

Teaching Caselette

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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A student interning at a domestic non-profit over the summer is frustrated with having to assume the tasks of a receptionist. This case examines the ethical dilemmas created by the situation and realistically presents the difficulties students face when their internships do not work out as planned.

The case and teaching notes for this teaching caselette were completed under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Dunning, the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Lisa's summer internship is with the Association for Bicycle Transportation (ABT), a domestic non-profit based on the West Coast. Since its inception two decades ago, the ABT has worked to promote bicycle use and improve bicycling conditions locally and in neighboring states.

While being introduced to the staff members and full-time volunteers of the ABT on her first day, Lisa notices that there is no receptionist on the staff roster. She learns that the receptionist recently resigned. The ABT is still looking to fill the position.

Two days after the start of Lisa's internship, her supervisor leaves on business for a week. It is during this period of time that Lisa is asked by other staff members to take over the cubicle located nearest to and facing the main entrance, the cubicle that had been used by the departed receptionist. Lisa has nagging doubts about this, as she senses the staff would like her to assume the role of receptionist. However, when asked if she has any problems with this change, Lisa does not voice her concerns. As a new intern with only two days on the job, Lisa feels that she can only do what is asked of her.

At her new physical location, Lisa is still engaged in duties that she had anticipated would be part of her internship, which include conducting research for the ABT and attending meetings. However, she is also now the de facto receptionist, and faces considerable difficulties when it comes to directing visitors, as she is still very unfamiliar with the work of the organization. Lisa's situation deteriorates with the appointment of a new executive director two weeks into her internship. This adds more to staff changes and creates further organizational disarray at ABT. At the same time, the new executive director approaches Lisa as an actual receptionist. He is unfamiliar with the internship program and with who she is, and asks her to do time-consuming tasks such as handling the large amount of mail that goes through the ABT.

While Lisa feels that she is not supposed to assume the tasks of a receptionist during her internship, and that she is also not qualified for these tasks, she also understands that the non-profit is under-staffed and she wishes to help as much as possible. Over the course of her internship, these conflicting desires have led Lisa to feel frustrated on more than one occasion.