

Tim is a postdoctoral fellow, in a second year of a postdoctoral fellowship in microbiology at a major university. He works in the laboratory of Professor X, along with several other post docs. A strong antagonism has developed over the past two months between Professor X and one of the other post docs named Jane, with whom Time has worked earlier on some research. Professor X has asked Tim to prepare an abstract of this research for submission to a leading journal. He insists that Tim submit the abstract without Jane's name on it because, in his opinion, her contribution was minimal. Tim believes, however, that although Jane has not been active in the research since the antagonism between herself and Professor X developed, earlier in the year she made substantial contributions. At this time, Tim has no definite prospects for a position next year, and he believes that a strong recommendation from Professor X would be a big help to him.

What is Tim required by morality to do in this situation, and why?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Given Tim's belief about the significance of Jane's contribution to the research he should decline to prepare the abstract without Jane's name on it. By submitting the abstract without her name, Time would find himself in the position of having, in his own opinion, deprived Jane of deserved credit, which could benefit her in her career. Professor X has no right to insist that Tim place himself in such a position. As a practical matter, Tim's problem is to communicate to Professor X his strong beliefs about Jane's contribution to the research, and his firm resolve not to prepare the abstract without including her name on it, but to do so in ways that avoid directly, or, as much as possible, indirectly accusing Professor X of unfairness to Jane. In this regard, Tim might say to Professor X that he recognizes the possibility of differing good faith perceptions in regard to Jane's contribution, but that he personally believes her contribution was significant. If, in the end, Professor X resents Tim's stance, and takes it out by not writing a strong recommendation letter for him, this is very sad. Time does not have a right, however, to assure a strong recommendation letter by acting in a way that harms Jane.

Case from the March 6, 1997 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1997.