Abstract discussions will be held at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, March 30 and Thursday, March 31 in Ryan Gym

Planets

An Honor Council Academic Trial

Released Spring 2011

This abstract was completed in accordance with the timeline in the Constitution.
The confronting and confronted parties were given the opportunity to review this abstract prior to its release.
(The addition of this disclaimer began Fall 2010).

Introduction

Mars and Jupiter were two students in Professor Galaxy’s 300-level Stardust class. Mars and Jupiter were roommates and often worked together on their Stardust homework. Towards the middle of the semester, Professor Galaxy noticed striking similarities between both the take-home and in-class parts of the exam that the two students had taken. After meeting with both of them, he requested that they bring themselves to Honor Council. Honor Council reviewed the case and consented to send the issue to an academic trial.

Delays

The trial was delayed for several weeks due to scheduling difficulties. When the jury met for a preliminary meeting to go over trial procedures, they determined that examining Mars and Jupiter’s exams would be helpful. The Chair asked Professor Galaxy to bring copies of the students’ exams to the fact-finding meeting.

Fact Finding

Professor Galaxy’s Statement:

In his statement to Honor Council, Professor Galaxy expressed that he was highly suspicious that cheating had occurred. He outlined in fair detail the similar and incorrect way that the two students had approached the problems, describing how unlikely he found it that both would have independently approached the problems this way and have shown such similar work at all steps. He also said that he had consulted two other professors in the department, and that they had agreed that cheating was highly likely.

When he spoke during the fact-finding, Professor Galaxy explained that the exam had a self-scheduled and a take-home part. Students were allowed to use a note sheet. When grading the self-scheduled portion, Professor Galaxy saw a strange answer that stuck out because it was wrong, inappropriate, and totally different from other answers in the class. He was surprised to
find the same incorrect answer on another student’s test. Professor Galaxy was struck by how odd it was for two students to have the same strange answers, but did not check the names at the time, and kept grading. Then, when he was grading the take-home portion, he saw another bizarre answer on both exams. When he checked the names on the exams, he saw that the two students with similar answers on the take-home portion also had the same answer on the self-scheduled portion. Professor Galaxy was suspicious of cheating, especially since the students in question had “stretched the bounds of collaboration” on past homework assignments. At this point, Professor Galaxy was unsure if he was overreacting to the situation, given that he was a fairly new professor. He consulted two of his colleagues about the exams in question to see if they shared his suspicions.

Professor Galaxy spoke to Mars and Jupiter separately about his suspicions regarding the exams. Given the unusual similarities on their exams, as well as his suspicions of their collaboration in the past, Professor Galaxy asked them to report themselves to Honor Council.

Professor Galaxy also submitted to Honor Council two statements from professors in the department to whom he’d shown the exams (without the students’ names). Both statements said that the professors were highly suspicious, and that they felt the similarities between the two tests could only be explained by collaboration. One of the professors wrote, “This evidence is as strong as I’ve ever seen.”

*Mars’s Statement:*

Mars’s statement was more than three pages single spaced, and included several more pages of an appendix with relevant emails. Throughout this statement, Mars asserted that he had worked entirely independently on the exam. He outlined the timeline for taking the self-scheduled portion, saying there was no way he could have worked with others because of the timing. He said that he explained his reasoning on the questions when he met with Professor Galaxy, but that Professor Galaxy remained suspicious. Mars reiterated that he did not violate the Honor Code, and expressed the desire to show the jury that he could explain his reasoning on the problems. He said that potential similarities to another student could be explained by collaborating on homework and studying for the exam with others.

During the fact-finding, before sharing his perspective, Mars said he had brought an Honor Council abstract from a past academic trial to share with the jury. He explained that the circumstances in the previous trial were similar to this case. The Chair asked that they look at the abstract later on in the process.

Mars explained he had taken a course at Bryn Mawr called Practical Techniques in Stardust with Jupiter in a previous semester, that had specifically covered the subject of one of the exam questions of which Professor Galaxy was suspicious. Mars talked about how he and Jupiter had studied together for several days before the exam. As part of their review, they created identical note sheets with information on Wormholes. Mars explained that he used this sheet throughout the take-home test. He emphasized that he had taken the exam completely independently.

He explained that they had also done the homework together all semester. He said he understood how this made their homework similar, but asserted that they did follow the guidelines.
Jupiter’s Statement:

Jupiter’s statement was also nearly three pages. He asserted that he had not violated the Honor Code, and also offered to walk the jury through his reasoning. He said he had told Professor Galaxy when he handed in the exam that he’d had some problems he wanted to talk with him about. Jupiter also went through his timeline in taking the self-scheduled portion. He expressed confusion about who Professor Galaxy thought he had collaborated with (Professor Galaxy did not disclose the identity of the other student, but Honor Council, after making sure it was okay with the students, told each the identity of the other). Jupiter said that he’d taken the exam at the same time as another student, Saturn. He asserted that he had not collaborated with Saturn, but that Saturn was the only possible student he could understand Professor Galaxy thinking he’d collaborated with.

