

Author's Commentary on "Making the Grade"

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Making the Grade

This case was designed to introduce a situation where the many roles, responsibilities and demands of students, advisers and faculty can be revealed in simple conflicts. In an environment that purports to protect academic integrity and scholarship, the discussants are provoked to consider a number of different outcomes and situations in their examination of the ethical conflict. This multifaceted presentation may facilitate a better understanding of the complexities of interpersonal, professional, academic and social responsibilities in ethical decision making. This commentary will approach the discussion and analysis from that viewpoint.

Of primary concern is the decision on the subject of plagiarism. The first two questions strike at the heart of this discussion. Did the student knowingly plagiarize a paper? Was this action wrong, and from whose perspective? The case also provides an opportunity to address the differing rules that apply to international students vs. domestic students. U. S. institutions of higher learning typically utilize similar policies for academic integrity and research. The internet has broadened the scope of research and education throughout the world. When authorship on the internet becomes questionable, academia confronts a dilemma in the quest to separate valuable and reliable sources from the vast information pool that is the World Wide Web.

Also unique in this case is the student's coming from a society where the normal practice is not referencing material. The professors are now forced to factor in potential cultural differences that are in direct conflict with any decision based on policies and procedures. Jihvraj and Brady are also concerned with their responsibilities as faculty members. Some schools do not place such decisions in the hands of professors due to potential for liability, etc. However in this situation, they decide to consult the University Handbook for guidance. They are presented with

five or six choices on how to deal with this situation. It is important to analyze how well they explored each of the options available to them. Should they have involved the Judicial Board? Would that have been a significant and important turning point?

Another important consideration is the issue of fairness. Fairness paints a picture with a broad brush as it involves a number of different factors. Being fair and being ethical may not be synonymous despite how often the word "fair" is used in this situation. What is fair to the student? Should he be given an opportunity to rewrite the paper or provide his references, or should he have to do nothing at all? Would that be a fair and favorable outcome? He feels that while he is a student, he is also a professional and that his treatment should take account of his status. Professional courtesy is not being extended, and there may be further implications from that viewpoint.

What is fair to the other students in the class? Their involvement in the conflict, while seemingly minimal, carries some weight. Graduate school is an investment in education, which implies that all three professors have an underlying obligation to treat all of their students equally and without bias. How should this obligation be approached in this situation? Further exploration may even illustrate that being fair may not be the *ethical* objective in this case.

Dr. Whelan's involvement was also critically important. Would his inclusion in the decision making have changed the outcome? When exactly should that inclusion occur? Where do his responsibilities ultimately lie? They may be with his student, his class or the rest of his faculty team. The fact that he is the senior faculty member of the group and a former department chairperson brings up conflicts due to potential power struggle, both personally and interpersonally. There is also the question of bias in his position. He is only contesting the decision on the grade and not on the retaking of the course. Therefore while it seems that he isn't protesting the issue of plagiarism, it is understood at least that there is no benefit to have his advisee receive a C grade.

The last few questions are directed at examining the impact of potential outcomes in arriving at a decision. Who is to gain or lose the most from the outcome? Response from the funding agency of the international fellowship may be complicated; the agency might take issue with the maltreatment of the student. As a result the school may suffer a backlash, jeopardizing future participation or funding.

Whelan's protest is also problematic for Jihvraj and Brady. As junior faculty, they face the challenge of achieving tenure. Crossing an influential segment of the faculty can hinder their achievement of that goal in addition to the potential for added strain in the team-taught course. The dean is faced with handling faculty dissension, possible student protest and a potential problem with the funding agency. The student faces the possibility of a stain on his record in addition to being labeled as a cheat. Retaking a course may also have an impact on his responsibilities for maintaining the fellowship.

Many different courses of action may have been used in this case, each carrying its own significant set of outcomes. It is the goal of the reviewer/observer/discussant to employ a careful approach to addressing the problem(s) and ultimately arrive at a solution that meshes social and academic responsibility with sound ethical practice.