

RCR Topic: Management of Research Data

Title: Secure or Not Secure, That is the Question

Case: Tina, an advanced graduate student, applies for a license to access an electronic copy of a restricted dataset. As part of the application, Tina's graduate advisor is to fill out the application as the primary person responsible for the security of the dataset. In addition, the person responsible for computer support in Tina's college is also asked to fill out a portion of the application stating that he too would be responsible for the security of the dataset. The license has many stipulations, including:

- Under no circumstances may the dataset be removed or telecommunicated from the licensee's site.
- The dataset must be kept in a space that is limited to access by those with permission to access the dataset and removal of the data from this limited access space is not permitted. The computer must be password-protected.
- Licensees are subject to unannounced, unscheduled inspections to assess compliance with requirements.
- Violations of the license are subject to a class E felony and violators can be imprisoned up to five years and/or fined up to \$250,000.

Tina's advisor and the computer support person agree to sign the license application and Tina submits it to the agency. The application is approved and an electronic copy of the data (saved on a small external hard drive) is sent to Tina's advisor. Tina does not have a secure office on campus so she and her advisor agree to keep the data in the advisor's locked office in a locked file cabinet (both Tina and her advisor have a key to the file cabinet, but only Tina's advisor has a key to the office). The office computers have wireless internet capability.

Even though Tina has a key to the file cabinet, her access to the data is largely restricted by her advisor's schedule because she cannot freely access her advisor's office. Tina is beginning to feel quite stressed because her dissertation research involves heavy use of this dataset. She is considering taking the hard drive out of the file cabinet next time she has access and making a copy of the contents on her laptop hard drive (her computer is password-protected) so that she can access the data at any time. Tina thinks that this may be a good solution to getting her analyses done in a timely manner, given that her fellowship will be running out soon and she needs to finish up her thesis.

Discussion Questions:

1. Tina's advisor is the primary person responsible for the security of the dataset. What sort of questions and clarifications should he have shared with Tina before he agreed to sign the license application?
2. The current arrangement for data access is not working for Tina—what might be a good solution that would honor the stipulations of the license? Is Tina's idea an appropriate solution?
3. If no other access arrangement can be worked out with her advisor, what options does Tina have?
4. Assuming that Tina did choose to copy the data to her laptop computer, how should this problem be categorized – questionable research practices, unacceptable research practices, or research misconduct?