



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

## Confidentiality Concerns

### Year

1998

### Description

This case discusses dynamics of academic departments specifically the complexities of confidentiality, trust, responsibility of leaders and the student-mentor relationship.

### Body

In their second year of graduate school, Susie Schmidt and Bob Bernhard took the written portion of the Ph.D. preliminary exam. The students had started graduate school together and had planned to take the exam from the start of their graduate career. They spent the summer studying and grilling each other on the exam material. A week after taking the exam, Schmidt and Bernhard were comparing notes on how they had worked the problems and guessing whether they had passed or failed. While they were talking, Bernhard confided that Dr. Maxwell, his adviser and the Ph.D. committee head, had told him that Schmidt had done very poorly on one of the five exam problems. Bernhard had thought little about Maxwell 's comment since Maxwell often disclosed confidential departmental information and gossip as they played racquetball together. Schmidt became very upset in reaction to his news. Bernhard was surprised by her reaction. He asked her not to say anything about it, since Maxwell would know who had told her.

Aware of the departmental policy of disclosing results only to students who had taken the exam , Schmidt felt that Bernhard should not have been told about her

results at all, and certainly not before she herself had heard her results. She broke her promise to Bernhard and told her adviser, Dr. Campbell, what Maxwell had confided to Bernhard, without revealing where she had heard the information. She asked Campbell to keep what she had told him confidential. Much to Schmidt's surprise, Campbell seemed to dismiss the whole incident, remarking, "Maxwell has always had a loose tongue, and always will. There's nothing we can do about that." Schmidt, feeling that she had been failed by two people she saw as her mentors, was reluctant to pursue the matter with the department head, for fear he would also dismiss her concerns with little thought. Several weeks later, both Schmidt and Bernhard were notified that they had passed the preliminary exam.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are Maxwell's responsibilities as a mentor to the graduate students in the department? Did he fulfill his obligations as a mentor to Schmidt? to Bernhard?
2. Does Bernhard have an obligation to report Maxwell's comments about the exam? If so, whom should he tell? Was Maxwell wrong to put Bernhard in this situation? Does your answer change if Bernhard had not reported Maxwell's comment to Schmidt?
3. Should Schmidt have notified her adviser? What moral issues should she have considered before doing so? Would it have been better for her to notify her adviser after the exam results were out to avoid putting her adviser in an uncomfortable situation?
4. What should Campbell do after Schmidt has told him about the situation? Should Campbell tell the department head about Maxwell's breach of confidentiality? If he does, what should the department head do? What can Schmidt do if her adviser doesn't see anything wrong with Maxwell's behavior?

## **Notes**

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**Resource Type**

Case Study / Scenario

**Parent Collection**

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**Topics**

Collaboration

Mentors and Trainees

**Discipline(s)**

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