Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Friendship vs. Authorship"

Commentary On
Friendship vs. Authorship

The lab or research group is the setting for many, if not most, of the cases in research ethics. To avoid problems highlighted in the cases and to promote predictability and fairness, leaders of research groups need to make policies explicit and discuss their rationales. Among the specific arrangements that policies must address are collaborations, in all the variations that can occur within research groups. However, as this case illustrates, collaborations can encompass other contexts that are beyond the scope of the research group's policies, indeed are not covered by any explicit policies. Nevertheless, certain principles -- openness, explicitness, honesty, fairness and consistency -- that underlie appropriate policies within research groups should carry over to other contexts.

In this case, Dr. Jane McDonald and Dr. David Woodford, professors at two different universities, have agreed to collaborate on a research survey for a professional association of which both are members. Previously together as graduate students, they are now good friends. Since there is no mention of funding, it seems reasonable to assume that the professional association does not provide significant funding for the survey. The two professors have agreed to respond to their professional association's request for help, thinking it would be fun. Evidently Jane offers to handle the logistics, with the idea she can get help from a graduate student if necessary.

In due course, Jane enlists the help of a new graduate student, Mark, but apparently without initiating a conversation about authorship. If she has not already oriented this student to her policies regarding authorship, it is time to begin when she approaches him for help on a project that will lead to a paper. She should also inform the student about the authorship arrangement she has made with David, even though he is not a member of their research group. Explanation of her authorship policies would fit very naturally with information about how she and David plan to divide the work.

Jane should realize that Mark may be too diffident, or may not know enough, to ask about authorship. Flattered to be chosen to participate, he probably does not think about how one gets appropriate credit or even consider whether he will find the work itself interesting. This situation is a template of a not uncommon experience for graduate students. Advisers and research group leaders should be alert to the possibility of causing reactions like Mark's, which make it all too easy for senior investigators to take advantage of graduate students.

As far as we can tell, Mark completes his tasks in timely fashion. Apparently, Jane cannot count on David to come through with his analysis and final report in time for her to present them at an upcoming conference. She, therefore, enlists Mark to perform the data analysis and produce the final report. To be accurate, honest and fair in her conference presentation, Jane should acknowledge Mark's work. She would deceive her audience if she led or allowed them to believe that she performed the data analysis and produced the final report herself.

It appears that Mark has completed most, if not all, of the work to which Jane had committed herself and has completed David's share as well. Before proceeding with the paper, Jane has a duty to review the authorship agreement with David and with Mark. The division of labor has not turned out as planned, which is not unusual. The changes require modification of the original agreement between Jane and David regarding authorship. If David does not contribute to producing the paper, there is no basis for including him as an author. David should be fully informed about Mark's handling the logistical aspects and stepping in to perform the data analysis and prepare the final report as well. If David is available for advice and consultation while Jane prepares the paper, she can add an acknowledgment regarding his support.

Jane and David should have learned such practices for dealing with authorship and giving credit when they were graduate students together. Moreover, Jane should be aware that by her conduct she conveys to her students standards for research and authorship in her field, not least in undertaking research for her professional association.

Jane's treatment of Mark in connection with writing the final paper, as described in the case, is inexcusable. She invites him to collaborate in writing the final paper, he agrees, and then she writes it alone in a two-month period, without informing him about what she is doing. If she is under an unanticipated time constraint and concludes that collaboration will take too long, she is obligated to let Mark know. Surely there is time for that. Perhaps Jane has made the invitation out of a momentary sense of indebtedness. Ethically speaking, she cannot use the invitation as a way of thanking Mark. Because Jane has led Mark to expect that he will be involved in writing the paper, she must follow through with collaboration or inform Mark why she cannot. She has a moral duty to respect his interests and must not use him merely as a means to her own ends.

Is Jane merely careless and not well organized? Does she have a problem with being forthright when she has to deal with developments that may disappoint colleagues or students? We do not know the answers to these questions. In any case, these are personal traits that interfere with responsible dealings with colleagues and students, causing avoidable harm, especially to students not in a position to defend their interests.

Can Mark be faulted for not raising questions and looking out for his interests along the way? After completing work on the logistics, Mark is entitled to ask whether he will receive some kind of credit - an acknowledgement, perhaps. After another two weeks or so devoted to data analysis and preparation of the final report, Mark should have questions about criteria for authorship, and he should feel justified in raising them. By this point, he should have a sense of the importance of credit and authorship, and he should not be diffident. Graduate students should not remain passive, expecting others to look out for their interests. We should note, however, that first year students often need prompting or support to ask the questions they need to have answered.

The title of this case, "Friendship vs. Authorship," suggests that the author views

Jane's failure to revise the authorship assignment as attributable to Jane's relationship with David. As noted above, Jane has no justification for listing David as an author. Even if David is unaware of Mark's contributions, he should not accept listing as an author. David knows how little he contributed to producing the paper. When colleagues who are friends list each other as co-authors on papers without actually collaborating, both are culpable. Such behavior corrupts the process and does damage to any who are unjustifiably denied authorship. When the behavior comes to light, it provokes resentment and fosters cynicism.

This case shows how damaging unethical handling of authorship can be. The graduate student does not get appropriate credit for his contribution. Finding himself listed as third author though playing no part in the writing process, he is likely to be confused about what authorship signifies. Moreover, he undoubtedly realizes that he has come up with publishable findings that he cannot now publish. As the author of the case and commentary suggests, the best way for students to extract something positive from such predicaments is "to take responsibility for becoming informed about how best to handle issues of authorship in the future."