

Academic Integrity: An Instructor's Obligation

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Most research in academic dishonesty focuses on why cheating is an epidemic in educational institutions, why students commit dishonest acts, and what can be done to curtail dishonesty in the classroom. Very little research focuses on what instructors have to endure when they charge students with academic dishonesty. This paper offers insights into actual cases of academic dishonesty, the process, the appeal, the result of each infraction, and why instructors might be reluctant to report incidents. Furthermore, this paper offers guidelines that can help prepare anyone who is serious about upholding academic integrity.

Researchers have provided evidence of a recent increase in academic dishonesty. A Who's Who Among American High School Students survey (as cited by McMurtry, 2001) reported that, in 1998, 80% of the nation's best 3,123 students admitted to cheating on exams. Kleiner and Lord (1999) found that 90% of those admitting to cheating had never been caught, and 50% believed that cheating was not necessarily wrong. Schab (1991) reported that the number of students who admitted to cheating on tests increased from 34% in 1969 to 68% in 1989, while the number of students who plagiarized increased from 67% to 76% and the number of students who admitted to letting others copy their work grew from 58% to 98%. McCabe (as cited in Carroll, 2002) concurred that cheating at colleges had doubled since the early 1960s; furthermore, Koch (2000) reported that between 20% and 30% of college students cheated regularly.

Most researchers (Carnevale, 1999; Heberling, 2002; Hinman, 2000; McCabe, 2001; McCabe & Pavela, 1997; McMurtry 2001; Olt, 2002) focused their studies on how to curtail dishonesty. Some proposed discussing the importance of integrity with the students, while others proposed that students monitor themselves. Others demonstrated that honor codes can effectively reduce academic dishonesty (Bowers, 1964; Campbell, 1935; Canning, 1956; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2003; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999; Trevino, Butterfield & McCabe, 1998).

Little research on academic dishonesty has covered the impact it has on the instructors. Every instructor plays a pivotal role in preventing dishonesty in the classroom, but many often hesitate. McCabe (2001) found that instructor sympathy for students and the tedious procedures involved in reporting dishonesty are the factors that most often cause instructors to ignore cheating.

McCabe (2001) offers a gleam of hope in that many of the students who admitted to cheating professed to have genuinely detested what they did. He discovered that most students preferred to work

honestly if being honest would not put them at a disadvantage. Students further revealed that they wanted to see their instructors take the initiative to help them perform honestly. McCabe strongly advised instructors to address cheating because integrity carries little weight if instructors look the other way.

When instructors face academic dishonesty, they encounter misunderstanding of what constitutes an infraction, having to document the infraction, having to meet with various committees, and the emotional strain that comes with the allegation.

Charges of Academic Dishonesty

The incidents discussed in this paper occurred at a mid-sized public university where an academic honesty policy is clearly provided in the student handbook and the university catalog. Instructors are strongly encouraged to include the university's academic honesty policy in their syllabi. Proper procedure to charge and notify a student of an infraction is included in the university's catalog, and students are afforded judicial procedure. The incidents in this paper took place at a single institution, but the information reported is not unique to any specific institution.

The incidents happened in different classes within one department where the instructors strive to uphold academic integrity. The instructors discussed in this paper also present mandatory academic integrity workshops for new international undergraduate and graduate students.

Adam. "Adam" (all students' names have been changed) was caught sharing his answers on a computer disk with his friend. The instructor gave Adam an "incomplete" grade, which allowed him to complete the course in another term. The instructor did not comply with university protocol. Adam took another course to fulfill his program and performed well – until the instructor found transition problems in Adam's term project. Using Google, the instructor uncovered numerous incidents of plagiarism, and the university's librarian confirmed at least seven instances in the first

four pages. Adam then received an "F." Upon further investigation, the instructor uncovered a total of 45 instances of plagiarism in the paper and realized that Adam had tampered with the date of the paper and consistently lied.

Bart. Bart was in the top 5% of his class and had earned nearly a 4.0 grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) in his MBA program when the instructor found inconsistencies and transitional problems in Bart's term project. A librarian confirmed 11 instances of plagiarism, including incomplete and inaccurate citations. Bart received an "F."

Carrie. Carrie was a popular graduate student who had earned nearly a 4.0 grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) in her college career. Carrie was found plagiarizing over half of her book review. The instructor charged Carrie with plagiarism, gave her an "F," and excluded her from further participation in the class. The charge meant that Carrie would fail her class, delay her graduation, and potentially cause the revocation of a significant job offer.

Dana. Dana was charged with inappropriately sharing her assignment. Her instructor allowed discussion of the assignment but instructed students to complete their work independently. Dana and her friend were both given an "F" in the class and were excluded from further participation.

