Magdalena

An Honor Council Academic Trial

Abstract Released Fall 2002

Abstract Discussions:

Wednesday September 25, 2002
12:30pm and 6pm in the Sunken Lounge

Introduction:

Magdalena, a student in Professor Raymond's class, was confronted by the professor regarding an assignment that she had turned in. Professor Raymond believed that the work was plagiarized, which Magdalena admitted to. Both parties agreed to contact Honor Council. Honor Council then came to consensus on a suspicion of violation.

Fact Finding Part 1:

Professor Raymond's Statement:

Professor Raymond told the jury that he had given his class a short assignment, which he later decided to cancel. This cancellation was announced several times during class, and later e-mailed to everyone in the class. On the day that the assignment was initially due, Magdalena approached Professor Raymond in class and explained that she had completed the assignment anyway. He agreed to look at her work, but told Magdalena that he would not give her a grade for the assignment. Professor Raymond met with Magdalena some time later to discuss the work, asking if the ideas presented in the assignment were her own, and she acknowledged that some of the work might have come from previous knowledge of the subject. Intrigued by a detail in her work, Professor Raymond later typed a phrase from Magdalena's assignment into an Internet search engine, and found that the first website consisted of work that was identical to hers. He then asked Magdalena to contact Honor Council.

Magdalena's Statement:

Magdalena explained that she had missed several classes prior to turning in this assignment, and therefore was unsure if it had been cancelled or not. The night before the work was due, she began to do research using the Internet. She found a website with information that fit the assignment, and decided to "cut and paste." Magdalena told the jury that she was worried about keeping the lines of communication open between her and Professor Raymond, because of missed classes and incomplete assignments. Magdalena said that by handing in the assignment
she had hoped to start a dialogue with the professor. She also told the jury that she would never have handed in a plagiarized assignment if it had been for credit.

**Jury Questions:**

The jury asked a number of clarifying questions to both parties. Magdalena told the jury that she was unable to remember whether or not she had read Professor Raymond's e-mail when she made the decision to cut and paste. The jury learned that Magdalena had turned in a cover letter with her assignment, which made reference to research and specific portions of the work. In the cover letter she also expressed her frustration regarding the cancellation of the assignment.

**Jury Deliberations:**

The jury felt that the violation should address the cover letter as well as the plagiarism, because of the specific indications that Magdalena had done the work herself—the jury interpreted this as an attempt to deceive Professor Raymond. Therefore, the jury came to the following statement of violation:

**Statement of Violation Number 1:**

The student violated the Honor Code by committing a gross act of plagiarism. Additionally, the student violated the Honor Code by acting with a lack of academic integrity in the way she presented her work.

**Circumstantial Portion Part 1:**

Magdalena explained that she had experienced a number of crises throughout the semester, and that these experiences had affected both her academic performance and her decision-making ability. Both her dean and Professor Raymond were aware of these issues.

**Jury Deliberations:**

The jury began by discussing the difference between plagiarized work that is turned in for credit, and plagiarized work that is turned in for no credit. Many jurors felt that the act itself was significant, and that intention was unimportant. Because separation is often used in cases of plagiarism, the jury then turned to discussing separation. Some jurors were in favor of separating Magdalena, while others were less sure. The jury decided to hold a second Question and Answer/Circumstantial meeting with Magdalena.

At this point, Magdalena was confronted by another professor, Professor Martin. Professor Martin believed that Magdalena had plagiarized two assignments in his class, and asked Magdalena to contact Honor Council. Honor Council came to consensus on a suspicion of violation. Honor Council also came to consensus on the decision to combine the two trials, although initially there was some ambivalence to this suggestion. Some members of council believed that combining the trials was unfair to the jury, who had only committed themselves to be on one trial. Others felt that doing two trials in one would be unfair to the confronted party, because the jury would be unable to separate the violations while creating resolutions. Still
others believed that the similarity of the confrontations meant that the trial should continue with one jury, and that this would allow the jury to create more comprehensive resolutions. For a variety of reasons, Honor Council agreed that the trial should continue. At this point, one juror stepped down for personal reasons, and the jury decided to continue and count that member as standing outside of all decisions.

**Fact Finding Part 2:**

**Professor Martin's Statement:**

Professor Martin explained to the jury that he had read an assignment of Magdalena's (assignment B), and had recognized it. He then found the work on the Internet. This made Professor Martin suspicious of her previous work in the course, so he found another piece of Magdalena's work from earlier in the course (assignment A), and searched for it on the Internet as well. He found this assignment online also. Professor Martin noted that the plagiarized material came from four sources (two websites for each assignment). He asked Magdalena to contact Honor Council.

**Magdalena's Statement:**

Magdalena told Honor Council that she could not remember the writing process for assignment A. She explained that she was very stressed the weekend before assignment B was due, so she decided to cut and paste.

