

June 28, 2006

Members of CASA,

As most of you may be aware, the departments of anthropology and industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Oklahoma have been working with CASA to better understand ethical issues that may or may not arise in a multi-disciplinary and multi-university setting, and the way in which those issues are resolved. This is part of a three-year research project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop an educational program that would provide instruction on how to apply viable strategies to resolve issues surrounding questionable research practices in the hard sciences. It is essential to maintain communication between our departments and CASA so that any questions that may arise throughout the duration of this project may be understood and answered. **This letter will act as the first of several updates that will be sent to you every two months.**

Definition of Ethics

Before delving into our goals of this project, it is important to first clarify exactly what is meant by the term “ethics.” While unethical behavior in science is often thought of as involving plagiarism and data fabrication, instances of these are relatively rare. More significant are those unethical behaviors which lead to poor relationships and conflict within scientific collaborations. Such behaviors include mismanagement of employees, unfair collaboration, inadequate budgeting, loss of objectivity, overwhelming conflict of interest, and a refusal to share pertinent data. These ethical issues, while less traceable, often undermine evidence, teaching ability, collaborative efforts, and even a group’s image– and the practice of science – as a whole.

Ethical Issues

Unfortunately, the degree of these ethical problems in science is high and continues to grow. It has only been within the last five years that NSF has provided funding for this area of research. And while the data is new, it indicates the problem is pervasive. A recent study has found that at least 30% of all professional and academic scientists are working in an unethical environment (Matheson, 2005). Perhaps a major catalyst for this is the publication pressure and competitive funding many scientists face as universities become more dependent on federal grants. Other reasons for the continual growth in unethical behavior may be through poor teaching or incorporation of future scientists. Despite the underlying cause, ethical problems continue to hinder effective collaborative work among many scientists.

Importance of Ethics to NSF, CASA, and the Practice of Science

This issue is of great importance to NSF after changing its policies to require more collaboration and less conflict among its recipients. As NSF is shifting its funding to more center-based projects, concerns surrounding ethical behaviors among multi-disciplinary are pushed to the forefront. CASA was chosen to participate in this study because it was among the first wave of NSF recipients after these policy changes. More importantly, CASA is a collaboration involving several universities and disciplines and thus making it an ideal representative of future NSF recipients. NSF intends to use the educational program created by our research project as part of a required training course for all future recipients.

The National Institute for Health (NIH) already requires ethical training for all of its principle investigators. Until recently this training involved the trainees simply reviewing facts, proving to be quite ineffective. The department of industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Oklahoma was enlisted to design a more effective training program. Teaching strategy rather than facts proved to be much more successful than previous training programs as every variable changed by a full standard deviation after a two day training course. This training program, however, was designed for those working at an individual level rather than group and organizational levels.

CASA' s Role and the Importance of this NSF Ethics Study to CASA and its Members

While it was demonstrated that teaching strategic responses to ethical issues is effective at an individual level, CASA and other NSF recipients work at organizational and group levels and thus may encounter different ethical situations. Members of the anthropology department have worked closely with CASA in order to better understand how members communicate and collaborate with one another. The anthropological contribution has also provided contextual knowledge to the industrial/organizational psychologists responsible for creating the ethics training program. The psychologists involved in this task have been using this data to build measures, add variables, and create surveys which will be essential to both pre and post training.

Proper ethics training can provide more effective strategies for dealing with questionable practices as well as maintaining a healthy collaboration. This collaborative process goes much smoother when everyone involved acts ethically. However, “acting ethically” can be much more complicated than it sounds, because unethical behavior and improper reactions to such behavior often occurs with little conscious effort. This ethics training will help you and those who work with you *think* about these issues and the different strategies to employ when an unethical situation arises. Recognizing and understanding the proper strategies to use when confronted with unethical behavior will help you interact and maintain healthy relationships in such a collaborative environment. Together CASA, the department of anthropology, and the department of industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Oklahoma can help make the ethics training course for NSF successful from the beginning while reversing the trend of unethical behavior in the scientific professions.

What Needs to be Done Thus Far

We need baseline data for tracking the effectiveness of training and other efforts initiated as part of this study. For us to be able to make the soundest judgments regarding these issues, **we need everyone in CASA to participate in the filling out of their surveys.** Due to the small size of CASA as an organization, we are already working with a very limited sample of participants that just barely meets the criteria that is needed to establish the validity of our findings. Without the complete data that the filling out of these surveys will provide, we will not be able to provide meaningful results. Given this, if it is at all possible for you to make time in your busy schedules to fill out these surveys, we urge you to do so – the successful outcome of this project depends on it.

If you have any questions, whatsoever, about the extreme importance of each and everyone' s individual contribution, or this research project in general, please feel free to contact me, Dr. Frederick H. Carr, at fcarr@ou.edu, or Dr. Michael D. Mumford, at mmumford@ou.edu. Questions about your rights as a research participant or concerns about the project should be

directed to the Institutional Review Board at The University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Thank you for your time and participation,

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