

Case Study:

Rising to the Standard of “Intellectual Contribution”

by: Andrew McBride

Jesse is starting her second year of grad school at Midwest University (MWU). Last semester, she had a research assistantship with Dr. Platt. Jesse mostly enjoyed her time with Dr. Platt; she worked long hours, sometimes over the required amount, but she learned a lot and even presented the findings from one project at a national conference. After her formal assistantship ended and the new semester began, Dr. Platt asked if Jesse would like to continue working on a project they had started towards the end of the previous semester. The project had a fairly large author team, and Jesse knew that she would probably not be very high on the list. After some careful thought on her own, Jesse decided she wanted to see the project through and agreed to continue on with the work. Dr. Platt was pleased and said that she would likely gain valuable experience from the continued work.

Throughout the first semester of her second year, Jesse worked on the project led by Dr. Platt. She sometimes had trouble balancing her new assistantships with the project, not to mention her thesis work, on which she knew that she needed to make progress. Despite these difficulties, Jesse felt that she put in quality work on Dr. Platt’s project: She was often called on to find and pull journal articles and conference proceedings, enter information in tables and figures, and organize references in the appropriate format. At times, Jesse got frustrated with the number and density of tasks that Dr. Platt and the other collaborators asked her to do; she wondered if they realized how long the tasks took. Still, she worked hard and liked to respond quickly so that Dr. Platt would see her dedication to the project.

Near the end of the semester, Jesse met with Dr. Platt to ask if they¹ would consider serving on her thesis committee. She had come up with some ideas and was hoping to propose soon. Dr. Platt agreed and pointed her in the direction of some useful resources for her proposal. Jesse was very pleased and made an offhand comment that it was quite the productive semester for her; after all, she would be submitting her first journal article for publication! Dr. Platt was surprised; they had not heard of this project. Curious, Dr. Platt inquired as to what else Jesse had been working on. Jesse faltered, explaining that she meant the project with Dr. Platt—the one into which she had put so much time. Dr. Platt looked uncomfortable and explained that they must have had a miscommunication: Jesse would not be listed as an author on the project. While all of the authors appreciated her work, Dr. Platt continued, Jesse’s efforts simply have not risen to the standard of intellectual contribution needed for authorship. Jesse would, however, be thanked in the acknowledgements section. Jesse was unsure what to say, so she simply attempted a smile: “oh...ok, I must have misunderstood.” Dr. Platt could sense her disappointment but had to get to class; they promised to meet again to discuss Jesse’s thesis and ended their meeting.

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Discussion questions

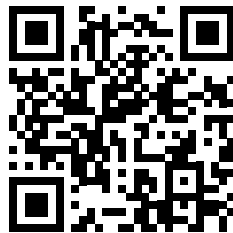
- What is Jesse’s perspective about the work that she did on the project?
- What is Dr. Platt’s perspective about her work?
- Did they each communicate their perspective appropriately?
- What could they each have done differently?
- Would you interpret the situation differently if Jesse was still on a GA with Dr. Platt?

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¹The reader should assume that the author of this fictional case does not know Dr. Platt’s preferred pronoun and has thus defaulted to “they,” rather than assigning Dr. Platt a gendered pronoun.

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