

The Whistleblower

Dr. Jean White is a senior faculty member who has been very successful. She has built an effective program supporting minorities that brings in about \$12 million per year. Everything is going very well, until she discovers that one of her subordinates has been embezzling funds from the program. The dollar amount is not trivial. Dr White becomes very worried about what to do. She considers doing nothing and working it out within her group, but then she worries that she may be guilty of a cover up or of breaking some other federal rule. Because the money stolen is from a federal grant, she is concerned about federal-level penalties.

She decides that the only way to keep her and her program out of jeopardy, and to keep everything going forward, is to report the crime to her superiors and to the federal unit providing the funds. She does so and a very thorough investigation follows (even Dr White is investigated) and Dr White is vindicated. The embezzler went to prison, and unfortunately, the University was embarrassed and had to repay some funds. The entire process took some years to complete.

During the investigation and afterwards, Dr White was shunned by long time friends and associates, gossiped about relentlessly, lost control of her program that she so successfully developed and led, was moved to a less prestigious position, and pressured to take early retirement. Some of her friends even condemn her actions. All of this happened because, through no fault of her own, someone embezzled funds, she blew the whistle and tried to keep her reputation and program intact.

Unfortunately, this kind of treatment of whistleblowers is not uncommon, and is a significant problem. How can collegial ethics improve the lot of whistleblowers at the collegial level, and at the departmental level? Would the University be justified in telling everyone to avoid her until the situation is resolved?