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Academic Dishonesty: Recommendations for the Future of Higher Education

Kevin Wright, Susan Jones, & Connor Adams

The culture of academic dishonesty has become a common practice among students across numerous college campuses. It is imperative to address the policies designed to clearly define plagiarism and academic integrity, as they are not universally understood. The authors explore how academic dishonesty and academic integrity are defined at varying institutions and compare and contrast how such policy violations are addressed by campus administrators. The authors propose recommendations for campus administrators and policymakers to redefine best practices for faculty and staff to instill a culture of academic integrity on college campuses.

“If students don’t feel valued in the classroom, they are going to cheat.”
– (College Associate Dean).

“I think the impact of cheating can be severe if you are caught. However, on a day to day basis, I think many people do trivial cheating without seeing any impact.”
– (College Student).

“Some students believe that cheating and plagiarism is a standard in the real world, and they are being unfairly penalized.”
– (College Conduct Administrator).

“I believe students are more concerned with the grade than retaining valuable information and skills. It’s disheartening but true.”
– (College Student).

“I was more concerned about the grade I received than knowing the information.”
– (College Student).

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These quotes from college students and administrators highlight some of the current beliefs about the cheating epidemic on college campuses. Most college students report having cheated at least once in their college career (Davis, Drinan, & Bertram Gallant, 2012), and although academic cheating (e.g., test cheating, working together when an instructor has asked for individual work, plagiarizing) is not a new phenomenon, such behavior has become normalized on college campuses (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012).

In light of pervasive views of cheating (Beasley, 2014), there remains no clear consensus among students and faculty about what constitutes cheating or the actions and consequences that should result from academic dishonesty. For stakeholders at institutions to uphold moral integrity, issues related to academic dishonesty need to undergo a vast overhaul. Using survey and interview data gathered from students and college administrators, coupled with the literature on academic cheating, we present a set of recommendations designed to decrease cheating and cultivate a culture of academic integrity on college campuses. For the purposes of this article, the authors utilize Davis and colleagues (2012) definition of cheating: “Acts committed by students that deceive, mislead, or fool the teacher into thinking that the academic work submitted by the student was the student’s own work” (p. 2).

Recommendations

We began by identifying the strategies we felt had the most merit or potential for improving academic integrity (based on our data and current and relevant literature), by analyzing data and selecting what we, as a collective, believed to be the most high-impact strategies. We developed the following recommendations:

:

1. Interrogate the Dominant Paradigm of Success
2. Redefine the Grading System
3. Define and Communicate Academic Integrity Definitions and Policies
4. Faculty Training
5. Start Early
6. Teach Writing
7. Promote Moral Development

We describe the seven recommendations below.

[1] “We draw upon Bensimon’s (2007) notion of the “dominant paradigm of success.” Under such paradigm, “student success is based exclusively on personal characteristics of students that have been found to correlate with persistence and graduation” (p. 443). The paradigm can essentially absolve institutions of their responsibility to facilitate the success of each student.

Recommendation #1: Interrogate the Dominant Paradigm of Success[1]

Academic dishonesty is often a result of larger societal issues related to the purpose of higher education, the value of knowledge, the assessment of learning, and the emphasis on individual achievement. Students feel compelled to cheat in an educational system that focuses on grades and credentials over learning (Demerath, 2006; Galloway, 2012). To explore these themes, policymakers need to engage in a broad conversation to challenge the traditional bureaucratic and credentialing model and instead consider ways to develop a collaborative, inclusive, and supportive academic environment, where students and faculty work toward the social good. This conversation must explore the following questions:

- How does the way we define admissibility impact our campus community? Who is not included in our definitions?
- How do we define knowledge? Who can hold knowledge? Whose knowledge is privileged?
- How do we define good teaching? How does this relate to hiring and tenure?
- How do we define student success in and outside of the classroom?
- How does our society define success?
- What is the impact on different campus populations based on these definitions?
- How could we create a new model of success that is inclusive and that would enhance academic integrity?

These conversations need to happen in the classroom, at the faculty senate, administrative assembly, and the student senate. By gathering data, quantitative and qualitative, scholars and practitioners can create a workbook for the campus community designed to inform future dialogue and practices around academic integrity.

Recommendation #2: Redefine the Grading System

Many argue that the organization of higher education is not conducive to student learning (Lang, 2013), and students feel compelled to act in ways that will allow them to keep up with their peers. Some suggest that to create change, government officials and policymakers will need to reevaluate the purpose of standardized tests and the design of current grading systems. The current grading system focuses on outcomes, rather than on the act of learning itself. This method is seen as a means to an end and can act as a breeding ground for cheating behavior. Not only does the system appear to condone academic dishonesty, students now believe it is “cool to work the system” (Galloway, 2012, p. 390).

By working the system, students fail to see the value of their education if they believe their efforts are solely to obtain a diploma. For there to be a cultural shift in how academic dishonesty is viewed by students, faculty, and administrators, a larger discussion of how and why our grading system is the way it is needs to happen.

