



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Making the Grade

Year

2002

Description

This case discusses understanding the complexities of interpersonal, professional, academic and social responsibilities in ethical decision making by discussing the subjects of plagiarism, authorship on the internet, and how to be fair with international student's understanding of referencing material used in research.

Body

Three professors team teach a 15-student graduate course (Dr. Whelan, a tenured senior faculty member, and Dr. Jihvraj and Dr. Brady, two junior faculty members). The only requirement for a grade in the course is a final paper on key course topics. Whelan arranged the course curriculum and does some of the instruction, but Jihvraj and Brady are responsible for reviewing and grading each paper. A student turns in his paper for a final grade. Jihvraj feels uncomfortable with the paper and does not assign a final grade.

In discussing the paper with Brady, Jihvraj points out that there are no references and a few of the paragraphs have different tenses. He does a web search with selected paragraphs of the student's paper and finds two online documents that match the student's paper. Apparently, the student has pasted sections of two different documents together. Jihvraj remembers reading articles in separate scientific journals and his suspicions are confirmed when he finds the articles and compares them to the student's work.

Jihvraj and Brady look at the school's penalties and policies handbook for some guidance. When a faculty member has information that a student has violated academic integrity in a course or program for which he or she is responsible and determines that a violation has occurred, the faculty member should inform the student and impose an appropriate sanction. A faculty member may make any one or a combination of the following responses to the infractions:

- warning without further penalty,
- requiring rewriting of a paper containing plagiarized material,
- lowering of a paper or project grade by one full grade or more,
- giving a failing grade on a paper containing plagiarized material,
- giving a failing grade on any examination in which cheating occurred,
- lowering a course grade by one full grade or more.

Faculty members can take an additional step of reporting the case to the university's judiciary board.

Further investigation by the two faculty members reveals that the student holds a medical degree from a different country and came to the department on a renowned international fellowship. The student's faculty adviser is Whelan.

Jihvraj and Brady discuss the option of having the student rewrite the paper but they are concerned about being fair to the 14 other graduate students. They decide to give the student a lower grade of "C" with the recommendation that he retake the course.

Whelan is very upset that his student is to receive a "C." He calls for a meeting with the dean. Jihvraj and Brady point out that plagiarism is punishable by expulsion if formal charges are brought to the judiciary board and that they have elected not to press formal charges in light of the total situation. The student refuses to admit that his paper is plagiarized, as it is a normal practice in his country to use material without referencing the sources. He also feels that he is being treated unfairly and unprofessionally.

The junior professors know that Whelan is a former department chair and that he has considerable political clout, but they feel that their decision is sound and just. Brady is even contemplating resigning publicly if their decision is undermined.

The dean listens and concludes that the junior professors' decision should stand.

Discussion Questions

1. Does it matter that this international student is unfamiliar with typical U. S. university policies?
2. Where is the line drawn for adherence to the rules and regulations on references?
3. Was the student being treated unfairly and unprofessionally? If so, how? What about the other 14 students in the course?
4. Did Jihvraj and Brady exercise all options in arriving at their decision?
5. Should they have consulted Whelan before giving the student a "C?"
6. Who would be most affected by this outcome? the dean, funding agency, instructors, student, school?
7. How would a potential backlash change the final decision? Potential problems may arise with the funding agency that sponsored the student and their relationship with the university and the future of the junior faculty when they go up for tenure.

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries*, Volume 6, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2002.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 6, 2002

Topics

Plagiarism

Research Misconduct

Discipline(s)

International Perspectives

Research Ethics

Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

Authoring Institution

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)