**Academic Integrity Policy: The Journey**

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*An undergraduate student breaks into a professor’s office and steals the answers to an exam; the*

*university initiates only process available--discipline pursuant to regulations governing student behavior through judicial affairs.*

*An undergraduate student fabricates lab data and is flunked for the course; the student initiates only process available--grade appeal through department academic practices committee.*

*A graduate student plagiarizes his master thesis and is dismissed from program; the student initiates only process available--appeal of dismissal through a readmission committee.*

All of these scenarios actually happened and all were handled through various administrative university processes not ever designed to handle matters involving cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism. But when a university does not have a unified method of handling academic integrity issues, administrators must default to whatever processes are available.

Because these scenarios happened, faculty and staff at a southeastern regional public institution began discuss better methodologies to handle these matters. But how to even begin a conversation about a process, as well as changing a culture?

This paper details the story of the idea, the process, and the final product on the journey toward developing an academic integrity policy and procedure that provide a unified methodology for handling the results of student choices to plagiarize, cheat, or fabricate, and, along the way, begins to change a culture.

**The Idea**

Beginning in 2002, various stakeholders at our university who had experienced the ramifications of student choices to plagiarize, cheat, or fabricate began to share their concerns with each other. Informal brainstorming sessions identified the major concerns of not having a unified academic integrity policy: (1) no systematic university-wide academic integrity philosophy existed regarding what is acceptable student behavior; (2) no systematic university-wide procedure existed regarding how to handle possible academic integrity violations; (3) no systematic university-wide method existed which could capture and retain information regarding students who plagiarized in one class in one college and also cheated in another class in another college; and (4) no systematic university-wide survey had ever been conducted to identify the magnitude of academic integrity violations.

**The Journey**

This initial group of faculty and staff also realized that since the path toward openly discussing campus academic integrity culture had not been previously paved, a deliberate course of action designed to involve as many stakeholders as possible on the campus would be a crucial component of the process.

***Creating Buy-In***

Initial stakeholders decided that creating buy-in from the top down and the bottom up would be critical during this journey. During 2003-04, the initial stakeholders began to make the rounds of meetings after meetings to discuss the concept of a proposed academic integrity policy. In total, 23 individual meetings were held with the president, provost, deans, vice presidents, Faculty Senate Executive Committee, Faculty Senate, and the leaders of Student Government Association. Three open forums were conducted. At one point, it seemed as if there could not be a person on campus that the initial stakeholders did not meet with, outline to the listener the general concept of the proposed academic integrity policy, and ask for general support of the audience.

***Ad hoc Academic Integrity Committee Formation***

Simultaneous with the meetings, the initial stakeholders approached the university president with a request to form an *ad hoc* Academic Integrity Committee. A 21-member committee, representing stakeholders from faculty, students, staff, judicial affairs, student affairs, registrar’s office, and others, agreed to begin tackling this issue. The initial meeting of the Academic Integrity Committee (AIC) almost derailed the entire idea. The AIC members were so diverse in their views, with debates involving key questions: (1) does the institution really need a campus-wide unified academic integrity policy? (2) does the institution really have a problem with academic dishonesty on the campus? (3) is the AIC, by proposing this policy, stripping away the rights of the faculty to govern their classrooms? AIC members expressed doubt about trying to adopt an academic integrity policy, especially since it was clear at the first several meetings that the members could not even agree on a definition of academic dishonesty.

***Campus Climate Assessment***

The AIC co-chairs quickly realized that, if this committee was going to function and agree upon a policy, understanding the extent and magnitude of cheating, plagiarism, and fabrication on campus should be the first step of the journey. Thus, a third-party, campus-wide assessment of the scope of academic dishonesty was conducted, with a survey administered to four separate groups: faculty, first-year undergraduate students, continuing undergraduate students, and graduate students. Although the survey results were not unexpected, they were disheartening.

Email surveys were sent to all 960 faculty members at the university, with usable data received from 240 faculty, a 25 percent response rate. Faculty perception of the pervasiveness of cheating activities in every category was higher than the perception of national respondents, as noted in Table 1. The national survey used as a comparator to the university was comprised of 33 schools with 3,752 respondents, surveyed in the year prior to the university survey.

