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Bureaucratic plagiarism

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies four types of failure to ascribe authorship accurately in college administrations: institutional anonymity, and three types of nominal authorship – ghost-written, rubber stamp and nominal direction. It argues that these failures to ascribe authorship accurately is a problem for the good operation of college bureaucracies as well as being a problem of principle and internal consistency. The paper concludes by proposing non disruptive ways of acknowledging authorship in colleges' administrations.

Introduction

In his remarks at a new members of Congress program former Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers (2004) observed: 'Most of what your office does, most of the constituents who interact with your office, most of the letters that are sent out under your signature, most or many of the votes that you cast, and a significant number of the statements that you make are not, in fact, going to be authored by you.'

Of course, the same is true of college presidents and other senior administrators. Most senior academic administrators' nominal authorship – let's not use the inflammatory pejorative 'plagiarism' for now – is of three types: ghost-written, rubber stamp and nominal direction. All are pervasive, they are problematic, yet are easily remedied.

Types of failure to ascribe authorship accurately

The most egregious form of bureaucratic plagiarism is nominal authorship which is commonly of three types: ghost-written, rubber stamp and nominal direction. Ghost-writers are used mostly by college presidents. Many of their formal speeches such as their state of the university addresses, freshman and commencement addresses, remarks at openings and speeches in honour of distinguished faculty, alumni and major donors are substantially ghost-written by a speech writer. Many presidents' regular columns in internal newsletters are ghost-written by a staff writer in the college's public affairs office. The nominal author might change a phrase in a text or *ad lib* incidental remarks in delivering a speech, but often not enough to warrant even joint authorship of the piece.

The rubber stamp is now anachronistic in wealthy countries, but the term still evokes the *pro forma* correspondence we all receive – by e-mail as much as through the post these days – 'personally' inviting us to a function, asking us to complete a questionnaire, soliciting donations and thanking us for our contribution. Many come from the college president, but others come from a variety of other academic and administrative officials. The nominal author may have glanced over a draft, but otherwise often has contributed little to the correspondence over their signature and may not be aware even of its recipients.

The third type of nominal authorship common in a modern college is the discussion paper, policy proposal or proposed procedure that is issued under a senior administrator's name and with their authority, but without their substantial contribution to the text. There is no problem with statements issued by an official as required by the college's internal laws. Offers of

appointments must be issued by the director of human resources, compensation formally authorised by the dean of college, internal grants authorised by the vice provost for research and invoices issued by the director of finance. These are clearly statements of the relevant office by its head.

The problem is with papers that contain analyses and proposals of some originality and worth that are mainly directed to stimulating reflection, provoking discussion, inviting responses or enjoining consensus. They might be a review of the college's recent past and a discussion of the issues that confront it; a paper discussing the college's options for response to the Education Department's plan to change student financial aid conditions; or a paper proposing methods for dealing with grade inflation or student plagiarism. Many of these papers aren't written by their putative author, and some with only their nominal direction and guidance, yet they are ascribed authorship like the honorary authorship granted to some heads of research laboratories.

Perhaps least offensive but most common is the failure to ascribe authorship that arises from institutional anonymity rather than incorrect ascription of authorship. This commonly occurs with the college's web site, annual report, student prospectus, college guide, and numerous other publications that appear anonymously under a college or department imprint. Yet they all had an author, an editor, a graphic designer and photographers whose contributions are largely overlooked without proper acknowledgement.

But is it a problem?

These types of nominal authorship would be caught by most colleges' proscription of plagiarism, almost all of which are directed against students, and also by their rules against research misconduct. Senior administrators' sanctioning and indeed promotion of nominal authorship that advantages them thereby seems hypocritical, or at least gives students a poor example. As one student in a study reported by Brian Martin (1994) said, 'If the President can use a ghostwriter, why can't I?' While most cases may be readily distinguished, as Christopher S Hawley (1984) observed, using one standard for college students and another for college officials at the very least imposes a rather perverse situational ethics on the whole idea of literary honesty.

Nominal authorship also overstates senior administrators' span and reach, their power and their contribution. They appear almost superhuman – certainly more productive and intelligent than you or me – in being actively involved in so many technical areas in such depth. This encourages us to place far too much emphasis on the president and other senior administrators, as if the college's whole future rested on the performance of a few key individuals. Some leaders are better than others, of course, but few warrant the extravagant praise, credit and pay that many are granted.

