Abstract discussions will be held on Monday, April 22, 2013 and Tuesday, April 23, 2013 at 7:30 PM in Ryan Gym.

The Wild Thornberrys: An Honor Council Academic Trial Released Spring 2013

This abstract was not released in accordance to the timeline specified by the Students’ Association Constitution. Honor Council was unable to contact the confronted party to receive their consent to the release of the abstract, but the confronting party consented to the release of the abstract. (The addition of this disclaimer began in Spring 2010).

Key
Eliza: Confronted party, BMC senior writing her Zoology major thesis at Haverford
Professor Nigel: Confronting party, Eliza’s thesis advisor for second semester
Professor Marianne: Eliza’s thesis advisor for first semester, Zoology department chair
Dean Debbie: Eliza’s support person

Summary

This case involved Eliza Thornberry, a Bryn Mawr senior majoring in Zoology at Haverford. Her thesis advisor, Professor Nigel, confronted her for plagiarizing a chapter of her thesis, “Talking to Animals.” Eliza had used information from Wikipedia in her introduction without citing, and used another author’s literature review without making it clear that she had not read the primary sources herself. Ultimately, the jury recommended that Eliza receive a grade of zero for the second semester thesis course and work with the Zoology department to write her thesis over the summer. This case brings up issues for discussion raises a number of important issues, including the impact of mental health issues on academics and the importance of communication between professors and students.

Fact-Finding

The jury and both parties gathered for fact-finding. Dean Debbie from Bryn Mawr was also present, as Eliza’s support person.

Professor Nigel’s Statement:
Professor Nigel said that he had read Eliza’s thesis chapter by himself first, then at a meeting of the Zoology department. Another faculty member became suspicious of Eliza’s paper. Using google, the faculty discovered that sections of the paper appeared to be plagiarized.

*Eliza’s Statement:*

Eliza admitted that parts of her paper were incorrectly cited: the narrative intro and her literature review. She was on academic probation in the Zoology Department at Haverford. She’d received a 1.0 on the chapter of her thesis she turned in at the end of the fall semester. This gave her a 2.0 in the course, and majors needed a 3.0 to continue in the second semester. The department made an exception in allowing her to continue if she completed the extra step of turning in a passing chapter by mid-February to be read and graded by all Zoology faculty members.

The Chair asked Professor Nigel and Eliza to clarify the potential plagiarism. Eliza said that the information in the paper that she had taken from Wikipedia and used in her introduction was not cited at all and the information in her own literature review had been taken from another scholar’s literature review without making clear from where she was getting her information. Eliza described it as accidental plagiarism.

The part of the potential plagiarism that Professor Nigel found the most serious was that Eliza’s paper gave the impression that she had been the one to integrate the various sources, when really she’d gotten that synthesis from a single literature review paper; Eliza had not read those sources and was relying on another scholar’s paraphrasing.

Professor Nigel said that a basic fact such as “London is the capital of the UK” would be something that could be considered common knowledge and not cited, but Eliza’s introduction had focused on specifics about talking to animals, not common knowledge. Her information appeared to be compiled from three Wikipedia articles and her sentence structure was almost identical to sentences from these articles. Eliza agreed with this assessment, and said that she had thought about citing but decided not to. A juror asked whether Eliza consciously or accidentally used the same sentences as Wikipedia. Eliza said that she hadn’t had a lot of time and had tried to skim her sources. She was reading as she wrote, and didn’t check to make sure her paraphrasing wasn’t too similar.

When the jury asked Eliza had ever consulted her professors, Eliza said that she didn’t have time. She’d known the thesis section’s due date since the beginning of the semester, but she had switched topics multiple times and when she finally decided on her research question, she had four days to write all 20 pages.

At this point, the trial chair passed out copies of Eliza’s paper. Professor Nigel pointed out several sentences that were similar to Wikipedia entries but did not cite Wikipedia, and sections of the literature review that improperly incorporated and failed to cite the review article, although this article did appear in Eliza’s “Works Cited.” There was a combination of direct copying from the article without quotation marks, uncited paraphrasing, and a block quote that should have been attributed to a review article, not the original source.

