

Handling a Case of Cheating

Some years ago, I was a teaching assistant in an upper level, undergraduate, biology course. I presided over the last lab of the year, and when it came time to grade the lab reports, I came across two papers that were strikingly similar. When I put them side by side, I could see that not every word was the same, but each sentence of every paragraph of either paper was virtually identical in meaning to the other. While students were not disallowed from studying together, their lab papers were not a group project. So, these virtually identical papers looked like a clear violation of the rules, i.e., "cheating."

I went to my faculty advisor who agreed with me that cheating doubtlessly occurred. What happened next surprised me. Without directly saying so but through rather vague phrases and overall demeanor, my advisor made it clear that carrying through on a disciplinary action would be extremely time consuming. She asked me what "type" of students these two were. I told her that they had done well all semester and that none of their other work appeared plagiarized. She gave me no explicit directive but advised me to "take everything into account" and then make my decision. There was no question in my mind that she would rather I take a softer approach to a disciplinary action.

I then set up a meeting with the students. They did not admit to cheating but did say they worked together. After talking with them and thinking about my supervisor's ambivalent response, I decided not to carry through with the punishment. I gave each a slightly lower grade and the matter, with the full endorsement of my advisor, stopped there.

My conscience has bothered me ever since. I'm not exactly sure why I took the easier course because I do believe my advisor would have backed me had I proceeded along the formal, disciplinary route. Or so I think. Nevertheless, instead of doing what I thought and felt was right and just, I caved in to my intuitions and maybe my fears. Am I wrong in placing some blame on my supervisor? I trusted that once her suspicions were confirmed, she would categorically endorse a disciplinary action against the students. But I was wrong. And to this day I regret that I went against my moral instincts and did something that was more convenient than just.

Expert Opinion

The failure of an instructor to respond appropriately to instances of suspected cheating or violations of an institution's honor code is certainly ethically troublesome. In the present case, there is strong evidence that the students violated an explicit class directive, i.e., that each student was to compose his or her lab report independently from everyone else. In violating this rule, the students unfairly enhanced their advantage over other students by being able to exploit and use one another's resources (e.g., notes, ideas, sources, etc.). The advantage that accrued to them was unfair to the rest of the class and so was a violation of justice. Also, by receiving a modest slap on the wrists by way of a slightly lower grade, the students might be motivated to cheat again,

but to be more careful next time. Consequently, the failure to report this incident to, say, the institution's honor council might reinforce these students' tendency toward immoral behavior in the future—which bodes badly for whatever profession or career they enter.

Also, the same “reinforcement” contingency applies to the teaching assistant. His or her failure to report this incident might heighten the probability of a similar, future failure where the teaching assistant—perhaps now a junior professor—just lowers the grade and walks away. (Indeed, there probably is some requirement at the teaching assistant's institution that obligates faculty to report suspicions of cheating. Consequently, the teaching assistant's failure to do so constitutes a moral infraction by way of a breach of his or her institutional obligations.)

Last, the teaching assistant's advisor cannot escape moral culpability since she gave positive but morally misguided cues to the teaching assistant to act in an excessively lenient fashion. Indeed, whereas the dilemma contributor places “some blame” on the advisor, we are inclined to think that the advisor perhaps bears the greatest moral onus because of her failure to role model—to a doubtlessly impressionable teaching assistant—a strong moral stand on reporting this cheating incident.

Of course, cases like this one always present factors that tempt one to take what seems to be the “easier” course. For example, the teaching assistant might not have felt empowered enough to take the matter forward, especially once he or she formed the distinct impression from the advisor that doing so might not be wise. Or perhaps the teaching assistant wanted to disbelieve the idea that the students willfully cheated and was impressed during the interview with them that the students didn't appear bent on malevolence or dishonesty, e.g., as tokened by their having been “good” students up to that point. Of course, there is nothing pleasant that issues from the kind of honor code investigation that the teaching assistant is contemplating. And that thought is, in and by itself, enough to considerably discourage its undertaking.

Oddly, though, both the advisor and the teaching assistant committed a decisional error or misjudgment. At most institutions, the heavy lifting of such an investigation would not fall on either of them but rather on the honor council—or some reasonable facsimile—and its related personnel (e.g., deans, faculty advisors, etc.). In other words, after the teaching assistant decided that cheating probably occurred and secured the agreement of the advisor, the teaching assistant should have been encouraged to take the matter to the honor council, whereupon the matter would largely be removed from both the teaching assistant's and the advisor's authority. Once the matter goes to an honor council, what would likely occur is a preliminary investigation; then a decision on whether or not to refer the case for a hearing; and if yes, convening the hearing and handing down a decision, e.g., a grade of failure for the course that would be recorded on the students' permanent transcript, or a period of suspension, or dismissal from the university, etc.¹ While the students would probably have the support of an ombudsman and the availability of an appeal mechanism, the point is that the teaching assistant's and advisor's greatest fear, i.e., the onerous burden that reporting the cheating would impose on them, is probably highly exaggerated.

Once the teaching assistant reports the incident, his or her involvement in the investigation would probably be limited to providing evidence in the preliminary investigation and at the hearing. And given the nature of this case, that evidential offering would probably not be terribly burdensome or time-consuming.

By failing to go in that direction, however, the teaching assistant reports that “my conscience has bothered me ever since.” And that is understandable and, one would think, a good thing as we would not want the teaching assistant to be blasé about his or her moral lapse. Had the teaching assistant and advisor opted for reporting the incident to the honor council, there would have been moral closure on this incident. Yes, the investigation and probable hearing would have exposed the cheating students to a very unpleasant experience whose end result could conceivably have marred their career trajectories and aspirations. But much better that happen than 1) dismiss or ignore extant institutional rules whose moral justification is unimpeachable and inarguable, and 2) chance that these students will be inspired to practice more serious acts of plagiarism and moral turpitude in the future.

Some readers of this opinion might argue that the investigation and hearing processes can invite much more harm to the teaching assistant and his or her advisor than is suggested here. For example, it is quite possible that the students’ parents will respond with a pronounced attack upon the teaching assistant, his or her advisor, and the university itself. That attack might involve threats of litigation and even physical harm.

But no profession is risk free, and we do not make that statement lightly. If academic honor and integrity is to be a moral reality on university campuses rather than righteous sounding rhetoric, the test will come with cases like this one. Most importantly, institutions need to have strong, explicit, and *uniform* policies (i.e., adopted and implemented uniformly by all the schools or colleges within the university’s system) on managing such cases. And they obviously need to do as much as is reasonably possible to protect the professoriate from harmful repercussions and insure fairness to everyone involved.

References

1. Honor Code of Emory College. Available at http://www.college.emory.edu/current/standards/pdf/honor_code_print.pdf.