Thirdly, as I have previously observed (Moodie, 1993), failure to ascribe authorship accurately within a bureaucracy leads to an unhealthy separation of accountability and responsibility. The originating authors for the several proposals, policies, statements and decisions issued under the authority of senior officials have no apparent responsibility for the actions they take, for they are never fully and openly acknowledged as the authors of the positions they state or the decisions they take. They rarely receive the public credit due to their work, but neither are they held accountable for inadequacies in their work. No bureaucracy has a perfect congruence of responsibility and accountability, but the widespread use of nominal authorship in many institutions separates accountability and responsibility too far.

Ready remedies

An obvious remedy for ghost-writing would be for senior administrators to author their own remarks and thus not to accept invitations to speak or contribute pieces unless they have enough time to prepare what they have to say. A senior colleague I put this to scoffed at the suggestion, but it is well known that Australia's second longest serving Prime Minister John Howard composes almost all of his speeches. And the former Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training Brendan Nelson made an ostentatious virtue of discarding the speech notes prepared for him by his department and speaking *ex tempore*. However, assuming that senior administrators continue to publish material prepared for them by subordinates an appropriate way should be found to acknowledge authorship. This should not offend the sensibilities of senior staff if it is going to have any chance of being adopted. As Brian Martin (1994) observed, if a president were to introduce a speech by saying, 'I'm now going to read a speech written by . . .,' this would not only reduce the president's aura and the status of the office, but also detract from the significance of the occasion. Similarly, if an important institutional policy proposal were openly acknowledged to be the work of junior staff, some might wonder why they weren't the ones launching and explaining it. Yet there are ways of appropriately recognising contributions without embarrassment.

Stanford University (2004) prefaces the text of some speeches delivered by its president with 'The following is the prepared text of a speech delivered by President John Hennessy. . .'. It would take only a minor modification to add that the text was prepared with the help of one or more named colleagues. I put at the foot of speeches I write for senior administrators an acknowledgement that the speech was based on notes prepared by Many press statements issued over the president's name indicate the originating author indirectly by giving them as the contact for further information.

Rubber stamp authorship was better although still not fully acknowledged by many bureaucracies when rubber stamps were common and correspondence and documents were produced by typewriter. A rule in these bureaucracies was to place at the foot of the document the initials of the actual author in capitals followed by a colon and the initials of the typist. This allowed a person within the bureaucracy at least to identify quickly the real author of the document and take any follow-up action directly with them rather than having to work through the nominal author. This practice fell away with the widespread adoption of easy word processing packages and desktop computers and printers which has resulted in most authors also producing their own typescript. It is often possible to find the real author of a Word document by examining its document properties or metadata, but this not widely known and in any case is hardly an adequate acknowledgement of authorship.

Nonetheless, a practice is developing that may result in a better acknowledgement of the real author of contemporary 'rubber-stamped' documents. Some of these documents have a statement towards the end of the document saying that further information may be obtained from or follow-up action conducted through a subordinate, who is often the real author and initiator of the document. If this practice becomes widespread and understood to indicate the real author of the document, it would be a useful convention for acknowledging authorship.

One possibility for acknowledging the real author of a document prepared under nominal direction is to report in the document that it 'was prepared by . . . under the direction of' the senior administrator. This has been systematised by the University of California, Los Angeles in its acknowledgement of the contributors to its academic policies. Thus, the report of an assessment of the academic climate for faculty at UCLA shows on its title page the members of the committee that commissioned the report, the members of faculty and staff who 'worked

closely with the committee' and colleagues who conducted focus groups for the report (UCLA, 2003). The general staff authors of UCLA's procedural manual for the review of proposals for academic programs and units are prominently acknowledged in an 'introductory note' on the verso of the title page (Crespo & Verhulst, 2003).

Institutional anonymity is readily corrected since it is more often due to oversight or inertia. Some institutions acknowledge the main contributors to annual reports and other formal publications with bibliographic details on the verso and many web pages now publish their content coordinator, authorising officer and web weaver. Thus at the foot of all MIT's corporate web pages the button 'About this site' leads browsers to a credits page acknowledging the people who designed and produced the site (Lisanti & Curran, no date).

These and other no doubt more suitable devices for each institution readily come to mind after a little reflection. Senior administrators may easily provide a salutary example to their college's teachers, researchers and students, and also thereby forestall the abuses of bureaucratic plagiarism.

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