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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Fair Play

Year

2000

Description

This case highlights potential dilemmas encountered by postdoctoral fellows in a research setting. Who should be included as advisor on a student's thesis when the work has been done in two laboratories?

Body

Dr. Abbott is a tenure-track assistant professor in the department of Biochemistry at the University of the Beautiful South. She has quite extensive teaching obligations, adequate funding and many graduate students, but her publication record is only moderate.

Mary is a graduate student who enrolled in the department as a terminal master's candidate with plans of going on to medical school. She was assigned to Abbott upon admission. As Abbott is very busy, she assigns Mary to an ongoing project in her laboratory.

Mary's performance through graduate school has been good, and she has gotten along with Abbott reasonably well, despite the fact that the two do not see each other very often. In reality, Mary's contacts are mostly with the other students in the lab and the one post-doctoral fellow. She finds basic research exciting and after the first year decides to change directions and become a biochemist instead of a physician. Early in her second year, Mary discusses her plans with Abbott and lets her know that, because she will be married right after her graduation and move to

the East Coast, she will apply for her Ph.D. to the University of Atlantic Ocean. Abbott agrees to write a recommendation letter, although she is not personally acquainted with any of Atlantic Ocean's biochemistry faculty.

Toward the end of spring semester, Mary wraps up her work in Abbott's lab and defends her thesis. She is accepted at the University of Atlantic Ocean and moves there. She has not had time to write any papers based on her master's research, but she agrees with Abbott to do so as soon as she gets settled in her new place.

The following months are extremely busy for Abbott. She is writing a new grant based in part on the data generated by Mary's and other students' projects. Her lab remains crowded and research rhythms continue. Her teaching responsibilities have increased, and she has been asked to consult with a couple of biotechnology firms in town.

In the spring of the following year, while preparing for the Biochemistry Society's annual meeting, Abbott browses through the abstracts looking for sessions to attend. She finds an abstract submitted by Mary, her former student, and Dr. Jonas, Mary's new adviser at the University of Atlantic Ocean. As she reads it over, she realizes that the work it describes is extremely similar to the master's research Mary had conducted in her laboratory.

Discussion Questions

1. How should Abbott respond to the appearance of this abstract?
2. Jonas's policy is that every publication from his laboratory include his name among the authors. If the work reported in the abstract is, in fact, Mary's master's project done in Abbott's lab, who should the author(s) be? Has Jonas committed plagiarism? Does he have the right to manage his laboratory this way?
3. Who owns the data generated by Mary's research?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries*, Volume 4, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2000.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 4, 2000

Topics

Authorship

Data Management

Mentors and Trainees

Publication Ethics

Discipline(s)

Biochemistry

Life and Environmental Sciences

Research Ethics

Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

Authoring Institution

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)