Academic Appeals: Instructors on the Defense

The instructors discussed in this paper are required to consult with the chairperson of their Department upon discovery of academic dishonesty. Students are then notified in writing of a formal charge. Students are given an automatic "F" in the course with the option to appeal. If the students choose to appeal, they may stay in class until the appeal is completed.

By this time, the instructor has already expended considerable time, perhaps anxiously. The instructor has had to track down the plagiarized sources, print or photocopy them in triplicate (one for the instructor, one for the student, one for the chair), cross-reference the student's paper with the plagiarized sources (which may include developing elaborate color-coding systems if the paper plagiarized a number of sources), write an explanatory letter, meet with the department chair, track down and break the news to the student, listen patiently to the student's sometimes tearful grievances, get the student to sign and date three copies of the letter (one for the instructor, one for the student, one for the department chair), and submit the documents to the chair in written and electronic forms. The meeting with the student must also include reminders of the student's right to appeal, including specific instructions on how to do so; the instructor must thereby spend time undermining his or her own argument. A paper that

would have taken but a few minutes to grade can, through this process, consume hours, even if the student does not appeal.

A student has ten academic days to appeal formally to the department chair, who appoints a committee to review the charge. If the student's appeal is rejected, the student may petition to the university-level Academic Appeals Committee. The departmental committee or the Academic Appeals Committee may amend the sanctions. On the other hand, if the instructor's charge is upheld, the student is dismissed from the course.

While instructors may agree with the judicial procedure to protect the student, the procedure only heightens the emotional toll upon the instructors, who are almost always put on the defensive, while students are deemed innocent until proven guilty.

Student Academic Appeals

Adam. Adam immediately considered appealing because it was his second charge and the consequence was expulsion. Knowing that his second charge was conclusive, Adam appealed his first charge claiming that it had not been handled according to university policy. That charge was decided in Adam's favor.

Bart. Before Bart's departmental committee had even met, he had individually contacted each of its members to profess his innocence. He said he had not intended to cheat, but had done so through ignorance of citation etiquette. The committee upheld the instructor's charge, but not unanimously. One instructor argued that Bart had attempted to cite properly but had bungled it. Another instructor agreed with the first, but nonetheless voted to uphold the charge in the interest of "supporting the professor."

Bart appealed at the university level, and the instructor was contacted for any amendments to the penalty, since the departmental appeal was not unanimous. The chair offered Bart an opportunity to complete the course, provided the charge of dishonesty stayed on his file. Bart reluctantly accepted the offer and completed with a "C."

Carrie. Carrie claimed that she did not think it was necessary to use quotation marks because the material came from the book assigned and was obviously not her own work. Carrie was well prepared for her appeal, with supporting letters from her department chair, sports coach, and adviser. All of the letters indicated a certainty that the charge of plagiarism was "a misunderstanding" and that any dishonesty was completely inconsistent with Carrie's character. Carrie expressed sincere remorse and swore to better understanding. The committee heard from Carrie and the instructor separately prior to an extensive discussion of the charge.

Several university committee members discussed the unusually strong support for Carrie from well-known and respected personnel. The instructor's short period of employment was questioned as committee members noted that such an extreme punishment was excessive and more the result of an inexperienced instructor than a dishonest student. A critical discussion of Carrie's intent followed. A committee member from the Education faculty stated that since the instructor did not specifically address plagiarism in his syllabus, it would be hard to hold the student to the standard expressed in the catalog. Finally, the purpose of the institution to teach rather than to police was revisited. One member argued that a charge should be sufficient for the student to learn from the experience and that further action was unnecessary.

The committee voted to amend the sanction to a grade of zero on Carrie's assignment. The instructor accepted the committee's decision but felt betrayed. As a direct result of this case, the university policy was changed, giving the instructors greater discretion in punishing dishonesty and affirmatively requiring instructors to consult with their chairs prior to deciding on a penalty.

Dana. Dana felt that she was punished for helping a friend. She had a solid "A" and knew the assignment well. She insisted that she did nothing wrong and that her friend was never supposed to submit her work. Dana appealed her charge to the departmental appeals committee.

The departmental committee reviewed the charge and interviewed Dana and her instructor. The instructor spoke of inconsistencies between the two students' explanations. The hearing addressed several significant issues. Did Dana knowingly break the rule? Was the purpose of the committee to support its colleagues and not to undermine their authority? Was the charge well documented enough to be upheld? The discrepancies between the students' explanations were especially disconcerting. Finally, Dana's denial of responsibility troubled the committee. The departmental committee rejected Dana's appeal, and she appealed to the university level, which upheld the decision. Dana received an "F" and retook the course.

Although the appeals described were all technically upheld, the instructors were inevitably "put on trial" themselves to defend integrity in their classrooms. In most cases, instructors who choose to uphold integrity were not encouraged, but questioned for the charges they brought forth. In every case, the instructor was noticeably stressed. Often, while upholding the charges, committees or department chairs nevertheless undermined the instructors' judgments.

