STEP 1: STUDY THE DETAILS

OF THE CASE

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE

RELEVANT CRITERIA

**How to Proceed**

If you have all the details, note what circumstances distinguish this case from similar ones. If you do not have all the details, obtain them. If they are unavailable, consider what they might be.

Consider all significant consequences—direct and indirect; obvious and subtle; immediate and delayed; physical, emotional, and intellectual; intended and unintended—of the action on the person performing the act as well as on others. Consider any *obligations* that might exist among the individuals involved—for example, contractual obligations, obligations of friendship or citizenship, business or professional obligations.

Education

**1.** Non–English-speaking students are swelling U.S. public schools.

The situation has sparked a debate over how best to teach them. Some people favor a bilingual approach in which students would be taught in their native languages for a period of time—for example, until they had learned to read and write in that language—and then switched to English instruction. Opponents of that idea argue for instruction in English from the outset, with tutoring for students who require it. What are the moral considerations that should be considered in this debate?

**2.** In recent years a controversy has arisen over the use of library computers. Some citizens object to the fact that it is possible to access pornographic Web sites on the computers and are demanding that software filters be used to block such access. Others consider any such action a violation of constitutionally guaranteed freedom. In light of appropriate moral considerations, which view is more reasonable? Would the answer differ if the library in question were not a public library but rather a public school library?

**3.** Some colleges and universities weight their admissions policies heavily in favor of black and Hispanic applicants. The net effect is that white and Asian students with significantly higher high school grades and admissions test scores have a significantly lower chance of acceptance at the university. Examine this policy and decide whether it is ethical.

**4.** High schools around the country sometimes experience problems with censorship. In most cases, school boards respond to community complaints that some books are immoral or un-American by banning those books from the school library. Is the censorship of books in schools ever morally justifiable?

STEP 3: DETERMINE POSSIBLE

COURSES OF ACTION

STEP 4: DECIDE WHICH

ACTION IS MOST ETHICAL

Consider relevant *ideals,* including prudence, justice, temperance, courage, loving kindness, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, repentance, reparation, gratitude, and beneficence. Identify the various alternative responses to the situation. Note that this step may require you to use your imagination. In light of your consideration of the criteria, decide which response is ethically preferable. If two responses produce good or two produce harm, choose the one that produces the greater good or the lesser harm.

**5.** Many colleges prohibit the drinking of alcoholic beverages on campus. Is such a prohibition morally justifiable?

**6.** Under what circumstances, if any, is it morally justifiable for grade school or high school teachers to hit students?

**7.** A complaint from a California state senator sparked a review of the women’s studies program at the California State University, Long Beach campus. The senator charged that the instructor of a course titled “Women and Their Bodies” showed the students in her class slides of her genitals and suggested that they imagine “doing things” with other women in the class.1 Is either of these acts morally objectionable?

**8.** In education, as in business, mistakes are sometimes made in promoting a person. For example, a respected high school teacher with twenty years of service may be made principal of his school. After serving for a year in this new capacity, the man may have demonstrated clearly that he is incompetent in administrative affairs. But, by that time, his former teaching position will have been filled. Consider the various ethical considerations involved both in retaining him and in firing him, and decide what course of action and what conditions would be the most ethical solution for the school board.

**9.** Once in a while, a case of a teacher who has taught for years with forged credentials comes to light. Once the deception is found out, of course, he or she is dismissed and may even be prosecuted. But consider the moral dilemma that must exist for the principal when he or she first learns of the lie. Suppose, for example, the principal learns that instead of having the master’s degree the records indicate, the teacher dropped out of college after one year as an undergraduate. Further suppose that the teacher is by every measure one of the very best in the school. Should the principal expose the teacher or allow the deception to continue? Would your judgment change if the teacher were not outstanding but merely average?

**10.** Every academic subject has areas of controversy, questions that different schools of thought answer differently. For example, in psychology there are Freudian, Jungian, and Adlerian perspectives; in literature there are several approaches to interpretation, such as the esthetic and the psychological. Is it ethically acceptable for an instructor to teach only the school of thought he or she personally accepts? Would your answer be different in the case of an introductory course than in the case of an advanced course?

**11.** In determining students’ final grades, some college instructors use as one factor their personal, subjective judgment of students’ effort and contribution to class discussion. The factor may vary in its weighting from 10 to 20 percent or even higher. Is this practice ethical? Under what conditions, if any?

**12.** More than a few college professors today believe that the very idea

of a grading system is punitive and archaic. Some of them, however, arein the minority at their institutions and therefore are required to submit grades in their courses. One way to do so and still serve their consciences is to give every student an A, regardless of the quality or quantity of the work he or she submits. Discuss the morality of this practice.

