



May 28, 2013

## E — as in Ethical

*This is the first of a three-part series based on the letters in the ESA abbreviation.*

Late last month, Grayson Brown, Frank Zalom and I participated in the meeting of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents (CSSP). One of the meeting's sessions was a group exercise on interpreting ethical issues. Each group was given the same scenarios – plagiarism, issues of authorship, and whistleblowing – and each group had to interpret and draw conclusions from the information given. The exercise showed that issues that appeared to be straightforward were not necessarily so. Each group drew different conclusions from the same information. What one group interpreted as a clear act of plagiarism, another group saw as the author having a lack of explicit directions. Black and white to one group was gray to another.

One topic that was not included in our discussion was that of sexual harassment in research laboratories or graduate programs. Harassment takes on many guises, ranging from bias at one end of the spectrum to assault at the other extreme. Clearly, assaults need to be reported to law enforcement. But what about the other extreme, when harassment is not so blatant? More subtle are bias and preferentially providing opportunities or resources, both of which can seriously impact the future trajectory of students and young professionals.

Two weeks before CSSP met, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement regarding the results of a survey of its members, which reported harassment that ranged from bias in mentoring to sexual assault. In response, the statement from the AAA reiterated their commitment to zero tolerance of harassment of any sort in the workplace.

The AAA report and subsequent statement occurred while ESA's Committee on Ethics and Rules is revisiting and updating the Society's policies concerning ethical issues. The Committee's recommendations will be important to demonstrate ESA's commitment to ethical behavior in all of our actions, whether it's publishing, making recommendations, or fair treatment of all of our members in the workplace. But updated and detailed policies represent only one important, albeit imperfect, approach. Policies can never anticipate everything, nor can they assure that we interpret actions the same way – just as the CSSP exercise demonstrated. Policies are necessary, but not sufficient. Nonetheless, it is still important for societies to articulate publicly their ethical commitments.

The AAA ethics policy (<http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics>) includes seven statements or positions, three of which are generally applicable to most scientific disciplines (including ours):

- 1) Do no harm;
- 2) Be open and honest regarding work; and

### 3) Maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships.

It would be easy to look at these three statements and believe they would be accomplished if everyone would "do the right thing." However, as shown at our CSSP exercise, the "right thing" can be open to interpretation. Thus, the challenge faced by the ESA Committee on Ethics and Rules in updating policies. However, policies cannot anticipate everything or undo harm already done. Our actions have to match our words.

In 2010, students at the University of Arkansas published a paper in *American Entomologist*, in which they surveyed entomology students from across the US to learn what education in research ethics was provided, versus what the students believed was necessary. The gap between what education on ethics was provided – even if in a cursory manner – and what the students felt was needed for their professional preparation, was wider than any of us expected. As we mentor students and young professionals, we also need to ensure that everyone learns or understands what is meant by "the right thing" in all aspects of our work. Ethical behavior doesn't just happen – we show it by our actions, but we also must be certain that the topic is discussed as part of education and scientific growth. That discussion is happening on our campuses through the training in *Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR)* (<http://ori.dhhs.gov/documents/rcrintro.pdf>.)

As advisors, mentors, and departmental leaders, we have an obligation to ensure that students and young professionals are as well prepared to consider ethical issues as they are to practice technical skills. Such preparation is crucial, yet the results of our survey showed we are falling short. Our reputation, our discipline, and our value to the world all rely on the need for entomology to be viewed as being impartial in the results we report, the conclusions we derive, and the recommendations we make.

For that reason, the ESA Governing Board adopted a policy in 2012 regarding *RCR*. "Ethical and responsible conduct of research is an important element of preparation for a professional career in science. Therefore, ESA recommends that *RCR* training is taken by all students, even if not currently supported by a grant." We offered *RCR* training for students and young professionals at our 2012 Annual Meeting – ESA was the first scientific society to be approved by the National Science Foundation to do so.

It is important that we "do the right thing," looking out for each other and ourselves and, importantly, holding each other and ourselves accountable. As a professional society, we need to have clear policies, and we must be willing to act when ethical transgressions are found. Not necessarily to act swiftly, but to act fairly and boldly.

Beyond enacting policies, we need to live by principles. One of ESA's strategic principles is that we have a social responsibility to develop all of our members – all of our members. Maintaining respectful and ethical professional relationships means we are cognizant of and averting bias in the opportunities and resources that we provide to our students and young professionals.

ESA is seeking to be more relevant to our students and young professionals. The Student and Young Professionals Committee members will participate in the Summer Governing Board Planning Meeting, because their opinions and input are important. That is one way to show relevance. Demonstrating that we care about ethical behavior and that we hold a similar zero tolerance for ethical breaches in the workplace is another. So is upholding the principles of *RCR* and providing training. Practicing ethical behavior shows social responsibility, and doing so will keep our professional Society strong – the Society that the new generation of our young professionals will soon lead.

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