

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Testing by a CO-OP Student"

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I

Co-op student Jack is given an important test to do and produces results that are too good to be believable; evidently he has faked the data. XYZ relies on Jack's results without confirming them and the consequence is that the tested component fails in operation, bringing down the units with it. Apart from the obvious point about faking data, the only ethical issue I see in this case is the questionable decision to assign an important test to a co-op student, and then to accept his results unconfirmed; but given the constraints on time in the department, this seems like a decision within management competence, and doesn't necessarily raise any ethical problem, even if it turns out to have been a mistake. No health or safety problems occur as a result of the units' failure, so the company is harming only itself by its loose supervision. Perhaps co-op student Jack ought to have been supervised more closely (especially in view of the importance of the project), but this too is judgment rather than ethics, and Jack's good record does not indicate supervision is required.

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Jack's supervisor relates his worry about Jack to Jack's professor. In general, before an accusation is made against someone to a third party, that person ought to be confronted with the charges and have an opportunity to explain himself. However the conversation with Dr. Thompson was presumably strictly confidential, and nothing is said to indicate that the questions asked by Tom were out of line. Tom is unsure of how to proceed and wants to discuss the question with someone who knows Jack better; also, Jack is no longer under Tom's jurisdiction. So if something is to be done, the ball has to be passed to the University. Further Tom's interest seems to be not punitive but correctional, since he puts his inquiries about Tom into a context of ethical training at the University (this could be a smoke screen of course). Since Jack has no current association with XYZ, the company is in the position of a victim of Jack's wrongdoing, not a prosecutor entrusted with dispensing justice.

For these reasons, Tom's move in talking to Dr. Thompson seems warranted. It's not clear what purpose would be served if Tom were to talk to Jack. Jack is now the University's problem. However if Dr. Thompson subsequently talks to Jack, Tom might be called in to produce the dubious data and explain his suspicions. What else happens depends on what comes before. First it's necessary to understand why Jack faked the data (if he did), and to make sure that Jack understands that doing so was wrong. Based on the information in the case, there's no reason to exclude Jack from XYZ in the future, assuming this problem gets cleared up and Jack's future trustworthiness is established, though such a reason might emerge after discussion with him.

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In hindsight, supervision of students is obviously not too satisfactory.

On the other hand, the department was busy and supervising a student whose previous work had been well done might not have seemed the best way to use time. Perhaps all co-op students should be closely supervised as a matter of course; I don't know enough about what they know or what they're supposed to do. Or

perhaps Tom's initial response, to suggest that all students take ethics and be made to understand the importance of honest data, is the best solution.

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So should State put in an ethics course? Yes. See this case for a reason why.