To clarify, a juror asked Eliza whether she had read the actual articles that she discussed in her paper; she said no. The Wikipedia information was covered in other Animal Communication courses she had taken and Eliza knew a lot about talking to animals, which made it hard to determine what was considered common knowledge. A juror asked whether she had had an issue taking a
sentence directly from Wikipedia, even common knowledge, given that proper research paper and citation format was covered in senior seminar. Eliza said that she had a hard time paraphrasing such a simple sentence. Overall, she wasn’t concerned with her introduction since she didn’t expect to use it in her thesis, and she wasn’t being very careful because she didn’t think it was so important. Eliza had not previously encountered any trouble with using facts from Wikipedia, though she held concern for her source usage and agreed that an Honor Code violation occurred.

**Statement of Violation**

The jury agreed with Eliza that a violation had occurred, and believed that it was plagiarism because Eliza had included information directly without quoting and had represented another’s ideas as her own. The jury consented to the following statement of violation:

*Eliza violated the Honor Code by plagiarizing portions of her graded senior thesis draft. Eliza copied from and failed to cite Wikipedia. Additionally, she represented another scholar's work as her own by copying sentences verbatim from a literature review, and otherwise implying that the scholar's sources, research, and analysis were Eliza's. (all consented, none stood outside.)*

**Interim**

The chair emailed Eliza and Professor Nigel the statement of violation. Professor Nigel responded that he would not be attending the circumstantial and wrote the following: “I am not sure I understand exactly what you are looking for in lieu of resolution. Academically speaking, Eliza's plagiarism resulted in an F for the course.” Due to a concern that a course of action had been decided on outside of the trial, the chair requested a meeting with Professor Nigel to better understand the steps the department had taken. Professor Nigel responded that “to my knowledge, the department has not yet taken any steps to determine the next course of action for Eliza” but that Eliza automatically failed in the thesis course by plagiarizing, and that there was no question in the minds of the Zoology faculty about this. She could not graduate until completing the thesis and was trying to set up a meeting with her major advisor (who was not Professor Nigel). Professor Nigel expressed that he would be willing to work with Eliza if he was available in the summer and/or fall. When asked about separation, Professor Nigel said that it seemed extreme.

**Circumstantial Portion**

Eliza brought Dean Debbie as her support person, but Professor Nigel was not present. Eliza began by describing how she had changed her thesis topic multiple times. She had been under the impression that she had to do fieldwork, but this had become unfeasible, and Professor Marianne had realized this. Eliza wrote and turned in a chapter on a different topic at the end of the fall semester. During the second semester, at Professor Marianne’s suggestion, she decided to change her topic again, and decided to use primary sources rather than fieldwork. Professor Marianne told Eliza that she would have to find all of her primary sources and write her first chapter in the following three weeks, or go back to the old topic. Eliza said that she had worked really hard, but that by the time she
had gathered her sources, she only had four days to write the chapter. Eliza also described her thesis as a “difficult, scary, all-consuming monster” and said that she began to have issues with anxiety and depression. Though she saw a therapist, Eliza still felt overwhelmed and began cutting corners when writing her chapter.

Eliza also expressed that turning in the chapter was a way of giving up. She claimed that she didn’t think asking for an extension or not turning the chapter in were options, though in hindsight, she recognized that she should have stopped and done it another time. Eliza reiterated that the anxiety and depression made everyday schoolwork difficult in a way she’d never experienced, which made it hard to get out of denial and seek help.

Eliza was aware that her work was not of good quality, and she knew that she might be plagiarizing, but by the night before the chapter was due she lost her usual work ethic and “didn’t care.” When a juror asked about her work ethic, Eliza said that she was always a pretty good student, though she did procrastinate. This year, however, she procrastinated to the point that she could not do her work well or at all. Her work in other classes had also suffered because of her work on her thesis.

