

Academic Integrity from Behind the Administrator's Desk

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IN JULY 2006, I started working as interim director of Syracuse University's newly established Academic Integrity Office (AIO). The office, in terms of the university's institutional structure, comes under Academic Affairs and is totally separate from Judicial Affairs. The AIO office staff consists of the director and one support staff person. When I began in July, the university's new Academic Policy and Procedures had been written and approved; our job was to implement them.

Patterns

By the end of the fall 2006 semester, 42 violations had been reported to the AIO, a surprisingly small number. Of the 42 reported violations, 37 involved undergraduates and 5 involved graduate students. Twenty-seven of the violations occurred in the College of Arts and Sciences. As the semesters pass, patterns of cheating or plagiarism in particular areas may be identified, and the AIO hopes to support ways to reduce these violations.

Dealing With Academic Integrity Violations

The first year started out very slowly. After several weeks, however, a few violations had been reported, and the numbers increased as the semester progressed. The procedure requires entering each reported violation into a database that only I and my assistant can access. Each student who violates the academic integrity policy for the first time is required to complete academic integrity programming through the AIO. As I worked on the planning for this programming, I decided that it would be best for me to meet individually with

students. It didn't seem appropriate to provide generic programming because each student had a slightly different kind of violation or different circumstances surrounding the violation. One-on-one tutorials also maintain confidentiality for everyone, which is an important feature of the policy.

The individual tutorial sessions are an important aspect of my work. Most of the students with whom I meet are honest in admitting what they have done—usually plagiarism. They explain what happened that led them to plagiarize.

Syracuse University's Vice Chancellor and Provost's Committee on Academic Integrity stated in March 2005 that 74% of undergraduate students and 42% of graduate students reported cheating behaviors.

Generally, they are under stress of some sort (crisis at home, deadline pressure) and make a poor decision without considering any of the consequences. In these meetings, the student and I typically discuss how to deal with issues of stress and time management and how to make a better decision the next time that they are under pressure. As we talk, if I have a computer available, I develop a list of behaviors, actions, and tips that they can follow in the future. For example,

if students are writing on the computer and looking something up on the Internet—copying and pasting—they should paste the information in using a different color or bold it and immediately put it in quotation marks and cite the Internet source. That way they can't "forget" that this material was taken from another source. I also stress the importance of meeting with their instructors as they are writing papers or going to the Writing Center, especially if they are struggling with their ideas or with the assignment. I've also learned that many students have not mastered the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing; they do not realize that changing a few words in a paragraph is not paraphrasing and that paraphrased material still requires a citation. As we talk, I try to focus ideas and suggestions to meet the particular needs of that student. Improving their writing process should help students make conscious, ethical decisions as they write.

Changing the Culture

Ethical behavior is a troubling issue in American society, as can be seen in how newspaper headlines frequently deal with business and political ethics. Internet scams also make headlines. How do we educate our students to understand that ethical behavior is important, whether it pertains to giving credit in papers for ideas from others, taking a test without cheating, or writing a truthful résumé?

The *Academic Rules and Regulations* at Syracuse University state that all instructors are “responsible for stating in writing course-specific expectations, particularly those regarding use of sources and collaboration” (Syracuse University, 2006, 6). But we need to go beyond that. Instructors should also discuss their integrity expectations in their classes. For example, expectations for working together on reports or projects must be clearly explained so that there are no gray areas for students. Additionally, students are concerned about integrity and want consistency of enforcement. The Syracuse University Vice Chancellor and Provost’s Committee on Academic Integrity (VPCAI) found that “students called for faculty to strictly *enforce the current policies* and for *consistent implementation* by all faculty members” (VPCAI, 2005, 183).

To increase awareness, first-year students during the fall 2006 semester received an electronic newsletter from the Office of Orientation and Transition Services that included tips on academic integrity. When the 2007 first-year students entered, part of their orientation included a video about academic integrity and making good decisions under pressure. The Academic Integrity Office also developed a faculty brochure that was sent to all instructors and teaching assistants with information on the instructor’s role, best practices, and how to handle and report academic integrity violations.

Changing the culture will not be easy, but if ethical behavior is consistently emphasized and encouraged across the campus, we may hope that everyone will want to—and know better how to—behave in an honest and ethical manner.

Recommendations

As I reflect on my experiences thus far, I’ve been thinking about what to share with other instructors. When I meet with students in tutorial sessions, it becomes obvious that they make poor, reckless decisions because they are not thinking at all about the consequences of their actions. Even though each instructor is expected to have a written statement of course-specific academic integrity expectations, I would also encourage instructors to discuss ethical behavior expectations with their students. Such discussion may help students to understand why source citation is an important cultural practice and why integrity is an essential part of all research.

Carefully designed assignments can discourage Internet plagiarism. Topics or questions that are framed by course readings or discussion, or assignments that require a specific format or organization, are not as easy to answer in cut-and-paste fashion as more general topics or questions. Requiring a process that involves a series of steps, such as first submitting a thesis or plan for the paper, an annotated bibliography, and a rough draft, can be effective for deterring last-minute papers.

Many students are timid about meeting with their instructors. TAs should encourage or even require students to meet with them during office hours to discuss their paper drafts or issues that arise as they are writing. Another source of help is the Writing Center. Writing consultants can work with students at various stages of the writing process. The Writing Center can also help non-native speakers of English, and some students who are shy about meeting with professors may be more comfortable seeking help this way.

Another issue is the problem of cheating on exams. To emphasize the seriousness of cheating, TAs should speak with their classes about the importance of honest test-taking. They might ask their students if they would

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feel comfortable with a doctor who cheated on medical exams or an accountant who copied exam answers from another student. TAs should also create an environment in which cheating is difficult or impossible. When giving examinations, essay tests are best but not always feasible; if multiple-choice exams are necessary, create several versions of the exam by changing the order of the questions. Do not permit students to have cell phones or other electronic equipment at their

seats, and try to have sufficient space between students. Exam proctors should circulate around the room and make sure that students are not engaging in any kind of cheating.

Students also do not realize that signing another student's name for class attendance violates the academic integrity policy, and they are "shocked" when this behavior is caught and reported. TAs responsible for sign-in sheets should include a statement on the sheet that says signing another student as present (forging a signature) violates the academic integrity policy.

Another violation of the policy is submitting the same paper in more than one course without the prior written permission of both instructors. Students may argue that they didn't know this action was against the policy, but that is not a valid excuse. Students are not learning anything new if they submit the same paper twice. They may, however, request permission from the instructor to expand a paper or to develop another aspect of the topic, but they need written permission in advance from both instructors to do this.

When students get caught for plagiarizing or cheating, the AIO tries to use the first violation as an opportunity to teach students about the importance of academic integrity. However, a second violation requires a hearing, and students

may be suspended or expelled from the university. Having a university-wide academic integrity policy is no guarantee that unethical behavior will stop, but I want to encourage all TAs and instructors to emphasize the importance of ethical behavior in their disciplines. If instructors make clear to students their expectations regarding academic integrity, and if they consistently enforce the university's academic integrity policy, I believe that, over time, we will see a shift in student behavior.

Works Cited

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