Steven and Professor Gray
An Honor Council Academic Trial
Abstract Released Spring 2002
Abstract Discussion: TBA

Introduction:

Steven was a student in Professor Gray's class. While grading Steven's homework assignment, Professor Gray noticed several suspicious sentences and discovered that they had been copied from a text used in class. He confronted Steven and they both agreed to contact Honor Council. Honor Council consented to a suspicion of violation.

Fact Finding:

Professor Gray's statement:
On this homework assignment, Professor Gray stated that the students were allowed to use information from the text and other sources, such as working with other students or getting help from study sessions. While grading Steven's assignment, he noticed that on one of the sections, part of the answer was taken directly out of the text that the class was using. Furthermore, he did not see any quotations and citation after the copied portion. Professor Gray confronted Steven and asked him to contact Honor Council.

Steven's statement:
After talking to Professor Gray, Steven admitted to having copied from the text due to lack of understanding of the homework and a rush for time. However, he said that he had meant to cite the passage but simply forgot. He didn't feel that a trial was necessary because he felt that had he cited, the professor would not have confronted him. He said that he had no intention of passing the passage off as his own. In addition, he said that sometimes on previously returned homework of other students, the professor would make comments about having forgotten to cite the source. Steven expressed his confusion as to why the professor did not comment on his lack of citation but instead took him directly to Honor Council. He felt, therefore, that Professor Gray must have been taking him to trial for some other reasons.

Jury Questions:
The jury asked a number of clarifying questions in order to better understand the situation.
Jury Deliberations:

The jury agreed that the student clearly did not follow the professor’s instruction regarding the homework. The jury also deliberated about the role of intent on plagiarism but then decided that that should be taken into account when discussing resolutions and not the violations. After discussion, the jury came to agreement that due to lack of citations, the student had represented someone else’s work as his own and therefore committed an act of plagiarism.

Statement of Violations:
1. The student violated the Honor Code by not following the professor’s instruction regarding homework assignments.
2. The student violated the Honor Code by committing an act of plagiarism.

Circumstantial Portion I:

Note: After consensus on the Statements of Violation was reached, the jury was informed that Steven and Professor Gray had been involved in a previous trial for the same class.¹

Steven’s statement:
Steven said that at the time of doing the homework assignment he was very pressed for time. Also, he was having general problems understanding homework assignments. Even after meeting with Professor Gray and getting additional help, he still had trouble approaching homework assignments. He also stated that all his meetings with the professor were unproductive, claiming that Professor Gray questioned his learning abilities and character. Steven said he felt that the professor was biased against him for several reasons and thought those were the reasons he was being brought to trial a second time. When asked about repairing the breach of trust, Steven stated he did not feel that it could be repaired.

(The professor was not present during the circumstantial portion. However, he emailed two proposed resolutions to the chair of the trial:
1. The student should receive a 0.0 for the course.
2. The student should be separated from the community.)

Jury Deliberations:

The jury decided they wanted some clarification on why Professor Gray thought the resolutions he proposed were necessary, as well as any responses he might have to Steven’s statement in the first circumstantial portion.

¹ According to procedural process, if the student was involved in a previous trial, the current jury will be informed of this fact by the chair of the trial only when the statement(s) of violation have been reached. The reason is for the jury to deliberate on the facts of the current trial without being biased.
Circumstantial Portion II:
(Steven was not present)

The jury asked several questions to better understand the relationship between the student and the professor. Professor Gray stated among other things that he felt a second trial was necessary because he thought that the student had not learned anything from the first trial. He also did not feel that the breach of trust could be repaired.

Jury Deliberations:

The jury felt that in view of the opinions of both parties, any attempt to repair the breach of trust would not be productive. They did, however, feel that it was necessary for the student to repair the breach of trust between him and the community.

The jury then considered Professor Gray's recommendation of a 0.0 for the course and decided this was too extreme, since the amount of plagiarism was small and unintentional. The jury then discussed a 0.0 for the whole homework portion of the final grade, but since Steven had completed his other homework assignments correctly, this would also be too punitive. The jury, however, did agree that a 0.0 simply for that homework assignment was too lenient, considering this was the student's second offense.

Some jurors felt that because this was the second offense separation from the community should be considered. After much discussion, the jury concluded that separation from the community would not help to repair the breach of trust between Steven and the community and would not be educational. However, they felt that because this was the second offense, something else was needed (this is addressed through resolution 2).

Resolutions:

1) The student will receive a 2.0 for the course.
2) The student will write an essay to his Dean on a topic to be assigned by the jury panel.
3) The student will write a letter to be released with the abstract to the community addressing the following issues:
   - What plagiarism is and its different degrees.
   - In what sense is his action an act of plagiarism.
   - How his perception of plagiarism has changed through his experiences.

Presentation of Resolutions:

Steven expressed his disagreement with the resolutions due to the fact that he felt he was being treated unfairly by the professor. The professor was not present to state any opinions.
The jury considered Steven’s concerns about the resolutions, but came to final consensus on the resolutions as they were.

Questions:

1. Would a 0.0 have been an appropriate resolution?
2. Should the student have been separated from the community?
3. Should the resolutions address both the first and the second offense?
Dear Haverford Community,

I have been asked to write about the definition of plagiarism, the various levels of it, and how my perception of plagiarism has changed based on my experience. According to the Haverford honor code, plagiarism is representing “another person’s ideas or scholarship as his/her own” (p.53, Faculty Handbook). Bryn Mawr’s honor code defines plagiarism as any idea taken from someone else and passed off as his or her own. Based on Haverford’s definition of plagiarism, there doesn’t seem to be any room for defining levels of plagiarism. I do believe that there are different levels of plagiarism and that they need to be accounted for. I believe intention plays an important role in the act of plagiarism.

To me plagiarism has always meant copying a person’s ideas intentionally and passing it off as your own. Even after going through two trials, I still believe that plagiarism has a lot to do with intention. I am almost positive that everyone has copied someone else’s ideas and has used it as their own, but did not mean to. No one is perfect. In both of my cases, according to the Haverford honor code, I “technically” committed plagiarism by not citing a source and by writing a statement that looks similar to another person’s statement. However, my intention was not to use the person’s/book’s ideas and pass them off as my own. As the community reading this abstract as a condensed version of the trial, you may see me as person with a serious plagiarism problem or you may see the professor picking on a minority student. Having been brought to trial by the same professor for the same sort of violation is something that struck me as odd and should raise questions.

As I have stated before, I agree that, according to the current Haverford honor code definition of plagiarism, I have committed an act of plagiarism. But I urge you, the community, to think about what plagiarism means to you after reading my letter and if there are changes that should be made to the Haverford honor code.

Sincerely,

Steven