

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Will the Real Culprits Please Step Forward? (Case 1018)

The mission of the National Institute for Engineering Ethics (NIEE) is to promote ethics in engineering practice and education. One component of NIEE is the Applied Ethics in Professional Practice (AEPP) program, providing free engineering ethics cases for educational purposes. The following case may be reprinted if it is provided free of charge to the engineer or student. Written permission is required if the case is reprinted for resale. For more cases and other NIEE Products & Services, contact the National Institute for Engineering Ethics, Purdue University, www.niee.org. (All reprints must contain these statements)

The Case:

As a new faculty member at a noted university you are teaching a graduate level engineering course. The course requires that a term project, including a written report, be worked out in the department's computer laboratory. Much to your dismay, you discover that more than half of the students (7 out of 12) in the course have turned in identical project reports. The font styles are different, but the wording and punctuation are identical, including numerous spelling and grammatical errors.

The project was comprehensive and constitutes a significant portion of the final grade for the course. Grade reports are due tomorrow. Your boss, the chair of the department, has already left town and cannot be reached. His parting words to you were to grade the new graduate students generously, since they depend on good grades for scholarships, assistantships and student visas. Furthermore, you have heard him say that the department needs to keep its numbers up to get laboratory space and faculty salaries (including yours) from the university, and the graduate program is vital to this end.

What do you do?

Alternate Approaches and Survey Results for “Between A Rock and a Hired Place...” (Case 1018)

1. Turn in incomplete grades and require the students to rework their project reports. (This will demand a great deal of extra time from you in addition to the students next semester, which neither of you can afford.)
Percentage of votes agreeing: 33%
2. Turn in failing grades for all of the students who appear to have collaborated on the report. (This will probably result in lawsuits. Neither the department nor the university provides legal counsel, and you doubt that you can afford the resulting costs on your own.)
Percentage of votes agreeing: 5%
3. Divide the score for the apparent effort by the number of collaborators, and turn in grades that reflect the average low level of individual work. (This will

result in petitions for changes in grade for you to handle and justify, and visa and scholarship problems for the students involved.)

Percentage of votes agreeing: 10%

4. Petition the university to accept late grades until the chair of the department returns and tells you what to do. (The university policy manual indicates, however, that grades are between the student and the instructor.)

Percentage of votes agreeing: 4%

5. Report the problem to the Dean of the Graduate School and request disciplinary action be taken against the students who appear to have cheated. (You have heard that such cases are usually decided in favor of the student, resulting in no grade penalty. You also wonder if you have sufficient documentation to prove that you told the students in writing that cheating will result in a penalty - something that is required in all disciplinary action cases.)

Percentage of votes agreeing: 16%

6. Throw the book at the students involved, since professional engineers must work ethically and the public safety would be jeopardized if they graduated and took jobs as engineers using the same behavior patterns. Give them the grades you feel they actually deserve for having participated in the cheating.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 24%

7. Give the students the benefit of the doubt, since their numerical computational ability in the projects appears to be adequate, and the written report is only part of the project.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 1%

8. Revise the grading scale for the course and place more emphasis on the non-report activities of the students.

Percentage of votes agreeing: 7%

9. Quit your job - resign from your position at the university and let someone else deal with it. (Even though you have a wife and kids who depend on your paycheck for food, shelter and clothing.)

Percentage of votes agreeing: 0%

Forum Comments from Respondents

1. This situation warrants investigation. Will one or more of the students admit to what is going on? Is this really a case of plagiarism, or is something else going on? Before you make a good case, you have to have facts. [editor's note: the case text indicates that all seven submittals had identical texts, down to and including numerous spelling and punctuation errors.]

2. I would bring the seven students in to the classroom and talk with them and try to find out if they cheated and if they did why. Try to figure out if the assignment was to [sic] hard. Trying to help the students I feel will out weight [sic] and the other situation [sic].
3. Call the students in who seem to have cheated. Conference with them. Find out what you can about the situation. Throw the book at them and see what they are willing to do to make recompense [sic]. Have mercy and let them redo the project even though it will cost you and them time. The point is to teach them that these things are serious without ruining their graduate studies.
4. You need to find out who was the original author of the paper and give that person the grade you normally would have. The other six people need to be given incompletes. I strongly suspect there are electronic means of determining who was the original author. Supplement these with interviews and questioning. You will learn, I am sure. If there is insufficient time to let the other six students complete the paper, then prepare a supplemental exam for them and tell them the exam is in place of the paper's grade. You will probably have to work a little overtime to get this done by tomorrow, but it's important and you can relax then.
5. Petition the school to accept late grades, then give the option to the students involved to complete a new project to be turned in [in] the same time frame allotted for the previous project or to retake the course.
6. I would take approach #1 [incomplete grades; rework and resubmit the term paper] but add the help of TA's and/or other professors to compensate for the needed time during the next semester for the instructor. The lack of time for the students is simply unfortunate.
7. I would give incomplete grades to the perpetrators. Then I would meet with each student individually, present the evidence and ask them what they did. If they confess, ask them what they think an appropriate punishment is, then give them the punishment you feel is best, taking into account their suggestion. If they don't confess, take off some points for not being original in their work and let them go. If they are in fact guilty, their consciences will inflict enough punishment at some time in the future, not to mention the fact that God will not allow them to slide by without proper punishment.
8. The teacher should write up a lesson plan that centers on ethics and give it as a short lesson to the class. Following which the teacher should very bluntly discuss the dishonesty that took place. The teacher should explain that cheating is wrong, whether or not every explicit case is mentioned in the course syllabus or department handbook. The teacher should then explain what he/she is going to do and ask for comments from the students.

