



Case: The Transition to Senior Author

Key Phrases:

- Transitions in authorship sequence
- Acknowledging, without crediting, senior mentorship
- Unspoken expectations

The Situation:

Bill couldn't decide what to do. He felt sure that he should be senior author on the papers that lay on the desk in front of him, but his mentor, Tom, was listed as senior author instead. Tom was a senior Associate Professor, known internationally for his research, with over 30 years of NIH funding. Because Tom had been a successful mentor for many researchers who now had successful independent careers, Bill had joined Tom's lab during fellowship. Bill, now an Assistant Professor, had done well—everything he did seemed to work. He published three important papers during his fellowship with Tom as senior author. During his last year of fellowship, Bill received a NIH mentored grant (K08) for which Tom was his mentor. After completing fellowship, Bill joined the division faculty; in the following years he really enjoyed working with graduate students and fellows in the lab and was highly sought after as a mentor himself. Bill had been second author on a paper that a recent fellow had written, and was a co-author on several others that fellows and students had worked on. Since Tom had too many fellows and students working with him, he had recommended that one fellow and one post-doctoral student work primarily with Bill instead. Unfortunately, over the past two years, two of Tom's main grants had not been successfully renewed and he was very concerned, as he had always been well-funded in the past.

Bill had developed a computerized simulation system to predict protein structures. He was learning how to use this system in the laboratory and was very excited about promising results. He recognized that the publications resulting from these results would go a long way in helping him get an independent research grant (RO1) that he was planning to submit in the next year. Bill decided to write up the results in two manuscripts with the fellow as first author on one and the post-doctoral student the first author on the other. He worked closely with the fellow and post-doc on the manuscripts. The manuscript drafts also had been circulated to Tom, who had made good suggestions. As they were coming close to the final versions, Bill mentioned that the



fellow and post-doc should add the author names to the manuscript. When he received each manuscript back, he was shocked to see that Tom was listed as the senior author. When he asked the fellow and post-doc why they had listed Tom as senior author, they told him that they thought Tom expected to be senior author, as he usually had been, and that they did not want to antagonize Tom. They told Bill that they had met with Tom, who had told them, “You are the first authors, so you know best the contributions of all authors, and therefore should list whomever you feel has helped most on the project and paper as senior author.” Bill made an appointment to meet with Tom.

Case Questions:

1. What might Bill have done differently?
2. What might Tom have done differently?
3. What might the fellow and post-doc have done differently?
4. What can be done now?