



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Responsibilities to Undergraduate and Graduate Students

## Year

2002

## Description

This case discusses issue regarding professors' responsibilities for helping their undergraduate and graduate students understand the material they are being taught, specifically advising and providing resources for tutoring.

## Body

Laura, an undergraduate, did her senior honors thesis in Professor Hopkin's lab. Because Hopkin was busy with teaching and other administrative duties, he asked Ryan, a senior graduate student in the lab, to help advise Laura. Although Ryan was busy running the last of his dissertation experiments and writing up the results, he agreed to advise Laura in order to help out Professor Hopkin and to gain some mentoring experience.

Soon after Ryan started advising Laura, he realized that it was more work than he had anticipated. He was meeting with Laura every day for one to five hours to talk about her experiment. He advised her on experimental protocol and informed consent, setting up the experiment, and the most appropriate statistical tests for her data. This pattern continued throughout the fall and winter terms. Ryan was surprised to find that he did not mind helping Laura out so much. In fact, he enjoyed being the adviser and helping Laura find her way in science. In addition, he was really beginning to enjoy the theory behind the experiment.

At the start of spring term, Ryan was working in the main lab room when he overheard Laura talking to Hopkin in one of the smaller testing rooms in the lab about all the work she had been doing; she did not mention Ryan's help. Ryan was quite upset. After all, he had spent months helping Laura from the conceptualization stage to actually running the experiment and analyzing the data. But instead of talking to either Laura or Hopkin about this oversight, Ryan decided to cut back on the amount of assistance he was giving Laura. He avoided working in the lab when Laura was around and only met with her once a week when she managed to track him down. It was difficult for him to step away, not only because he had spent quite a long time on the project, but because he really enjoyed the science and theory behind it. However, Ryan did not like confrontation and so he felt like his only option was to back away from the project.

A month later, Laura presented her senior thesis work to the department. At the end of her presentation, she mentioned that she and Hopkin were preparing a manuscript reporting the work. Neither Laura nor Hopkin had mentioned to Ryan that they were thinking of publishing her findings. When Ryan asked Hopkin whether he would be listed as an author on the paper, Hopkin replied that Laura had done all the work without his help so there was no reason for him to be a co-author. Ryan finally told Hopkin that he had helped Laura considerably throughout the fall and winter terms. Hopkin replied that even though Ryan may have helped out in the beginning, he had not been there throughout the project, and therefore would not be a co-author.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Was Hopkin's decision fair to Ryan? To Laura?
2. What could Ryan have done early on to ensure a different outcome? Was his behavior self-destructive?
3. Do you think Hopkin should allow Ryan to be a co-author on the paper? What would have to change for Hopkin to allow Ryan to be a co-author?
4. Should Ryan have been given the task of solely advising Laura? How would the situation be different if Ryan had not spent so much time helping Laura?
5. What are graduate students' responsibilities to undergraduates working in their lab?
6. What are professors' responsibilities to their graduate students in terms of advising them and/or in terms of the obligations of authorship? Do those responsibilities differ for undergraduate students working in their labs?

## **Notes**

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 6, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2002.

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