

Abstract of the Honor Council
Case 39, Spring 2011
Monday, August 29, 2011

Members Present:

Kaleb Underwood (presiding), Matthew Diasio (clerk), Abby Endler, Adam Hartman, Johnny Lam, Andres Rodela, Barbara Redeker, Brian Walker, David Fortunato, Brandon Hault (Observing)

Ombuds: Alec Lignitz

Letter of Accusation:

The Honor Council received a letter accusing Student A of plagiarizing a report for an upper level natural sciences course.

Evidence Submitted:

- Letter of Accusation
- Supplement to the Accusation
- Student A's Written Statement
- Course Honor Code Policy
- Assignment Prompt –“Instructions to Authors” and “Writing the Research Paper”
- Student A's 2nd Final Paper
- Student A's Final Paper
- Alleged Source of Plagiarism
- Student A's Additional Statement
- Professor Response to Student A's Statement
- Professor Deposition Re: Library Project
- Group Member Deposition
- Correspondence between Student A and the Professor
- Letter of Accusation with highlights
- Student A's papers with highlights
- Alleged Source with highlights
- Student A's notebook pages with highlights
- Student A's papers drafts
- Group members' final papers
- Correspondence Re: Zhu paper available online
- Reference list for BIOC 311 students
- Model Paper available to class
- OWL-Space Comments
- Student A's Lab Notebook
- Study guide for reading assignments
- Course texts

Plea:

Student A pled “In violation.”

Testimony:

Opening: Student A admits to unintentionally looking at alleged source of plagiarism. He found it online with his group during an earlier assignment in the semester. The professor said it was not allowed as it was not a published source, but did not point out that it was a report by a student in a previous semester of the course, and so Student did not think it was unacceptable to consult.

Student says he was greatly inspired by the alleged source of plagiarism and in the course of his assignment probably did commit plagiarism.

Questions:

Student A said that he did download the previous student paper and could have copy and pasted from it into his own assignment. He accidentally turned in the abstract from the previous student paper instead of his own. Some of the similarities are attributed to there being a limited number of ways to phrase things. Student A says that discrepancies in the procedure between drafts are due to a disorganized lab notebook and that he may have based further revisions on the procedure section from the previous student paper.

Student A said he never realized that the alleged source of plagiarism was a previous student paper because of different formatting and presentation, even though the experiment performed was extremely similar. He did not intentionally seek out that specific paper. Student A said he once spoke to the professor about using an outside source and asking if doing so violated the Honor Code of the course and was surprised to hear the professor encourage and expect students to look up external sources and so thought he should look up more. The previous student paper was not referenced because students were instructed to only reference papers for specific facts, not for formatting.

Identical figures are allegedly caused by the default formatting of the software used to make the report. Student A said identical phrases in his submitted report are possibly the result of copying and pasting the previous student paper into his report, instead of using the appropriate section of the course website. The website was consulted due to the disorganization and alleged illegibility of the notebook several months after the lab was conducted, and Student A said he did not need to edit it further because the final paper is supposed to be written as if the experiment ran perfectly.

Verdict Deliberations:

Council members believed that a preponderance of the evidence supported that a violation occurred because of the similarities pointed out by the accuser and student A's plea and own admission of copying.

The council also felt that the degree of similarity between student A's paper and the previous student paper was too great to be explained solely by using the previous paper as a stylistic guide.

Straw Poll #1: Does a preponderance of the evidence support that a violation occurred?

Yes: 9 + 1 observing

No: 0

Abstentions: 0

The Council then discussed whether or not Student A committed the violation. All council members felt the evidence clearly supported that Student A committed the violation.

Straw Poll #2: Does a preponderance of the evidence support that Student A is “In Violation?”

Yes: 9 + 1 observing

No: 0

Abstentions: 0

Straw Polls #1 and #2 made binding.

Penalty Deliberations:

Council members opened by discussing mitigating circumstances. The weight of the assignment and amount of the assignment in violation struck members as being too great to allow mitigation on these circumstances. Some council members considered mitigating on cooperation due to the evidence that the student offered to bring in.

A council member wanted to discuss aggravating due to attempt to conceal the violation. The council member was concerned over student A resubmitting the report after realizing he turned in a preliminary version of his paper. Other council members agreed that the large similarities between the abstract of the preliminary and final paper, with only minor changes, could have been an attempt to conceal an initial violation after realizing he sent in a plagiarized paper. Some council members felt that this was not an attempt to conceal the initial violation, but was an accurate representation of the student’s original intent to submit the final paper, which was still plagiarized. It was also pointed out that evidence showed the paper had not been edited after Student A realized he had submitted the wrong version.

Council members also discussed aggravating for attempting to deceive the council. Several council members felt there was not enough material evidence to prove deceit. Other council members pointed out that Student A provided misleading statements during testimony and felt it was impossible to believe there was no intent to plagiarize given the sheer amount of the paper in violation. Another member felt there was an intent to deceive the council when the accused insisted his notebook was illegible, but members of the council could clearly read copies.

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

F in the course and 3 semesters of suspension:	1
F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension:	7
F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	1
F in the course:	0
Abstentions:	0

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

F in the course and 3 semesters of suspension:	0
F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension:	8
F in the course and 1 semester of suspension:	1
F in the course:	0
Abstentions:	0

The council member who moved said they did so because they felt the material evidence was not strong enough to support a claim of deceit.

Straw Poll #4 made binding.

The Honor Council thus finds Student A “In Violation” of the Honor Code and recommends that he receive an F in the course and 2 semesters of suspension. A Prior Violation Flag is also attached to his record.

Time of testimony and deliberations: 1 hour, 32 minutes

Respectfully submitted,
Matthew Diasio
Clerk