**Table 1. Faculty Respondents’ Perception of Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities**

**(Responses of *Often* or *Very Often*)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities** | **Percentage of**  **University**  **Respondents** | **Percentage of National Respondents** |
| Inappropriate sharing of work in group assignments | 64% | 53% |
| Plagiarism on written assignments | 60% | 52% |
| Cheating during tests or exams | 27% | 22% |

Email surveys were also sent to all 2,722 active student accounts for first-year students, with usable data received from 434 students, a 16 percent response rate. First-year student perception of the pervasiveness of cheating activities was similar to that of Canadian respondents in a comparator survey, and, interestingly, the same percentage for “inappropriate sharing of work in group assignments.” However, “plagiarism” and “cheating on tests” were flip-flopped in percentage of level of pervasiveness between the university and the national respondents, as Table 2 shows. The national survey used as a comparison to the university was comprised of 5 Canadian schools, with 1,269 respondents, administered two years prior to the university survey.

**Table 2. First-Year Respondents’ Perception of Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities**

**(Responses of *Often* or *Very Often*)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities** | **Percentage of**  **University**  **Respondents** | **Percentage of National Respondents** |
| Inappropriate sharing of work in group assignments | 57% | 57% |
| Cheating during tests or exams | 40% | 33% |
| Plagiarism on written assignments | 35% | 43% |

Email surveys were then sent to all 12,355 active student accounts for continuing undergraduates (sophomores through seniors), with usable data received from 917 students, a 7.4 percent response rate. Alarmingly, continuing undergraduates’ perception of the pervasiveness of cheating activities on the campus was higher in all categories than the national respondents, as noted in Table 3. The comparative sample is comprised of 28 United States institutions surveyed in the year prior to the university survey, with 10,817 continuing undergraduates responding.

**Table 3. Continuing Student Respondents’ Perception of Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities (Responses of *Often* or *Very Often*)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Pervasiveness of Cheating Activities** | **Percentage of**  **University**  **Respondents** | **Percentage of National Respondents** |
| Inappropriate sharing of work in group assignments | 60% | 54% |
| Plagiarism on written assignments | 39% | 35% |
| Cheating during tests or exams | 31% | 27% |

Finally, email surveys were sent to all 2,300 active graduate student accounts, with usable data received from only 77 students, a 3.3 percent response rate. Due to the small number of respondents, the data were not evaluated.

Sufficiently alarmed by the survey results, the AIC agreed, in principle, that a university-wide academic integrity policy and process should be adopted. However, this committee member “agreement” was on the surface only--since the overarching philosophical issue that the AIC could not reach consensus on, at this time, was whether this academic integrity policy should be a “hard” or a “soft” honor code.

***Writing of the Policy and the Process***

A “hard” honor code, as defined by the AIC, would require students who knew of an academic integrity violation to report their fellow student for possible disciplinary action. A “soft” honor code would not have such a requirement; however, it would still bind the students to the lofty principle that plagiarizing, cheating, and fabrication were unacceptable actions. The committee did, however, agree to move on with writing the definitions and the process and return to the overarching issue at another time.

Divided into sub-committees, various committee members worked on writing (1) definitions of academic dishonesty, *i.e.*, plagiarism, cheating, and fabrication; (2) the process for handling an alleged violation of the academic integrity policy; (3) the overarching philosophy supporting the policy; and (4) the Honor Pledge. Approximately six months later, the first rough draft of the policy was compiled. The AIC finally opted for a “soft” honor code, basing its decision on the realization that the campus climate would not tolerate a jump from no academic integrity policy to a strict interpretation honor code with required reporting and compliance.

***The Vetting Process***

The proposed Academic Integrity Policy was now ready for campus-wide vetting and approval from various stakeholders. At this time, the university did not have a formal process for seeking approval of a newly proposed university policy; the AIC decided that the process for adoption of this policy should have one focus: disseminating the policy to as many stakeholders as possible so that the adoption process would be transparent, made with due deliberation, and reflect the appropriate respect for academic freedom coupled with the need to provide due process rights for the students. The four-month long vetting process began.