**Jury Questions:**

The jury asked a number of clarifying questions to both parties. They found that assignment A was handed in around the same time as the plagiarized work for Professor Raymond's class. They were also told that the class was given an extension on assignment B, although Magdalena turned in the assignment according to its original due date. Professor Martin reiterated that in each case, the plagiarized work came from two separate sources, and said that because of this he believed that Magdalena was fully aware of her actions as she plagiarized.

**Statement of Violation Number 2:**

The student violated the Honor Code by committing two gross acts of plagiarism.

(The member who stepped down stood outside consensus.)

**Circumstantial Portion Part 2:**

In addition to reviewing the circumstances she had initially described, Magdalena told the jury that Professor Martin's course was large, and was not one of her priorities. She mentioned being led to plagiarize assignments that didn't "hold a personal weight." She said that she had asked for extensions in Professor Raymond's class, but not in Professor Martin's. When asked why she hadn't taken the extension for assignment B, Magdalena said that doing so had not occurred to her. Magdalena also explained that in spite of her difficulties during the semester, she had resisted taking a semester off because her family was pressuring her to graduate on time.
Jury Deliberations:

All jurors agreed on resolutions 3-7 (see below). The jury felt that a mediated dialogue with Professor Raymond would help repair the breach of trust between him and Magdalena. Because Magdalena's contact with Professor Martin had been very limited, though, the jury felt that a different approach would be more appropriate. The jury felt that Magdalena and Professor Martin would really have to create (rather than rebuild) a relationship, and planned to ask Professor Martin for suggestions regarding the essay topic so as to further involve him in the resolution. Compulsory meetings between Magdalena and her dean were also discussed by the jury. The topic for the letter to the community was also debated, although most jury members seemed to agree right away that it would be beneficial for Magdalena to reflect on the significance of submitting plagiarized work, regardless of whether or not the work is for credit.

The issue of separation was most difficult for the jury to agree on. After the details of the second confrontation were clear, all jurors felt that Magdalena should be separated. Discussions about the length of her separation were extensive. Some jurors felt that because plagiarism often results in separation, and that one standard has been one semester per act of plagiarism, that Magdalena should be separated for three semesters. Others felt that Magdalena's circumstances were enough that two semesters of separation would be excessive and that one semester would be most appropriate. Many jurors kept returning to Magdalena's initial comment that she would not have plagiarized the assignment in Professor Raymond's class if the work had been for credit. Because the plagiarized work in Professor Martin's class was for credit, many jurors felt that her problem was severe, and had little to do with any outside circumstances. Reasons for deciding on two semesters of separation were discussed in depth. Some jurors thought of this as "one semester per class". Others thought of it as one semester of recovery from a difficult semester and one semester for the plagiarism. Others felt that two semesters of separation was the best choice because three felt too long, and one too short. For a variety of reasons, then, the jury eventually agreed that two semesters was an appropriate combination of compassion and severity, and that regardless of her circumstances Magdalena needed to be held accountable for her breach of trust with her professors and with the community in general.

The issue of class credit was also complicated. All jurors agreed that Magdalena should receive no credit for Professor Martin's class, because the majority of the work in that course had been plagiarized. Initially, however, the jury was unsure about credit in Professor Raymond's class, primarily because the plagiarized work in his course had not been for credit. Some jurors felt that failing this course would be unnecessarily harsh. The jury eventually came to consensus on this portion of the resolution, with one juror standing outside. Many jurors felt that the severity of failing this class in some ways balanced the feeling that three semesters of separation was too many.

The jury came to consensus on the following tentative resolutions (with one juror standing outside for resolution 2 in addition to the member that stepped down):

1. The student will be separated for two semesters.
2. The jury recommends that the student receive a grade of 0.0 in both classes.
3. The student will participate in a mediated dialogue with Professor [Raymond].
4. The student will write an essay on a topic given by the jury, for the purpose of facilitating a dialogue with Professor [Martin].

5. Upon her return to Haverford, the student will meet with her dean every other week for at least one semester and continue until they both agree that meetings are no longer necessary.

6. The student will resign the Honor Code Pledge upon her return to Haverford.

7. The student will write a letter to the community. Among other things, she should address the question: "Is plagiarism a violation of the Honor Code, even if the work is not for credit?"

Presentation of Resolutions:

Magdalena was upset and confused about the length of the separation. She was adamant that one semester and two semesters were very different, and argued that two semesters seemed punitive. She explained that she didn't understand what change the extra months of separation would make, and that she genuinely felt that the jury was holding her too accountable and therefore punishing her. The jury defended its decision at length. Many jurors explained why two semesters seemed, to them, to be the right choice. Magdalena said she understood why the jury came to this decision.

Neither Professor Raymond nor Professor Martin was able to attend the presentation of resolutions, but each sent an e-mail to the chair expressing their approval.

Jury Deliberations:

The jury came to consensus on these resolutions as Final Resolutions, with one present juror standing outside on resolution 1, one present juror standing outside on resolution 2, and the absent member standing outside the whole decision.

