

Current Comments®

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The International School of Professional Ethics; or, How to Succeed in Science Without Really Trying

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Last summer, the political humorist Art Buchwald wrote a column describing "The Washington School of Applied Ethics and Morality."¹ In this fictional institution, aspiring politicians could enroll in a range of courses covering hypocrisy, betrayal, and sleaze, with degree programs in such areas as stonewalling and perjury.

In view of our recent discussions of fraud and other forms of scientific misconduct,^{2,3} it struck me that there may be a need for a similar school in the scientific community—for those interested in succeeding in science without really trying. Actually, I've mentioned Buchwald previously. In 1974 I noted that he is one of my favorite candidates for immortality.⁴ A few years later he inspired a mock dialogue on the intricacies of interlibrary loan.⁵ The following hypothetical telephone conversation is presented in the spirit that if you're going to do something wrong, you should do it right.

"Good morning. International School of Professional Ethics. Can we help you?"

"One of my students is coming to town this summer and I would like to know if you are offering any courses on the least publishable unit, self-citation, inflated or coauthorship?"

"Yes. We have an excellent intensive summer course that will lead to an intermediate postgraduate certificate in data fabrication or advanced falsification of authorship."

"Can you give me some idea of your offerings?"

"Certainly. We have a popular class in data fudging. We also offer a personal computer course in curve fitting and stretching, with beautiful color graphics. And we even have mock correspondence exchanges where you learn to baffle journal referees. If the referee asks a compromising question, for



example, you learn to challenge his authority as an expert. There are also sessions on how to embarrass the university president, assuming that disgracing the provost or department chairman doesn't work."

"How do you do that?"

"Oh, there are lots of methods. Some prefer the Quackenbush Defense, while others endorse the Hornswaggle-Mountebank Maneuver.

"If the student is asked to document an experiment, he is taught to say that the janitor trashed his notebooks. If asked about the coauthorship of his boss, who denies ever seeing the notes, the student learns to say something like, 'Well, the notebooks probably existed, but I don't remember, and if the janitor says so I'll take his word.'"

"Is Hornswaggle or Mountebank a faculty member?"

"No, but the students consider them and others their role models—remember the case of the midwife toad or the Piltown man?"

"Of course."

"That's not surprising. They're classic cases, like the Cyril Burt caper. You could read about them in the standard textbooks on cheating, but we're far more current than that. We've even got special seminars on breaking down expert witnesses.

"Suppose that your student encounters an evangelistic pundit like Feder or Stewart. You've got to decide quickly whether to use the typo ploy or blame the computer program written by the guy in the next lab. Or you swiftly say that you got it from Professor Alzheimer in the elevator, who can't remember the conversation anyhow.

"Whether it's interrogation in person by the tenure committee or from afar by the journal editor, or even the NIH study section, you've got to be on your toes.

"There's also a special course on immunity."

"Oh! You even teach hard science because of the AIDS crisis?"

"Oh no—I'm talking about immunity from NIH or university investigations.

"For example, maybe you give immunity to one student who agrees to rat on her professor. It's very important to pick one who is just about to get her PhD. If she changes her mind, you simply fail her in her oral exams."

"Isn't that pretty dirty politics?"

"No, that's a separate course. That's the one where you charge the Nobel laureate with sex or race discrimination."

"You mentioned expert witnesses earlier. Tell me how that works."

"Well, we're not in the habit of giving freebies over the phone. But suppose you're trying to tear down the reputation of an expert witness in an air-pollution case."

"Yes?"

"Remember, the guy has been so involved in protecting the public from environmental damage for so long that he hasn't published a paper in 10 years. He knows more about air pollution than Ralph Nader, but you attack his publication record. If he mentions his 20 years as a respected scientist on carcinogenesis, you ask how that's relevant to air pollution. If you've been sloppy and missed his definitive paper in the *Environmental Quarterly*, you ask how come he never got a paper published in *Science*."

"Would that work in a tenure dispute?"

"The course on tenure strategies is one of our most popular. Suppose the committee is considering two candidates. Each has a good teaching record and has published a paper in some obscure journal. But suppose the other guy is cited five times, and your candidate only four."

"Publish a correction note?"

"Pretty good. But it's too obvious. Use the self-citation ploy. By quick arithmetic you show that the other candidate's least

publishable unit was really cited only by his friends. On the other hand, the paper by your candidate was cited by a group in Soviet Georgia as well as New Zealand. Be sure to mention only the first author of the last paper so the tenure committee doesn't realize one of the citing coauthors is Hornswaggle."

"What do I do if one of the tenure committee members is a smart aleck and looks up the other three citing papers and finds out they proved the data were phony?"

"You say they were recently discredited by the Chinese Academy."

"Can you send me some application blanks?"

"Of course. You can also tell your students about our postgraduate fellowship program. This is reserved for the top students in each graduation class."

"That's marvelous."

"These endowed programs teach you advanced plagiarism and citation obliteration. Students are instructed in a special text-processing software package called SwipeMate that scrambles the 'borrowed' text so deftly that even the original author wouldn't recognize it. And your publisher certainly won't know the difference. If the editor points out the similarity of your borrowed citations, just switch the *et al.*s around. By the time they're detected by the computer at ISI®, the book will have sold 10,000 copies."

"That's incredible."

"I've got to go now, but I simply can't resist telling you about the desktop-publishing workshop for our fellows. After you've created your *magnum opus* for publication in the *Journal of the National Academy* by the methods I mentioned earlier, you take the one-day course showing you how to falsify credentials by Xeroxing the stationery of an academy member."

"You've really thought this out."

"Now get this. You use your PC with advanced typesetting features to prepare your paper in the identical format of the journal. Then, you simply work up a letter from a famous academy member, saying something like this: 'I'm returning the proofs of the paper by Bloggs. This is indeed a masterpiece. I've indicated a few typos but recommend immediate publication.'

"You would be amazed at how many papers get into the elite journals by this method. It's crucial to do this when the chief editor is on a sabbatical so that the junior editor will not think to call the professor in his lab. However, to avoid a slipup add a postscript saying, 'I'll be away on sabbatical myself, so if you have any further questions please talk to my assistant.'"

"Hasn't this scheme ever failed?"

"The only case I can recall is when one of our *cum laude* graduates failed to update the memory of his computer. The letter was signed by one of the professors two weeks after he died."

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