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Assigning Research Projects

The importance of ethics in research is aptly underscored in Caroline Whitbeck's letter about overlapping research topics (19 Aug., p. 1020). She justifiably wonders whether it is wise for senior researchers to assign overlapping dissertation projects to graduate students and postdocs. In deploring the overlap and its attendant destructive competition, Whitbeck does not address the equally questionable practice of assigning topics in the first place.

If the goal of graduate study or postdoctoral training is to educate independent, creative scientists, then the choice of a research topic should be made in large part by the student, with advice from senior researchers. As fields become technically more sophisticated and team research is being encouraged strongly by funding agencies, top-down science is spreading. It may be robbing initiative and independent thought from many young scientists and placing too many decisions about the direction of research in the hands of too few people.

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Constant Caesar, Not Cassius

John Travis (Research News, 16 Sept., p. 1660) says that "Shakespeare's Cassius described himself as 'constant as the Northern Star.'" It was Julius Caesar, not Cassius, who said this, just before he was assassinated (*Julius Caesar*, act 3, scene 1, line 60), and it was this vanity of Caesar that led Cassius to plot his death ("Why, man, he doth stride the narrow world like a Colossus.")

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