

The Robin Rogers Case

Robin Rogers is halfway through her third year of a chemistry PhD program at State Polytechnic University (SPU). Since her first year in the program, she has been a member of Professor Larry Lin's research group, a group that currently includes 12 graduate students who take an average of 5.5 years to complete their PhDs and three postdoctoral fellows who each have three years of funding.

Robin's research has involved both theoretical and experimental work aimed at developing rigorous empirical tests of proposed mechanisms for a particular class of chemical reactions. Her hard work in the lab has led to excellent results, and she has found compelling evidence that challenges the accepted mechanism in the literature for an important chemical reaction she's been studying. Prof. Lin has been following her progress with excitement, and last week the two decided that Robin should start drafting a journal article that describes her novel experimental approach, lays out her evidence that the accepted mechanism is wrong, and proposes a new mechanism that better fits the experimental data. This will be Robin's first significant publication from her graduate research, as well as the heart of her dissertation.

This morning, Prof. Lin comes into the lab with an uneasy look on his face. He tells Robin that Kevin Semple, a postdoctoral fellow in the lab, will be writing up Robin's findings instead. "Kevin's fellowship is almost up," Lin says, "and none of his experiments here have been successful. If he doesn't get a significant publication from his time in this research group, it will have been a waste of three years for him."

Robin is concerned about this sudden change of plan. "What about the work I did to design my experiments and get them to work? Won't I be losing two years of progress toward my PhD?"

"You'll still be second author on Kevin's publication," Lin tells her. "Besides, if your next round of experiments aren't as successful, I'll find something else for you to write up."

Kevin has been friendly and helpful to the graduate students in the Lin group, including Robin, pointing them to useful references and interesting new research in their area. Kevin's main focus in the Lin lab was an ambitious set of experiments that he worked on alone. It turned out that some of these experiments were not technically feasible, while others didn't produce results that could be clearly interpreted.

Robin wants to be a good team player and make her PI happy. But given how hard she worked to come up with and execute this research project — and how central it is to the dissertation she must write to earn her PhD — she is not at all happy that Prof. Lin is asking her to turn over her notebooks, data, and draft of the manuscript to Kevin.

Should Robin Rogers go along with Prof. Lin's plan to let Kevin Semple write up her results and present them as his own? Why or why not?