

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Who Controls Where Information Will Be Published?"

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Who Controls Where Information Will Be Published?

This brief case features a relationship between a graduate student and his major adviser that becomes very close and then turns sour. The case usefully illustrates one way in which an adviser/student relationship can go off the track. Evidently, over the course of a prolonged relationship, an adviser can fail to establish a persuasive policy about publishing in his field and can leave a student in confusion or disagreement about the best outlet for the student's work. And after benefiting from an adviser's guidance over a sustained period, a graduate student can find it necessary to challenge the adviser's guidance about publishing.

The account offers only one or two hints concerning the roots of the misunderstanding that eventually leads to the rupture between this adviser and this student. During the crucial first month of graduate study, the adviser is very busy and neither finds time to orient the student nor to see to it that the student receives a proper orientation from someone else in the department. This lapse may be one root of the misunderstanding that arises much later. Apparently, neither the university nor the department has a program or mechanism in place that assures each student appropriate orientation to graduate study.

Graduate students should arrive at the outset prepared to ask questions, but they should not be made responsible for orienting themselves. The graduate school environment can be intimidating, and students may not yet have enough information to know what questions to ask. In the first month, policies governing research and publishing need not be laid out in detail, but students should be introduced to conventions associated with research, recognition, and publishing in print and online. Policies and procedures should be in place, and students should get a sense that they operate within a framework of conventions that provide guidelines.

Mark's unusual position as a part-time staff member in the museum under his major adviser's direction may provide a second clue to the misunderstanding that develops. In two different roles under the direction of the same adviser, Mark gains certain benefits but also experiences certain disadvantages. One is the prolongation of his thesis research. About others we cannot be certain, but exaggerated dependence on the adviser, blurred or clouded expectations about performance in the different roles, and excessive reliance on informal arrangements are likely.

It might seem that Mark has adequate time and exposure to learn the ropes about publishing in his field. However, his job duties may obscure that issue so that he does not pay it enough attention. It might seem that Dr. Lee has ample opportunity to brief Mark well in advance about publication arrangements for the completed work. However, in simultaneously supervising him in two different roles, he may lose track of some essential elements of supervision relating to one or the other. Because Mark's expected product is suitable for inclusion in the online national plant database Lee was prominent in creating, Lee must raise the issue of inclusion early on.

It may be that Lee has become so accustomed to directing Mark that he is unable to step back and consider how to negotiate publication. Perhaps, having become an authority in his area, Mark feels somehow entitled to set his own terms, forgetting how important Lee's direction has been to his attaining this status. We can only speculate. A case so scanty in details does not allow inferences. However, Lee is open to ethical criticism for not providing for Mark's orientation to graduate study at the outset and for not guarding sufficiently against the pitfalls of Mark's combining graduate study with a staff position.

In the course of his research, Mark should have shared with Lee his own ambitions

regarding publication. Together, they should have thoroughly addressed the impact that inclusion in the database might have on the publication of a book. We do not know if Mark has good evidence for thinking that publication in the database will doom his chances for success with a book. It is unfortunate that he frames his problem with Lee in terms of rights. Deciding about publication in the context of graduate study is not a matter of inherent rights, but of conventions, procedures, expectations they generate, and respect for persons. Advisers commonly play an important role in helping graduate students to publish their research. In an open research environment where there are reasonable, explicit understandings about publication, there should be no purchase for questions about who controls where information will be published.