Dean Debbie asked Eliza how it had gotten so close to the deadline. Eliza said that she and Professor Nigel had met regularly, and she presented him with potential research questions, but that he always pushed her to be more specific. Professor Nigel had advised her on how to write a literature review and talked her through the chapter from the previous semester that she had failed, but hadn’t offered any advice on pacing or conveyed a sense of frustration or urgency. When asked about her relationship with Professor Nigel, Eliza said that she’d taken one other course with him, the previous year. It was a fairly large class, but she had gotten some help from him over the course of the semester, and found him approachable.

A juror then asked Eliza why she had decided not to graduate this semester, which she’d mentioned in her written statement. Eliza said that Professor Nigel told her she could not graduate because she didn’t meet the 3.0 grade requirement. Dean Debbie said that before the start of second semester, Bryn Mawr and Eliza had received a letter saying that the way for Eliza to pass was to come back, meet with the department, get a new advisor, and write a 3.0 level chapter by the given deadline. Dean Debbie said this was different from Bryn Mawr procedures, and Eliza said she had not known about this requirement before reading the letter.

When a juror asked Eliza to compare the timelines for writing the chapter during first semester versus the second semester (the arrangement in response to not getting the required 3.0), Eliza said that she felt rushed on the original chapter, but not so much that she could not do well. For second semester, she was expected to do in three weeks what she had had a semester to complete before. The department had allowed her to change it in order to combine her major and minor theses.

Returning to the violation at hand, a juror asked Eliza to explain better how her sources became incorporated into her chapter. Eliza said that she found the literature review, and it was exactly what she needed to lead to more research, but that she didn’t have time to do that research herself. She had used Wikipedia to write the introduction, and that it was all information she knew and could have written from other sources but didn’t have time. She knew that she was misusing the literature review, but didn’t know how to fix this issue. For the text she had incorporated too closely, Eliza said that to her it was stating a fact, and she didn’t know how many ways you could say that information. When a juror asked, “do you see your issue as going beyond improper citation?” Eliza said yes.

When asked what the Zoology Department had told her, Eliza said that they had told her that
she cannot graduate or continue with the second semester of the thesis. Professor Nigel had said that Eliza could probably take a failing grade in this thesis semester, write her thesis over the summer, and re-enroll for the first semester of the thesis course. She wouldn’t need to be on campus then, since the work would already be done, but she had to be enrolled to receive the grade and couldn’t graduate until the following May. The jury talked further about grades and incompletes and transcripts work at Haverford and Bryn Mawr, as well as the financial concerns of repeating a course as a part-time student.

When asked how she was feeling about all of this, Eliza said that she was unhappy, but that she saw that she made a mistake and is suffering the consequences for it. She expressed that she would like to just continue with her thesis.

When asked to propose resolutions, Eliza said that she would like to continue writing her thesis and finish it before the end of the summer, (at which time she had planned to move away from the area), but she didn’t know if she would be able to continue with the same research topic. A juror asked whether re-enrolling in the fall would be a big financial burden for Eliza and her family. Eliza said she currently works 8-12 hours a week to pay for school, and her parents would not pay beyond this semester.

**Tentative Resolutions**

The jury began by discussing the three options for Eliza’s grade: failing, withdrawing, and incomplete. Withdrawing from the course due to plagiarism seemed inappropriate, and a zero seemed the most popular option. One juror mentioned that multiple people had failed the first semester of their Zoology theses, and Eliza and the department both seem to have done a poor job of communicating. Though there was sympathy for Eliza’s depression and anxiety, the jury agreed that Eliza had plagiarized deliberately.

One juror asked how the resolutions could address education, and it was suggested that she could read Maud McInerney’s essay, “Plagiarism and How to Avoid it,” but since Eliza seemed to understand plagiarism, this might not appropriately address the educational aspect of the resolutions. Someone else suggested that since Eliza was leaving, maybe community education was more important than Eliza’s personal education. For this, the jury discussed a letter to the community that could focus on communication with professors in order to help others avoid her situation.

One juror then expressed concern that Eliza had not met with her major advisor yet and wondered whether she actually had been trying to contact him. The jury then discussed having Eliza meet with the Zoology Department but decided that maybe she should meet with only the department chair because meeting with the whole department could be too mentally taxing.

