A Degree with Two Names?

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Scene 1: Ten minutes until class. You’d completely forgotten to do your homework in the excitement of Saturday’s big Texas Tech football game. You aren’t the kind of student this usually happens to; you’ve never even missed an assignment before. You decide that based on your previous record it would be okay to ask a friend to borrow his assignment this one time. You know he’ll do it, and you’ll find some way to make it up for him, maybe by doing his assignment next time.

Scene 2: Ten minutes until class. You completed your assignment not an hour after the last class so nothing would stand between you and Saturday’s game. You are about to leave for class when you receive an urgent text asking you to forward your assignment to your friend who hasn’t done hers. Your friend is a good student, so you find it hard to believe she didn’t finish her assignment. You send yours to her, but you make sure to write that she can use your paper but needs to change it so her copy doesn’t have the same structure.

Scene 3: Friday afternoon before the big Tech game. You and your roommate are talking about the last class period and decide to run through the answers on the assignment. You’re each on separate computers, writing different sentences as you answer the various questions discussed in class. You print out your paper so you can get to the student section on Saturday without a care in the world.

Which of these students would the university consider academically dishonest? The answer is all of them.

More than 99% of my students strive for honor academically. In fact, in my four years of teaching at Texas Tech University, not even half of 1% of my students committed acts of academic dishonesty. Unfortunately, I have taught more than 2,000 Red Raiders in the last year, and nearly 100 of these students have been dishonest. Ninety-nine percent sounds like a good number overall, whereas the staggering number of 100 students sounds awful. But the major culprit in my classes is not, as some might expect, plagiarism (using someone else’s words as your own). The big culprit for these 100 students is collusion.

The university’s operating policies currently state that collusion “includes, but is not limited to, the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing academic assignments offered for credit or collaboration with another person to commit a violation of any section of the rules on scholastic dishonesty” (OP 34.12). Because collusion is any form of unauthorized collaboration, it is a form of academic dishonesty that always affects more than one student. All students involved in collusion suffer
the consequences even if they did not mean to collude; much like sexual harassment, intention is irrelevant. The consequences for collusion may be as small as having to redo the assignment and as significant as expulsion from the University.

I should point out that nearly all of my students never intend to collude. They are Red Raiders: hard working, caring, observant, and ready to give their all. Most of them only want to do what they consider the right thing—helping a friend in need. A Red Raider should always help a friend, but collusion never helps. It only hurts. Consider the difference between failing to turn in an assignment and colluding with someone. If your friend fails to turn in an assignment, he or she will receive a zero. Period. There are no other consequences. But if you collude, it’s possible that you and your friend will both receive zeroes. Your instructor could also send an incident report to Student Judicial Programs about your collusion.

The Texas Tech University Statement of Ethical Principles comments on the pursuit of excellence: “The university intends to be a model of excellence, following best practices in its professional work, displaying the highest standards in its scholarly work, and offering venues to showcase national and international examples of achievement.” You can achieve high standards by doing your work and allowing your friends to achieve their own. After all, nobody gets to share their diploma because it bears the names of more than one student.

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