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Overlapping Dissertation Topics

The practice of assigning graduate students overlapping dissertation topics comes to my attention with increasing frequency. This practice puts great pressure on a student to finish before the student or students with overlapping topics, because finishing in any other position means starting over. The practice has been hypothesized as an explanation of patterns of sabotage of graduate students' experiments by other graduate students and as a strategy embraced by some researchers to put pressure on graduate students to help them stay ahead of competing labs. I find the spectrum of opinion expressed about this practice, to range from shock to matter-of-fact acceptance.

One department had addressed the problem by changing its policy regarding thesis proposals. The graduate students there are still threatened by postdocs moving in on their research, however.

I welcome comment from others about the extent to which this practice has caught on, especially in hot areas of scientific research. What are morally relevant factors that may influence its effect? Is the course of research in some areas so unpredictable that researchers are forced to err on the side of assigning potentially overlapping topics lest they leave gaps in the lab's research program? Is there evidence that under this sort of pressure some students falsify results? How does this practice affect the dropout rates (or hospitalization or suicide rates) in a field? How does it affect the trust and trustworthiness of a researcher who is trained in a place where it was used?

Informal standards and sanctions need to be established that are the substance of a functioning moral community.

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Corrections and Clarifications

A table accompanying Christopher Anderson's article "Fusion research at the crossroads" (29 Apr., p. 648) incorrectly stated the length of time the JT-60-U machine at the Naka Fusion Research Establishment in Japan was closed for an upgrade. The reactor was shut down for 14 months between November 1989 and January 1991, not for a 4-year period between 1989 and 1993. The information in the table was supplied by the U.S. Department of Energy.