

Abstract of the Honor Council
Case 14, Spring 2010
Sunday, February 21, 2010

Members Present:

Lindsay Kirton (presiding), Austin Edwards (clerk), Jackie Ammons, Hilary Baker-Jennings, Matthew Diasio, James Hannah, Andrew Patterson, Kate Snyder, Travis Smith

Ombuds: Eric Harrison

Letter of Accusation:

The Honor Council received a letter accusing Student A of plagiarizing several assignments in a lower level science course.

Evidence Submitted:

- Letter of Accusation
- Student A's written statement
- Course syllabus
- Course Honor Code Policy
- Assignment #1 Prompt
- Student A's Assignment #1 (with Comments)
- Assignment #2 Prompt
- Student A's Assignment #2 (with Comments)
- Assignment #3 Prompt
- Student A's Assignment #3 (with Comments)
- Assignment #4 Prompt
- Student A's Assignment #4 (with Comments)
- Professor Deposition #1
- Professor Deposition #2
- TA Deposition
- Accuser Deposition
- Email submitted by Accuser
- Student A's Original Assignments (Week 1-4)
- Samples of Others Assignments
- Online Source (submitted by Student A)
- Comments on Assignments (submitted by Student A)
- Email submitted by Student A
- Assignment Outline (submitted by Student A)

Plea:

Student A pled "Not In Violation."

Testimony:

In her opening statement, Student A said that at the beginning of the semester, she wrote the lab assignments in her own words and did poorly on these assignments. She said that

the comments on her graded assignments instructed her to use more detail. Student A said that she asked the TA what she could do to raise her grade, and no reference to her plagiarism was mentioned. She said that in her attempt to make a better grade, she wrote down more notes from the protocol. She said that the lab assignments were time sensitive, in that she had to record her notes on the lab in her notebook and turn it in before the class was over and that it was difficult to record the lab and perform the experiment simultaneously. She said that in one of the points of alleged plagiarism referenced by the accuser, she changed much of the given lab protocol into her own words. She also gave examples of where other students copied more directly from the given lab protocol than she did.

Student A said that she understood the Honor Code policy for the class to mean that she could copy the technical terminology from the lab protocol, but that she had to rewrite the rest of the protocol in her own words. On one point where the accuser said she plagiarized from the protocol concerning a lab step that she did not actually complete, Student A said that she thought since the lab protocol included the step, then she should also include the step in her own lab protocol. Student A said she was told to record the lab in enough detail that if she had to carry out the experiment again, she could do so using only her notes. Student A said that she submitted carbon copies from her lab notebook and that she did not receive the graded pages back. She said that she received comments and grades through OwlSpace. Student A said the class was told that the TAs would not be able to tell the students what to write in the lab notebook for each assignment. She said that since she was not aware she was in trouble, she did not think to contact the professor. Additionally, she said she only talked to the TAs since they were the only ones to grade the lab notebooks.

Student A spoke to a point made by the accuser in the accusation letter, and claimed she noted in her lab assignment that the TA performed a step in the experiment, while the accuser stated that she did not. A council member pointed out that the accuser was accusing her for incorrectly recording the action that the TA performed, not for the fact that the TA performed the action.

Student A said that she was trying to be thorough in completing her assignment, which is why she wrote the protocol in complete sentences. In the deposition, the professor of the course said that students were encouraged not to write in complete sentences.

Student A said the TAs would not answer a yes or no question, but would attempt to lead the students toward the answer. She said that the students were graded on whether or not they could perform the laboratory experiments on their own while asking minimal questions. She said that for other assignments in the course, they were completely barred from asking the professor or TA any questions.

Student A pointed out that in one of the comments she received from the TA on her graded notebook, the TA told her to remember to put the procedure in her own words. She also said that during class, she did not have time to ask other students questions about their lab assignments, as the assignments were due at the end of the class period.

Student A said even though she copied errors in the protocol into her own lab assignment, it was because she did not know the steps were erroneous. She said that she thought they were important and should be included in her own lab protocol, based on the instruction that she should record the procedure as if she might later be asked to carry out the lab using only her notebook. She said that she was never told by a professor or TA that she should modify her own protocol to not include machinery that they did not use in lab. Student A claimed that because she was not sure if everyone in the lab was using the same updated machinery, she thought it was better to record what machinery was used in the lab protocol.

