

Research Misconduct at the High School Level

I did my undergraduate work in a biological research lab that was proud to host numerous high school students throughout the year. Each student would learn basic microbiological techniques by isolating and characterizing novel viruses from the environment. Many would use this experience for a high school graduation project.

One time during the Spring semester, the coordinator of this program received an e-mail from a local high school student who stated he was working with us for his senior high school science project. He inquired in the e-mail if he could ask the coordinator some questions about the program. The coordinator responded affirmatively, so the student followed up with a list of questions. Upon reading the questions, however, the coordinator was struck by the fact that they were not the type of questions that a student who participated in the program would ask, e.g., "What does your program do?" "What building is your program located in?"

So, the coordinator became suspicious as to whether the student actually set foot in the lab to do the work he claimed he was doing. So we investigated. We searched for notebooks with his name on it, his name in the time logs, and his initials on community reagents. We went back through old e-mails to see if he had been assigned a mentor to work with us. Our efforts turned up nothing. There was absolutely no evidence that this student had performed the work he claimed to have done.

After a brief discussion on whether we should notify the student's teacher, we did. In fact, we contacted both the teacher and the principal. We explained that we had no evidence that this student had ever worked with us, and if he claimed to have done so for a high school project, he was lying. As it turned out, the student had indeed claimed to have worked with our lab, and he fabricated the data on his project as well. The high school required him to redo the project, which meant he couldn't graduate that Spring.

It seems to me our decision to contact the high school was entirely proper. Do you agree?

Expert Opinion

Absolutely. The lab had an overriding professional obligation to contact the high school and discuss this occurrence. Many, if not all professional organizations impose a moral obligation on their members to call attention to wrongdoing. In this case, the initial communication between the student and the program coordinator was not the privileged sort that occurs between a lawyer and a client, or a priest and a penitent. Indeed, the lab's failure to do so would arguably have taught a youngster that he could get away with a remarkable act of deception.

With college applications becoming more competitive, scenarios like this one might be becoming more familiar. Students have been known to "join" teams and groups and "volunteer" for community projects which they can list on their applications when, in reality, they participate very little in these endeavors. Parents also are in collusion with many of these endeavors as they arrange "internships" at their companies or other places where they have standing.

Teenagers and young adults may be our least capable and experienced moral agents, while our educational system (both secondary and higher education) often generates situations with a lot of temptation, little chance of getting caught, and not much information about or support for making good ethical decisions.

One approach might be to encourage secondary education and higher education to work both separately and collaboratively to ensure that students develop, nurture, encourage, and support good ethical decision making. For example, high schools might want to select textbooks that incorporate explicit instruction in ethics or develop those units themselves. Colleges might want to think about replacing admissions policies that encourage students to list as many activities as possible and, instead,

ask for one letter from a person who has supervised an outside activity in which the student was genuinely involved.

One hopes the student learned his lesson. One wonders, however, whether the high school's disciplinary action appeared on the student's academic record. If the student applies to college, the displeasure of his having to explain his wrongdoing, as so documented, might drive home the gravity of his behavior in a way that just making up the science project over the summer wouldn't.

Related reading:

Jacques Steinberg. "Before college, costly advice just on getting in." NY Times, July 18, 2009.

Available at

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/education/19counselor.html?_r=1&ref=education.

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