



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Co-Authorship Controversy

Year

2006

Description

This case discusses issues of authorship, credit, proper procedures for publishing and collaboration specifically targeted to post-doc fellows, junior faculty and supervisors.

Body

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Part 1

Peggy Platt, a graduate student in the biochemistry department at State University (SU), had completed her third year and had established a dissertation committee consisting of SU faculty. Following one of her data sessions, Dr. Michael McClair, a member of her dissertation committee, suggested some experiments that could be included to strengthen her project. McClair suggested that Platt should perform these studies at the institution of his collaborator, Dr. Gary Gleeson, because

Gleeson's facilities were already set up for these experiments. Platt felt that this would be a beneficial experience for her and took the idea to her adviser.

Dr. Jenny Jones, Platt's adviser, was not thrilled with this idea, especially since Gleeson's institution was located in England. Jones did not discuss her objections to the trip with Platt directly, but she expressed her reservations in subtle ways. However, recognizing that the experiments would be beneficial, Jones allowed Platt to go. Jones warned Platt not to share too much of her unpublished data with Gleeson's group because they were doing similar studies on a parallel system. Although her work had not been published, Platt had presented her data and techniques at regional and national meetings. Platt mentioned her adviser's concerns to McClair, and both he and Gleeson assured her that her visit was a collaboration and that she should definitely be willing to share her research. Platt was content with McClair's response on the matter and went to England to perform her studies.

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Discussion Questions

1. Was it appropriate for McClair to suggest that Platt go to a laboratory where he knew similar work was being done?
2. What issues arise from McClair and Gleeson telling Platt that she was expected to share her data despite the fact that they knew Jones had advised otherwise?
3. Has Platt done anything that could lead to a potential conflict?

Part 2

While conducting her studies at Gleeson's research institution, Platt also helped members of that lab do preliminary experiments on their system. These experiments verified that they needed to do some studies similar to the unpublished studies Platt had completed at SU. She helped them set up the instrumentation necessary for doing these studies and made sure that the instruments were working as expected.

Platt completed her work during her scheduled six-week stay in England and

returned to the United States. A couple of months after returning to SU, Platt received a preprint of a paper from Gleeson's lab, which reported their findings on the studies they had begun while she was there. Platt was neither asked for input on writing the article, nor was she included as a co-author. Instead, the acknowledgments mentioned Platt and her "helpful discussions."

Platt felt that her contribution in establishing a need for the studies and providing a means of achieving successful results entitled her to co-authorship. In fact, the studies performed in Gleeson's lab utilized a protocol that Platt had established as part of her dissertation project. Furthermore, she had been assured that her relationship with Gleeson's lab was to be a collaboration.

Discussion Questions

4. What are the criteria for being included as a co-author on a publication? Did Platt's contributions fulfill these criteria? Does the fact that Platt had presented her data and techniques at scientific meetings come into play when deciding whether or not Platt has earned authorship?
5. What constitutes a collaboration? Is co-authorship inherent in a collaboration? What are the reasonable expectations of each member of a collaboration?
6. What was Platt's role in the development of this dilemma? What could she have done to prevent this situation from arising?

Part 3

When questioned by Platt, Gleeson had several reasons for excluding Platt's name on the paper. First, Gleeson stated that Platt did not do the experiments and therefore did not deserve to be included. Furthermore, Gleeson asserted that they had planned to conduct the studies prior to Platt's arrival. Finally, it was revealed that a post-doc in Gleeson's lab was applying for jobs; having Platt as a co-author on this piece would detract from his worth.

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Discussion Questions

7. Which of Gleeson's arguments are valid reasons for excluding a researcher as a co-author?

Part 4

After receiving Gleeson's response, Platt took her case to McClair. Despite his initial role in arranging this collaboration, McClair denied any responsibility at this point. He claimed that this conflict was a matter between Platt and Gleeson. When Platt approached her adviser, Jones refused to pursue the issue because she felt it would make her laboratory look bad. Platt was not satisfied with her adviser's response, but quickly became aware that pushing the issue would only result in a very difficult working situation.

Discussion Questions

8. Looking at the entire situation, what role was played by lack of communication?

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Notes

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