

Author's Commentary on "How Much Help Is Too Much?"

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While this case presents many ethical questions, the problems stem from two fundamental issues: responsibility and trust. I make this assertion because an underlying assumption in the academic community is that each professor and student will be responsible in his/her respective position. Similarly trust has been established between the faculty and the outside community, both scientific and lay.

If we focus first on the responsibility issue, we need to be careful in how we approach the problem. At first glance many would say that the responsibility lies with Dr. Brown. It is apparent that Brown has committed a number of gross violations. He has given an unfair advantage to his student on exams in addition to falsifying authorship to a peer-reviewed journal.

There can be no doubt that both of these acts are egregious, but to place blame solely on his shoulders is to miss the more pervasive, and more troubling problems. As culpable as Brown is, James and the other faculty members are also responsible for the situation. James is responsible for letting his professor know when his studies aren't going well. Rather than be proactive, or even reactive, James exhibits an apathetic attitude. This attitude creates a situation in which Brown must either allow James to fail or take extraordinary steps to ensure his success. And while these circumstances do not mitigate Brown's actions, they certainly provide a backdrop for them.

More importantly, the faculty's failure to provide honest criticism to Brown and James is the worst violation of responsibility. By failing to address Brown's actions with respect to the exams, and then by passing James, the faculty is creating an atmosphere in which merit and work no longer predominate in student evaluation. The faculty's failure of responsibility is dangerous because it creates a situation in which students can be awarded a degree they did not earn. The obvious result is

that unskilled, and perhaps incompetent, students are released into the general community.

Coupled with the issue of responsibility is the issue of trust. All students who matriculate assume that they will be treated equally and that the requirements for graduation will be uniform. When Brown creates a differential, he is not only being irresponsible to the university, but he is violating other students' trust in him and the faculty. In addition, industrial employers trust that the university will teach students a certain skill set that they can utilize. When Brown violates this trust, he endangers other students by creating a situation where they may not be hired given James's performance.

Many more issues are at work in the case. The discussion questions should facilitate the exploration of some of these questions. However, I would argue that the case at its heart is an investigation into the expectations of the graduate experience. Also very important are questions about what actions are appropriate to ensure that those receiving degrees have mastered a skill set and are responsible and trustworthy enough to be employed.