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Ethical Issues: Good, Bad, and Ugly

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[I don't understand this box -- I'm not building on someone else's research. Is it a citation for my own work? I will have to give it some thought.]

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I thought I missed the deadline by a week, but after submitting my presumably late proposal, I see from the email acknowledgment that I have more time to put it together.

In reconsidering my original submission, I find that I have a question about my topic. I have two ethical issues that I am trying to combine and I think I could make good case studies out of both of them. Although both of my issues have wider currency and resonance this year, I probably have more materials on the censorship question. This was a year for questions about the power of art, beginning with the response to Dana Schutz's Open Casket painting, the "fearless girls" sculpture in the financial district of NYC, and other incendiary art events. The one of immediate relevance to me, my role as chair, and my department began with a black curtain that was placed over a display case holding a photograph of a female nude made by the young woman in the photograph. The curtain was placed there by someone who worked for a local church group that used a room in the downtown building we shared. The complications are immediately evident: who placed the curtain? Who removed it and why did he remove it without consultation with the department chair or the student artist? When the chair did not support the faculty member's action, she was accused of not being supportive of her department. This accusation was perpetrated in an under-researched article in the student newspaper. There is much more to this story and in its entirety, it raises questions about censorship, about faculty dialogue, interactions between academe and the town: as a result, this is a case study that has potential interest to academic chairs who are not in art departments.

The second issue involved a student accusation of inappropriate behavior on the part of a professor who had been teaching here for 20 years and received numerous awards. Yet, although this was the first time someone went to the Title 9 coordinator about this faculty member, it was not the first time that he was seen to be out of control (although the meaning of that phrase can vary). As this case proceeded, faculty and chair alike were left out of the collection of evidence, discussion of findings, and plans for the future. Although incident began in March, we were not given a final solution until the end of the spring semester. The accused faculty member himself raised the question of a conflict between Title 9 and the Faculty Handbook. It was a difficult situation, traumatic for all who were involved, and my role as outsider was not easy. The final decision was made by the President of the university and I hope to have a conversation with him about the incident and its implications for the future. How should the chair have been involved in these situations? Is a good outcome possible in each case? Can we prevent recurrences of events like these in the future?

Taken together, neither event had a happy ending. One event ended with a very unhappy student and perhaps a better relationship with the other residents of the downtown building. But was it worth it? The other ended with the retirement of the accused faculty member who considered himself the victim and rather than offering an apology to his colleagues, he wrote a letter telling them how they could improve the department!

I said I have a question and to put it simply, is this too much trauma for one session? Would it be more effective to focus on one of these case studies?