1988 HONOR COUNCIL ABSTRACT: BECKY AND SUSAN

SUMMARY: Professor Johnson was disturbed by peculiar similarities which he discovered while correcting the final exams of two of his students, Becky and Susan. He brought this concern to Honor Council, hoping to find an explanation for these commonalities. An inquiry was held and the jury concluded that no violation had occurred.

FACT-FINDING

Professor Johnson began with a short description of his policies for the course: he encourages students to work and study together but also to have an individual understanding of the material. On tests and exams, students are allowed to use notes, books, homework or any other reference material, but are not to discuss the exams or problems with anyone.

Professor Johnson stressed that he could understand certain types of similarities between the work of students who had studied together on a regular basis. However, he felt that the types of similarities he had found on Becky and Susan's exams could not be explained merely by the fact that they had studied together. He pointed out that even in their errors, many problems showed unusual similarities. Although Professor Johnson also noted some variation in the answers, he felt the similarities were unlikely to have occurred simply by coincidence.

Becky said she took the exam first, alone in her room with the door closed. Once finished, she sealed the exam in an envelope and threw away all scratch work. Becky emphasized that since she and Susan were roommates, there was "a lot of interaction" during the year and that they had exchanged notes and assignments. Becky was not surprised that she and Susan had cited the same variable names on the exam because these had often been used in class and on the homework, and some were even suggested by Professor Johnson.

Becky pointed out that there was no motivation for either of them to cheat since they had both taken the course pass/fail. The only explanation she could offer was that they had "basically tried to explain everything to one another" and often had similar misconceptions.

Susan agreed with Becky's account, saying that she had taken the exam alone in her room using her notes. She pointed out that one of the questions Professor Johnson had been suspicious of when grading the two exams was almost identical to a question that appeared on the mid-term.

Becky had taken her exam about a week before the end of finals. Since Becky had another exam to turn in by the deadline, she had kept this exam she had already taken and sealed so that she could turn in both of her exams together. Susan was going to be away on the last day of finals, so she gave her sealed exam to Becky to turn in for her. Susan did not know until that night that Becky still had her own exam.

A jury member asked Professor Johnson if other students had also chosen the names and examples that Becky and Susan had. He replied that yes, there were other similarities among other exams, but it was "a whole series of things" that distinguished Becky's and Susan's exams. He explained, "I could see if they had copied from a previous work, but I'm not hearing that." Although some of the mistakes they made were common errors, he pointed out examples where their errors were unique yet still identical to each other.

Susan said that "This is not my subject...even now, I would make the same mistake." Both students reminded the jury that they had studied only with each other and that Professor Johnson had informed the class of the types of questions on the exam.

Professor Johnson remembered that he had gotten half-way through correcting one of the exams when he was struck with the realization that he had seen the same answers and mistakes before, and so he went back to find the other exam. He said that he "understood how one could account for" some of the similarities which contributed to this feeling, but also emphasized that others were less
easily explained. He stressed that it was not one problem in particular that bothered him, but the aggregate of all the similarities.

When asked if this had been a recurring problem during the semester, Professor Johnson noted that the mid-terms did not share such similarities.

Becky and Susan replied that the work at the beginning of the semester was not as difficult; as the work got harder, they had to study together more often. Homework was graded by Teaching Assistants and Becky said she had often asked them for help. She felt that Professor Johnson was "out of touch" with how she was doing in the course: "He wanted everyone to love (the subject) and found it hard to understand that I didn't grasp these ideas." Professor Johnson said that he could see where they might have gotten similar answers, but in some cases they had been "grasping at straws and I find it hard to believe that they grasped the same straw."

After looking at their exams side by side, both Becky and Susan agreed that the exams did indeed remarkably conform. Susan said that, "It seemed this man came out of nowhere and accused me, but now I can see where he's coming from." However, they could give no explanation except that they had worked together, shared notes, and often had the same misconceptions.

Professor Johnson stated that he did not feel this was an adequate explanation: In order for such a series of similarities to occur, he said it was most probable that there was some transfer of knowledge, whether deliberate or inadvertent.

**JURY DISCUSSIONS**

It became immediately clear that there were doubts among the members of the jury. During the many hours of deliberation, positions of the jury members switched back and forth as new questions and arguments were presented.

After carefully examining Becky's and Susan's exams, the jury acknowledged the combination of similarities, whether inadvertent or deliberate, that troubled Professor Johnson. The evidence did not help the jury construct a conclusive scenario that could either account for the similarity or prove that there was a violation. If information was somehow transferred, could this have occurred without constituting a violation of the Honor Code? In addition, although the jury wanted to trust Becky and Susan as fellow members of the community, it also felt obligated to respect Professor Johnson's expertise and experience. Members of the jury found it difficult to weigh one trust against the other, or to weigh community trust against insufficient evidence.

**CONCLUSION**

The jury finally came to consensus on the following statement:

In an effort to determine whether a violation had occurred, we explored various interpretations of the incident. We found that no single account could sufficiently or exclusively provide proof of academic dishonesty. Thus, insufficient evidence led us as a jury to agree that no violation had occurred. Our conclusion rests largely upon the foundation of trust which supports all members of this community.