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# Contribution, attribution and the allocation of intellectual property rights: economics versus agricultural economics

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## Abstract

In this paper, I compare several readily observable measures of intellectual property rights between agricultural economics—a discipline that attaches considerable importance to author order—and economics—a discipline that attaches little, if any, importance to author order. Specifically, I examine: (1) the incidence of coauthorship—i.e., the likelihood that an individual coauthors with others, (2) the extent of coauthorship—i.e., the number of authors listed on each *coauthored* paper, (3) the number of individuals thanked for contributing to the research being reported and (4) alphabetization of authorship for papers published in three top journals in each scientific discipline. I find statistically significant differences across-the-board. These differences suggest that interdisciplinary differences with respect to the relative importance attached to contribution affect the allocation of intellectual property rights in science. These findings are compelling because they demonstrate that the allocation of intellectual property rights and how the production of science is structured are related. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Coauthorship; Intellectual property rights; Priority; Contribution

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## 1. Introduction

There are considerable differences from one scientific discipline to another with respect to the importance attached to the order of authorship of scientific papers Engers et al. (1999). In certain disciplines, virtually no attention is paid to author order on multi-author papers. Author order is not questioned in the annual performance evaluation process during the promotion and tenure ordeal or when an individual is being considered for employment. The  $N$  authors listed alphabetically on a paper are assumed to have each contributed  $1/N$  to the paper. In other disciplines, by contrast, there is considerable

discussion among authors as to author order and well-established conventions regarding the listing of the senior author, laboratory director, graduate students, etc. There is a strong presumption that relative contribution is closely correlated with author order. Even if the authors are listed alphabetically, the first-listed is presumed to have been the ‘lead’ author with the most significant contribution, and so on by author. Anecdotally, one hears of serious rifts that have blasted apart professional collaborations because of disagreements over order of authorship.

The fact that not all scientific disciplines attach the same degree of importance to priority should have observable consequences for the assignment of intellectual property rights. In scientific disciplines where the importance of contribution is (not) recognized and appreciated, scholars should be relatively (un)willing to extend intellectual property rights to individuals who contribute to the production of science. In turn, differences in the allocation of intellectual property rights will influence the distribution of rewards across members of the relevant scientific community. To my knowledge, however, there has been virtually no empirical investigation of how interdisciplinary differences with respect to the importance attached to contribution affect the assignment of intellectual property rights in science.

In this paper, I compare several readily observable measures of intellectual property rights between agricultural economics—a discipline that attaches considerable importance to author order—and economics—a discipline that attaches little, if any, importance to author order. Specifically, I examine: (1) the incidence of coauthorship—i.e., the likelihood that an individual coauthors with others, (2) the extent of coauthorship—i.e., the number of authors listed on each *coauthored* paper, (3) the number of individuals thanked for contributing to the research being reported and (4) alphabetization of authorship for papers published in three top journals in each scientific discipline. I find statistically significant differences across-the-board. These differences suggest that interdisciplinary differences with respect to the relative importance attached to contribution affect the allocation of intellectual property rights in science. These findings are compelling because they demonstrate that the allocation of intellectual property rights and how the production of science is structured are related. Thus, comprehensive analysis of the latter requires consideration of the former.

## 2. Framing the hypotheses

To illustrate how priority of authorship matters to the allocation of intellectual property rights in a team production setting, let us suppose that on the average, 10 individuals contribute (in a variety of ways) to the production of science in economics and in agricultural economics with the ‘lead’ author in both cases responsible for 75% of the overall contribution. In agricultural economics where priority is valued highly, it is relatively costless for the lead author to list individuals other than himself as coauthors because readers correctly will infer from the fact that he is the first-listed author that he is the major contributor and the others are minor contributors. Economics, by contrast, is different. Since priority has little or no value, it is relatively costly for the lead author to list individuals other than himself as coauthors because readers incorrectly infer that all named

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