

ETHICS ON THE JOB MARKET

Case 1: Letters of Recommendation

Jim Young—Professor Mentor’s first advisee at PHD University—is in his second year on the academic job market, looking for a tenure-track position in English. Young’s first year on the job market was emotionally very difficult on him. While he was not able to find a permanent position, Young was able to secure a non-renewable visiting lecturer position at a nearby small liberal arts college. This time, he has a few more credentials in both teaching and research on his *vita*. Young is convinced that he has a really good chance of finding a tenure-track position this time around. He is not sure what he will do if he doesn’t—he is not interested in spending the next several years moving from one city to the next. Even though she believes him to be an excellent scholar and teacher—and would flourish in a permanent academic setting—Professor Mentor is somewhat less optimistic of Young’s chances, given the extremely tight job market.

This year, Professor Mentor also agreed to write a letter of recommendation for Sally Smart—a PhD student at competing Top University, who also works in Professor Mentor’s area of specialty. Mentor came to know Smart while serving a year as a visiting faculty member at Top U a few years earlier. Mentor and Smart stayed in contact after that time, and have worked together on a paper that was ultimately accepted for publication in a top journal. Professor Mentor is very fond of Smart, and thinks that she is a promising scholar—perhaps even a little stronger than her own protégé.

As she is writing Smart’s letter, Professor Mentor begins to worry about what effect this might have on Jim Young’s job search, since Young and Smart will be competing for many of the same jobs. She is worried that if one of the letters is more enthusiastic, she will be putting the other candidate at a disadvantage. In fact, anything that she writes to try to distinguish the two candidates might end up hurting one of them. On the other hand, she thinks, some search committees will read too much into it if her letter for her own advisee is not stronger than her letter for Smart and think that she has a lower opinion of him. In this job market, even slight disadvantages could end up killing an application. To make matters even worse, Professor Mentor thinks, if she writes two highly enthusiastic letters, some search committee members might think that she is just inflating her impression of both candidates—they might then discount both letters.

Professor Mentor decides that, since this is already Young’s second year on the market, she needs to work extra hard to help him find a permanent position—and Smart has her own advisor looking out for her interests. So, Professor Mentor writes a strong letter for Smart, but makes sure that her recommendation of Young is somewhat more enthusiastic—maybe even slightly more ringing than it would have been if she hadn’t been writing both.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do advisors have special responsibilities to help their advisees succeed in the academic job market? If so, what are they? Is Professor Mentor satisfying them?
2. Should Professor Mentor have agreed to write a letter of recommendation for Sally Smart? Why or why not?
3. Evaluate Professor Mentor’s reasoning in this case. How important are each of the different considerations that she thought about? Are there any relevant factors that she has not considered?

4. It is sometimes claimed that there is a trend of inflation in letters of recommendation. What are the moral implications of such a trend? What special problems does this create for individuals writing letters of recommendation?
5. What other moral issues does this case raise?

Case 2: The Campus Visit

Joe Hopeful has had a positive year on the job hunt. Of the fifty applications he submitted, four resulted in a conference interview. So far, two of these schools have contacted him for an on-campus interview. The first scheduled visit is for Hiring College, a private liberal arts college in a decent area of the country with a focus on teaching. The second visit is scheduled two weeks later at Career University. Career U is Joe's dream job. The school has a strong reputation for both research and teaching and is located in a major metropolitan area that Joe would love to live.

Joe's campus visit to Hiring College, has been going very well—he is confident that his research talk and teaching demonstration both went as well as he hoped they would, the location is very pleasant, and his potential colleagues all seem intelligent, engaged, and friendly.

During a small reception, a slightly inebriated member of the search committee corners Joe. Professor Grimm—the professor in question—proceeds to speak freely about the search. Joe learns that Hiring College had another candidate, Lisa Lerner, visit the previous week, and that her visit also went very well.

“We really lucked out this year,” said Professor Grimm. “This is the strongest applicant pool I have ever seen. I was especially impressed with Lisa’s and your applications. And both of you are really strong in person too … but between you and me, I am rooting for you.”

“Lisa was a joy and has a very impressive cv,” Grimm continued, “but I am not sure that she will be able to keep her current pace up … she told us that she has a two-year-old son, and toddlers can be a handful … and although she didn’t say anything about it, I think she might be expecting another one … she didn’t drink anything her entire visit.”

Feeling uncomfortable about the situation, Joe just smiled nervously and thanked Professor Grimm for the encouragement. Eventually, he managed to change the subject. Grimm later started asking Joe about how the rest of his applications have fared. Joe wasn’t sure how to respond. In particular, he wasn’t sure if he should mention his impending visit to Career University.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it appropriate for Professor Grimm to back Joe Hopeful’s application for the reasons he provided? Why or why not?
2. How should Joe respond to Professor Grimm’s comments about Lisa Lerner? Does Joe have any ethical responsibility to his competitor in this case? If so, what are they?
3. How should a job applicant respond when asked questions that should not be asked in the first place? Does the applicant have a responsibility to answer truthfully, if he answers at all? Is Grimm’s final question to Joe one of these questions?
4. What other ethical problems commonly arise during on-campus interviews?

Extra Discussion Question: What other ethical issues arise on the job market?