

Deborah Johnson's Commentary on "Responsibilities to Undergraduate and Graduate Students"

Commentary On
Responsibilities to Undergraduate and Graduate Students

This case raises a whole host of issues having to do with faculty responsibilities and graduate students supervising undergraduate students. I would like to bring to the fore one particular aspect of this case, one that is typical of many research environments, where norms of practice are poorly understood and only vaguely articulated, rarely made explicit and not intentionally promulgated. This situation is ripe for misunderstanding.

Typically, faculty members have many expectations of graduate students, but they are not explicitly stated. Rather, faculty members assume that graduate students already know what will be expected of them, or they assume the students will pick it up from the environment.

Informal social practices are at the heart of all institutional activities. One enters a work environment and makes assumptions about all kinds of things that may or may not be explicitly stated; for example, that you will be paid on a regular basis; that you will be fairly evaluated; that you will be allowed sick time. In business environments, these general presumptions facilitate employer-employee relationships. However, when the norms of practice are not well understood or when individuals or groups of individuals who are working together have different assumptions about what they are supposed to do, how they will be evaluated and what they will get in return, the situation is ripe for conflict, disappointment and exploitation.

A variety of factors explains the poor articulation of norms and conventions in academic research environments. For one, newcomers to the environment -- graduate students -- have little opportunity to learn these norms before they actually enter the environment. Even if graduate students have worked in labs as

undergraduates and have some sense of what will be required, they are likely to have had only limited experience. While newcomers may be unfamiliar with the norms of behavior in research, faculty may not recognize the importance of developing and articulating the norms for graduate students. Faculty may give little thought to this necessity and simply presume the same environment they had in graduate school. Moreover, because many aspects of the research environment are relatively new, the norms are still evolving and there is no old practice to fall back on. Consider that fifty years ago there were hardly any research environments of the kind that exist today at many universities, i.e., with high levels of funding, large numbers of projects and teams, complexity of research organization, and so on.

It is the poor articulation of norms of behavior that leads to the problems described in this case. Professor Hopkin asks Ryan to help advise Laura on her senior honors thesis, but what is entailed in this request and in Ryan's acceptance? As the case evolves, we see that Hopkin had certain ideas about what he expected Ryan to do and how long he expected Ryan to stay with it. Hopkin had criteria for Ryan's becoming a co-author on the publication of a senior thesis.

The case suggests how much better the outcome would have been if Hopkin had explicitly explained to Ryan what his responsibilities would be in his role as adviser to Laura. Hopkin might have explained roughly how much time Ryan should spend, what kind of advice he should and shouldn't provide and so on. Hopkin might have specified at the beginning that the thesis might produce potentially publishable results and in what circumstances Ryan would be included. If Hopkin had articulated the norms for a relationship in which a graduate student advises an undergraduate student, Ryan would have a much better chance of successfully managing his relationship with Laura.

The problem in this case arises, in large measure, because norms of practice are not well understood and are not made explicit. (Even if the norms are variable, an explicit discussion of the variability helps individuals manage their work.) It appears that Hopkin has not thought through the complexities of the relationship between Ryan and Laura adequately to anticipate some potentially problematic moments and give Ryan enough information to avoid problems.

The commentary to the case is right in pointing out that Ryan could have avoided this problem if he had spoken out sooner. In other words, even though Hopkin can be faulted for not giving Ryan proper instruction in how to manage the relationship

with an undergraduate, Ryan can be faulted for not responding in a way that would resolve the situation quickly and with minimal damage. Even if Hopkin had told Ryan not to invest too much time in Laura's project and that he would not be co-author on Laura's thesis publication, at least Ryan would not have a bad feeling about the situation. He would have understood from the start that he would not be included; he would have understood that as the norm for the situation.

While the commentary suggests that Laura may be at fault for "taking more credit than she deserves," I am reluctant to draw this conclusion because Laura, as an undergraduate, is the least familiar with the norms of practice in research. She may simply not know that Ryan should be given credit. Again, Hopkin should have thought about and discussed this issue with her early on or at least when he saw that she was getting results that were worth publishing.