Upholding Integrity: Perspectives of Instructors

The primary role of an instructor is to teach, not to police dishonesty. It is nevertheless absolutely necessary to report an infraction because inaction tells students that dishonesty is acceptable. All incidents of dishonesty are complicated for instructors, starting from when they decide to file, document, and defend a charge. Instructors usually feel unsupported, isolated, and attacked during the whole of the process. Because charging students with dishonesty is serious, and the judicial process ensures that students are protected from wrongful charges, instructors must be willing to endure an onerous process.

Literature shows that when students know their instructors care about integrity and will take appropriate actions, they are less likely to be dishonest. Research has also shown that students actually preferred to be honest but needed their instructors to set the example (McCabe, 2001).

Before filing a charge, instructors need to review carefully all the suspect areas, accurately document the incidents, and carefully consider appropriate consequences. Instructors must be absolutely certain of the charge and provide as much documentation as possible, because a wrongful charge is devastating to students and instructors alike. It is easy to understand why some instructors ignore filing charges whenever they can and would prefer alternatives. Upholding integrity requires courage, perseverance, and the will to distinguish diligent students, who should receive what they have earned, from cheats.

Upholding Integrity: Perspective of Appeals Committee Members

The appeals committee plays several roles relating to academic dishonesty. While the process taxes the instructor, it is also burdensome to committee members. Hearings frequently last hours, and no matter the outcome, no one is completely satisfied. No committee members take the task lightly and the process is draining, time consuming, and inherently unrewarding.

Committee members frequently have different agendas and ideals. Some believe in strictly imposing the policy unwaveringly, without consideration for mitigating circumstances. Others want to see absolute proof, beyond any doubt, of the student's guilt. Some believe that dishonesty requires intent; if the student did not intend to cheat, then the student did not cheat. Others believe that intent is not an element and that ignorance is not a defense. After all, the most common defense is "I did not know."

Students who are better known and respected by instructors receive greater benefit of the doubt. Expressed support from instructors and staff also seems

to matter. Remorse and a promise not to repeat the offence seem to be important factors, as committee members tended to be more forgiving of students who admitted that they were wrong and were willing to learn from the experience.

Instructors who are less experienced tend to follow university protocol, while more experienced instructors are more likely to handle infractions outside the prescribed process. Some committee members are overly forgiving, believing that the process itself is a lesson and that the sanctions should not be too harsh. Others believe that even the slightest occurrence of dishonesty should result in expulsion from the institution, the academic equivalency of the death penalty. Most committee members believe the rules should be applied fairly and with consideration for the sake of learning. Applying the rules otherwise can only damage the institution (Hoover, 2002).

Guidelines for Integrity

Gostick and Telford (2003) offer ten characteristics of integrity, and six of them can help instructors instill trust in their classrooms. The characteristics include “you know that little things count,” “you find the white when others see gray,” “you create a culture of trust,” “you keep your word,” “you care about the greater good,” and “you stay the course.”

You know that little things count. Every incident of dishonesty should be apprehended. There should be no distinction between plagiarizing a sentence and an entire paper. Even minor cheats should be called out so that students know deviant behaviors are intolerable. When an instructor starts differentiating, integrity itself is jeopardized.

You find the white when others see gray. McCabe (2001) demonstrates that students want to be honest, but they want their instructors to take the lead. It is definitely easier to ignore acts of dishonesty, but instructors have to remain objective in their assessments. Instructors must keep their objectivity when making charges, to see the situation for what it is.

You create a culture of trust. Instructors must include clear policies in their syllabi and discuss them in class. Instructors must clearly state how students will be assessed and stick with it. Furthermore, instructors must also clearly communicate that students will keep the scores they earn. When charging students with dishonesty, instructors absolutely must not invent anything merely to make the charge itself more defensible.

You keep your word. An empty promise serves no one. Instructors who are serious about taking on the challenge to prevent the spread of academic dishonesty must be prepared to keep their word. They must be diligent and act quickly. Any instructor who wishes to

sound rigorous at the beginning of a semester but who then balks at actually punishing offenders would have no ground to stand on.

You care about the greater good and you stay the course. Educators mold the next generation of leaders. Recent scandals have uncovered a deep social problem, an ethical vacuum that can be attributed to the poor training students received when they were impressionable. The misconceptions that cheating is tolerable, acceptable, even efficacious have severe adverse implications. Instructors must take the challenge to curb the epidemic of academic dishonesty, even by fighting one offense at a time.

Conclusion

Every instructor should take the utmost care when acting against academic dishonesty. No instructor takes the task lightly. Although the process can be arduous, instructors must regain the trust that was once the premise of educational institutions. The authors of this paper further implore instructors to take the challenge for the greater good, to regain trust in our institutions and to renew our students' sense of honor. Oftentimes, this work is difficult and unrewarding, but it is an instructor's obligation.

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