

RA versus co-author

A reader poses a good question. I paraphrase:

I am close to closing a deal that will send me to Africa to manage a randomized impact evaluation and co-lead an NGO. Ultimately, my goal is to go back for a PhD. I am lobbying to get co-authorship on a paper or two from the evaluation. Given that this is my first experience negotiating co-authorship, I am not familiar with how it works.

I need to keep in mind that the economists are also people I would like to write recommendations for me. At this point there are no promises, only the commitment to consider co-authorship if I prove that I have sufficiently interesting research proposals.

I understand there's a economic theorist at Harvard who does his best thinking standing in a corner with his forehead leaning into the wall. This is not a man who needs to worry about giving credit to co-authors. Much of economics and politics is likewise individualistic.

The rise of large empirical projects, especially those in developing countries, means more academic projects involve large teams. The norms for authorship, however, remain dominated by the more individualistic style.

The new norms are still evolving, but my sense is that co-authorship for RAs can't be taken for granted. What follows is my take having been a junior and a senior partner on several projects.

Co-authorship as an RA usually implies some combination of making a creative contribution and doing a lot of the work. In some cases, the work is unpaid when authorship is on offer. In a field study that takes several years, like an impact evaluation, authorship also requires that you're along for the full ride.

For new RAs, the people that hired you are going to wait and see if you're pleasant to work with, willing to stick around and work hard, and able to bring in new ideas. At the point you begin to analyze the data, they might offer you co-authorship (especially likely if they are short of money to pay you for all that analysis time). But I don't think most researchers would regard granting co-authorship an obligation unless you make a substantial original contribution—something that transforms the paper.

Keep some other factors in mind. First, on some projects there are already so many cooks in the kitchen that adding another can spoil the broth.

Second, some researchers want their paid staff mostly to be doers, and don't necessarily feel that they need another thinker. This is especially true when the researcher is nontenured. Many want

to be generous but their incentives point in the opposite direction. Tenured professors (and those with more field projects than they can handle) tend to be more willing co-authors. The professional staff at places like the World Bank are often generous for the same reason.

At the outset of a project, I would simply try to establish that co-authorship is a possibility on current or follow-on publications, but not assured. If it's important to you to get a publication, seek tenured or busy scholars, and be bright and dedicated. But in general I'd recommend you do the best you can irrespective of the co-authorship possibilities, and look for a potential shared project in the next phase.

In the end, I don't think being a co-author on will greatly influence your chances of getting into a PhD program. The work will give you great experience, and prepare you to write a better dissertation, and eventually (if it is coauthored) look good on your graduating CV.

Like I said, however, the norms are still evolving. Does anyone have a different take? If so, please state your point of view (e.g. lead researcher, student, etc) as well.