Recommendation #3: Define and Communicate Academic Integrity Definitions and Policies

Students regularly report feeling that cheating is considered acceptable, due to an unclear understanding of cheating and limited consequences for their actions (Galloway, 2012). Students who have been caught violating academic dishonesty believe they would have refrained from committing the act if they knew the policies and definition of cheating (Beasley, 2014). The use of these policies across campuses and departments can hold students responsible for cheating. Failure to do so places institutions at risk of perpetuating a culture of academic dishonesty (Galloway, 2012; McCabe et al., 2012).

It is imperative to incorporate both faculty and student perspectives to guide the discussion of a common definition and set of policies around academic integrity and cheating. As one of the first steps in creating a common language, a starting point is the development of a school-wide survey of faculty and students. Specifically, the questions should pertain to a students' understanding of academic integrity, as well as what resources could be provided to alleviate any temptation to lie, cheat, forge, or partake in the act of academic dishonesty. An institution could share results from the survey to facilitate joint faculty and student discussions of how to create the policy. Gathering data from faculty would allow for examination of processes currently used on campus. By including authentic student voice, scholars anticipate policies will be embraced by the students and faculty (McCabe et al., 2012).

Lastly, a key step for administrators to take once they create academic integrity policies and procedures at their institution is to share these expectations with a new member of the academic community (academia). In regards to students, the most common context for setting expectations for new students is during the orientation process or first-year experience. Providing detailed information regarding what the institution views as cheating, what options are available to students to make moral decisions, and strategies they can use to improve their learning without cheating will alleviate further instances of academic dishonesty.

Recommendation #4: Faculty Training

“Teachers may see the ethical failure of student cheating but not their own ethi-

cal failure of not confronting it” (Davis et al., 2012, p. 154). During our interviews with college administrators, participants reported that those who train faculty often overlook academic misconduct. It is imperative to inform faculty of institutional policies addressing academic misconduct and cheating on an annual basis. We also suggest forming a faculty committee to facilitate ongoing inter-group dialogue to address issues of academic integrity throughout the term and school year. We suggest some of the following themes for discussion:

- Who is affected by academic misconduct?
- What are effective strategies and pedagogies for fostering academic integrity?
- What tools can we utilize in crafting and proctoring exams?
- How can we develop faculty/colleague support networks around academic integrity?
- How can we create a faculty culture where faculty are open and talk about cheating and academic integrity (what it is, what the effects are, what faculty expectations are)?

Recommendation #5: Proactive Practice and Prevention

Research shows that students learn cheating behaviors before they get to college (McCabe et al., 2012). Student and academic affairs need to discuss prevention efforts around cheating in K-12 schools, including more preparation and education of K-12 students and teachers about cheating and the importance of integrity. By doing so, students are at less of a risk of developing cheating behaviors they can use later in life. Additionally, teachers have an opportunity to emphasize the value of education to their students. Recognizing the value of one’s education can instill a sense of purpose and belonging in the classroom. If students feel as though they belong in the classroom, they will thrive using their intelligence instead of shortcuts to get a high grade. However, these efforts cannot be executed only by the K-12 education system. With additional partnerships in place between the K-12 school system and postsecondary educators, there is an opportunity to ensure a student does not wander off the right path toward their academic success.

Recommendation #6: Synthesize a Community Dedicated to the Development of Students’ Writing

In some cases, student plagiarism results from a misunderstanding of how to paraphrase or appropriately cite. We recommend incorporating a first-year class to the development of students’ writing skills and styles, including what constitutes plagiarism and how to properly cite, paraphrase, etc. Furthermore, the importance of this issue will thrive off faculty providing consistency with

explaining and emphasizing the importance of not partaking in academic dishonesty. It is valuable for faculty to have autonomy in how they facilitate their classes, and it is also imperative for consistency with academic policies to have a presence. With more consistency, misconceptions of plagiarism decrease, so students are not receiving mixed messages from their professors (McCabe et al., 2012).

Recommendation #7: Engage in Activities Rooted in Moral Development

College is a prime developmental period in which to engage students in discussion and activities around issues of ethics and integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Davis et al., 2012). Faculty and student affairs practitioners could offer classroom and co-curricular opportunities for students to grapple with real-life dilemmas related to cheating and academic integrity. For college students to grow in their moral development and ethical skills, it is essential for administrators to establish clear academic dishonesty definitions, expectations, and policies (McCabe et al., 2012). By having the classroom designed as a space for moral development in addition to intellectual development, opportunities are created for students to understand the consequences of their actions, inside and outside of the classroom. We do not anticipate these efforts being carried out by faculty only, which is why we recommend additional partnerships between academic affairs scholars and student affairs practitioners.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the fact some of these recommendations are easier said than done. Each campus has a different culture, and academic dishonesty is perceived differently across varying campus communities. However, we hope that current and future policymakers within higher education consider these recommendations to contribute to the academic well-being of students pursuing higher education. Moving forward, we also hope current, and future student affairs practitioners understand the importance of this topic and do not perceive it as an issue solely among faculty to address. Regardless of where practitioners and scholars place themselves within the field of higher education, we still have to develop the necessary resources to ensure the holistic development and academic success of our students.

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