Jim and Carol

Fall 1997

Introduction: Carol, a student in Professor Jim's Botany class, contacted Honor Council after she was confronted by her professor for plagiarism. At the time the case was brought to Council, there had already been considerable dialogue between the professor and the student.

Fact Finding: The jury first heard the opening statements of both parties.

Jim: Professor Jim began by stating the nature of the assignment. All students in his Advanced Botany class were expected to read two articles on different plant specimens and present the information to the class in an oral report. The entire class was expected to have read each of the articles presented. The report in question was Carol's second. Professor Jim mentioned that Carol was ill at the time she was to give her presentation, and that she had informed him that she would read her presentation from a set of notes she had prepared. After hearing the presentation, Jim was concerned about the high level of sophistication that the presentation showed. Suspecting that the work was not entirely Carol's own, Professor Jim went to the library and searched her carrel in an attempt to find the written notes from the presentation. He found them, made a photocopy, and returned the originals to her carrel. After looking over her notes, he discovered that they were largely identical to the original article. He was unsure how to proceed, and so contacted the Department Chair. At first the Department chair thought the matter lay in a gray area. Upon seeing the notes and the original article, however, the Department Chair felt that the matter was serious, and thought it appropriate to lower Carol's course grade by 1.0, so that her grading for the course would begin at 3.0.

Jim confronted Carol the next day about the oral report. Carol said she did not think she had plagiarized. Jim told her that it was "not a question of what she had done, it was just a question of what they needed to do now." He suggested giving Carol a zero for the assignment and having
her redo the oral report. Jim also asked Carol to look up plagiarism and think about what she had done for 24 hours and then come tell him whether or not she felt what she had done was plagiarism. The next day Professor Jim received a letter from Carol apologizing for the situation and offering to do a total of six additional presentations over the course of the semester to prove that she did in fact know how to do an acceptable report. Jim found this proposal excessive.

After he received the letter, Jim and Carol had another discussion in which they reached a tentative agreement that Carol would re-do the presentation and Professor Jim would not reduce her grade by 1.0. The question of whether or not Carol would contact Honor Council was left open. Carol asked whether this was alright with Jim, and Jim replied that he "needed time to think about it." Professor Jim was unclear as to the function and duties of Honor Council. However, through subsequent conversations with the Department Chair and the Dean of the College, Jim learned that the issue must go to Council. Jim and Carol contacted Council the following day.

**Carol:** Carol began by talking about a rough draft of a proposal for outside research (another requirement for the class) that she had recently submitted for feedback. She had been unsure as to the expected format for a research proposal, but had started the proposal with a review of relevant literature. She turned in that section, along with other parts of the proposal, in a draft form with the following comment hand written at the top:

"JIM--Can you look over this rough draft + make suggestions? I'd like to rewrite it later today. Thanks, Carol. P.S.-- Sources aren't included-- I'll explain later."

When she received the proposal back from Professor Jim, the first section (the review of the literature) was highlighted and he had written that the section was entirely plagiarized.

Carol next talked about her oral report. Because she was sick at the time she was to give her presentation, she prepared an extensive set of notes for the presentation, in addition to a set of slides of the plant specimens in question. She informed Professor Jim that, due to her illness, she would be reading directly from her notes during the report. She stated that despite the fact that she spoke from her notes, she had a clear understanding of the material. In addition, a significant portion of the presentation related to the slides she had drawn, and she gave that part of the report without any notes at all.

When Professor Jim contacted Carol regarding his concerns of plagiarism, she immediately offered to bring him a copy of the notes she had used. She was shocked when Jim informed her that he "already had a copy." Carol did look up plagiarism, and wrote a long letter to Professor Jim apologizing for the lack of clear communication, and proposing a number of resolutions to the situation. Carol read this letter to the jury. She and Jim had talked after he received the letter, and reached the agreement mentioned above (that Carol redo the presentation and that Jim not lower her grade). Feeling that the matter was largely resolved, Carol left campus for the weekend. While away from campus, Carol received an email from Jim stating that he was
bringing the matter to Honor Council and was withdrawing her letter of recommendation to graduate school. When she returned to school, Carol immediately contacted Honor Council.