Jurors did not feel separation was appropriate because Eliza had not removed herself so far from the values of the community that she was not taking responsibility or trying to remedy her mistakes. Some jurors also felt that separation would cause Eliza more duress than help by postponing her thesis even more. Finally, a juror brought up that even Professor Nigel felt that separation would be extreme in this case.

Returning to Eliza’s grade, one juror said that she felt Eliza did not deserve a zero, but others
felt that it was appropriate because she blatantly plagiarized and because that’s what Professor Nigel wanted. Then a juror said that he felt uncomfortable assigning Eliza a grade because he felt that it was not the jury’s place to do so. This comment prompted a long discussion in which the trial chair and other jury members explained to the juror that, while the final decision about grades was always up to the professor, the jury still had the responsibility to recommend a grade that would hold Eliza accountable for breaching the community’s trust. There was some concern that Eliza’s grade for the thesis chapter draft and that for the course were essentially equivalent.

The discussion then transitioned to discussing Eliza’s financial situation. Some jurors expressed a desire to find a way to help Eliza, but one juror noted that finances were Eliza’s own responsibility and, though they felt bad for her, there was nothing they could do.

The group discussed the possibility of Eliza writing her thesis over the summer and asked the trial chair to speak with Professor Marianne about the feasibility of that plan.

The trial chair opened discussion with the issue of assigning Eliza a grade. Although the Librarian was unable to find pertinent sections of the Constitution, the chair read the Post-Trial section of the Universal Trial Procedures, which stated that the grade was ultimately at the discretion of the professor. The chair added that it was standard for juries to recommend grades and that this was an implicit power granted to the jury by the fact that Honor Council proceedings were the main avenue of adjudication at Haverford.

In regards to the other resolutions, the jury remained united that this case did not require separation and most were in favor of a zero on the thesis with the opportunity to write it over the summer. As Professor Marianne had not gotten back to the chair with a response yet, the jury decided to emphasize in the resolutions that Eliza having the opportunity to write her thesis over the summer was a recommendation “if feasible.” The jury decided that she should start over with the writing but that, since she had put so much effort into choosing a research question and compiling sources, she could keep her topic and sources for when she began to write again.

Then the jury discussed a timeline for Eliza finishing her thesis. Some jurors expressed concern that Eliza needed explicit structure and guidelines because of her anxiety and procrastination, while others felt that they shouldn’t restrict her to anything and that the details should be left up to Eliza and the Zoology Department. The jury did agree, however, that Eliza should finish her thesis in time to graduate at the end of the following school year.

A juror then spoke of the possibility of Eliza speaking with a learning specialist or a writing center tutor before the end of the semester. Some jurors felt that requiring this would be holding Eliza’s hand too much and that the jury should not forget that she is a good student, but it could also address the education aspect of the resolutions and that Eliza had been frustrated by the little structure Professor Nigel had given her throughout the course of writing her thesis chapter.

The jury agreed that Eliza should write a letter to the community and provides her guidelines to do so. A juror asked whether they should create a resolution that deals with some sort of accountability with Bryn Mawr, but a resolution like this would be complicated and her breach of trust had been with Haverford, not Bryn Mawr.

**Tentative Resolutions**
1. Eliza will receive a 0.0 for her thesis chapter and the second semester of her senior seminar. (nine jurors consented, one stood outside)

2. Eliza will complete her thesis in time to graduate in May of next year. If the department deems it feasible, the jury strongly recommends that Eliza complete her thesis by the end of this summer. Eliza will use no part of her plagiarized chapter, though she may use her existing research and topic. (all consented, none stood outside)

3. Before the end of this semester, Eliza will meet with the learning specialist to create a detailed timeline structuring her thesis writing process. This timeline will contain consistent goals to help her complete her thesis in a timely manner. (all consented, none stood outside)

4. Eliza will write a letter to the community about her experience with plagiarism. The jury suggests the letter discuss the importance of time management and good communication. (all consented, none stood outside)

5. Eliza will meet with the chair of the department and Professor Nigel to restore trust and to provide the department with an opportunity to learn from Eliza’s experiences. (all consented, none stood outside)

Resolutions as a whole: all consented, none stood outside.