The teacher needs to be in a position to help the students. However, their responsibility for their actions must not be taken away by the teacher or anyone else. Since the teacher is newly hired, it might be more appropriate to allow the final decision to be made with the help of the Dean of the Graduate School, in order to be honest, but also to be in good standing with the students and faculty. [editor's note: the students are graduate students. It is a sad commentary to have to give a lecture on ethics and ask for student comments for such a situation in graduate school (or undergraduate school, for that matter). Responsible faculty do not need to defer decisions to the Dean or to be "in good standing with the students and faculty".]

9. Discuss the problem with the Dean of the School of Engineering as well as the Dean of the Graduate School. Explain that cheating is a serious offense. Let them look at the reports and see that there is an issue that needs addressed [sic] with the students. There is usually a standard university policy on cheating which is normally on the course syllabus. [editor's note: hopefully it is not necessary to explain to either dean that cheating is a serious offense!]
10. "Operating under the assumption that most Universities now require that a cheating/plagerism statement be included in the course syllabus and course catalog therefore the students know the rules. If the assignment was truly an individual assignment, unlike the real engineering working world where most tasks are performed in teams, the students should be dealt with by the proper authority, which in this case appears to be the Dean of the Graduate Schools. Undoubtibly I (the prof) would be required to present my case but this should be my duty. Being currently in the academic arena, I know that there are more guidelines and details that need to be presented to make the best judgement on this case. Many universities have Honor Codes and strickter regulations to prevent legal action. With the little info provided, I feel this is the best coarce of action [sic]". [editor's note: based on more than 35 years of experience in the real world of consulting engineering practice, most engineering tasks are done individually, even if in a team setting. Also, in the real world of engineering, concise syntax and proper spelling are mandatory for successful project communications with team members, the client and the public.]
11. It seems when the teacher was making the assignment for a "Team Project" more emphasis should have been made on the fact the teacher wanted completely individual reports. In addition to this, the teacher should not have required the reports to be written in the same room. When you require students to do team work and write a report on the team work in a lab together, of course there will be lots of similarities in the papers. [editor's note: there is no indication in the description of this case that the paper was to be a team effort, only that it was to be done in the computer lab – assumably because the applicable computer software was resident in that

lab. Notably, the text indicated that it was a “term project”, not a “team project”. Perhaps more careful cognizance of the words used would be appropriate in this instance before offering an alternate solution.]

12. Lecture the [involved] students on cheating and give them all a grade of D on their term project. Tell the students that this is their only warning and that the next incident will result in expulsion. Also, tell them that you will inform the other members of the faculty of this incident.
13. I would give them a failing grade for that exam. No good comes from dishonesty; not for the school, not for the department, not for the students, not for society!
14. You have no choice but to fail all of the [involved] students and demand disciplinary action.
15. They are graduate students. If they can't be trusted not to cheat, they shouldn't be in grad school. That's the bottom line. They must be pretty desperate if they think the teacher is going to fall for that one!!!
16. This is an easy one. Cheating is rampant, even in Graduate School. Do you make a point of it now or do you let them get fired from their first job because of similar unethical actions? You should give the seven copiers a “ZERO” for the project and calculate their course grades accordingly, even if they all receive “F’s”. There cannot be any compromise. What is right is right! This is the way it would be enforced at my university [where I am the Associate Dean of Engineering].
17. Interestingly, I had personal involvement as a faculty member in a similar case. I had caught students cheating in this fashion on a homework assignment, divided the grade among the cheating students, and explained why such behavior would not be tolerated. These same students were caught cheating on an exam in another class in the department the next week. That faculty member gave the cheating students zeros on the exam, and the department graduate committee initiated proceedings to drop the students from the program (which eventually occurred). Both of us faculty involved were untenured, and the pressures to maintain high graduate enrollment are just as described in the case study. However, there was never any hesitation from our department chair or graduate committee in supporting us in our decision to treat this as a serious breach of ethics. It did make the entire quarter quite stressful, because the students were still in class while their cases proceeded. This meant administering quizzes and exams in a fashion to eliminate any question of cheating (closed books, closed notes, all personal belongings to be left at the front of the room, seating assigned and students well separated). My syllabus has always referred students to the university student handbook to learn how cheating

may be dealt with. I now include a larger written policy on what I consider to be cheating and how I may deal with it, and discuss it at length on the first day of class. I also warn the students that students found cheating were dropped from the program in the recent past, and had to go home and explain to their families what had happened. Interestingly, the students dropped from the program were all from the same [undergraduate] university, and we have not since received any applications from that university.

Epilogue

The faculty member involved in this case elected to divide the score for the apparent effort on the written report by the number of plagiarizing students (7), using the result in calculating the course grades for the individual students involved (Alternate Approach 3). Nonetheless, he was then directed by the department chair to give the students the benefit of the doubt (Alternate Approach 7). As a result, the faculty member elected to submit his resignation rather than continue being involved in situations which comprised his integrity and professional ethics (Alternate Approach 9). Despite the potential financial difficulty in supporting his family, he was hired quickly and has continued successfully in a responsible position outside of academia where his conduct and ethical posture is recognized as an asset.