

Human Frailty

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“Fill the seats of judgment with just people, but not so absolute in justice as to forget what human frailty is.”

When the University Ethics Committee (UEC) was established, *justice* was its charge. Not equity, perfection, nor judgment itself, but rather to judge frail humans simply as such: humans. While the function of the UEC is to hand down punishment, those punishments are to be adjusted per situation, per instance, and per person--in this case, that person being Alexandra Romanov. During her final year at the University of Colorado, Alexandra has committed plagiarism, purchasing a paper written by someone else in an attempt to pass it off as her own. While there is no doubt that plagiarism is an offense worth a punishment, and Professor Stone has sought Alexandra's expulsion, it is my recommendation that she be failed on that particular paper and be allowed to continue on the path to her degree uninterrupted.

Two years ago, Alexandra became a mother. While there are plenty of mothers who have graduated from (and will graduate from) the University of Colorado, it is a statistical fact that women with children graduate at a lower rate than women who do not. The stress of parenting and having a child is more than most students can (or should be expected to) handle; when freshman students arrive at CU, they are told by advisors, professors, and other university staff that being a student is a full-time job. The average student is advised to spend 40 hours a week on school--*outside of class*. With 40 hours a week on work outside of class, a workload of five

classes, at an average of three credit hours each, along with the recommended eight hours of sleep per night for students, leaves Alexandra with less than five hours a day to spend with her child, work a part time job to make up for her husband's lack of work, cook, clean, do chores, and eat. No human being should be expected to live up to that standard and be able to make it out as a perfect person. When faced with this time crunch (during the time she purchased the plagiarized paper, she had four other papers due), Alexandra chose to take a shortcut in an attempt to simply make it through what is most likely the hardest time in her life yet.

This case was brought to our attention by Alexandra's professor who assigned her the plagiarized paper--Professor Stone. Professor Stone, in the last year, has brought more cases before the UEC than any other professor on our campus. While some may say this is admirable, I believe Professor Stone to not understand what it takes to be one of his own students. In his own words, Stone regards himself as one of the finer teachers here on campus. He is a harsh grader, regards plagiarism as a personal slight, and takes pride in failing his students. In this committee member's opinion, a plaintiff with a personal score to settle should have no place attempting to administer justice. This case that he has brought before us is not about a moral shortcoming, or even because of a repeated offense, but rather because a professor on our campus has a personal vendetta against acts of plagiarism and is unwilling to consider one of his students' situations.

I'm sure there are many members of the committee who would be likely to take the stance of Professor Stone; having already been criticized recently for being too light on plagiarism, this seems like the perfect opportunity to make an example of a student and begin cracking down. After all, Alexandra dislikes her professor, his class, and chose to pay for the paper. And yet, even as the committee is criticized, I am reminded, again, of our charge: "Fill the

seats of judgment with just people, but not so absolute in justice as to forget what human frailty is.” Professor Stone fills neither part of this statement; in this instance, he is unjust, using his own personal motivations and opinions to reflect upon the situation. His recommendation to expel Alexandra is not based at all on contextual information or even the degree of the crime she committed; it is as though he is seeking the death penalty for a first-time drug offender. A crime has been committed, yes, but the punishment must fit that crime.

Stone also seems to forget the latter part of the statement: “be not so absolute in justice as to forget what human frailty is.” In this situation, Alexandra was frail--and she broke. She broke under the pressure of a two-year-old child, an unemployed husband, mononucleosis, depression, and maintaining her (rather impressive) grade point average.

The precedent set in the academic community for situations such as this varies wildly. In the attempt to find a recommended punishment for this instance of plagiarism, the committee has encountered various policies across dozens of universities that include expulsion, failure for the class, failure on the paper, and even in certain circumstances, complete clemency and exemption from a grade on that assignment. In the case of the final choice, I would like to bring up an instance that occurred on our own campus very recently. As much as university politics seem as though they may have no place while the committee is attempting to administer justice, it seems important to state the precedent that has been set here. Recently, when a regent’s son was accused of plagiarism, he was given an F on the paper he plagiarized. This same regent chose to expunge their son’s punishment, but that, in this particular case, is actually irrelevant. What matters is the precedent set by this very committee: a graduating senior, on a final paper, chose to plagiarize. Even completely disregarding Alexandra’s extenuating circumstances, a precedent

has been set that the committee has the option to follow. If that particular student was failed on a plagiarized paper (albeit a temporary failure), why should Alexandra's paper be any punished any more stringently?

In the final determination of Alexandra's punishment, we are presented with two options: consider the outward pressure we are receiving, or consider what the calling of the committee is. Outside of this particular instance, Alexandra has exemplified every characteristic of Colorado Creed: she has acted with honor, integrity and accountability in her interactions with students, faculty, staff, and neighbors. This is her first offense, and a decision she has not made lightly. However, Alexandra did indeed plagiarize, and while I do not agree with Professor Stone in seeking her expulsion, I believe she should be punished for her actions. Simply letting her off with a warning will satisfy neither the charge of the committee, Professor Stone, nor those choosing to criticize this committee for its "softness."

Based on the precedent set by a previous case, extenuating circumstances surrounding her need to complete this paper, her proximity to graduation, her financial situation, and her lack of previous offenses (plus her high grade point average), I recommend to the committee that Professor Stone's request for this student's expulsion be disregarded, that she fail the paper, and that she be allowed to continue and finish her education as a student here at the University of Colorado.

Justice is not the choice to exact the most stringent possible punishment to avoid further occurrences of a deviant action; it is rather the consideration of circumstances and options considered by a person, a human being, on their way to making an unfortunate choice. In this case, justice is gentle. Give Alexandra another chance.