

Student Cheating/Plagiarism

Richard Belding is a teaching assistant in the Political Science Department at Bayside University. While he has been a teaching assistant before, this is the first time he is teaching his own course—a section of Introduction to Political Ideology. When designing the course, Richard decided that in order to encourage students to keep up with the reading, a major component of their grades would be determined by a set of twenty-four reading questions distributed on the first day of the class. Each of these questions asks about some specific element from one of the readings. Students are supposed to provide a response “in their own words” of a half-page to a full-page in length for each question. He decided to divide the questions into three sets of eight—corresponding to the three main units of the course—and have one set of responses due every five weeks.

Richard is marking the first set of responses for the semester. Not surprisingly, many of the students’ answers are very similar to one another. However, as he is grading the second question, Richard noticed that Zack Morris’s answer sounds a little *too* familiar—in part, because it showed the same major misunderstanding of one of the readings that another student had made. Looking back through the other students’ responses he confirmed that Zack’s response to the question was nearly word-for-word identical with Kelly Kapowski’s. After carefully comparing the two students’ assignments, Richard determined that their responses were nearly identical for all but the last question.

Richard suspected that Zack had talked Kelly into helping him cheat on the assignment. Kelly was a bright and engaged freshman, who routinely contributed to class discussion. Zack, on the other hand, was a sophomore taking the class Pass/Fail; his contributions to discussion were infrequent and normally either rambling or off-topic. Richard already had known that the two of them were friends outside of class.

Since the syllabus for the course clearly stated that any instances of academic dishonesty would result in a zero for the assignment in question, Richard gave both Zack and Kelly zeros on the first set of questions and as an explanation wrote “Academic Dishonesty” on their assignments. Richard returned the graded assignments at the end of the next class meeting. Kelly was in class that day, but Zack was absent.

After looking at her grade, Kelly was visibly upset. She approached Richard after everyone else had left the room. “What does this mean?” She asked. “I didn’t cheat on this!”

“I can’t talk about this right now,” Richard responded, “but if you come to my office hours tomorrow we can discuss the matter.”

When Richard showed up to office hours the next morning, Kelly was already waiting by the door. “I’m not a cheater!” Kelly exclaimed. “I’ve never cheated on anything in my whole life!”

Richard responded by telling her that helping someone else cheat is also a violation of the academic integrity policy. Then he showed Kelly copies of the two assignments for her to compare. Nearly in tears, Kelly admitted that the week before

they were due, she had given Zack a copy of the reading responses she had finished—all but the last one.

“He told me that he wasn’t sure what you expected from them and so he wanted to look at mine to see if he was on the right track. I never thought that he would copy from me! And I didn’t think that letting him look at my responses was cheating since you never told us that we couldn’t get help from each other on them!”

Given this explanation, Richard softened and decided to increase the grade from a zero to half-credit. After it was explained to her that it would still be possible for her to receive relatively high marks in the course if she performed very well, Kelly agreed to accept the penalty.

After Kelly left his office, Richard found an email from Zack (who had seen his grade posted on Blackboard) asking why he failed the assignment. Richard responded by saying that he failed the assignment because he had cheated and that he could meet with him in his office later that day or the next to discuss the issue, if he would like.

Later that day, Zack showed up at Richard’s office clearly angry. “I’m not a cheater! I’ve never cheated on anything in my whole life!” he fumed.

“We both know that you copied your responses from Kelly,” Richard calmly replied as he handed Zack his assignment back with a copy of Kelly’s to compare. “You didn’t come up with almost exactly the same words by accident” Richard continued, “and Kelly already told me that she gave you her assignment to look at.”

“She’s lying!” Zack insisted. “She never gave me anything! She’s always borrowing my laptop. She must have taken it without my knowing! But I didn’t cheat!”

“Well if you aren’t going to take responsibility for what you did, then there’s nothing more we need to talk about. You are free to appeal my decision with Judicial Affairs—I was willing to let things slide and not report this case to them, but if you are going to press the issue I will need to file a report.”

Questions for Discussion

1. What should a graduate student instructor do when she discovers that one of her students have cheated on an assignment? What, if anything, in Richard’s response was appropriate? What, if anything, in his response should have been done differently? Why?
2. How should a University judicial board resolve this case?
3. Why do students cheat? What if anything can we do to prevent cheating from happening in our classes? Given the information in the case, is there anything that Richard might have done differently before the fact to reduce the likelihood of cheating in his course?
4. What constitutes academic dishonesty? Assuming that Kelly is telling the truth about letting Zack see her assignment, does her behavior count as academic dishonesty? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on?