



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

To Be or Not to Be Included

Year

2001

Description

This case looks at the issue of who determines when a graduate student makes an intellectual contribution to a project? Also, it looks at potential conflicts between students and faculty when assigning authorship is at the discretion of the faculty member.

Body

Upon entering the graduate program, Alyssa decided to do start working in the laboratory of Dr. Harry Swift. She started on a project that consisted of administering and evaluating the effects of an anti-malarial agent using an animal model. Although six other graduate students were working in the laboratory (not doing rotations), none of them was involved with the project, other than occasionally assisting Alyssa with the animals. She presented her data at weekly laboratory meetings attended by all members of Swift's lab, including Swift.

Alyssa and Swift did not get along very well. Swift believed that although Alyssa was a hard worker, she required too much supervision and was not an independent thinker. Alyssa, on the other hand, believed that Swift expected too much from his students and failed to provide adequate direction. Therefore, after completing the project, which took approximately nine months, Alyssa decided to leave the lab and begin working in another laboratory in the same department. Alyssa's lab book remained in Swift's lab, and Swift told her that the work did not merit publication.

Approximately one year later, Alyssa learned that her data had been published. The paper did not list her as an author, but it did list the names of other graduate students who had worked in Swift's lab during Alyssa's tenure. Alyssa decided to bring this situation to the attention of the departmental chairman, who referred her to the Director of Student Affairs. The director formed a committee of senior faculty members from outside Alyssa's department to investigate the situation. When the committee questioned Swift about the exclusion of Alyssa as an author, he responded that Alyssa did the work but had not contributed intellectually to the project. Rather, she had functioned primarily as a technician.

Swift commented that he had had several discussions with Alyssa about her inability to add to the project, other than data collection, and she had made no effort to increase her input. The committee questioned Alyssa and reviewed her lab book. The other graduate students who had worked in Swift's laboratory were never questioned.

The committee decided that Alyssa was responsible for the data presented by Swift. They also concluded that she did not have a major input into the experimental design, nor did she carry out the statistical analysis of the data required for publication. The committee concluded that the decision to include Alyssa as an author was at Swift's discretion.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Swift have notified Alyssa about the decision to publish the work?
2. Should Alyssa have been given an opportunity to analyze the data for publication?
3. Should Alyssa have approached Swift about the matter before approaching the department chair?
4. Should the committee have questioned more individuals associated with Swift, (e.g., the other graduate students working in the lab who were listed as authors on the paper)?
5. Should the university have rules about acknowledging students' contributions to laboratories?
6. What criteria should determine authorship?
7. Did Swift fail in his responsibility to Alyssa as a graduate student adviser by allowing her to function solely as a technician?

8. Did Alyssa fail in her responsibility as a graduate student to contribute intellectually to the project rather than limiting her contribution to data collection?
9. Is it necessary for graduate programs to spell out the responsibilities of advisers and graduate students, or are they implicit?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 5, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2001.

Contributor(s)

Brian Schrag

Editor(s)

Brian Schrag

Rights

The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) grants permission to use these case and commentary material with the citation indicated above.

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 5, 2001

Topics

Authorship

Collaboration

Mentors and Trainees

Publication Ethics

Discipline(s)

Life and Environmental Sciences

Pharmacology

Research Ethics

Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

Authoring Institution

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)