Various members of the committee met with different university groups: provost, deans, chairs, Faculty Senate, Student Government Association, and faculty from each college. The committee held open forums for the students to encourage input and conducted focus groups for each college. After each of these meetings, the proposed policy was fine-tuned and disseminated to the AIC members for input on each proposed change. Heated email exchanges among the committee members were frequent as each apparently wrestled with various aspects of the proposed policy and process.

**The Destination**

The Academic Integrity Policy was adopted by the Board of Regents on June 12, 2006, approximately three years after the initial idea was formulated. The complete Academic Integrity Policy can be seen at http://www.policies.eku.edu/policy/. While the adoption process was arduous, it did provide an opportunity for open dialogue among faculty, staff, and students, highlighting the issues and the question regarding how to handle matters of academic dishonesty.

The Academic Integrity Policy affords initial discussions between the faculty/staff and the student regarding the alleged academic dishonesty incident and the resulting reporting of disciplinary sanction. The associate director of Academic Integrity in the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities (AI director) maintains and documents all communication. If a student accepts the sanction, the matter is closed. If the student does not accept the sanction, s/he has the right to request a hearing before the College Academic Integrity Committee, with a further appeal to the University Academic Integrity Committee on procedural grounds only. If the alleged academic integrity violation is particularly egregious, the matter could proceed to the Student Disciplinary Council, the campus body with the authority, pursuant to statute, to expel or suspend a student.

***Permanent Record***

A particularly controversial aspect of the Academic Integrity Policy was the institution of an “FX” grade. Designed to be given in situations that constituted egregious conduct, this particular sanction is a permanent notation on the student’s transcript representing an academic integrity violation. The authors note that the initial explanation of the FX notation in the Academic Integrity Policy created confusion regarding its utilization and application, and, accordingly, the Academic Integrity Policy was subsequently amended to better reflect the intent of the sanction.

***Academic Freedom Maintained***

Growing pains associated with the Academic Integrity Policy were not unexpected. Initial resistance was promulgated by faculty/deans regarding their perceived loss of control of their classrooms and college-level decisions. Generally, this concern dissipated after a faculty member had a conversation with the AI director, who reminded that person that s/he still has the right to report the alleged violation and determine the initial sanction. Additionally, resistance to reporting lessened after the faculty member realized that if the educational component of the Academic Integrity Policy was going to work, the student’s actions in the one class had to be reported in order to discourage the student from repeating the violation in another class.

**Fast Forward…Five Years Later**

Five years after the Academic Integrity Policy was adopted, a total of 328 academic dishonesty cases have been reported and adjudicated. Of these reported violations, 169 cases involved plagiarism, 142 cases involved cheating, and 17 cases involved fabrication. Of notable significance, only 33 students (10 percent) of the 328 reported cases were repeat offenders.

Campus climate about academic integrity has changed. Minor tweaks have been made to the process since its adoption, and the processes are functioning effectively and efficiently, providing a true safeguard of student and faculty rights (*e.g.*, academic freedom).

A faculty member was hired, on a part-time basis, as the AI director to implement the process. New Student Days Orientation now features a freshman convocation during which the university president, deans, and the AI director stress the importance of the Academic Integrity Policy and making the right choices in life. This event also features the donning of t-shirts (paid for by various university stakeholders, including Student Government Association) that highlight a saying promoting academic integrity. Academic integrity tutorials focusing upon the definitions stated in the AI Policy were developed and are now housed on the university library homepage (http://www.library.eku.edu/tutorials/honesty/).

In addition, faculty Professional Learning Communities focusing on academic ethics are flourishing, and outreach programs to area high school students, exploring issues of ethics and social responsibility, have been implemented. An in-depth and systematic plan for increased educational opportunities for the campus community dealing with issues of academic integrity, copyright, and peer-to-peer file sharing have also been implemented.

**Conclusion**

Our university was faced with a choice. We could continue to deal with students’ choices to plagiarize, cheat, or fabricate on a case-by-case method with little consistency of result and frustration for faculty and students since no formal process existed. Or we could embark upon an ambitious plan to reshape the culture of the institution, resulting in a fair and transparent process for the students and faculty and an educational moment for all.

The choice seemed simple.

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