Author's Commentary on "The Under-Prepared Student"

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This case is not intended to focus on the policies and procedures of viewing student records. Different institutions undoubtedly have specific policies about obtaining this kind of information while maintaining student privacy. Faculty and students should be aware of those policies and follow them.

Rather, the case is intended to focus on professors' responsibilities for helping their students deal with deficiencies in understanding and knowledge. Each course has a specific body of information that is intended to be transmitted to the student. If a chemistry professor noticed that a student had a problem understanding physics, he would send that student to the physics department. If he discovered a deficiency in computer programming, no one would expect him to do anything more than send the student to the computer science department for further study.

Teaching responsibilities become less clear when a student in a chemistry course does not understand mathematical tools that are utilized in the course. It is easy to say that Dr. Franklin should teach Jim the necessary math to complete the course assignments, but that would be done at a cost to the other students in the class, the graduate students Franklin is advising, and the other departmental responsibilities he carries. The huge amounts of time he has already spent with Jim have prevented other students from having their questions answered. This type of situation also arises for graduate student instructors who have teaching responsibilities on top of their own course work and research responsibilities.

It is important for Jim to be made aware of his deficiencies. School is the time when Jim will have the most resources available to learn the material that he needs to master in order to earn a meaningful degree. Institutions have many sources of help in the form of resource centers, tutoring and help sessions, learning centers, etc. Professors and graduate students should be aware of these resources to enable

students to receive the help they need. Rather than simply ignoring Jim's lack of understanding, Franklin identified a specific deficiency, helped generate reasonable solutions and ultimately left the student in a position to decide how to proceed to solve the problem.

It is also essential to help students who need special attention without compromising them within the department by gossiping about their problems and difficulties. Other faculty members in the department are likely to encounter students in other courses or asked to write recommendations for them. Discussions about students must be responsible and respectful.