

# **Ethical Issues Related to Research Collaborations: How to Prevent and Address Them**

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# Introduction to Research Collaborations

- What is a research collaboration?
  - Cooperative efforts by two or more parties to answer a question, fulfill a goal, or create a product.
- Why collaborate?
  - Increase ability to make significant advances and address broad research questions.
  - Augment existing technical skill set and background knowledge.
  - Increase access to technical, human and intellectual resources.
- Why not collaborate?
  - Lack of time
  - Lack of resources
  - Lack of interest in the research problem
  - Lack on interest in sharing intellectual knowledge with others
  - Lack of interest in not having full credit for research done

# Major Issues to Consider for Effective Collaborations

- **Effective and continued communication**
- Goal alignment
- Defining expected contributions
- Dividing responsibilities
- Delineating legal obligations of all parties
- Authorship and credit
- Accountability
- Interpersonal issues

## **Case 1: Ethics of research collaboration for co-mentored PhD students**

As a new student at Emory, you want to take advantage of the interdisciplinary nature of the graduate programs, and wish to build a thesis project that will involve research collaboration between two mentors in your program. You feel that this will allow you to address a broader scientific question and that you'll gain a more diverse and solid training in developing such a collaboration. In order to make sure that the two laboratories you're interested in match your needs and expectations, you complete rotations in each of these labs and, indeed, find out that these teams use complementary techniques you'd like to use in your thesis project. After you've completed these rotations, you discuss the possibility with the two mentors, and put forward the idea of a project you'd like to undertake under their supervision. Both agree that the project makes sense and they are interested in co-mentoring you in these studies. You, therefore, undertake your thesis work under this plan. However, after having been involved in these collaborative studies for about 2 years, you realize that things are not going well in one of the labs you are working in. You're not getting enough technical support to learn the methods essential for your studies, and you have very limited access to your co-mentor because of his busy schedule. Because you have already put so much time into this work, you are very concerned, and feel that this lack of support is going to affect your graduate training.

- *What should you do to solve that problem?*
- *What should have been done to avoid this problem?*
- *What is the role of you other co-mentor in helping you solve that problem?*

## Case 2: Ethics of research collaboration for PhD students in charge of mentoring and training new lab. members

You're a fifth year graduate student in Dr. Jones's laboratory. Although you have learned a lot in this lab. since you started your graduate studies, you have not yet published any first author's paper, and realize that you still have a significant amount of work to do in order to achieve that goal. However, during the past two years, you have been actively involved in mentoring and collaborating with new students and postdocs who have joined Dr. Jones's laboratory, and you hope this will lead to co-author's publications. Because of the expertise you have with some of the techniques used in his laboratory, Dr. Jones keeps adding to your responsibilities requesting that you help and collaborate with more and more new people who join his lab to get their work done. Although you like mentoring other lab. Members, you are worried that these extra collaborations are slowing you down in getting your own thesis work completed, and get your own first author's papers out. You are afraid that this lack of first author's publications may lower your chances of finding good labs for postdoctoral training.

- *How could you solve this problem?*
- *How much effort should you devote towards mentoring and collaboration with other lab members during your doctoral studies?*
- *How would you discuss this problem with your mentor?*

### **Case 3: Ethics of research collaboration for junior faculty**

You are a junior tenure-track faculty member who is contacted by Dr. Brown, a senior and well renowned faculty member at the same institution, to develop a research collaboration. Dr. Brown recently attended one of your lectures, and noticed that some of your methods could help her provide evidence for a particular mechanism of disease causation, which could potentially lead to a solid paper that could gain access to some of the highest impact journals in the field. Thus, Dr. Brown contacts you to discuss the possible project. For the project, you would provide the equipment and understanding necessary for the experiments to analyze samples that Dr. Brown has collected. Dr. Brown will continue to generate samples as well as contribute to the data analysis and interpretation.

- *What are some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a collaboration? For you? For Dr Brown?*
- *How might your status as a junior faculty member impact your decision in moving forward or not with this request for collaboration?*
- *Does the scale of the potential benefit of the project (e.g. A translational project with visibly significant potential benefit to society and a co-authorship in a high impact journal) impact whether or not you should collaborate?*

# Take Home Messages: Ethics in Research Collaboration

- **Frequent, responsible and fair communication between parties involved is the key to a successful research collaboration.**
- Many factors must be considered before you make the decision of developing a research collaboration.
  - Do I have the time to achieve this work?
  - Does my lab. have the necessary personal and technical resources?
  - Am I genuinely interested by this collaborative project?
  - Will my career goals, training and development benefit of this collaboration?
- The decision to participate in a collaborative research project is a major **responsibility**. You must fulfill your duties in a scholarly responsible way.
- It is important to immediately address issues that arise.
- The ethical issues that may arise through research collaboration do not end with the dissolution of the collaboration.