Questions:

1. Is there a difference between plagiarizing something for credit, and plagiarizing something that isn't for credit?

2. When a student is confronted by two separate parties, is it appropriate for Honor Council to look at these violations in combination with one another?

3. How much should the confronted party's circumstances affect a jury's decision regarding separation?

4. Resolutions in an Honor Council trial are supposed to address Education, Repairing the breach of trust, and Accountability. Is there a distinction between accountability and punishment? Where does this distinction lie, and can the two be synonymous?

To the Haverford College students, faculty, and staff,
I first want to express a deep and sincere regret for the actions that caused so much violation of the Honor Code and a breach of trust between myself and all of you. It is clear that, despite my inability for clear thinking and judgement at the time of violation, what I did was wrong. I simply cannot express enough how much I wish I could take them all back. However, mixed with this profound regret is also a lot of disappointment not only in myself but in the Honor Code and its trial process. And, rather than mope for two pages and try to make you feel sorry for me, I want to use this letter to bring to light many things that Haverford's community doesn't want to hear about the Code.

Throughout the trial process, one thing was made absolutely clear to me: our honor code and our trial process leaves much to be desired. Despite the fact that I approached the Honor Council with true repentance and a deep wish to make amends, it was only the professors themselves who were truly willing to listen. While I realize that my violation of the Honor Code places me outside of the Haverford community, that violation does not warrant the disrespectful attitude I received from some jurors nor should it discredit the statements I made during the trial. Our Honor trials, be they academic or social, are held in an environment in which all statements made in the room are truthful and must be taken as such by all members present. I know for a fact that my credibility was not taken seriously in this trial, and it worries me.

The circumstantial portion of this trial was particularly upsetting. During this portion, I explained the physically and emotionally painful situation I was in at the time of violation. Unfortunately, confidentiality issues limit what I can say about the circumstances, but let it suffice to say that it wasn't easy for me to being to light the issues that were discussed. I was further discouraged by rolling eyes and gestures of dismissal made by certain jury members. In short, the trial process doesn't give the confronted party a chance to defend her/himself because the statements s/he makes are already tainted in the minds of the jurors.

What was even more upsetting was when it was clear that my confidentiality had been breached by someone else involved. One uninvolved student approached one of my friends and expressed complete disbelief about one of the statements I made in the trial room. That statement should never have left the trail room, nor should it have been discussed with my name attached to it. This even was a clear breach of my confidentiality. How can I trust that I'm getting a fair trial by my peers when it's apparent that they themselves are violating the Honor Code during the trial process?

Let me give you an idea of what the trial process is like for the confronted (and keep in mind this is only my own experience). I walk into a room of other students, some of whom I've seen around campus and some who I don't know at all, and I readily admit to the violation. I'm already demonized because I've admitted to the violation. The fact is, I went into the trial expecting to brainstorm with my fellow peers on how I could repair the damage I had done and how I could do my best as a returning student to prevent another from the same path I found. As a product of this expectation, I had proposed a workshop idea as a resolution. I proposed that, in lieu of a second semester of separation, that I return and run a program and/or workshops that would bring to light exactly why plagiarism is a violation of the Code and to create a resource for students "on the brink". How many of these abstracts have we read in which the student was
stressed, short on time, and/or didn't care and simply cut and pasted or cheated on a test? In my mind, it's been too many.

When the question of whether plagiarism is a violation of the Code even when not for credit comes up in the discussion, I immediately respond "Yes, and I did it." However, I do express that the nature of the document was not boost my grade but to spark a dialogue between myself and Professor Raymond. I think the question I'm supposed to address in this letter ("Is plagiarism a violation of the Code even when it's not for credit?") is a stupid one: of course it's a violation. Even in my initial email to the Honor Council I admitted to a clear violation.

What is it about Haverford College that promotes the Honor Code while simultaneously creating an environment in which stressed students have nowhere to turn? The way I see it, plagiarism is much like academic suicide: the student is placed in a position in which s/he can see no other options. And, let's face it, the resources we have now are not as accessible as they seem.

Unfortunately, instead of working on this as a creative and more beneficial solution, the jury and chairperson took the easy way out and separated me. Despite the fact that the workshop proposal would have addressed ERA more extensively and thoroughly than separation, many members expressed the belief that other community members would feel "slighted" if I "got away" with only 1 semester of separation.

So, do you feel less slighted because I'm separated for a second semester? Or perhaps you've been slighted because when the proposal for a program that would have fulfilled ERA and helped students under extreme pressure came up, 12 members of your community couldn't see past their own anger to give that to you.

Even upon my return, why should I stick my neck out and breach my own confidentiality in starting this program if even the Honor Council doesn't seem interested in preventing plagiarism?

More importantly, why should we have faith in an Honor Code that clearly does not hold up in its own trial process?

With my deepest and most sincere apologies to all of you,

Magdalena