
PLAGIARISM AND DISCIPLINE

Liliana Lopez Jimenez wrote this case under the supervision of Deborah Compeau solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Unbelievable! How could they do this? The last group that cheated got themselves expelled from the program!

When Professor Isabel Lesmes found out that one of the groups in her Management Information Systems (MIS) MBA class had plagiarized part of their assignment from other sources, she did not know what to do. Plagiarism was not an unusual situation to her; in the past, she had always reported it. Her university also took plagiarism seriously; students who were caught were expelled from the university. But this situation seemed a little different, and Lesmes wondered whether reporting the students and having them expelled was the sensible approach this time.

ORGANIZATION AND COURSE

Lesmes had worked for Universidad del Puente's (UP's) business school for six years, the last four as a full-time faculty member. She had been in charge of the Management Information Systems (MIS) courses for MBA students since 2006. In all her courses, she tried to strike a balance between enabling a friendly atmosphere in class and demanding rigour in the assignments.

The UP business school was part of Universidad del Puente (UP), a prestigious private university in Latin America. The most prominent program of the school was its MBA, which, according to the regional business press, was highly ranked among all such programs in Latin America.

All MBA courses in UP's business school were offered part-time, and Lesmes' MIS class was no exception. Part-time MBA students typically worked during the daytime and attended class two weekday evenings and all day on Saturday. The program's duration was two years. The MIS course took place toward the end of the first year. By that time, students were becoming tired, as the first year wound down.

Lesmes' current class, in particular, was diverse in terms of the students' ages and work experience and also in the kinds of jobs they held and the industries they worked in. Class contribution also varied:

anything was possible, from non-existent responses to long monologues, from light comments to deep analysis.

Like many other students, and likely also as a result of their full-time work, the students in Lesmes' class didn't always have sufficient time to complete their readings and other coursework. On average, Lesmes found that their performance was below their potential. However, the class dynamics were satisfactory, and the enthusiastic students kept the discussions lively. The atmosphere was friendly, and most students truly cared about the practical implications of what they learned.

The course was completed over a six-week period. Evaluation was as follows:

- 20 per cent for a group report on the *Retail Ltd.* case
- 20 per cent for a group report on the *Agrofood Inc.* case.
- 30 per cent for an individual essay on types of enterprise information systems (IS)
- 30 per cent for an individual report on information technology (IT) governance

All assignments were due between one day and two weeks after the course was finished.

PLAGIARISM IN THE UNIVERSITY

In UP, plagiarism was typified as a serious scholastic offence. Given the rise of occurrence of plagiarism events in the previous years, the university had strengthened the communication mechanisms used to prevent it. In the past, students only had to sign a form accepting the university's policies, one of which touched upon plagiarism. More recently, program directors were required to inform students explicitly and with some detail about what constituted plagiarism and what the disciplinary consequences were. This meant that the responsibility for communicating the policy was handled by the program, not the individual course. Statements regarding plagiarism were not part of a typically UP syllabus. In the business school, all programs allocated some time during the orientation session for this purpose. Deans and program directors also encouraged instructors to talk about plagiarism in their first class session.

Lesmes usually followed this recommendation and discussed plagiarism when setting up the course's ground rules with her students.

According to the university's rules, instructors at UP had the duty to report any activity out of the ordinary that could lead to disciplinary action. Instructors were not expected (nor authorized) to decide on how to handle any of these situations. Instead, they were required to report all cases to the Graduate Disciplinary Committee, which would then analyse the situation based on collected evidence and send a recommendation for action to the president's office.

Some years previously, it was learned that some individuals at the university did not report disciplinary cases, but handled these matters internally. The university, aware of the reputational damage such behaviour could cause, had strengthened its measures. Departmental deans were asked to keep an eye on these situations and to communicate to their academic communities about the nature of plagiarism, why it was problematic and the sanctions that went with it. Additionally, although the sanctions had not explicitly changed, readmission was no longer being extended to students who had previously been sanctioned for plagiarism. As a consequence, at the orientation sessions, all program directors devoted special attention to informing students of plagiarism and its effects.

Nonetheless, many believed that not all cases of plagiarism were reported. Most reports came from the same faculty members, including Lesmes.

Individual and group cases of plagiarism were treated alike at UP. When team cases were reported, the logic of their treatment was along the following lines:

All team members are equally accountable for their collective assignments. If they do great, they all do great. If they fail, they all fail. If for any reason disciplinary action is taken, they shall all be sanctioned.

We always expect some team members to argue they had split the report, so they are not responsible for other people's parts. However, what if the other part was excellent? Would they complain they deserved an inferior grade because that was not their part?

The treatment given to team members, as described above, was not publicly known, but Professor Lesmes was aware of it because she sat on the Graduate Disciplinary Committee, where she had seen all members of a team being equally sanctioned in other cases of plagiarism.

THE RETAIL LTD. ASSIGNMENT

The Retail Ltd. assignment was given to the class in week 4; during class, students sat in their teams and were able to work in many of the assigned questions, with Lesmes as a facilitator. The assignment was due two days after the end of the course. Although some groups had finished the core of the assignment in class, Lesmes explained to the students that she preferred to give all students more time to work on grammar, style and other presentation issues. About a week after the assignments were handed in, Lesmes was grading group reports on the case, when one of the reports caught her attention. Most of the report was fine. The students had properly understood the facts and had stated the problem situation succinctly. However, in the remaining sections, several paragraphs did not follow the narrative, and the writing style did not match the writing style elsewhere in the report.

Thus, Lesmes decided to pass the file through Approbo, an anti-plagiarism software product. Since the university did not have any licensed anti-plagiarism software, Lesmes had used Approbo for a few years, as a free online alternative. The suspicious paragraphs had exact matches with two electronic sources: Wikipedia and SlideShare. In total, the overlapping material was equivalent to about 20 per cent of the report. The report included no references to Wikipedia, SlideShare or any other sources. Lack of references was quite normal in case method reports at the MBA level because students were expected to base their work solely on material provided in class.

The suspicious report had been handed in by a group of four students. Two of them, Lisa and Camila, Lesmes clearly remembered as being actively engaged in the discussions. She also remembered these two students had approached her at the end of the last session because they were leaving the next day on a six-week study trip abroad, and they had wanted to confirm that she had received their individual assignments. As for the other two, Amanda and Katy, Lesmes recalled that they had hardly participated in class and had not even asked questions. Among the 40 students in the class, they had truly passed unnoticed.

Lesmes had reported several cases of plagiarism in the past, so she did not feel badly about reporting one more. But this case wasn't similar to previous ones because of the perceived differences among the team members and the study trip abroad by two in the group. Lesmes had been a student before and had worked

in teams. She knew that, on occasions, you simply had to trust your teammates because you could not check everything they did. What if the students who travelled abroad hadn't seen the final version of the report? Should they still be held accountable for plagiarism issues that may have occurred after their departure?

If she reported the case, all four students would likely be expelled, which didn't seem fair. However, if she didn't report the case, the outcome would be different, but it would be like taking justice into her own hands, which she wasn't comfortable doing.

The next meeting of the Graduate Disciplinary Committee was the following Wednesday. Lesmes knew she didn't have much time to make her decision.

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