Growing as a Research Professional

Setting Up Collaborations

Faculty Orientation

University of Tennessee

Adapted from Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty (2nd Edition)
Topics to be discussed:

- Necessity of Collaboration
- Setting up a Collaboration
- Ingredients of a Successful Collaboration
- Challenges for Beginning PIs
- International Collaborations
- When a Collaboration Stops Working
Collaboration
Varieties of Collaboration

• Collaborators: Researchers who share an interest in the outcome of a product – NOT service providers or customers

• Collaborations can vary greatly in scope, duration, and degree of formality

• When to Collaborate? Collaborations should occur only when you can be sure of seeing it through and fulfilling the obligations
Considering Collaboration

• Consider the following:
  – What exactly is being asked of me?
  – Is it necessary to move my own work forward?
  – Will it allow me to contribute something significant?
  – Do I really have what is needed? Do I have the time?
  – Can the collaboration be conducted efficiently? Is there funding?
  – Are our professional and scientific interests compatible? Can I rule out potential conflicts?
  – Will the person(s) be accessible to me and consistently interested?
Setting Up a Collaboration

- Some general guidelines apply:
  - Develop an outline of your proposal for the joint project – define in detail how each of you can complement the other
  - Send an e-mail – describe your research in general terms and ask for the opportunity for a conversation
  - You should convince the potential collaborator that:
    - You have the expertise needed
    - He/she is the best possible collaborator for the project
    - Both of you stand to benefit
    - The whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts
Setting up a Collaboration (cont.)

- Be informed about the potential collaborator’s work

- The informal Collaboration Agreement
  a detailed written summary of the joint research plan – should include:
    - The purpose of the collaboration
    - The scope of work
    - The expected contribution and financial responsibilities of each contributor
    - Milestones
    - Reporting obligations
    - Expectations about authorship
Setting up a Collaboration (cont.)

• The formal Collaboration Agreement
  – Formal; a legally binding written agreement
  – Often necessary for collaborations involving a commercial entity or a commercial application in which a patent is an expected outcome
  – In these cases, consult with the appropriate officers at UT
Successful Collaborations

• Communication
  – Keep communication open and frequent
  – Set up a fixed schedule of meetings

• Expectations for Authorship
  – Discuss expectations for authorship before a collaboration begins
  – Agree to revisit authorship as publication nears; the relative contributions of different participants often changes from original vision
  – If the data can be published, immediately discuss publication plans
Successful Collaborations

- Pursuing Patents
  - File before the work is presented publicly or published
  - Joint intellectual property
International Collaborations

• Communication
  – Keep communication open and frequent
  – Set up a fixed schedule of meetings

• International collaborations can be worthwhile, but keep in mind:
  – How much travel will be required; what costs are involved (money and time)?
  – Is travel to this country safe?
  – How good are the channels of long-distance communication?
  – Do I understand the other culture well enough to communicate about scientific matters?
International Collaborations

- Do I know the language of my potential collaborators?
- Do they have a good oral and written command of my language?
- In what language will the papers be published?
- What are the country’s customs regarding publishing and authorship?
- Is the lab adequately equipped and supported by the country’s infrastructure?
Failing Collaborations

• Collaborations can fail for various reasons:
  – One part loses interest or develops other priorities
  – Illness or family problems hinder someone’s progress
  – Key personnel move on or become uninvolved
  – Scientific results are not forthcoming, and the project simply stalls
  – Honest disagreements arise about the plan, finances, or authorship
  – One or both parties behave badly
Failing Collaborations

• How to protect yourself in these cases:
  – Open up communication immediately
  – If a situation can be fixed, do so
  – If a collaborator has lost all interest or you really don’t get along, back out
  – Do not be discouraged by an unsuccessful collaboration