Henry West's Commentary on "Testing by a CO-OP Student"

Commentary On
Testing by a CO-OP Student

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I

If Jack Jacobs, the co-op student, either faked the test results or took a few points and extrapolated the rest, he was taking credit for work without doing it, which is like cheating on a test or plagiarizing a paper. He was also making the company count on work which hadn't been done properly, trusting in something which turned out to be unreliable. There are other possibilities, however, that shouldn't be discounted. The test may have been carried out properly but be an inadequate test for whether the part can operate under the strain of regular use. The test results may be in error is some other way. Jack may have not run the test properly. Although Jack was familiar with the test equipment and had previously done similar work, he may still have misused it and made honest mistakes. There is only presumptive, not conclusive, evidence that Jack did not run the tests to the best of his ability. Another issue is whether Jack was getting proper supervision in his work session at XYZ. It is good for co-op students to get demanding work to give them practical experience, but shouldn't their work be checked, both while doing it and after done, so that they and the company know if they are doing it properly?

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If Tom had talked with Jack first, what could that have achieved? If Jack falsified the data, he might have lied about it and simply gotten himself into deeper unethical water. And if he did lie, what more would Tom know than he already knew? There would still be presumptive evidence that the results were falsified, but no more proof than before the conversation. On the other hand, if Jack had misused the equipment or had extrapolated from a few tests, that might be found out, and Jack would be known to be guilty of the lesser of the suspected errors. And Jack might not realize that extrapolation from a few tests could have the dire consequences that did in fact occur from passing on materials which would not stand up under complete tests. There would be two reasons, then, for having a conversation with Jack. One would be to find out more about what really happened. The other would be to impress upon Jack the consequences of his poor performance.

But is it Tom's responsibility to get in touch with Jack? Students are hard to reach at the University. Jack may not have a private telephone, and to write a letter hoping for an answer is a slow way of doing something. Furthermore, the case is not just about Jack. It is about preparation of students for co-op work and, ultimately, for their professional work. Tom wants the Co-op Coordinator to be informed that a student probably falsified data or at least extrapolated from a few tests, which is not adequate job performance. The Coordinator should be told, for Jack's performance reflects on the University and its training of its students. Jack's identity would be hard to keep secret, in case Tom wanted to do so; but there isn't any reason to keep it secret. There is evidence that Jack failed to do honest work.

Another question is whose job it is to discipline Jack if he has done dishonest work for XYZ. XYZ could refuse to have him return as a co-op student. It could also write a letter to the coordinator to put into writing the charge. It could inform all the people at XYZ with whom Jack had worked that if he asked for letters of reference, they should be aware of this failing. But ultimately, the University has to be responsible for dealing with Jack's dishonesty. How should it be dealt with by the University? If Jack is getting academic credit for the co-op work, should it be denied? If he deliberately falsified the data, should he be dismissed from the University? What procedure should be used for ascertaining the facts and assigning a penalty? Should this be treated in the same way as a case of cheating on a test or

plagiarizing a paper, and by the same procedures? Or is honesty something that the University should leave to society in general and the conscience of the individual?

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It is easy to say, when something goes wrong, that more supervision is required. Jack was in his second work session at XYZ. He had done similar test work, and his co-op work had been usually well done. Why shouldn't he have been trusted to carry out the tests without supervision? Would the work of a regular employee have been supervised any more closely? Why, then, shouldn't a co-op student with Jack's experience be treated like a regular employee?

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There are many areas in which a course in professional ethics might sensitize students to issues that they haven't thought about. But is this one of them? Surely, Jack knew that he should not falsify data. All lab courses emphasize the need for accuracy in data taking. But he might not have been sufficiently sensitive to what the consequences of short-cuts in testing might be. If that is the issue, and if that is the ethics of the case, then ethical instruction needs to include such sensitivity to consequences, not just rules of honesty and so on. Insensitivity to real consequences of one's work may also be due to the way lab work is graded. In lab work, the consequences are only a grade. If one knows what the results are supposed to be and gets those results, it may not have any practical consequences that one didn't carry out procedures properly. In lab work, if one makes a mistake in procedures, and they show up in the answers, one gets a poor grade. If one makes a mistake in procedures, but they don't show up in the answers, one may get by with a good grade. So maybe there may be a fault in the way labs are run and lab work is graded.

What might have motivated Jack to falsify the data or to extrapolate from a few tests? Probably it was the time constraint. In order to finish before returning to the University, he didn't have time to run all the tests. So there was a conflict between

his self-interest, in wanting to look good by finishing the tests, or in wanting to work less diligently, and the company's interest in having the tests run properly. How can sensitivity to this conflict, and willingness to be responsible in one's work at the expense of some short-term self-indulgence, be taught? Perhaps some role-playing would help. If one student was put in a situation like Jack's and another in the situation of that of supervisor, another in that of coordinator of co-op students, and so on, for this and other situations of conflict of interest, students might come to see things from more than one perspective and develop an awareness that in taking an irresponsible short-cut they are not only taking the risk that they may be caught, which will hurt their future careers; they are letting someone else down. Ethical sensitivity requires awareness of the possible bad consequences of one's action, both for self and others, and willingness to see things from more than an individual point of view.

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