

## *When the TA Suspects Cheating*

Probably the most common dilemma a TA experiences, other than grading exams and papers objectively and fairly, occurs when he or she suspects instances of cheating. Unfortunately, I had two such experiences during my days in graduate school under two different instructors. The first time it happened, I went to the course instructor and told her about my suspicions. The issue involved two students who obviously worked together on their lab reports although the instructions—which were explicit and exceptionless—forbade collaboration. When I showed the instructor the students' papers, she frowned and said, "I'll handle it." The second time it happened—and, remarkably, the same kind of cheating: collaborating on a study when the students were instructed to work independently—the instructor told me to take care of it. This latter instance of cheating was even more blatant than the first, and I made up my mind to take it to the honor council. But when I told the instructor of my decision, he suggested I not go that route. He said that in his experience, these things are better handled privately, i.e., just between the students and the faculty. That's what the first instructor did, incidentally, and I wound up doing the same thing: Having the students redo the assignment but turning in a lower, final grade for their deviating from instructions.

I was never satisfied with these approaches. Cheating is cheating and should, in my opinion, be formally addressed. If students only get a slap on the wrist, they learn that cheating is not as bad as it's made out to be. And if they decide to have a career in science, a favorable attitude towards cheating is exactly what we don't want them to develop. What are your thoughts?

### *Expert Opinion*

The TA was certainly correct to go to his or her instructors given these situations, but we are inclined to agree with the TA that each instance was handled suboptimally.

Perhaps one can understand an instructor's reluctance to report these incidents directly to the honor council or whatever entity is explicitly charged by the University to investigate instances of cheating. The instructor might fear his or her becoming involved in a time-consuming investigation punctuated by numerous, emotionally uncomfortable encounters. However, we suggest that when there is enough evidence to believe that cheating has occurred, the professor should report the incident to whatever committee or council is tasked with conducting such investigations.

The professors' fears that such investigations would require too much of his or her time and prove unreasonably distressing are probably exaggerated. At least in our experience, what generally happens is that the case is removed from the instructor's purview altogether. Of course, the faculty member should make copies of any relevant documents before turning them over to the investigators and make notes about any conversations with anyone (such as the TA) that are pertinent to the incident. But turning the investigation over to an Honor Council or the like relieves both the professor

and the TA from having to determine that cheating actually occurred and, thus, somewhat distances them from whatever emotional distress will result.

Usually, the subsequent investigation is entirely conducted by the oversight committee with the professor and the TA being available for informing the committee of their experiences, just as the accused students will be able to do. Furthermore, a penalty will be determined (or possibly mandated) by the committee. By virtue of the committee's primarily handling the investigation itself, the accused students will tend to focus their dismay towards it rather than towards the professor or the TA. (Presumably, the instructor will desist from giving the students a grade until the investigation is complete.)

One also hopes that the institution would have an office where incidents like this are reported and recorded. This would deter "serial cheating," wherein certain students might cheat numerous times in numerous courses. Without a central repository that is aware of previous cheating, students could get away with a series of relatively minor sanctions by faculty members without ever suffering a serious penalty like suspension or expulsion.

We are impressed with the TA's worry that a tepid response to instances of cheating undercuts the goal of instilling scholarly integrity among the student body. Cheating is a serious offense and its associated suspicions need to be dealt with aggressively.