

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "The Graduate Student Laborer"

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The Graduate Student Laborer

This case focuses in an illuminating way on the power disparity between a graduate student and the student's research adviser. A carefully nuanced account of a single incident -- a visit by the adviser to the student's office on a Friday afternoon to ask a favor -- allows the psychological and ethical subtleties of the situation and of the student/adviser relationship to come fully into view.

Because the second year master's student, Joe McGrath, is extremely hard working and productive, he has accomplished enough to have landed a desirable job, with the starting date set. Joe's expertise is needed for a new initiative at the small company that has hired him. This job commitment has resulted in a tight time schedule because Joe must finish his research and complete his thesis before starting the new job. Nevertheless, his research adviser, Dr. Smith, has put him to work providing figures and graphs for a presentation Smith is to make. Although the figures and graphs are based on data Joe and two predecessors collected in the lab, Joe has to set aside his own thesis work to prepare the requested items. In requesting the figures and graphs, has Smith adequately respected the student's needs and interests? Smith appears to have given priority to his own need to have his presentation prepared on time.

When Smith shows up to ask Joe to come in on Saturday, he seems unaware that Joe routinely comes in on Saturday and that taking more time away from his thesis project may interfere with Joe's completing it on time. Smith may be unheeding enough to believe that Joe feels pleased to have been chosen to flesh out Smith's presentation and to ensure that it is ready on time. He may think that Joe appreciates his thanks for time spent on Smith's presentation and his offer to list Joe as fourth author after himself and the other two graduate students who did not finish their degrees. Smith seems to have no idea that Joe is anxious about the time he has lost working on the graphs and is disappointed to be listed as fourth and last author.

Nor does he realize that under the pressure of his thesis deadline, Joe is not prepared to question the rationale for this assignment of authorship. In a situation that the student reads as a request he cannot refuse, the adviser seems clueless about the student's discomfort and dissatisfaction. Finally, the student's chagrin at his adviser taking a day off work while the student loses time from his thesis work escapes Smith's notice.

While all these failures of attention and respect for the student's interests show some lack of sensitivity on Smith's part, Joe appears somewhat diffident. We are very comfortable when others read our feelings correctly and are sensitive to our needs and interests. On some occasions, when others fail to pick up clues, it may be necessary, although not easy, to speak up politely. Joe has done well in his studies and in the job market, and he ought to feel some confidence in calling attention to his own interests. He could use this occasion to make Smith aware of his tight schedule. Perhaps they could discuss how best to plan the time ahead after Smith's presentation to ensure that Joe completes his thesis work on time. Joe could mention that he would be interested in further explanation of the criteria for authorship when there is more time for a conversation. There is no harm in Joe's informing Smith that he normally comes in on Saturday to do his own work and that he has found that routine has helped him to progress well.

Not all of Smith's failings are failings of sensitivity. He should be generally aware of the power disparity between student and adviser and should be careful not to take advantage of students, for example, by asking favors students cannot refuse. He should be conscious of where students are in their course of study. Most importantly, he should not mention authorship in a way that allows it to be read as a return for a favor. Authorship criteria should be a matter of research group policy, with rationale provided, and not treated as a personal matter. It is precisely because awarding recognition and credit produces awkwardness and discomfort, raising issues about the value of a person's work, that policies are necessary. Joe should already have encountered discussion in his research group about credit for collecting data as against credit for such contributions as providing figures and graphs. When pressed to take time away from his thesis, he should have known what the recognition for his contribution was likely to be.

The situation in this case indicates the importance of open communication between graduate students and research advisers and the necessity for research group policies that are clearly articulated and explained. This case highlights the need for

policies regarding the roles and responsibilities of graduate students in preparing presentations for advisers and preparing presentations that represent team efforts. Explicit ground rules concerning expectations for graduate students in these and other common situations should reduce the likelihood of research advisers' taking advantage of students and increase the likelihood of graduate students' speaking up as their interests require.

Lacking information about why Smith does not plan to work on Saturday, we cannot say whether it is appropriate for him to ask Joe to work on his presentation when he himself does not. If Smith had earlier committed himself to, say, representing the university at an all-day consortium or performing in a community musical production, he might be justified in asking Joe to help out. The last-minute character of Smith's request is harder to justify. In any case, he owes Joe an explanation.

In order to flourish, graduate students need an environment in which they feel safe enough to ask necessary questions and to look out for their own interests appropriately. Policies regarding authorship, the roles and responsibilities of graduate students, and other matters must be decided and articulated within research groups and customized to their particular circumstances. In some areas of research, data compilation may have more importance; in others, analysis may have greater significance and earn greater recognition. By creating an atmosphere in which research group members, including students, feel comfortable discussing the ground rules covering their activities, research advisers can prevent conflicts and disappointments that might pass unnoticed but nevertheless hamper the progress of students.