**13.** In most colleges, the chairperson of an academic department is responsible to the academic dean. If the dean should, for example, criticize the chairperson’s department for submitting too many low grades in a particular semester and demand that the department reviews its grading policy so that it can begin assigning “more reasonable” grades, the chairperson would have to decide how to deal with the matter. Each of the following is a possible approach. Evaluate the ethical character of each.

**a.** The chairperson can call in each faculty member and review the member’s grading policy with him or her in an attempt to determine whether the policy is too stringent.

**b.** The chairperson can issue a memorandum to the department members explaining the dean’s concern and desire that the department grades improve in the next semester.

**c.** The chairperson can issue a demand that each department member’s grades conform in the future to the normal distribution curve.

**14.** Few colleges today are without their experimental courses or curriculums. In their most sophisticated form, such courses or curriculums are run side by side with traditional ones so that their effectiveness can be compared. At the outset of such experiments, of course, it is impossible to be certain that the experiment will be even minimally effective. Are such experiments ethically permissible? If so, under what conditions?

**15.** A teacher is usually assigned to teach courses with specific content. He or she is expected to select or create lessons that will impart the knowledge and develop the skills that are associated with that content. To do other than that—for example, to teach economics instead of literature in a literature course—would clearly be to break his or her moral obligation to the students who enrolled for the advertised course. Yet in subtler cases, the answer is not so clear. Would it violate that obligation if a chemistry professor presented a filmstrip on chemical weapons as part of an antiwar lecture? Would it violate that obligation if a math instructor spent one class period talking about the importance of population control?

Why or why not?

**16.** Term paper ghostwriting is surely not a new idea. But doing it on the scale of big business—with advertisements in college newspapers, branch offices, and a stable of writers—is. It is possible today to buy a term paper on virtually any subject, complete with footnotes and bibliography. Some companies even offer tailor-made papers. Is such a business ethical?

**17.** Some time ago a young man filed a $1 million lawsuit against the high school that graduated him, charging the school with legal responsibility for his inability to read and write adequately.2 It seems unlikely that the courts would find the school legally responsible for his ignorance. But is it possible that the school is morally responsible? Under what conditions might it be?

**18.** Compulsory education, the required attendance of young people between certain ages (for example, between 5 and 16 in many states), has become a tradition in the United States. The idea that requiring young people to attend school is an infringement of their rights as citizens, a kind of slavery, is unthinkable to many Americans. Yet there are men and women, some of them respected educators, who are openly expressing that idea. They argue that children themselves, or at least their parents in their behalf, should decide whether they will attend school and, assuming they decide in the affirmative, where, what, and for how long the children will study. Consider the ethical side of the question. Are compulsory education laws morally wrong?

**19.** The age difference between teachers and students is sometimes relatively slight. A high school teacher could be 21 and a high school senior 17. A college instructor could be 25 and a college senior 22. Would it be unethical in any way for such teachers to date their students? Would it be different if the students were not in their classes?

**20.** Tenure is the permanent right to a position or an office. In teaching, tenure has traditionally been reserved for those who have proven themselves competent in the classroom. Once it is awarded, usually after a provisional term of from two to five or six years, the teacher may not be fired except for gross negligence of duty or some moral offense. The proponents of tenure have maintained that it frees teachers from fears of petty pressures inside or outside the school and enables them to function at their creative best. Recently, however, there seem to be a growing number of opponents of tenure. These people contend that it tempts even the best teachers to relax professionally and stifles creativity. What are the ethical considerations that any full discussion of tenure should address, and why are those considerations important?

**21.** When faced with the annual decision of how to distribute salary increases to faculty, many administrators elect wherever possible to divide the money among all teachers rather than single out the most deserving ones. (Having everyone a little happy is less troublesome than having a few thrilled and many angry and questioning.) Which action is more justifiable ethically? Be sure to consider all aspects, including the effects of each action on the quality of education.

**22.** Most teacher retirement programs calculate the individual’s pension based on the average salary earned during his or her highest earning years. Realizing this, some college presidents routinely promote faculty members the year before their retirement (whether they meet the established requirements for the rank or not). Thus the faculty members can get a slightly higher pension. Is this practice of routine promotion ethical?

**23.** Is it ethical for students not to work to their capacity? Is it ethical for them to study so diligently that they strain the limits of their physical and emotional endurance? Discuss the various degrees of under work and overwork that occur among college students and decide in what circumstances each becomes a moral issue.

**24.** The practice of cheating on homework and examinations is probably as old as education itself. Few would deny that it is an unethical practice in most cases. But what of the dilemma of students who do not cheat on their work but know other students who do? Discuss the moral considerations they should make in deciding whether to inform the teacher. Then decide when they should and when they should not do so.