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The Graduate Student Laborer

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Description

This case is a discussion on the responsibilities of research advisers and graduate students in regard to completing work related to research. It also discusses issues of authorship in regards to graduate students in laboratories.

Body

Joe McGrath is a second year graduate student who will begin to write his master's thesis at the end of the term. Joe has worked extremely hard during the two years of his master's program, regularly working six or seven days a week. The effort has paid off, however; Joe already has four publications with two additional papers in preparation and, most importantly, a starting date for a new job at a small pharmaceutical company. The company is very excited to have hired Joe because they are starting a new initiative and need Joe's expertise to get the project off the ground. This situation puts Joe on a very tight time schedule to finish his last set of experiments and write his thesis, but the job is exactly what he had hoped for.

It is Friday afternoon. For the past week, Joe has put his experiments on hold. Instead, he has been making graphs and figures for a presentation that Dr. Smith, his research adviser, will be making at a conference the following Wednesday. Smith has requested specific figures based on data from experiments completed by Joe and his predecessors in the lab. At 3 p.m., Smith comes into Joe's office and says, "I hate to ask you to work on a weekend, but will you come in and work tomorrow? It is

really important that the presentation is ready on Monday."

Joe hesitates. He was a bit taken aback by Smith's request, because he almost always comes into the lab Saturday mornings, "Isn't Smith aware of this after two years?" he asks himself. Furthermore, he had planned to start the last set of experiments he needs for his thesis, which he has been delaying all week.

Finally, Joe replies, "Yes, I can come in and finish up these figures tomorrow." "Thanks, Joe," Smith says. "I really appreciate the fact that you have spent so much time compiling and analyzing the data collected by Dave and Frank, who left without finishing their degrees; without that information, the presentation would have been very thin. By the way, I've decided to list you as the fourth author on the presentation, because it was the other students who actually collected the data," Smith says. Although Joe feels disappointed that he will be listed as the last author on the presentation, he doesn't want to quibble about whether doing the data compilation and analysis was more significant than collecting the raw data.

After discussing a few more details about the presentation with Smith, Joe closes the conversation by saying, "Well, have a good evening and I'll see you tomorrow!" Smith stops as he is leaving the lab and replies with a surprised tone, "I'm not working tomorrow."

Should Joe spend Saturday making the figures for the presentation, or should he start his experiments as planned?

Discussion Questions

1. Is it appropriate for Smith to ask Joe to work on Saturday? Is it appropriate in light of the fact that Smith is not going to work? Are there valid reasons why Smith might ask Joe to work although he is not planning on working himself?
2. Would it seem less onerous a request to complete the figures and graphs at the sacrifice of his dissertation work if Joe were compiling and analyzing data from his own experiments rather than data from students who left the program?
3. What are the proper roles and responsibilities of graduate students in preparing presentations that include the entire research group's efforts?
4. What are appropriate criteria for authorship?
5. Is data collection always more significant than data compilation and analysis?
6. Should Joe ask to be placed higher on the list of authors? How should he approach Smith about his concerns?

Notes

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Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

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