Author's Commentary on "Friendship vs. Authorship"

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Working with advisers and other faculty on research studies is an integral part of the graduate school experience. It is an excellent opportunity for students to be mentored and guided as novice researchers. As we all know, the dissemination of study findings through publications and presentations is key to the success of labs and departments in most academic settings. However, professors and students often find themselves grappling with the rules, or lack of rules, when it comes to authorship. The purpose of this case study is to generate discussion about the typical pitfalls that both students and professors encounter in sorting out issues of authorship.

Although authorship is the key to academic success, it is rarely discussed during the planning stages of a study. When is the best time for researchers to discuss this issue? Jane and David discussed it at the outset of the study. During the planning stages they divided their responsibilities and decided that Jane would receive first authorship. This approach could avoid problems at the closure of a study when it is time to publish and both researchers may feel they deserve first authorship. Jane and David had an understanding at the beginning that David's contributions would be less than Jane's, and therefore she would be listed as first author.

The most obvious disadvantage to having a discussion about authorship at the outset of the study played out here in this case. David didn't follow through with the original plan that he would conduct the data analysis. In fact, his contributions to the study were minimal, at best. However, he and Jane had already agreed that he would be second author. How should Jane have handled this situation? Although not legally bound to include David as a second author, is she bound professionally to honor the agreement originally made? Was David ever told that Mark stepped in and completed his work? Mark was not told whether Jane informed David that a third party was brought in to do his work. Furthermore, Mark was never informed whether

David insisted on remaining second author. It's hard to speculate about Jane's motives here. Why would she choose to jeopardize the integrity of her relationship with Mark in order to keep peace with David?

Friends collaborate daily in academic settings, and this scenario is not unusual. Professors, like students, seem to be unsure about how to handle the issue of authorship, especially when collaborators fail to do their part. Jane and David handled it well by discussing authorship early in the research process, but they failed to continue the discussion throughout. Unfortunately, Jane chose to handle the situation by avoiding it. She went so far as to exclude Mark from the writing of the manuscript in order to justify his placement as third author. How could Mark possibly argue that he deserved second authorship when he didn't contribute to the manuscript? Did Jane deceive Mark by excluding him from the writing of the manuscript? Absolutely. Regardless of her intentions, she failed to inform Mark that she would be writing the manuscript without him. Furthermore, Mark's contributions in the data analysis earned him the right to publish his findings. Even though Jane originally offered him the opportunity to do so, she failed to keep her word. The price that Jane paid here to avoid confrontation with David was considerable and unnecessary.

The second issue of this case is who should be included in the discussion of authorship. Jane approached Mark at the beginning of the study and asked him to participate. She was very clear with Mark regarding his responsibilities; however, she failed to inform him that an agreement had already been made regarding authorship. Mark might not have agreed to work on the study had he known that he had no chance of being listed as first or second author. Fortunately, for Jane, Mark was the typical graduate student who was flattered just to be asked.

Why wasn't Mark included in the discussion? The answer to this question brings up the issue of those responsibilities that lend themselves to receiving credit through authorship versus those that do not. It is common knowledge that some responsibilities, such as survey development and data analysis, are typically considered to be more important than other responsibilities, such as mailing surveys and keying data. Mark may not have been included in the discussion because he was originally responsible for mailing surveys and data entry. Jane and David may not have regarded his contributions to the study as significant.

The final issue in this case is Mark's responsibility to himself. Should Mark accept what his adviser tells him, or can he take further action to ensure that he receives proper credit for his hard work? Mark is in a difficult situation because he is not considered to be a colleague or a peer, but a subordinate. He was hired to do a job, not to be a collaborator or a major contributor on the project. If he chooses to confront his adviser, who is in a position of power, he may have difficulty throughout the remainder of his graduate school career. However, Mark should take responsibility for becoming informed about how to best handle issues of authorship in the future. Although Jane did not bring up the issue of authorship when she asked Mark to work on the study, perhaps Mark should have. There are no rules that say students can't ask. Students have a responsibility to themselves to become informed about university and department policies regarding ethical conduct in research, including authorship.

The Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (1995) recommends that frank and open discussion regarding the division of credit within a research group occur as early as possible in a study. Furthermore, they suggest that authorship criteria be explicit among all collaborators, as well as giving students and research assistants appropriate credit if they make an intellectual contribution to the research project. Jane was faced with a few situations here that required open and direct communication. Unfortunately, she missed a valuable opportunity to teach her student the best way to handle some tough issues with regard to authorship.

References

- Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. *On Being a Scientist: Responsible Conduct in Research*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995.