



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Faculty Responsibilities and Student Rights: A Case Study

Author(s)

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Body

Speakers: **Narrator; Sarah;** the **Undergraduate Chorus** (at least 3 voices, ideally 4); **Alex; Bob; Christina.**

NARRATOR: The setting is the Institute for the Social Sciences,^{[1](#)} an interdisciplinary program in which faculty members and students from all branches of education and the social sciences can work together. It's midterm week, and tensions are running high. First-year graduate students are expecting to hear whether they will have a teaching assistantship next year. Second-year graduate students are about to receive the results from their master's exams. TA's are preparing to give or grade midterm exams and midterm papers. Advanced students are preparing for their comprehensive exams. Doctoral candidates, indifferent to the rhythms of the academic year, are either slowly reading books vaguely related to their dissertation topics or manically writing, discarding, and editing. In the Institute's TA office, Sarah is grading the essay portion of the midterm exam for S101, a mammoth course, when the telephone rings.

SARAH: Hello?

UNDERGRADUATE CHORUS: What did I get on the midterm?

SARAH: You'll get your grade next week in class.

NARRATOR: As Sarah hangs up the telephone, Alex, a doctoral candidate with an instructorship, enters. He glances out the window and speaks.

ALEX: There's old Bob talking to Professor G.

SARAH: How long has Bob been around, anyway?

ALEX: He was ABD when I got here and finally finished two years ago. He applies for hundreds of jobs every year and he's only had one interview.

SARAH: Quite a loser, huh?

ALEX: He's actually quite bright, but his social skills aren't what they could be. The real problem is that there aren't many jobs.

SARAH: That's not what they told me when I applied.

ALEX: Don't believe everything you hear. Besides, Bob has it hard because his topic was so narrow and kind of, well, weird.

SARAH: Not many people do what he does, huh?

ALEX: Two. And they're both right here. If Professor D or Professor R drops dead, Bob has a pretty good shot at a job; otherwise he'll have to hang out for five years or so until Professor D retires.

NARRATOR: The second telephone rings.

ALEX: Hello?

UNDERGRADUATE CHORUS: Will it be on the exam?

ALEX: Everything will be on the exam.

NARRATOR: As Alex hangs up the telephone, Bob enters.

BOB: You'll never believe what Professor G just said to me.

SARAH: Professor G -- he's the guy who's everyone's buddy, right?

ALEX: Yeah, he's always, "We're all friends here. We all really agree on this."

BOB: That's him. I was making small talk about how stressful it is to assign grades and he said, "Oh, I always give my graduate students A's. Otherwise, they just come to my office and cry."

SARAH: That's outrageous! How can he get away with that?

ALEX: He's at the top of his field.

NARRATOR: Just then, Christina, a second-year student, enters. She's visibly upset.

SARAH: Oh, Christina, did you hear about your master's exam?

CHRISTINA: Yes, but that's not why I'm upset. Well, it is, but it isn't. Look at this.

NARRATOR: Christina shows the others the comments on her MA exam.

SARAH: Ouch.

ALEX: Those are some pretty harsh comments.

BOB: Yeah, Professor B is always like that.

SARAH: How do you know it's B?

BOB: Her handwriting.

CHRISTINA: And look at the grade!

SARAH: High pass!

BOB: She always does that. Professor B can't stand to see a good exam go by without getting in some licks.

ALEX: I can see why you're upset, Christina. Those comments are insulting.

CHRISTINA: Oh, that doesn't really matter. I mean, it's bad, but what has me steamed is Chuck.

SARAH: He took the exam too, right?

CHRISTINA: Yes. We were standing there looking at our comments, and I'll all depressed because mine are so bad and Chuck is all elated because his are so good. Then I see I have a high pass, and Chuck sees that he failed!

SARAH: They said no one ever fails the master's exam!

BOB: One every three years or so.

CHRISTINA: He was crushed. After reading those comments he was joking that they'd skip the M.A. and give him a Ph.D. right off the bat.

SARAH: That's really cruel.

NARRATOR: The first telephone rings.

SARAH: Hello?

UNDERGRADUATE CHORUS: Can I have an extension on the paper?

SARAH: No extensions.

NARRATOR: While Sarah was on the telephone, Alex had picked up the latest issue of an important scholarly journal.

ALEX: Bob, take a look at this table of contents.

BOB: Hey, I didn't know Professor S was interested in that.

ALEX: Wasn't that the topic of the master's thesis Kim wrote in Texas?

BOB: It sure was. It's all she talked about for the first year after she transferred here. She was hoping to get back to it some day and publish it.

ALEX: Look, Professor S thanks Kim in the acknowledgments but doesn't cite her MA thesis, or anything else she wrote.

BOB: And she misspells her name in the acknowledgment!

SARAH: I guess I'll never work with Professor S.

ALEX: Oh, there are worse things than having your idea stolen.

BOB: That's right. Professor S is actually pretty supportive. Most of her students get teaching assistantships. If you don't like surprises, stay away from G and B. G always acts friendly until orals, then he zaps you, big time. It can take people years to recover. And B is so insecure that she's always undermining her students like she did to Chuck. She's even worse when she helps someone write a grant proposal.

ALEX: Then there's Professor O. He chaired my master's committee. When I gave him my thesis to read before the defense, he gave it back just covered with red ink. But it was all copy editing stuff. There wasn't one substantive comment about what I'd done. NARRATOR: The second telephone rings.

ALEX: Hello?

UNDERGRADUATE CHORUS: I want to leave early for Spring Break. Is it all right if I miss class?

ALEX: You know my attendance policy. That's your decision.

NARRATOR: As Alex hangs up, Sarah sighs.

SARAH: I wish the faculty would take us seriously.

Questions for discussion

1. Identify the ethical issues presented in the case.
 2. Which ethical issues seem to be the most serious? Which are the least serious?
 3. What, realistically, can the students do about the faculty behavior?
- 1he Institute for the Social Sciences is fictional, as are all of the graduate students depicted in this case study; however, the author has first- or second-hand knowledge that every situation described (except one) actually took place.

Notes

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