



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Final Exam

Year

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Description

This scenario highlights potential dilemmas encountered by postdoctoral fellows in a research setting. How should issues of possible cheating be resolved when no clear evidence supports the claim?

Body

Part 1

Zilch is an assistant professor in a tenure-track position. Her initial tenure review is scheduled to take place at the end of the academic year. She currently mentors and advises five Ph.D. students. Two of her five students recently took the final examination for a traditionally difficult course required in their graduate program. The students' exam was a two-day, take-home exam consisting of three complex questions. The sixteen students taking the exam were permitted to share resource materials, but they were not allowed to work in groups or discuss any questions. When grading the exam, the course instructor, Bell, noted that two students, Josh and Robert, had identical, word-for-word responses to one of the questions. When the two students were confronted, both denied any wrongdoing. Bell gave both Josh and Robert a failing grade on the exam because of cheating, but agreed to pass each with the minimum passing grade for the course.

While Josh accepted the grading decision, Robert appealed. The university's appeals process stipulated that all graduate disputes were to be managed at the graduate college level at the discretion of the college dean. If the dispute remained unresolved, university policies formalized the process before the student senate and a mixed faculty/student jury. In response to Robert's appeal, the graduate college dean decided to convene a review committee to investigate Robert's and Josh's case.

The committee consisted of the graduate college dean and an associate professor in the same graduate department, both of whom knew Bell and Zilch personally. During the review, Robert pointed out that he had an "A" in the course prior to the final, answered the disputed question based on his research experience, and left his final exam on his office desk the night before it was turned in. Josh acknowledged that he had a "C" before the exam, but he stated that his answer was appropriate for his knowledge base, and that he, too, had left his exam in the office overnight. The committee noted that Josh and Robert shared the same office and had identical key access. The committee decided that guilt could not be adequately placed and upheld the instructor's prior grading decision.

In arriving at their final decision, the review committee informally discussed their opinions with Bell and Zilch. The committee strongly felt that only Josh had cheated on the exam, but they could not discover sufficient evidence to prove this theory and justify official action. Bell was satisfied with the committee's disciplinary action, but Zilch disagreed, stating that punishing both students was not justified.

Discussion Questions

1. Were Josh and Robert treated fairly by Bell (instructor)? Explain.
2. Were Josh and Robert treated fairly by the review committee? Explain.
3. Was it fair to punish both students?
4. What were Zilch's roles and responsibilities as an adviser during and after the investigation?
5. What are the advantages/disadvantages of allowing a single dean to have authoritative discretion over disputes such as these?

Part 2

After the review committee dissolved, Josh, Robert and Zilch were called for individual meetings with the graduate college dean. During the informal "off-the-record" meetings, the dean informed Josh that the review committee "really knew that Josh was guilty" and recommended that Josh learn to "fly right." Robert was advised to continue to "maintain his integrity." The dean suggested to Zilch that she "creatively" remove Josh from her research group as part of an effort to dissuade Josh from completing his graduate education at the university.

Zilch was told that once Josh left the graduate program, Robert's disputed grade would be changed to an "A," records regarding the dispute would be eradicated from his file, and the issue would be completely resolved.

While Zilch felt very pressured by her administrative superior, she did not act to facilitate Josh's removal from the program. Nevertheless, Josh secured a job and left the program with an intermediate-level degree within six months after the incident. Shortly after Josh's departure, Zilch learned that Robert's transcript was administratively updated to reflect an "A" for the previously disputed course.

Discussion Questions

6. Were the dean's actions appropriate? Why or why not?
7. What were Zilch's options when confronted with the dean's request? What should she have done?
8. What ethical problem(s) did Zilch face?
9. Should Zilch have reported the actions of the dean or the review committee for investigation?

Notes

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