At this point, Professor Jim wished to comment on the research proposal. He said the first part, the overview of relevant literature, was copied almost word for word from two different botany articles (one of which Professor Jim himself had written!) Jim felt this "lack of scholarship" was entirely unacceptable even in a rough draft. At this point he also attacked Carol's overall level of scholarship in the class, suggesting that a ten-year-old could have done better work.

**Jury Deliberations:** The jury first discussed the research proposal. They quickly reached consensus that the proposal was not plagiarized, based on the note at the top (which identified the work as a draft and clearly acknowledged that sources were missing), on the fact that the draft was submitted for feedback and not for any kind of credit, and that the section of the proposal in question was clearly labeled as an overview of relevant literature, not as Carol's own research or thought.

The jury then turned its attention to the oral report. Some members felt that, since the original authors were cited in the beginning, and since there was no attempt to present the work as her own, that she had not committed plagiarism. Other members felt that since the majority of the text was taken from the article and was not properly cited in her notes, she had plagiarized. In its discussion, the jury struggled with the fact that the primary "evidence" was a *written* transcript of an *oral* report-- a report which no one on the jury was present to hear. In the end, the jury found that the oral report was not plagiarized. One of the arguments against plagiarism came from a juror who said that in her Botany class, the professor frequently lectured directly from the textbook, without citing the authors. because everyone is supposed to have done the assigned reading, it is assumed that students will know or recognize the material. This seemed like an exact parallel to the case the jury was considering.

Additionally, since Carol's notes for the presentation were largely a piecing-together of the original article, the jury asked Professor Jim if he would consider it plagiarism if Carol had simply read from the original article. Jim responded that "that would have been more forthright." This suggested that the problem lay with the existence of the un-cited notes, and not with the oral report.

The jury acknowledged the gray area around citation within an oral presentation of another person's research. Though the jury did not find Carol's work to be entirely unproblematic, scholarship, jury members eventually reached consensus that the problems with the report did not constitute plagiarism.

Some jury members had questions as to whether Carol had violated the Honor Code by not explicitly asking how to cite sources for an oral report. [*"It is each student's responsibility to find out exactly what each of his/her professors expects in terms of acknowledging sources of information on papers, exams, and assignments"* Honor Code III. A. 1.] The jury engaged in an extended discussion of this clause of the Honor Code. Had Carol fulfilled her responsibility to
find our Professor Jim's expectations regarding citation? Some jurors felt that since she had not met those standards, she had obviously not fulfilled her requirement. Others felt that given her close communication and frequent interactions with Jim regarding her work, Carol had not violated the Code. After much discussion, there was enough unity for the jury to reach consensus (with two jurors standing outside) that no violation of the Honor Code had taken place.

During the time the jury was deliberating, the chair of the trial received an email from Carol indicating that Professor Jim had already submitted her grade for the course, disregarding the jury's finding that there had been no violation of the Honor Code. The jury was very concerned about Professor Jim's unusual disrespect both for the Honor Code and for the trial process. Midway through the trial, he informed the chair that he "no longer had any time for the Honor Council" and would not be participating in the trial process from that point on. Most disturbing was the lack of trust and respect he displayed by searching a student's library carrel without her permission. Secondly, the jury felt he was disrespectful to Carol throughout the trial; he made several inappropriate comments about her personal life during the trial. His actions did not display the trust, concern or respect that all members of the community expect from each other. The jury was also concerned with the inappropriate delay in bringing the matter to Honor Council.

**Presentation of Findings:** Professor Jim did not attend the presentation of the jury's findings. Carol was present, and on hearing jury's findings, she agreed that what she had done was not entirely unproblematic. She stated that she had learned a lot from the process, and that she did not take the process or the jury's decision lightly.

Because there the jury found no violation of the Honor Code, the trial formally ended.

**Questions:** (Return comments to any Council member, or to the office on the third floor of the CC.)

1. What issues does this case raise for you?

2. Should students be expected to explicitly ask about citations? What is the professor's responsibility?

3. Is it ever appropriate for a professor and a student to work out private arrangements and resolutions regarding potential Honor Code violations? (Note that the Code says it is not.) Do you agree? Why or why not?

Send comments, problems, or suggestions to: code@haverford.edu

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