

Deborah Johnson's Commentary on "To Be or Not to Be Included"

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To Be or Not to Be Included

Assignment of authorship for published research is an extremely intricate matter, as this case illustrates, and it is also a highly contentious matter. No doubt this contentiousness is correlated with the high stakes associated with authorship since published research plays such a pivotal role in the careers of scientists.

The commentary suggests, however, that authorship of published research is not all that is at issue in this case. The case points to broader issues in graduate education.

An outside observer viewing the case first from Alyssa's perspective and then from Swift's perspective might be most surprised by the differences in the expectations of each. They each have different expectations regarding authorship and credit, what is supposed to happen in the lab, the role of a professor in the training of students, and so on. The fact that the two have such different expectations illustrates a highly problematic condition of graduate education. The norms for professors and graduate students are poorly articulated, rarely explicitly promulgated, and therefore, poorly understood. The situation is ripe for misunderstanding. In the absence of clear norms, intentionally transmitted to students and modeled in practice, students and faculty develop a variety of diverse, ad hoc, variable expectations.

It is easy here to suppose that the student, Alyssa, was some sort of dunce and simply had not picked up on the prevailing norm for authorship - that lab work alone does not justify authorship, that one must make an intellectual contribution. Or perhaps she was just unable to contribute to the project intellectually. Such a response is much too easy. For one thing, there are hints that Swift uses the norm inconsistently. Why has he included other students from the lab? Did these students contribute intellectually, or did they earn authorship simply by being members of the lab? Further, the investigative committee concludes that the decision is at Swift's discretion: He could include Alyssa as co-author if he chose. The norm is not

definitive; sometimes lab work is sufficient to justify authorship, and sometimes not.

While we can understand that attributions of authorship are complex and intricate such that they must, to some extent, be left to the discretion of the faculty member, that does not mean that faculty can assign authorship arbitrarily or at whim. The discretion allowed faculty members correlates with obligations, and faculty members are accountable for how they use this discretion. They are obligated to tell students what to expect and to make decisions as fairly and consistently as possible.

Since attribution of authorship is an intricate matter and often a matter of faculty discretion, the potential for mistreatment of students and abuse of power is great. That makes it extremely important for faculty members to provide students with guidelines.

Norms with regard to attribution of authorship are illustrative of a broader problem in graduate education. In general, norms are not well articulated or explicitly communicated. This problem leads to a wide variety of expectations among faculty and graduate students, so much so that it is not uncommon for graduate students to experience shock and disappointment in the first years of their graduate training.