

The Greg Garcia Case

Greg Garcia is a new assistant professor of biochemistry at Western Institute of Technology (West Tech). Before his official start date, he managed to secure some big grants to support his research. He spent the summer getting his laboratory space set up and recruiting graduate students to his research group. Things in the lab are going well, with enough data coming in that Greg anticipates submitting three articles to journals within the next few months. The part of the new job that Greg finds most challenging is building relations with other people in his department and his scientific field.

To try to cultivate more professional relationships, Greg decided to push himself out of his comfort zone by joining some of his colleagues for a dinner with Hal Edmund, a biochemist from the East Coast who is visiting the West Tech biochemistry department to give a seminar presentation. Greg figures that the dinner may be a good way to get to know both Hal and his colleagues better, which may pave the way for more collaboration opportunities and (Greg hopes) a smooth path to tenure.

On the way into the auditorium for Hal Edmund's seminar, Greg runs into his senior colleague, Cheryl Gruen, and her new postdoc, Carmen Choi. At Cheryl's request, Greg has spent some time helping Carmen revise a grant proposal that got good feedback but was not ultimately funded. Greg has lots of experience writing successful grant proposals, and was happy to give advice to Carmen about making her proposal clearer and more persuasive.

The three settle in to their seats in the audience and listen to Hal Edmund describe his research, which centers on making structural modifications in membrane proteins in algae so that the modified algae catalyze reactions that break down long-chain hydrocarbons to smaller molecules.

Greg Garcia is impressed by the hour-long presentation, but as the rest of the audience is getting up and heading to the reception that precedes the dinner with

Hal Edmund Greg notices that Carmen looks disturbed. He asks if something is wrong.

Cheryl Gruen says, “Edmund seems to have figured out a problem that Carmen has been working on. I knew it was a promising idea, but sometimes that means other smart scientists have the same promising idea and get there first.”

Carmen nods, but does not look comforted by Cheryl’s reassurance. In fact, she looks a little sick. As Cheryl goes off to the reception, Greg asks Carmen quietly, “Is there something else?”

Carmen replies, “He didn’t come up with the same idea himself. I know he didn’t. That magnesium intermediate in his synthetic pathway doesn’t work!” Then Carmen explains that she submitted a grant proposal with the identical synthetic pathway, using the magnesium compound as a trap to keep researchers reviewing the grant proposal from stealing her idea. Carmen also mentions that she did not tell Cheryl Gruen that she had built this trap into her proposal.

Greg is digesting this information as his department chair finds him and says, “We’re heading out to the dinner now. You and Hal Edmund will be in my car.”

Should Greg Garcia say anything about Hal Edmund’s apparent theft of Carmen Choi’s intellectual property? (If so, to whom?) Why or why not?