Jupiter said that he took the exam alone. He explained that he walked directly from class to Professor Galaxy’s office to pick up the self-scheduled portion and that he did not talk to Mars. Jupiter said he took less than the time allowed to complete the self-scheduled exam.

Mars clarified that he took the self-scheduled portion at a different time than Jupiter, took the whole time, and went straight to class, which started soon after. Both Mars and Jupiter remarked that they did not see each other or communicate in any way during this time.

Questions from the jury

One juror asked for Professor Galaxy’s reaction to the note sheet Mars and Jupiter had made together and used. He responded that the sheet was okay, but that it did not explain the similarities of the exam questions.

Mars and Jupiter were asked why they had used an unorthodox method on the self-scheduled exam question and whether they were confident in their answers. Mars said he did not know the conventional way to approach the question, so he used guess and check. He expressed that his strategy might not have been the best but that he was pretty burnt out by that point and confident in his answer at the time. Jupiter said he was not present the day Professor Galaxy taught the concept on which the exam question was based, so guess and check was his only hope. Jupiter also said that he found the self-scheduled exam difficult and was not confident in his answers as a whole.

The Chair distributed copies of Mars and Jupiter’s exams during the fact-finding. A juror asked Mars why he had not shown his work, and he said that he did not know how much work the problem would require, so he wrote on a separate sheet. Jupiter did not show work on any other questions on the self-scheduled portion either. A juror then asked Professor Galaxy if he could explain why he was still skeptical. He said, “no two people’s minds work that similarly.” He explained that when there is a standard approach to a problem, student work leading to the right answer tends to be similar, and, “the more wrong an answer is the more unique it seems to be.” With a wrong answer, there are so many places someone can stray. He explained that especially on the take-home exam, the structure of Mars and Jupiter’s answers was just too similar.

At this point the jury felt it would be best to ask Mars and Jupiter to go through their reasoning on their answers separately. The jury consented to having one of them leave the room while the other spoke. After having both Mars and Jupiter separately explain their reasoning on
their answers, the jury decided to speak with Professor Galaxy alone. A juror asked how much variability he generally saw on the exam questions. He said that on homework problems, “you can usually tell when people have worked together appropriately, but their answers aren’t exactly the same.” He said that he became suspicious of Mars and Jupiter collaborating inappropriately on a homework assignment because their work was almost verbatim. After talking with them, their homework was fine for several weeks. A week or two before the exam in question, he became suspicious again that they had worked together too closely on a homework assignment. Regarding the exam, Professor Galaxy said that he thought it was too coincidental that Mars had all his work on separate sheets that he could easily have shared with Jupiter without having to see him or spend much time with him.

A juror asked Professor Galaxy whether he believed Mars and Jupiter. He said he wanted to believe them, but could not.

**Statement of Non-Violation**

The jury began by examining the abstract Mars had brought and agreed that it was very similar to this case. In the abstract, the jury came to a statement of non-violation because they did not feel there was evidence proving that a violation had occurred “beyond reasonable doubt” (Statement of Non-Violation from *Bebop, Rocksteady, and Professor Krang*). Ultimately, the abstract did not become a significant part of the conversation about whether Mars or Jupiter violated the Honor Code.

Although the jury was suspicious of Mars and Jupiter, they were not sure beyond reasonable doubt that they had violated the Honor Code. A juror shared that he felt a violation of the Honor Code might not have occurred because both Mars and Jupiter explained their reasoning for each answer in their exam, even though another juror pointed out that the two were roommates and had been suspected of inappropriate collaboration by Professor Galaxy earlier in the semester. The juror was also doubtful that a violation had occurred because Mars and Jupiter had taken Practical Techniques in Stardust, intended to prepare them for Professor Galaxy’s course, in which they may have learned the same techniques to approach the problem.

Another juror noted that Mars and Jupiter did not say anything that contradicted what they had said before. Their methods, while odd for an upper-level course, were sensible given that they did not know how to find the correct answers. Some on the jury felt that all the professor kept saying in response to the students’ arguments for why they hadn’t cheated was “that isn’t possible,” but that he wasn’t really able to say more. One of the professor’s arguments seemed to be that it was ridiculous that the students in an upper-level Solar System course would approach the problems this way. However, the jury felt that if the students really didn’t know how to correctly approach the problems, the way they had gone about them made sense, and could have been tried independently. For the problem where both students had used guess and check, the jury thought that once you’ve decided to use guess and check, it made sense that the rest of the problem could appear similar. The jury was compelled by the fact that each had independently explained his reasoning to the jury without the other present.

One juror worried that Professor Galaxy, as a newer professor, would have “his faith…shattered” in the Honor Code if the jury did not come to a statement of violation. Though Professor Galaxy admitted that parts of Mars and Jupiter’s exams were clearly their own work,
the problems in question made him extremely suspicious that they cheated. A juror noted that Professor Galaxy had said that he wanted to believe Mars and Jupiter, but just could not.

