

The job search

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Marco is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biology at Springfield State University. The department has about 20 faculty members, six of whom are in ecology and evolutionary biology. Marco has become the spokesperson for the ecologists in department politics. He is a herpetologist who studies the physiological ecology of lizards and salamanders – in particular, the spatiotemporal variation in the relationships between thermoregulation and nutrition. His wife, Maryann, is also a physiological ecologist in the department, but she works on lichen. None of the other ecologists in the department work on physiological questions, and Marco is the only zoologist in the group. Two other faculty members in the department are physiologists, but neither have much understanding of ecological concepts.



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Marco and Maryann probably have the most successful research programs in the department. Christine, a post-doc, joined Marco's lab a few months ago. She plans to study how water regulation has evolved in relationship to habitat shifts in all the reptiles. There are also three graduate students in the lab. Sheila is starting this year, and just knows that she's loved watching frogs since she was 3 years old. Evan is in his third year, and is co-advised by someone in the molecular genetics group. For his dissertation, he's investigating the genetic regulation of toxin production and how seasonal variations in nutrition may influence production costs in poison dart frogs. Kenji has spent 5 years studying spatial, seasonal, and ontogenetic variation of osmoregulation in salamanders. He expects to defend his dissertation within a year.

For the past few years, Maryann has been unhappy in Springfield because she feels isolated from her family, who all live on the opposite coast. Consequently, Marco and Maryann have decided to leave SSU if they can get jobs near her family.

Q: *When should Marco let the members of his lab know about his decision to leave SSU?*

Q: *Who else could be affected by the decision to move? When should he tell them?*

The Provost has discussed the possibility of the university expanding “sciences related to the environment”, perhaps by adding three ecologists to the biology department. However, the department has a strong and vocal group of senior cell biologists and geneticists who have made it clear that they have little respect for ecology. They want the funds for environmental scientists to be used to reinstate an undergraduate biotechnology training program that ended 2 years earlier. Marco believes the biotech supporters would use his and Maryann's departure to argue that ecology was crumbling, and that the Provost should spend the money on biotech. Marco therefore wants to keep the job search and departure quiet for as long as possible, at least until the ecology expansion is decided one way or another.

Maryann argues that rumors spread rapidly, and thinks it's best for the future of ecology at SSU that they tell no one at the university about their plans. Marco's not so sure. The move would definitely disrupt the lives of the people in his lab.

Q: *Whose interests is Marco looking out for by wanting to keep his departure quiet? How important is his responsibility to them in comparison to his responsibility to others his departure will affect?*

Q: *Does this change the timing of when Marco should let the members of his lab know of his plans?*

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■ Commentary on “The job search”

The central issue in this case is the student–advisor relationship, and the potential for advisors to make decisions that have major effects on their students. Essentially, Marco has made a decision that will disrupt the lives of Christine, Sheila, Evan, and Kenji, and he has an ethical obligation to minimize that disruption.

Faculty moves are reasonably common, but may have different impacts on ecology students than do moves by faculty in other areas of science. This is because the experimental skills students have acquired and the research they do are not easily switched to another lab, and starting new projects typically requires a substantial time investment. In addition, ecology students are relatively independent in their research (which is generally a good thing), so they might not want to simply take over a part of a new advisor’s research grant.

In this case, it would be difficult for members of Marco’s lab to change advisors and remain at SSU, since there are no other faculty members who work on the types of questions and organisms that Marco studies. However, Evan has a co-advisor, so it is possible for him. Kenji is nearly finished, so he may be far enough along that he could manage to stay at SSU without Marco. Things would be different if Evan didn’t have a co-advisor, or if Kenji still had a field season or two to go. But many ecologists expect to “defend within a year” for 2 or more years.

The different characters in this case exist solely to illustrate that Marco’s departure will have different consequences for various members of his lab. Feel free to change their circumstances to explore the range of other possible impacts. This should spark a discussion about whether different lab members should be told at the same time, or whether the different impacts justify telling them at different times. Initially, at least, the case indicates little reason for secrecy, so most people are likely to conclude quickly that they should all be told at the same time. Marco’s obligation to minimize the disruption in his lab derives from simple respect for them as individuals. As such, it doesn’t depend on how much the different members of his lab will have their lives disrupted.

One additional consideration is that Christine and Sheila are relatively new in the lab. Marco may have known, or at least suspected, that he and Maryann would be leaving when these two individuals were interviewed for their respective positions. Should they have been warned at that time? Alerting prospective new lab members to the possibility of a move may be difficult, but if such a move is reasonably likely, the best policy is to give

them a heads-up. This puts them in a position to make the best decision for themselves that they can, which is ultimately also in the lab’s best interests.

The second part of the case introduces a reason why Marco and Maryann want to keep their plans secret for the time being. They have an interest in keeping ecology strong at SSU. This may be due to a sense of loyalty or responsibility to a variety of parties: the other ecology faculty members (their friends?), SSU undergrads interested in ecology, the ecological science community, and perhaps others. It will be useful to explore the effects Marco and Maryann’s move will have on people outside their labs before focusing on which of Marco’s possibly conflicting responsibilities should take precedence.

In reality, if the Provost decides to hire the new ecologists, and then Marco and Maryann announce their decision to leave, there is no guarantee that they will be replaced. The discussion may become mired on this point, with the argument that Marco is misguided and it doesn’t really matter who knows that they are leaving. However, keeping their departure confidential may still prevent an overall reduction in ecologists. Also, remember that it is Marco who has a decision to make, and it is his perception of what will happen that will affect his decision.

A second issue worth discussing occurs if Marco decides to tell his lab about his decision, despite Maryann’s objections, but wants to keep it secret from the rest of the department. Is it ethical for him to ask his lab members to keep a secret? What kind of problems could it create for them? Secrets are not in and of themselves unethical, but keeping secrets can induce stress in people, and the bigger the secret, the greater the stress. It would also create a dilemma if rumors began to circulate and Marco’s lab members were asked about the possible departure. Leading people into situations where they are forced to choose between lying and keeping promises is not exactly responsible advising. It is probably best that when the lab members are told, they should not be asked to keep it a secret. However, if Marco explains to his lab why he’d appreciate keeping it quiet, especially if there’s a clear end of the secrecy in sight, they may collectively agree that keeping the move confidential is best. Marco could further help matters by acknowledging that rumors may get out, and if his lab members are asked about them, they should direct the questioner to Marco himself.

This is the fifth in our Ethical Issues series. For the introduction, please see the August issue (2003; 7: 330–33).