Statement on Multiple Authorship

The statement that follows was approved for publication by the Association's Committee on Professional Ethics in June 1990.

Over the years, different scholarly fields have evolved different patterns of research and publication. In some areas, the solitary researcher remains the model, an ideal that draws some of its strength from association with the Romantic conception of the creative artist. Even in those fields, however, genuine collaboration is possible and even inescapable as different analytical skills are called upon to illuminate increasingly complex subjects of inquiry. Elsewhere in the scholarly world, collaboration is the norm. This appears to be particularly true in those sciences where separated disciplines must be brought to bear on a novel question, or where complex, articulated laboratory organizations are essential, or where (as in some areas of physics and astronomy) the scale is so large and the expense so vast that any original contribution is beyond the capacity of a scholar working alone or of even small teams of scholars.

In this varied and constantly shifting situation, disciplines have arrived at certain conventions that govern the listing of names of collaborators. This may seem at first glance a sufficiently equitable arrangement: scholars within the field know what to expect and how to evaluate their colleagues' estimate of their respective contributions. But there are times when the wider academic community must become involved in such questions, as will a still-wider world outside the university. Faculty members and administrators making decisions about appointments, promotion and tenure, and salary increases must try to evaluate individual worth and reckon with the significance of authorship. So, too, must granting agencies, public and private, while the government and the press, seeking expertise, must make repeated judgments about the basis of the authority that individual scholars may claim. A vast list of publications, dazzling to the uninitiated, may conceal as much as it reveals, and the conventions of particular disciplines may give rise to the suspicion, if not the actuality, of questionable ethical practices.

It is well known that actors' agents frequently negotiate hard about the order of credits, placement, and size of type; no such excesses need follow from an expectation that scholars who take part in a collaborative project should explain forthrightly—to disciplinary peers as well as to other academic colleagues and to such members of the public as may have occasion to inquire—the respective contributions of those who put their names to the finished work. This clarification might be accomplished in a preface, an extensive footnote, or an appendix; no one format can serve every scholarly combination. But a candid statement would do much to establish degrees of responsibility and authority, to ensure fair credit to junior or student colleagues, and to avoid unseemly later disputes about priority, real or alleged errors, and plagiarism. Purely formal association with the enterprise (such as the headship of a laboratory where no direct research involvement was present) would be noted for what it is, to the benefit of the participants as much as of those outside the field.

Making plain the actual contribution of each scholar to a collaborative work calls for an equivalent recognition in return. That academic decision makers frequently find themselves in a troubling dilemma when faced with genuine substantive collaboration testifies to the strength of the ideal of individual creativity. While in some scholarly activity carried on in tandem it is possible for contributors to make clear the respective contributions of each (as is often, and should be regularly, done by two or three joint authors of a book), in other cases the collaboration is so intimate as to defy disentangling: the creativity is imbedded in, and consequent upon, constant exchange of ideas and insights. This scholarly and psychological reality must be fully recognized in making academic decisions about the accomplishments and careers of single

members of such combinations: what they have done must not be reduced to a second order of merit or, worse, dismissed out of hand. This recognition is particularly important in the case of younger scholars who may take a leading role in a collaboration that at first sight is one of subordination. To insist on individual demonstration of the abilities of a young scholar working on a topic where collaboration is inescapable, and where (as is often the case) immense amounts of time are required for fruitful results, may disrupt a promising career, force unneeded and diversionary publication, put undue emphasis on the vexing question of priority of discovery, and distort perceptions of the creative process.

These are questions of immense complexity and subtlety, not to be resolved by an unimaginative application of traditional academic myths or by bureaucratic heavy-handedness. Peer judgment alive to these questions, together with a sensible weighing of merely quantitative measures of accomplishment and reputation, will do much to remedy a problem that through parochialism, misplaced egotism, and inadvertence threatens to become steadily worse and to contribute to tarnishing the scholarly enterprise.