When I started as an assistant professor in Biological Sciences and later Biochemistry and Genetics in 2000, I made a special effort to seek out anyone at the university who would be interested in research ethics. My experiences as a graduate student and as a postdoc were that there were always a few people interested in “spreading the preventative ethics gospel” and I wasn’t disappointed. Clemson University established the Rutland Center for Ethics Across the Curriculum (now the Rutland Institute for Ethics) and Sigma Xi encouraged its local chapters to focus on research ethics just as I was getting settled into my position enough to branch out into offering occasional research ethics trainings. Because these were occasional and at my choosing, they were actually enjoyable.

I incorporated ethics labs into my Intro Genetics undergraduate course, I worked with the Rutland Center and Sigma Xi to offer occasional day-long research ethics workshops on weekends, and finally, I convinced my department that we needed a course for graduate students that would deal with research ethics as well as writing, presenting, and other professional skills. I am proud that the course, Issues in Research, is now required of all graduate students in the department, and that another faculty member took the time to be trained in research ethics education so that he could teach it as well.

So with tenure under my belt and research ethics incorporated into the departmental curriculum, one might think there was little else to work for. But like many others, I have always had a desire for research ethics education to be more mainstream—to be incorporated into the warp and woof of scientific training. At a National Academy of Sciences Panel on Research Ethics Training I participated in, the panel suggested that funding agencies not only incorporate research ethics instruction into the training of students they support, but that they put the burden of providing instruction on the university and not the individual investigator.
This sounds wonderful in theory. The idea, which I fully embraced, was that such a mandate would encourage a top down approach to research ethics, changing the culture of the university. Because such training was now linked to the receipt of research dollars, universities would value it, and because it would be offered at all levels from faculty to undergraduates, it would be more effective. So one might expect me to be singing the praises of the recent focus of NSF, which funds the broadest range of science of any federal agency, on such a system. But instead I’m here to say “Be careful what you wish for”.

The story of the implementation of a university program at my institution is a story of unintended consequences. First of all, the implementation came just as a perfect storm of a declining economy and reduced state support for higher education resulted in budget cuts so deep that we have furloughed faculty and staff, retired almost 1/3 of the faculty & staff in my college, and uprooted entire departments in an effort to balance the books. Faced with the need to develop a program, the university turned to the Office of Research Compliance and asked a single person to develop a university-wide program that would meet the requirements—without giving her a budget that covers more than office supplies. If importance to the university is measured in monetary support, research ethics education is below just about everything.

Obviously, with little to no budget, the first thing implemented is exactly what so many of us dread—the online training with multiple choice questions at the end. It serves the purpose of inexpensively exposing anyone being paid by the NSF (this includes faculty on summer salary) to some form of ethics education. But in order to comply with a training mandate for those with support longer than one year, a system of face-to-face training earning “credits” has been devised. When delivered correctly, this is the kind of training that has effect.

Because of the need to deliver some kind of monthly training at the university level, suddenly faculty who can teach research ethics are in demand to deliver content—in their spare time for no compensation, and usually against the wishes of the department chair, who needs the faculty member to deliver departmental content. If you teach a course as I do that is one of very few courses on the books that can “count” for credits, I could register it to count and deliver content within my normal teaching obligations. But then I open myself up to going from a course that works well at 10-15 students to one that is oversubscribed and unmanageable.
Either I'm happy because many more people than I ever thought possible will now be exposed to case studies and thinking about research ethics due to the NSF mandate, or I’m frustrated because of the additional responsibilities that hurt my science career with no compensation from the university. I do not know if this is university specific, but I can say that while it has not put the burden of delivering training on individual PIs on NSF grants, it has put the burden on specific faculty within the university. So my advice to beginning science faculty who wish for more “support” of research ethics at the university level is simple. Be careful what you wish for.