

Protecting ideas when a principal investigator changes

Financial support provided by research grants are required to perform research. Without grant support many projects would simply be impossible to undertake. Due to limited availability of research funds, obtaining an independent research grant is highly competitive. Funds from agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, for example, are generally only awarded to applications scoring in the top 10% to 15% of all proposed projects, sometimes the funding amounts may be even lower. In order to successfully obtain funding researchers need to outline their best ideas in such a way as expert grant reviewers are able to understand and evaluate different grant proposals.

As a general rule because an awarded grant represent the best original ideas of a scientist, and they are the most qualified to complete the work related to their ideas grants generally move with the scientist if they transfer institutions. Situations may arise however, when a scientist moves but a research project remains at the former institution. This may be due to restrictions on a grant award, that the proposed work could not be performed at the place the scientist is moving to, or a variety of other reasons. When this occurs the questions that arise become how can the work be completed successfully and what obligations must be met in order for the work to be completed.

In the journal *Science and Engineering Ethics* we examined this question from an ethical and potentially legal perspective. In it we discuss why under situations when a grant represents the original ideas of a researcher the work must include them to move forward, particularly regarding publication. To not do so we argue would misrepresent the original researcher's ideas as someone else's; something that would misrepresent the scientific record and therefore must be corrected. Plagiarism in science is the misrepresentation as someone else's ideas or words as one's own. By this definition publishing the ideas of the scientist responsible for receiving the grant without their involvement would constitute plagiarism. If, however, the grant has been taken to alternative directions such a concern is lessened.

Patent disputes may also arise around such a grant that becomes separated from its original creator. Under such a situation original inventions would belong to the holder of the patent rights. Historically this had been the inventor of the science and engineering resulting in the patent. More recently many Universities have required faculty relinquish this right to patents as a condition of employment..

Finally, we consider how oversight and transparency with potential ethical oversight if needed can prevent difficulties that may arise if a grant remains at an institution when a researcher leaves. Preventing the possibility of plagiarism and its implications while allowing a project to move forward should be the objective of such oversight. We also suggest if agreement regarding ideas cannot be obtained that consideration for terminating such a grant should be considered.

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Publication

[Protecting Ideas: Ethical and Legal Considerations When a Grant's Principal Investigator Changes.](#)

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