Description

Publication at Any Price!

As a doctoral graduate or junior researcher, publication is everything. Under constant pressure to "publish or perish," the perceived value of that recently completed thesis, dissertation, or research study is limited until it appears in print. One would assume that the integrity with which the research was conducted would carry over to the academic publishing process, but for such eager and earnest junior collaborators, that is often far from the case.

Inexperience Makes You Vulnerable

That pressure to publish or perish applies to all but a few highly regarded faculty or research scientists. This means that even experienced researchers with a track record of publications, still need to publish in order to either maintain rank or to move along the tenure track. For some, the inexperience of junior researchers proves to be too much of a temptation, such that invitations to collaborate that are eagerly accepted by those junior co-authors suddenly degenerate into doing all of the work for very little, if any, of the credit.

The ease with which such research abuse is allowed to occur is surprising given the number of journals that have clear criteria to qualify for 'authorship' status. The *International Committee of Medical Journal Editors* (ICMJE), for example, specifies three simple criteria:

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data.
2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.
3. Final approval of the version to be published.
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Abuse of Goodwill

Accounting and finance students often struggle with the concept of goodwill. It shows up on the balance sheet as an asset, but it consists of nothing more than a perceived value premium that a potential buyer of the business would be expected to pay over and above the book value of that business.

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In academic authorship, the same principal can be seen to apply. When senior researchers are approached to collaborate on a journal paper, those with less integrity than their colleagues will expect and often explicitly demand a lead authorship position because of the “cachet” that their involvement will bring to the project. Some will even go as far as forcing themselves onto a project without bothering to be invited by virtue of their position or rank in the department. The argument here, of course, is that anything less than stellar work would reflect badly on the department, and that without his or her involvement, stellar would not be achievable.

Other, less blatant, examples of abuse include ghost authorship, where an individual is not listed as an author despite making a substantial contribution to the research or the writing of the report, and honorary or guest authorships, that are often awarded out of friendship or respect for a colleague who may be in need of a publication to address his or her own pressure to publish or perish. In this scenario, the abuse is no longer senior to junior; it is a deliberate attempt to leverage goodwill or legitimacy for the article and its potential publication.

A Simple Solution

For journal editors, setting standards of authorship, as the ICMJE has done, is clearly not enough. Ignoring the abuse of authorship casts a stain on the entire process. Simply requiring a formal statement of authorship participation, signed by all parties, to formally back-up a similar statement of contribution that is included in the article as a footnote, should go a long way towards curbing this activity and ensuring the authority over scientific authorship.

However, there is no guarantee that signing the form and making the statement won’t simply become part of the bargaining process, allowing the abuse to continue.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Submitting Manuscripts

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2016/03/10
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