After extensive conversation, the weight of the group seemed to be in the direction of a statement of non-violation. Most jurors had lingering doubts, but did not feel there was enough evidence to come to a statement of violation. The jury determined that the parties had presented plausible and logical arguments that they did not work together.

The jury determined that there were two separate things leading them to a statement of non-violation. First, Mars and Jupiter were able to explain how they independently arrived at their respective answers. Second, Mars and Jupiter had explained the logistical challenges that prevented them from collaborating.

The jury consented to the following statement of non-violation with no jurors standing outside of consensus:

*While we share a number of Professor Galaxy’s suspicions about the degree of similarity between Mars and Jupiter’s exams, we the jury cannot come to a statement of violation for the following reasons:*

- Mars and Jupiter were independently able to explain how they arrived at their respective answers on the two exam questions of primary concern.
- Mars and Jupiter made a compelling argument as to why their schedules would have prevented them from directly collaborating on the self-scheduled portion of the exam.
- Their similar Solar System backgrounds (having taken many of the same classes, in particular a Bryn Mawr course with a focus on approaches to Practical Techniques on Stardust) and consistent collaboration on homework could help explain their similar approaches.
- They made a common note sheet while studying together for the exam and used these identical sheets on the take-home exam (as allowed by the test guidelines).
- Despite the fact that we are not completely comfortable with how similar Mars and Jupiter’s answers were, we do not feel that there is enough evidence to come to a statement of violation.

The jury then discussed whether or not it wanted to come up with resolutions, which is an option following a statement of non-violation. They checked on the extent to which these resolutions are binding, and found that they would be “suggested resolutions.” The jury was concerned that Professor Galaxy would be unhappy with the jury’s decision and lose faith in the trial process. The jury decided to have a juror meet with him to explain their decision in more detail. Given that they remained suspicious of the similarities between Mars and Jupiter’s exams, the jury wondered whether there was any action it could take to express this concern, and to ease Professor Galaxy’s concerns. Because of its lingering doubts, the jury decided to recommend that Mars and Jupiter not work together for the rest of the course. The jury discussed whether it could recommend that Mars and Jupiter not work together in all Solar System courses, or indefinitely, but determined that would be punitive and outside of the realm of the jury’s authority. The jury consented to the following resolutions with no one standing outside:
1. *A member of the jury will meet with Professor Galaxy to explain the jury’s reasoning.*
2. *The jury recommends that Mars and Jupiter work independently of each other for the remainder of the course, both on homework and exam preparation.*

**Discussion Questions**

1. Given that the professor’s concern was based on nuanced understanding of Stardust, which none of the jurors had, should Honor Council consider deliberately putting individuals with advanced coursework in a particular department on a jury?
2. How much evidence does there need to be before a jury can find the parties in violation of the Honor Code when they continue to maintain that they did not violate the Honor Code?
3. How much weight should be placed on previous abstracts of similar nature in a trial? What if the parties bring the past abstract themselves?
Letter to the Community from Professor Galaxy

To Whom it May Concern,

I would like to thank Honor Council for giving me the opportunity to respond to the abstract “Planets”, in which I am referred to as “Professor Galaxy”. The abstract is a reasonable record of events, but I think the deliberations and conclusions of the jury in this case are problematic, and I hope that this communication of my misgivings about the case will encourage constructive discussion within the Haverford community.

The key sentence of the entire abstract is the following:

*Some on the jury felt that all the professor kept saying in response to the students’ arguments for why they hadn’t cheated was “that isn’t possible,” but that he wasn’t really able to say more.*

I think the jury’s frustration with my seeming intransigence was reasonable but misguided. Explaining by analogy is dangerous, but it’s as if these two students had been asked to summarize Joyce’s “Eveline” and had given identical, highly ungrammatical answers saying that the title character is a devil-may-care party girl in Buenos Aires. If that had actually been the situation, I imagine that the jury would have recognized that no innocuous explanation was possible. Instead, since it ultimately endorsed the students’ explanations, I can only conclude that the jury was not competent to assess the circumstantial evidence in this case.

The first two discussion questions in the abstract are good ones, and I hope they will inspire serious discussions. In addition to the idea proposed in Question 1, Honor Council might also consider soliciting opinions from outside experts (for example, Swarthmore professors in the relevant discipline) in cases like this one. That being said, it does not appear that the statements from my departmental colleagues played much of a role in this jury’s deliberations, so I wonder whether such expert opinions would be taken seriously.

It seems likely that there is a connection between the second discussion question and the jury’s second resolution, which I found curious. If there was no violation, then recommending that the students not work together in the future is: (i) a non-sequitur and (ii) contrary to both the spirit and the practice of our department, which strongly encourages students to collaborate on homework and studying for exams. To be honest, this resolution seems like a half-hearted attempt to reassure me that the jury didn’t find my concerns baseless (perhaps so that my faith in the Honor Code wouldn’t be “shattered”?) without having to seriously engage the issue of whether the evidence trumped the students’ protestations of innocence.

Sincerely,

“Professor Galaxy”