

Commitment to Honesty: Easier Said Than Done . . . Or Is It?

Academic dishonesty is an issue most faculty members have faced or will face during their teaching career. Situations in which students engage in cheating behaviors can range from minor lapses in judgment to deliberate and coordinated efforts. Yet, if discovered, these situations could be publicized in the college newspaper or even become national news, in which the institution is adversely affected in numerous ways, not in the least in its reputation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is just one of a number of national publications that frequently publishes stories about colleges and universities experiencing integrity-related issues. In this *Innovations Abstract*, I describe some of my teaching experiences related to this topic and provide recommendations to faculty and administrators, which help to further promote and encourage a culture of academic honesty at their institution.

Academic Dishonesty in the Classroom

During the past five years, I have been an adjunct instructor at several community colleges and universities where I experienced multiple academic dishonesty issues in the classroom. For example, I recently assigned my students a project that required them to log into Blackboard twice a week and respond to a discussion post. Although we had very active class discussions, the online discussion was a way to promote greater dialog outside the classroom on the current topic, as well as to provide an avenue for students to practice professional writing techniques. I read each post, responded to a few students who had raised interesting points, and posed additional questions to other students in order to elicit further conversation. As I read the posts, I noticed that two students had submitted almost identical responses. It appeared that one student had copied and pasted another student's response, simply changing a few words and submitting it as his own. When I confronted the two students in question, one had no idea what I was referring to, while the other student, after several minutes, admitted that he had copied the response to meet the assignment deadline. I praised the student for his honesty and for taking responsibility of his action, but still assigned him a grade of zero. I also reminded him about the college's policy on academic integrity and the consequences for any future offense.

More recently, I experienced a second and similar incident. In this situation, a homework assignment

required students to read an article and answer several questions about it. The students were to complete the homework individually and submit it for a quiz grade. One student told her classmate she had forgotten about the assignment. In response, the classmate took out her assignment and said, "Here, just copy mine." The student was grateful until I took both students aside due to the similarity of their answers and questioned their behavior. Their justification was, because the assignment was to be graded as a quiz and not an exam, they thought they could share answers. I reminded them that the syllabus specifically stated individual work was required, awarded them the appropriate grade for the assignment, and also reminded them about the school's integrity policy and consequences for any future occurrences.

Addressing Assumptions and Taking Honest Action

Academic dishonesty includes various types of misconduct that range from collaborating on an assignment with other students without the permission of the instructor, also known as collusion, to plagiarism or cheating on an exam. As faculty members, we often incorrectly assume that our students already have a concrete understanding of the institution's academic integrity policy and understand its importance. This false assumption is often shattered when we encounter and must address a difficult and highly serious situation of misconduct, such as when a student cheats on a mid-term exam or submits a plagiarized paper for the final exam grade, or when students simply collaborate on an assignment not realizing they are required to complete the assignment individually. Regardless of the situation—cheating on an exam, plagiarizing a paper, or colluding on an assignment—a violation of academic honesty has occurred. Consequently, the faculty member and/or the administrators in the institution's judicial affairs office must investigate, resolve the violation, and impose appropriate sanctions on the student. This is indeed an unpleasant situation for all parties involved.

As educators, it is not only our responsibility to ensure students receive a high-quality education, but that students also complete their course work honestly. If a student develops a habit of dishonesty, he or she may be more likely to continue engaging in dishonesty beyond college and continue those behaviors into their interpersonal relationships or their workplace, where consequences could be disastrous. We hear about ethical failures by business leaders who committed fraud by misreporting their company's financial performance, teachers and administrators in K-12 manipulating standardized test scores, and professors plagiarizing a

publication or falsifying research data. Therefore, the appropriate action is to address dishonesty issues early.

Recommendations for Promoting Academic Integrity

Although we as educators and administrators are limited in our ability to help students outside of the academic environment, there are measures we can take within our sphere of influence to assist students in becoming good citizens, learn about honesty, and understand the consequences for dishonesty. Understandably, academic integrity is a broad and complicated topic with serious implications for violators that requires considerable discussion and research beyond this short abstract. However, below I propose a few recommendations that faculty and administrators can easily implement to further promote and encourage a culture of academic honesty at their institution.

- 1) **Clearly state the institution's academic integrity policy in every course syllabus, as well as the consequences for violating the policy.** Often a student may engage or continue to engage in academic dishonesty because he or she has a mentality of "Everyone is doing it," or "I got away with it once." To address this issue, consequences must be consistently imposed, although they may vary depending on the severity of the offense. For instance, penalties could be imposed in three successive phases, such as: a first offense of academic dishonesty would be followed by a warning and a zero grade on that assignment, a second offense would elicit a grade of "F" for the course, and a third offense would warrant the student's suspension from the institution. Normally, the college's judicial office would administer such penalties in accordance with the institution's academic integrity policy; however, the professor may have some flexibility in how to address the issue(s).
- 2) **Routinely remind students about expectations prior to each assignment, quiz, or exam.** In addition, and to further increase awareness of academic integrity, consider including a short integrity or honesty statement on the cover page of each quiz and exam that students must sign. By signing this honesty statement, students are aware that they are fully responsible for their actions and they are aware of the consequences, should they violate the statement.
- 3) **Make it difficult for students to cheat online and in the classroom.** When it comes to the delivery of exams, many professors may choose to deliver them via Blackboard or another online platform, or they may choose to have students come to class and take an exam using Scantron scoring. If the exam is delivered online, consider using the randomized questions function; this will make

the questions random each time a student logs into Blackboard. Another option is to set a time limit on the exam to prevent students looking up answers. If professors choose to give the exam in the classroom, consider creating two exams—each exam would have the same questions, but listed in a different order, making it difficult for students to copy one another. Additionally, have students place their bags and electronics at the front of the room to eliminate the temptation to look up answers.

- 4) **Establish an academic integrity awareness campaign.** Schedule events on campus that focus on promoting academic integrity and encourage students to act ethically. Invite guest speakers to campus to present on the topic. Often local leaders in education, business, and other community organizations welcome the opportunity to speak at a college about how they promote integrity within their organization. Perhaps the campaign could also include increasing student involvement by establishing a student committee to solicit input and assist with this effort, such as creating awareness posters and placing them in various parts of the campus as constant reminders of academic honesty.

Conclusion

So, where do we stand regarding the title of this article? College faculty and administrators are well positioned to help students succeed not only academically, but also ethically and honestly. A commitment to honesty is very much a realizable goal, especially when it is actively promoted and encouraged. We want our institutions to be known for maintaining high ethical standards. Academic integrity and honesty reflects favorably on a college, as well as its administrators, educators, and students.

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