

The Graduate Student Laborer

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'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?

Commentary

This case is intended to focus discussion on the responsibilities of research advisers and graduate students in regard to completing work related to research. Most graduate students will do whatever an adviser asks in the research arena. A huge power differential exists between the graduate student and the adviser, who largely decides when a student has completed enough work to graduate and will be asked to write recommendations for the duration of the student's career. In this case, an argument can be made that Joe is being taken advantage of in preparing a presentation that his adviser will be making. Whether or not Joe's perception of the situation is accurate, he is definitely left with the feeling that he is completing Smith's work over the weekend at the expense of completing his own research. If Smith had a legitimate reason for not working on Saturday, this would have been an excellent time to share it with Joe. There are certainly legitimate reasons why Smith may not be able to work over the weekend, but he needs to respect Joe's time and effort enough to explain the situation to him.

Research advisers have a responsibility to be aware of what goes on in their lab. That includes being aware of workloads students are carrying, their general schedules, etc. It is definitely acceptable to expect students to carry out work at the direct request of the research adviser, but there is a huge difference between working *for/with* an adviser, and working *instead* of the adviser. Open communication between the adviser and the students is essential to maintaining a productive research environment.

Graduate students also have a responsibility to make certain that their advisers are aware of what they are doing. The communication must be both adviser-to-student and student-to-adviser. Joe bears some responsibility for Smith's taking advantage of him: He could have told Smith that he always works on Saturdays, that he had plans that weekend to start his last set of experiments, etc.

The second large question raised by this case is the murky issue of authorship. Research advisers should have a carefully thought out idea of how authorship is established and how the order of authors is decided. It is important to make sure that graduate students and collaborators are aware of these policies as well. Authorship issues often are not discussed openly because they are awkward and uncomfortable. It is worth it to face the discomforts of openly discussing these issues, however, to avoid situations like Joe's, where the student and adviser clearly have different ideas of what authorship should be. The students who have left the program should also have an opportunity to review the presentation if their names and data are included.

Overall, the research adviser is ultimately responsible for establishing the policies and norms that will be followed in the laboratory, whether by active participation and awareness of what goes on in their labs or by the default of nonparticipation. It is impossible for research advisers to avoid this responsibility. Better to craft the environment they want than to send the default message that there are no policies or standards for conducting research in the lab.

Commentary on “The Graduate Student Laborer”
Vivian Weil
Illinois Institute of Technology

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 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 feelings 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.