

An Instructors Guide to Reducing Academic Dishonesty in the Classroom

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Abstract

There can be no doubt that academic dishonesty, in college students, is on the rise (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2020). This truth is evidenced by the fact that the Internet is full of pirated solutions to end-of-chapter problems of many popular college text books. An experienced college instructor may also comment that students today, are sometimes unaware that they are violating academic integrity codes, i.e., they feel that if they submit a correct answer, they should receive full credit, no matter how that answer was obtained.

In this paper, the argument is made that academic dishonesty is a matter for the student, the instructor, and the educational institution itself. It is up to the instructor to engage methods that deter dishonesty. These methods require more creativity in test giving, homework assignments, and lab reports. It requires making the student aware of the definition of academic dishonesty, the employed preventative measures and consequences. The institution itself must maintain strict adherences to its own stated policies, and support the pursuit of grievances.

This paper presents many specific ideas that have proven to be successful in eliminating the need of having to author and file student letters of academic dishonesty. This paper is limited to academic dishonesty deterrents for courses completed in the traditional classroom

environment. The issue of academic dishonesty in an online environment, is reserved for a later discussion.

Introduction

The issue of academic dishonesty in college classrooms has ramifications for many parties: the students involved, their classroom peers, the instructor of the course, the department, college, and university where it is occurring. On a large scale, the integrity of the institution is challenged by graduates who have not learned the techniques of their discipline, but rather, have simply cheated their way through. The employers that hire the graduates receive a product that is second rate. Eventually, it can affect the public perception of the institution when graduates boast that their education was easy and they could fraudulently pass their way through. For the instructor, it presents a dilemma of whether the cheating should be challenged, which requires extra time and effort (as outlined in the remainder of this paper) or whether the easier way is simply to ignore that it is happening. The students that are not involved in the cheating feel cheated themselves knowing that their hard efforts are being rewarded only as much as the false efforts of their peers. It is the cheaters themselves who lose the most. They entrusted the institution to grow their character; to make them a professional, but what they found was the ability to scoot by with little effort, and they succumbed to that path.

Academic duplicity comes in many forms (Richard C. Hollinger, 2009). Most significantly, it occurs in test taking where the student has pre-knowledge of the content of the test either handed down from previous semesters or obtained through dishonest measures. It could also

be as simple as looking over the shoulder of the student adjacent during the exam, or more sophisticatedly, by texting across the room, or by using the internet via cell phone to help with answers. It has even been observed that students use their phones to take pictures of the questions and/or answers to send to another student in the class or even to an individual outside of the classroom who responds with a solution. In lab, cheating often occurs by copying previous labs, or duplicating someone else's laboratory results or discussion. It may occur on homework by copying someone else's homework or working in a homework group where others do the work and the offender writes down the solutions without understanding. There is an easy criterion to judge cheating; *if the student turns in work that they did not create, this is academic dishonesty.*

Cheating is more rampant today (Open Education Database, 2020) than ever before for many reasons; some of these reasons are obvious and some may be argumentative (Keith, 2018). There is a greater ability to cheat, primarily due to the accessibility of the internet and digital technologies. The internet contains solutions to end-of-chapter problems of many popular textbooks. The internet holds past copies of instructor's tests, with solutions. Students commonly post these to popular websites that are intended to be a helpful student resource. To some problems, the internet has instant answers, just by searching. In addition to the internet, there may be a cultural shift with the 'millennial' students. On occasion, they don't even realize it is cheating to get answers from the Internet because they will reason that this was part of their problem-solving procedure. There have been many publications regarding an uptick in academic dishonesty from the international population of students. There are many explanations why this may be true. It has been gesticulated that these students may be under

extreme pressure to perform, as families may be depending on them to succeed. Language barriers may also be an explanation for why international students may feel they must resort to dishonest measures in order to complete their educations. Some international students even claim that these duplicitous actions are acceptable modes of operation within their cultures as long as they are not caught. It has been reported that it often appears that some students put more effort into devising methods of avoiding the learning system than would have been required to simply study the material.

This paper recommends college instructors take ownership of the responsibility to reduce or even eliminate academic dishonesty. It also outlines how college instructors can equip themselves to achieve it. It is possible to thwart these fraudulent efforts and bring integrity back to the classroom. Nevertheless, this objective will require a significant investment of time. Below, three different degrees of corrective action are defined: light, meaning little effort on the part of the instructor, moderate implying more effort, and brute force meaning a nearly complete shutdown of cheating at the expense of significant instructor time. In reading this discussion, keep in mind, that in all cases, academic dishonesty **MUST** be confronted.

Light: At a very minimum, an instructor should put a comment about academic dishonesty in the syllabus of the course and discuss this information on the first day of class. Taking this a step further, the instructor can devote 15 minutes of one session in the first week to show a PowerPoint slideshow on academic dishonesty; what constitutes academic dishonesty, how instructors recognize it, and the consequences that would be pursued should a student be found guilty. Also at minimum, instructors should proctor their own tests actively; walk around the classroom during an examination, ensure no cell phones are out on desks, sit down in the

back of the classroom so students don't know where the instructor is looking. Additionally, without investing too much time, the instructor could print a single test in two parts and on two separate pages. It is then quite simple to pass out one part to half of the class, and the other part to the other half, staggering the parts row-by-row. In this manner, no one is sitting next to a student that is working on the same part. Upon completion of the first part, students would submit it to the instructor and obtain the second part. (This method was administered in a class recently, and a student actually emailed the instructor afterward that he believed he had made a mistake and did one part twice. He made the comment that during the test he thought there was a lot of similarity in the two parts!) For this reason, it may be necessary to print the two test parts on different colored paper explaining they should do one color first. Then, retrieve the second color.

