

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "Left in the Dark"

Commentary On
Left in the Dark

If Dr. Conway has submitted the paper, listing Elizabeth as first author without her even knowing that the paper had been written, something is seriously wrong. Conway cannot have any justification for submitting this paper without Elizabeth's knowledge or consent. Furthermore, it seems that Elizabeth has good reason for doubting that her data is ready for use in a publication. If that is the case, Conway is putting Elizabeth at some risk as a credible researcher, and he may be contributing to a misleading, if not mistaken, path of future research that relies on this paper. Nevertheless, it would be a good idea for Elizabeth to talk with Conway before going to the department head or another member of the faculty. Rather than being overtly confrontational, she can ask him about how the paper came to be written, why she is listed as first author (or listed at all), and whether this practice is common. She can express her concerns about the inclusion of preliminary data.

Elizabeth may find Conway's responses to be completely unsatisfactory. However, if and when she goes to the department head or some other appropriate person in her institution, she will be able to report his account of the matter. Anticipating that she might well take her concerns to another level, Conway may withdraw the submission, agree that his decision to go ahead with the paper was unwise, or even apologize to Elizabeth for what he has (and has not) done. However, it is unlikely that this response would end the matter for her. She still has to face the question of whether Conway should continue to be her thesis research adviser. Even with his apology, she may have good reason to be uncomfortable having him as her adviser. Furthermore, she may wonder whether, if she keeps things to herself, he might continue to treat his other advisees in this way.

At some point it will be important for Elizabeth to be able to confer with someone else about her situation. It should be someone she can trust and someone who is in a position to give her meaningful support should Conway try to create difficulties for her graduate life, and possibly even for her career prospects. It is to be hoped that

someone in her department will be able to play this role B if not the department chair, someone on the faculty who is in a good position to provide support. A worst case possibility would be that what Conway has done is commonly accepted practice in the department. In that unlikely event, it would be best for Elizabeth to leave the program entirely.

In any case, Elizabeth would still be well advised to do her best to prevent the paper from being published with her name on it. Whether she should do more is a good question. The answer may depend, in part, on whether removing her name from the paper would also include removing reliance on the data she has collected. However, quite apart from whether Elizabeth might have an obligation to carry matters further, it seems that she would be justified in doing so if she chooses to. It is difficult to imagine what explanation Conway might come up with that could justify his conduct thus far, and any threatening or retaliatory measures on his part would only make the case worse for him. Sadly, it could also make it worse for Elizabeth; but at least she would have the consolation that her complaints are just.