Student A said that she noticed that one of class protocols given to the council members was not correct. Student A showed the Council another protocol that contained additional steps.

Verdict Deliberations:

Council members believed that there was clear and convincing evidence that a violation occurred because of the amount of direct copying, and because Student A included things in her own notebook that she did not actually do during the lab procedure but which were included in the lab protocol. Additionally, the honor code given out in class said that students were supposed to record exactly what they did, whereas Student A copied exactly what the lab protocol said.

Some council members commented on the fact that the feedback that Student A received from the TA was misleading. However, other members pointed out that the council should look at the professor's defined honor code policy when determining if there is a violation, not at what the TA told the student.

Straw Poll #1: Is there clear and convincing evidence that a violation occurred?

Yes: 9
No: 0
Abstentions: 0

The Council then discussed whether Student A committed the violation. Council members thought there was clear and convincing evidence that Student A was in violation because all of the lab assignments were written in Student A's handwriting. Council members brought up the fact that the accuser noticed that Student A's was directly copied when the accuser compared Student A's assignment to other students' assignments.

Straw Poll #2: Is there clear and convincing evidence that Student A is "In Violation?"

Yes: 9
No: 0
Abstentions: 0

Straw Polls #1 and #2 made binding.

Penalty Deliberations:

Council members opened by discussing mitigating circumstances. Some Council members said that they would potentially mitigate based on the nature of the violation, since Student A plagiarized unintentionally or without malicious intent to do so. Other members said they would not be mitigating based on the intention of the student because she had the honor policy readily available to her and knew that direct copying of the protocol was not allowed. These members also pointed to the fact that the Council cannot consider ignorance of the Honor Code as a mitigating factor and that in this case, the student knew the policy and still copied directly from the protocol. Some members said that they would not be mitigating based on the weight of the assignment because of the number of assignments copied. Other members said that the amount of plagiarism within most of the assignments was not very large and thus they would be mitigating on nature of the violation.

Some members agreed with Student A that the guidelines for the students in writing their own lab protocol were ambiguous and would thus be mitigating based on the nature of the violation. However, other members said that since the lab protocol explicitly stated that students should use their own words, Student A should have put more effort into doing so. Council members unanimously agreed that they would be mitigating based on the cooperation shown by Student A.

Council members did not see any reason to aggravate.

Straw Poll #3: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension:	0
F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	1
F in the course:	3
3 letter grade reduction:	1
2 letter grade reduction:	1
1 letter grade reduction:	0
Letter of reprimand:	0
Abstentions:	3

One council member said that they would be considering the recommendation made by the professor in how much to mitigate. Other members discussed whether or not to mitigate based on how much Student A actually copied from the lab protocol.

Straw Poll #4: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	1
F in the course:	2
3 letter grade reduction:	5
2 letter grade reduction:	1
1 letter grade reduction:	0
Abstentions:	0

Some council members said that they changed their votes based on the amount of plagiarism that actually occurred, including the amount of copying that might have been due to the fact that much of the lab protocol was very technical and could not easily be paraphrased. Additionally, some council members said that they mitigated more on cooperation because of the additional relevant information that the student brought in.

Straw Poll #5: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	0
F in the course:	3
3 letter grade reduction:	5
2 letter grade reduction:	0
1 letter grade reduction:	1
Abstentions:	0

After further discussion, a council member said that they would be willing to move down from an F in the course penalty to a 3 letter grade reduction penalty so that the council could reach a binding penalty for Student A.

Straw Poll #6: What is the appropriate penalty for Student A?

F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	0
F in the course:	2
3 letter grade reduction:	6
2 letter grade reduction:	1
1 letter grade reduction:	0
Abstentions:	0

Straw Poll #6 made binding.

The Honor Council thus finds Student A “In Violation” of the Honor Code and recommends that she receive a three letter grade reduction in the course. A Prior Violation Flag is also attached to her record.

Time of testimony and deliberations: 2 hours and 27 minutes

Respectfully submitted,
Austin Edwards
Clerk