Abstract discussion will be Thursday, April 3rd at 8:00 pm in Ryan Gym.

Mean Girls: An Academic Case

Released Spring 2014

This abstract was released in accordance to the timeline specified by the Students’ Association Constitution. The confronting party consented to the release of the abstract. The confronted party consented to the release of the abstract. (The addition of this disclaimer began in Spring 2010).

Key:

Confronting Party: Kevin Gnapoor
Confronted #1: Gretchen Wieners
Confronted #2: Karen Smith
Class: Spelling 100: Spelling the Colors

Summary: Kevin Gnapoor confronted two of his friends, Gretchen Wieners and Karen Smith, over a potential case of inappropriate collaboration. Upon reading statements from all parties, Honor Council consented to drop the case.

Statements: Kevin began his statement by explaining that he was a close friend of Karen and Gretchen, as well as their tutor for Spelling 100. Early in the week, Gretchen came to see Kevin about a question on her spelling assignment – working through how to spell “orange”. Each student had been asked to come up with their own method for identifying the necessary letters, arranging them appropriately, and arriving at the correct spelling. Later that week, Kevin also met with Karen to discuss the same assignment. It was then that Kevin noticed similarities between Karen’s work on the “orange” question and Gretchen’s – not only were Karen’s answer, method, and notation very similar to Gretchen’s, but Karen had difficulty explaining her answer. Kevin was suspicious that Karen could have collaborated inappropriately with Gretchen, especially because Karen didn’t seem to understand her own work. Kevin asked Karen if she had discussed the assignment with Gretchen (as they had frequently collaborated on assignments before), and she said that she had. Knowing that students in Spelling 100 were allowed to discuss assignments but not share their work, Kevin confronted Gretchen and Karen. He advised that they be more careful about working together because some of their answers were so similar, it looked like they must have been shared. Both girls maintained that they had done their work independently, but because Kevin could not be sure that a violation had not occurred, he asked Karen and Gretchen to contact Honor Council. Kevin said he did not feel there had been a major breach of trust and still felt close to Karen and Gretchen, but reasoned that he was obligated under the Honor Code to bring the case to Council as a precaution.¹

In her statement, Gretchen explained that she had modeled her answers from in-class examples.

¹ Honor Code, Section 3.06: “While an initial confrontation should also occur in the case of academic concerns, academic violations of the Code cannot be resolved between the confronted and confronting parties alone because such violations also constitute a breach of trust with the community. Therefore, unless it is indisputable that an academic violation did not occur, the confronted student must report him or herself to Honor Council.”
She also said that she and Karen had talked about the assignment in general (including the fact that she was using in-class examples), but they did not discuss specifics on how to spell anything. Karen was very emphatic that she had completed the assignment on her own, and she was concerned that things would reduce to an “our word against theirs” situation.

In her statement, Karen explained that she started the assignment early because she was going to be out of town the weekend before it was due. Karen initially met with Kevin to find a good place to start on the assignment, and then worked through the first question on her own. On the second question, however, she got stuck. At this point, she discussed approaches to the question with Gretchen, who explained that she was using the professor’s example spellings to reach her answer. Karen tried this approach, and based on discussions from class and (permitted) online research, pieced together a mostly complete answer. Because she was still stuck, Karen then went to Spelling Resources, where another student relayed a suggestion from the professor for how to solve the problem. Karen implemented this suggestion without completely understanding it, and arrived at the correct answer. Later, Karen met with Kevin to go over the assignment, but struggled to explain the steps she had incorporated based on her online research, class examples, and the suggestion from a student in Spelling Resources. Karen emphasized that she had followed the assignment’s instructions on collaboration, and that she and Gretchen may have arrived at similar answers because they had been homework partners before and may have adopted similar modes of thinking, or because they had both worked from the same examples from class and online resources.

**Council Deliberations:** Honor Council discussed extensively whether they felt suspicious that a violation of the Honor Code had occurred. Upon analyzing the statements, members of Council felt that it was plausible that Karen and Gretchen had arrived at similar answers independently, and that given the consistency of their narratives, they had no reason to mistrust them when they said they had not shared their work. Council unanimously consented to drop the case and send a note to Karen that she should be careful not to write down answers without fully understanding them, as one’s work should represent one’s own understanding.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. The Honor Code dictates that potential academic violations should always be reported to Honor Council, unless it is indisputable that one did not occur. With this case in mind, why is that component of the Code important?
2. In this situation, students chose to contact Honor Council before involving the professor of the class. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this decision.