In circumstances where academic dishonesty is suspected, instructors should at a minimum confront the student and consider appropriate discipline as outlined in the course syllabus or in university policy. These minimal efforts, while light, in terms of instructor time, should assist in deterring some student duplicitousness.

Moderate: This level of thoroughness would include the methods discussed in the 'Light' section above, but go a bit further. At this level of effort, instructors should create original examinations and multiple versions of them. Many teachers who teach the same course repeatedly, reuse their same tests each semester. Certainly, this does save time, but in this age of total and digital communication, this should be considered a certain invitation to 'cheat'. To see how easy it is to find old exams online, just search for 'where can I find my professor's old exams'. Online forums can also be found that defend this method of 'studying' because

professors should know that their past tests have been digitalized for anyone to see. “If the professor thinks you cheated, then s/he is very naive about how the world works. Student fraternities typically keep records of old exams and students study from them. If the professor uses old questions, they should expect that those questions are available.” (Stack Exchange, 2019). By reusing the same test questions every time a course is taught, instructors may not be grading an exam that is actually reflective of whether a student has learned the material. In this case, it is also arguable whether or not the student committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors must be conscious that their exams have, in all likelihood, been shared by one student or another. It is essential that new and original tests are created each time the course is offered in order to determine what level of mastery their current students have actually achieved.

In many college classrooms, seating proximities and desk or table-arrangements, make visibility of a peer’s exam too easy a temptation to avoid. To discourage (or catch cheaters) classmates looking at another’s answers, this guideline suggests the necessity of multiple versions of tests. It is also advised that instructors inform their students that no one sitting next to them has the same exam. This can be as simple as changing the order of the questions or changing numbers in a question. It is, however, important that the two exams remain equitable in content and in level of difficulty.

Obviously, outside of the classroom, it is nearly impossible to maintain academic integrity. If homework constitutes a significant portion of a student’s grade in a course, then, it is also necessary to create new homework problems for each semester (If not, instructors will receive the same solutions over and over for problems from the back of the book or websites that publish textbook solutions). If this requires too much time investment, homework cheating may

be diminished by placing less emphasis on the homework grade. One suggestion would be to grade homework for completion or participation only, and allow the weight of homework to be minimal, as in 10% of the course grade. Inform students that it is understood that work outside the classroom cannot be guaranteed to be their own. If they do not actually do the homework, they will receive the 10% of their grade, but will certainly be unable to answer test questions, which constitutes the majority of their course grade.

The last moderate suggestion is to more thoroughly discuss cell phone usage in the classroom and during an examination, specifically. These statements should be made in the syllabus and in the classroom on the first day. Additionally, prior to any quiz or test, students should be asked to take their cell phones out, to turn them off (or silence them), and place them in their school bags. They should not be permitted on their desks or on their person during an exam of any sort.

At this level of effort, instructors should vehemently pursue any suspected cases of academic dishonesty. Consequences should be clearly defined in the syllabus and followed up in a consistent and thorough manner. Suggested consequences should include some or all of the following: a grade of zero for the offending assignment, a failing grade for the course, and a letter from the dean to be placed in the student's academic file.

Brute Force: This last approach is a protocol that should deter, reduce and, hopefully, abolish academic dishonesty in the classroom. At this level, instructors would include the proposals of the 'Moderate' section above, but expand on them as well.

While tests should always be original, to ensure no fraudulence can occur, tests should also be individualized. This may be quite difficult for certain subjects, but in some areas, it is not completely unreasonable. In an English composition class, literature class or the social sciences, for example, answers may be subjective and must be entirely read to be graded so changing long-answer questions may not necessarily extend the grading time. In mathematical, science or technical courses, individualizing tests may require an unrealistic time to grade. One solution to this issue is to create test questions whose values are determined from a student's identification number, for example. Grading time can be minimized by writing a solution key in a program like Excel, where formulas can be written, and then copied down for each student's identification number. This can even be done ahead of time. Then, each student's exam can be graded quickly.

In the 'Moderate' proposals, students were asked to turn phones off and placed in their school bags. In this method, students would be required to place their phones in a bin or storage place determined by the teacher until the exam is concluded. As in the 'Moderate' outline, all acts of academic dishonesty must be addressed consistently and to the fullest extent.

Conclusion

Following any one or combination of the scenarios described above will take an instructor and an institution far in reclaiming academic integrity. Paramount to achieving this is consistency in confronting offending students and following appropriate punitive actions when the academic process has not been respected. It is essential that instructors maintain an objective, respectful and professional demeanor throughout any confrontation process. These students will likely appear in their classrooms again, and must feel as though they will still be treated equitably.

Lastly, remember cheating is, and always has been, a dynamic evolution. It has changed from generation to generation and by every new technology. Tomorrow will bring a new cheating transformation, so, keep those eyes peeled.

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