Case Notes

# Chapter 12: Addressing Ethics in Leadership

# Case 12.1: The Write Choice

## Case Summary

This case study outlines the ethical decision-making process that leaders (in this case, a professor) must make when faced with dilemmas aligned with following policy. In this case, a student, Kelly, openly plagiarized a brochure from a community agency in order to meet requirements for an assignment. The professor in this case, Professor Ramirez, is left with an ethical dilemma as whether or not to report Kelly for plagiarism, which could have a significant impact on her ability to obtain employment (which Professor Ramirez has already recommended her for), and to graduate from community college.

Instead of following policy, Professor Ramirez instead decides to have a one-on-one conversation with Kelly, to determine the extent of her plagiarism. Due to circumstances beyond her control, Kelly has been preoccupied with outside responsibilities in addition to school, and Professor Ramirez has determined that she was able to meet the required hours for community service, noting that it was just the paper itself that was the concern.

Professor Ramirez ultimately decides to go against college policy and not report the plagiarism, noting that the institutional policy for plagiarism was very serious and that Kelly deserved a second chance, which was consistent with Professor Ramirez’s values. Ultimately, she assigned Kelly a value of a “0” for the assignment, which allowed her to pass the course with a “B” grade.

Case Analysis

This case study presents a scenario where **ethical values**, **actions**, **honesty**, and **character** conflict with institutional roles in regulations. In this scenario, Kelly, the student in question, clearly breached an institutional policy. However, the seriousness of the policy could have had very severe consequences on Kelly’s future, preventing her from securing employment post-graduation and requiring her to repeat the course after a semester suspension.

Knowing what the consequences were by reporting Kelly’s plagiarism to the community college, Professor Ramirez decided to approach her in a one-on-one environment to assess the seriousness of the breach and determine what might have happened to cause Kelly’s **actions**. Professor Ramirez believed in giving her a second chance and showed respect and justice to her in order for her to graduate and retain her employment. It must be noted that Kelly’s actions were not without consequence; Professor Ramirez assigned her a “0” on the assignment which led to her grade ending up with a “B” in the course, instead of allowing her to redo the assignment.

## Sample Answers to Case Questions

*1. Even though Professor Ramirez deviated from the college’s policy regarding plagiarism, do you feel she acted ethically?*

Professor Ramirez acted ethically by still holding Kelly to a standard and not permitting her to redo the assignment. By meeting with Kelly one-on-one, Professor Ramirez was able to determine the extent to which Kelly should experience consequence, and determined that a punishment such as temporary expulsion and failing the course was far too much because of Kelly’s prior work ethic and outside, extenuating circumstances.

*2. If you were a student in this class and learned Professor Ramirez made an exception for this student, would you think she acted ethically? Explain.*

There are two perspectives for this answer. On one end of the spectrum, some students would probably be upset because the policy was not followed in accordance with the institution, and exceptions were made for Kelly. On the other end of the spectrum, Professor Ramirez did hold Kelly accountable for her actions, albeit not completely in accordance to policy. The ethical threshold of students will differ in this case, leading to different answers depending on their perspectives.

*3. In Table 11.1 the Six Pillars of Character are detailed. Which of these six pillars did Professor Ramirez display in consideration for her student, and how?*

Professor Ramirez displayed trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, and caring for her student, Kelly.

Professor Ramirez displayed trustworthiness by being honest with her and discussing with her the plagiarism before turning her in. She took her words at face value and arrived at a consequence that was not as major as reporting would have been.

She also displayed respect for Kelly’s external situations with her mom, knowing that she was a hard-worker and did complete the internship hours to fulfill a component of the community service initiative, and it was just the paper that was in question.

She also showed responsibility by still holding Kelly accountable in some form. Even though she was not reported, Kelly was still held accountable for her actions, resulting in a “0” on her paper score.

Fairness was also displayed. Professor Ramirez could have easily not addressed the plagiarism at all, and just assigned Kelly a score on the paper to let her graduate. However, Professor Ramirez realized this wouldn’t be fair to the other students and some action had to be taken, even if it wasn’t as severe as the institutional policies set forth.

Finally, she displayed caring by meeting with her one-on-one and ultimately giving her a second chance to address her actions.

*4. Professor Ramirez’s actions ultimately brought into question whether or not the ends justify the means. Do you feel that her leniency in this case made her a stronger or more ethical leader? Explain.*

It could be argued that Professor Ramirez was a weaker ethical leader by not ultimately following the set-forth college policy. However, her leniency showed that she exhibits compassion for others and was cognizant of Kelly’s issues and viewed this as a single mistake and not the entire body of work for Kelly’s performance. This would classify her as a strong ethical leader, as she truly was concerned for the well-being of her student.