CASE STUDY –

In the following case, you are asked to identify a course of action and to defend it based on a discussion of ethics and ethical courses of action.

Your ethical arguments may include references to provisions of your academic field’s “code of ethics” or “code of conduct” if one exists. If your area does not have such a code, three popular approaches to ethics include a duty based or legal one (what is required by my position, what is required by law?); a virtue, “golden rule” or “right behavior” approach (i.e., for example, good people don’t steal, one should never tell a lie, do unto others as you would have them do unto you); and a utilitarian or consequences-based approach that considers the possible results of a course of action and seeks to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people (i.e., are more people helped than hurt by this action?).

Often, any course of possible action brings about multiple outcomes and raises many different concerns—some of which are desirable and others that are not. This is why ethical decisions are seldom easy ones. Nonetheless, many times decisions do have to be made.

Please read the following case study carefully: What ethical dilemmas are to be considered? Identify these and three of the most important issues that are raised. After considering all sides of the issues, identify the course of action you would take to resolve the ethical dilemma and justify such action from an ethical standpoint. If your choices are based on any particular code of ethics, or one or more of the approaches named above, you should identify these. Likewise, be sure to show that you recognize the ethical implications of having not selected other approaches.

Adapted from James Svara: The Ethics Primer 2nd edition, Jones & Bartlett, Case 3.6 Renewing Funding p. 43.

Tina Webbert could not believe her good luck! She had recently been selected as an intern and research analyst for the city council in Fortune, TX and, in the six months she had been serving, she was already making a difference in the community. One project she worked on had resulted in helping senior citizens get involved in volunteering. The socialization and friendships that the seniors enjoyed had really improved their quality of life and the good work they were doing was impactful. Tina was particularly proud of this project because it was her hard work and long hours of compiling data that had helped it to become a reality. Her work on the project had also been recognized by several of the city council members, including Max Cheffington who was a long time member of the council. In fact, it was he who had used the data and reports created by Tina to help the city secure the grant that resulted in extended funding for the senior volunteering program. Max had been particularly open about praising Tina’s work and she appreciated the attention she received from the other members on the council. The fact that Tina also knew a few of the senior volunteers who had been personally helped by the program was also gratifying.

Altruism (the “good feeling that one gets from helping someone else”) had always been a motivator for Tina's actions. As a youngster, she felt good about helping the community through simple acts like picking up litter or lending a helping hand at the library, reading to toddlers after school, or
doing whatever else might be needed. She enjoyed the special badges and ribbons she had received in scouting groups and in school-based activities but nothing was as satisfying as the “good feelings” that came with helping others and being recognized as having been a part of making improvements in the community.

For Tina, the fact that her research skills contributed toward building the reports necessary for decisions to be made by the council was also exciting. Not only was this consistent with her own personal values about being involved in her community but it helped her develop a strong self-image of one who was a positive contributor—not a taker, or worse yet, someone who ignored community service altogether. What shallow lives these people must live she secretly thought.

Tina was not unaware that her good work also might have some personal benefits that extended beyond her own good feelings. Building a solid, skill-based resume that might also help her find future employment was also gratifying. Tina had been careful to be thrifty and had saved her pennies throughout her time at the university but it was expensive to pursue an education and she worried about the debt that was mounting. Still, she had been successful in applying for several scholarships and those had helped her keep her educational debt under control. Although there would still be loans to pay off after graduation, she was confident that she was on the right path toward doing just that. She considered her internship to be one that might very well result in a job after graduation. The opportunities that she had encountered had allowed her to rub elbows with many of the “movers and shakers” in the community in addition to serving the needs of the members of the city council in Fortune.

One day, a new project was laid on Tina’s desk by Max Cheffington. Tina’s tasks would include serving as a research analyst on a city project that could result in continuing funding for improvements in low-income neighborhoods. Tina felt that, as an analyst, it would be her obligation to make the strongest case possible for the continuation of program funding to help ensure that those in need could be served. The city’s grant was the major source of funds for the rehabilitation of deteriorated housing and there would be serious unmet problems if its funding were reduced or cut. Critics on the city council, however, were looking for an excuse to cut the grant and direct funds toward a monument that would recognize the efforts of past council members and provide for some cosmetic improvements at city hall. As they approached Tina, they asked her to be open and transparent with her reports and to keep a lookout for any irregularities as funds could be utilized in other ways. After all, the image of the local government was important too, they told her. Tina was shaken by this push by several council members to have her serve in the role of a “look out” for ammunition that could be used to stop the funding for the low-income neighborhood rehabilitation projects. As luck would have it, Tina did become aware of some minor problems that had been detected in the performance report on the neighborhood rehabilitation program projects. And as she combed through the files, although none she thought were major irregularities, there were frequent minor issues.