

Teaching Caselette

Teaching Notes

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.

Please refer to the "Ethics of Engagement" overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework that this case is used to illustrate.

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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Issue: Student interns working at a minority-interest non-profit, Builders for Community Unity (BCU), are being pressured by their supervisor to pass off one client's scholarship application as that of another. This case highlights a reality some students might observe while working with non-profit organizations – working with limited resources the organizations may cut corners, at times to the point of seeming unethical. The questions below are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What are the challenges to acting ethically in this case?*

Due to the nature of the position, Chris has an incomplete understanding of affairs in the community, and his position and work is only temporary. In his capacity as a short-term volunteer, Chris questions his ability to challenge “how things are done” at his internship site. While he feels passing off the application is dishonest, he also believes the benefits to the student of receiving the scholarship—as well as benefits that could accrue to the student's family and the wider community—should be considered. This case is not only about student interns deciding on the best way to help with a student's scholarship application. The interns also face dilemmas on how to respond to the demands of their supervisor, and how to navigate the unfamiliar work of civic engagement.

2. *Can you identify any ethical dilemmas confronting the interns?*

- Short-term versus Long-term
 - The short-term discomfort of the interns and the long-term benefits that can be reaped from the student winning the scholarship – for herself, her family, her community, and for the BCU.
 - Going against the requests of the supervisor in the short-term and having to continue working with the supervisor and face possible repercussions until the end of the internship.
- Justice versus Mercy
 - Justice in this situation could mean not passing off one student's application as another's, as this is unfair to all the applicants, while being merciful might entail using the application to help the girl get the scholarship.
- Individual versus Community
 - The personal desire of the interns to “do the right thing” and the wish of the supervisor, as a representative of the BCU, to improve work efficiency and handle as many cases as possible.
 - The requests of the supervisor are not necessarily representative of the organization as a whole, or what is best for the community.
- Truth versus Loyalty
 - Passing off one application as that of another's is untruthful, yet Chris feels some obligation to follow the dictates of his supervisor.

3. *How would you respond to this situation? Use the Resolution Principles (Utilitarianism, deontology/principle-based, care-based) to justify your response. Possible responses include:*

- A utilitarian approach would prize the greatest good, and hence suggest that the student interns compromise their position. Not only would the scholarship applicant be served, the likelihood of future repercussions against the interns would also be greatly reduced.
- A deontological approach would suggest that the interns not compromise, and uphold their principles even when working with impoverished individuals from communities of great need.
- A care-based approach would emphasize the relationships the interns have, with their supervisor, the non-profit, the girl applying for the scholarship, and the community the non-profit serves. If these relationships are not strong, it would be easier for the interns to refuse what is been asked of them.

In the discussion help students to recognize that the dynamics of this case would be very different if there were no other interns working with Chris. In many ways, the other interns provide a source of support for Chris, as well as creative resources in devising different resolutions to the dilemmas. While it is true that the interns are challenged by larger factors, and their involvement is too short-term to effectively address a supposed “results-driven” culture of engagement, their response, whatever that may be, can only be more effective if it is born out of collectivity within the intern community. This would be especially relevant to consider should the principle-based approach be preferred.

Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

Utilitarianism - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism) - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

Care-Based - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.