

Teaching Caselette

SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION

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A student interning in an NGO that works with ethnic-minority groups is asked to pass off one individual's scholarship application for another. The intern must decide how to respond to the supervisor's request to do this, while considering the benefits and drawbacks of any decision that is ultimately made. Other interns in the office join in to help the student decide what to do.

This case illustrates the dilemmas students may face at their internship sites as they balance the directives of NGO staff with their own personal ethical codes. The case also illustrates the balance that students will seek to strike between short and long-term results, and individual and community needs.

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Chris is abroad for his summer civic engagement internship. Together with two other student interns, Chris is placed with the Builders for Community Unity (BCU), an NGO that works with ethnic minority groups in the city in which Chris is working. Acting as an umbrella organization, the BCU organizes minority-interest non-profits, pooling resources for the advancement of ethnic minority communities and helping start-up NGOs. One BCU initiative assists ethnic-minority students in their application for study grants and to enroll in university. As such, it is not uncommon for the BCU to help these students complete scholarship applications. The assistance provided includes writing skills tutoring and logistical support to submit the applications.

One day, while all three interns are working in the office, their supervisor approaches Chris and asks for his help with a scholarship application. Two students affiliated with the BCU had asked the organization to submit their application forms to an open scholarship, due the next day. The supervisor explains that one of the two students just withdrew his application for personal reasons. While the remaining applicant still wants to submit her application form, it is in very poor shape. The application lacks substantive content and is comprised largely of fragmented sentences. Since the applications are due the very next day, and the girl who is interested in applying has left for the day, the supervisor asks Chris to simply copy the first applicant's form and submit it as the girl's.

Although Chris expresses discomfort at carrying out this task, his supervisor seems eager to be done with this issue and move on to other work, even adding that this is how things are done locally and that no one would care. Chris then turns to the other interns for advice. Together, they come up with two options. One is to find the girl, interview her, and work with her to improve her application. This is difficult if not impossible, however, with the workday nearing an end and the applications due the next day. Another option is to work with what has been written, which would still leave the application sub-par. The interns are confident of improving the English, but find the dearth of ideas in the original application to be extremely problematic.

The interns feel uncomfortable making changes to the application without the applicant's own input, but they also understand it is the mission of the BCU to assist members of ethnic minority communities. At the same time, the supervisor has shown displeasure at Chris, for both speaking with the other interns about this matter and not getting this piece of work done more efficiently.