to handle this situation?
2. Can a trainee take initiative without risking major errors? What are some strategies PIs can use to help develop independence?
3. When should X have discussed the new project ideas with PI A? PI B? PI C?
4. What approvals, if any, are necessary before transporting biological specimens:
 - Internationally?
 - Between NIH and other US institutions?
 - Among different NIH labs/ICs?

How are the answers different if we are talking about data instead of biological samples?

5. What are some generally accepted standards for keeping a lab notebook? How should researchers who are collaborating address potential conflicts between record-keeping standards among their home institutions?
6. If a paper is written, even if it was not directed by any of these PIs, does X's contribution warrant first authorship, and who decides?
7. Would it be selfish or unethical for PI B to want the main focus of the paper to be on data collected in PI B's own research group versus a collaborator's?
8. What are some of the challenges associated with co-mentorship? The advantages?
9. What needs to be done at this point to move forward with this project? Who needs to be contacted?

[End of Case Study 2]

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