Interim

During the time between tentative and finalizing Resolutions, the chair received two emails. One of from Professor Nigel said, “I am in full agreement with these resolutions,” because he had elected to not attend the finalizing resolutions meeting either. The other email was from Professor Marianne saying that the Zoology Department did not think it would be feasible for Eliza to write her thesis over the summer. She said it would be unfair to ask a professor to stay around all summer to advise Eliza and Professor Nigel already had plans to be away most of the summer.

Finalizing Resolutions

To start the meeting, the chair told the jury about the emails from Professor Nigel and Professor Marianne. She asked them what they thought about Eliza writing her thesis over the summer being a burden for the professors. The jury was confused because all parties had previously seemed in agreement that a summer thesis was the best option for Eliza and the Zoology department. The jury still wanted to recommend that Eliza be allowed to work on her thesis over the summer, and as a recommendation the wording only had to be tweaked to acknowledge Professor Marianne’s opinion that it isn’t fair to ask a professor to make a class for one student over the summer.

The jury then re-consented to the tentative resolutions with one standing outside on resolution 1 because he didn’t feel it was his place to decide a grade.

Eliza then joined the jury and said that the resolutions seemed fine but was surprised when the chair told her about the email from Professor Marianne. Eliza expressed that Professor Nigel made it seem like a summer thesis would be okay and that postponing the thesis further would complicate her financial situation and her plans to move after the summer. Eliza suggested that she work on her thesis
over the summer and have a draft by the fall so that she could meet with Professor Nigel a few times before turning in a final draft. However, the jury was concerned that Eliza needed more structure than this. They discussed having a Zoology professor and a juror meet with a learning specialist or just with Eliza about a timeline, and Eliza agreed that it would be helpful. The jury asked if Eliza would like to have Dean Debbie at the meetings with the Zoology department as a support person, but Eliza said it could make her look defensive and stifle restorative discussion.

After Eliza left the jury discussed the resolutions further and consented to the final resolutions:

**Final Resolutions**

1. *Eliza will receive a 0.0 for her thesis chapter and the second semester of her senior seminar. (nine jurors consented, one stood outside)*
2. *Eliza will complete her thesis in time to graduate in May of next year. While recognizing the likelihood that that the department will not be able to advise her, the jury strongly recommends that Eliza begin work on her thesis during the summer. Eliza will re-enroll in the second half of senior seminar in the fall semester. Eliza will use no part of her plagiarized chapter, though she may use her existing research and topic. (all consented, none stood outside).*
3. *Eliza will have two separate meetings with the chair of the department and Professor Nigel. One meeting's purpose will be to restore trust and to provide the department with an opportunity to learn from Eliza’s experiences. The other meeting will include a juror and its purpose will be to come up with a mutually agreeable timeline for the completion of Eliza’s thesis. (all consented, none stood outside).*
4. *Before the end of this semester, Eliza will meet with the learning specialist to create a detailed timeline structuring her thesis writing process. This timeline will contain consistent goals to help her complete her thesis in a timely manner. (all consented, none stood outside).*
5. *Eliza will write a letter to the community about her experience with plagiarism. The jury suggests the letter discuss the importance of time management and good communication (all consented, none stood outside).*

*Resolutions as a whole: all consented, none stood outside.*

**Post-Trial**

Eliza emailed the chair to tell her that she had met with Professor Nigel and Professor Marianne as specified in the resolutions. She said the meeting had gone well, and they had decided she could write her thesis over the summer. Eliza asked the chair if they still had to have another meeting with one of the jurors because that seemed redundant now. The chair discussed it with the other co-chair, the co-secretaries, and the Honor Council administration advisors and they decided that Eliza did not need to have another meeting. Eliza did not complete a letter to the community in a timely manner.

**Discussion Questions**
1. Should Eliza have been separated?

2. How should juries distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism?

3. How would you respond to the juror who was uncomfortable commenting on Eliza’s grade? Should this be a power juries have?