Academic Integrity Policies: Has Your Institution Implemented an Effective Policy?

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Abstract

There is a strong consensus that widespread breaches of academic honesty exist on university campuses. This paper argues that effective solutions must begin with an acknowledgment that a problem exists and a plan to address it through the development of a comprehensive policy. Requirements for doing so include participation of key stakeholders with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, demonstrated support on the part of senior administrators, and a process for measuring and monitoring results as a way to "close the loop".

Keywords: academic integrity, cheating, honor codes, academic honesty policies

Background

In the contemporary educational environment, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, purchased essays and term papers, shred test and quiz files, identity spoofing for online exams, koofers, and usage of test banks serve to undermine commonly understood, long-standing educational ideals. Among those ideals, academic integrity, honesty, honor codes, and appropriate academic conduct comprise a critical part of the perceived value of an institutional degree. The reliance on technology-assisted educational practices has only served to push the circumvention of anti-cheating tools, which makes detection by instructors a time consuming and technically challenging affair. Many academics may recall a time not long past, when a significant academic integrity concern was the use of programmable calculators.

While instructors often bear the burden of addressing these issues, they are not the only stakeholders. Students who do not honestly earn their grades and degrees may put themselves at risk of being unable to function at a level expected by their employers, which in turn reflects poorly on the educational institution. Employers also have a stake in academic integrity since circumvention can lead to Type I and II hiring errors. The Type I error would be not hiring students who actually have mastery of required knowledge; a Type II error would be hiring students who do not. This may help explain a current movement calling for the development of standardized university exit-exams (Belkin, 2013). Although the victims of cheating may be less visible than other stakeholders, cheating is not a victimless crime: students who honestly earn their grades and degrees are hurt by their dishonest peers. Dishonest students may put honest students at a disadvantage by pushing honest students "down the curve" when in fact honest students' mastery of concepts is higher than it appears. Last but not least, academic institutions are key stakeholders. Recent scandals at prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Columbia Universities have created negative publicity, but all institutions risk earning a reputation of producing low quality graduates that employers avoid because experience has shown that their students perform poorly in the workplace.

This paper contributes to the literature by presenting best practices for implementing, achieving buy-in, and enforcing academic integrity policies. Specifically, this paper addresses the need for active participation from the administration and relates the process to well-known accounting concepts – the "tone at the top" and the internal control framework. Additionally, this paper evaluates and organizes the academic integrity literature from various sources utilizing concepts familiar to accountants.

This paper provides insight into academic integrity and contains a brief overview of the problem, followed by a discussion of the parties whose involvement is necessary to achieving academic integrity goals. The paper also outlines various components necessary for the successful implementation of an academic integrity policy, and provides several citations for available resources. While there is no self-contained solution for eliminating these behaviors, the practices, tools, and resources explored in this paper can be leveraged to significantly reduce their occurrence and promote academic integrity.

For consistency, throughout this paper the term "misconduct" and "violations" are used to represent the various types of behaviors considered inappropriate in educational settings. "Integrity" is used to represent the ideals to which academic honesty policies aspire. Additionally, the term "institutions" is used to represent colleges, universities and other post-secondary institutions.

Problem Overview

There is no shortage of studies that have documented instances of misconduct in academic institutions – few argue that the problem may be less significant than commonly believed. Exceptions include Baron & Crooks (2005) who conclude that concerns regarding academic dishonesty in web-based instruction are unsubstantiated. A majority argue that the advent of new technologies has exacerbated the problem. Regardless, the percentage of students who violate policies at least once over the course of their higher-level education is thought to be relatively high (McCabe, 2005). In reporting results of his research over the past decades, McCabe (2005) reported 21%-51% of undergraduates admitted to a serious instance of cheating on written assignments and tests. About 80% of respondents admitted to some type of internet-based cheating. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the general lack of methodologies other than survey-based self-report data, there are significant difficulties in estimating the pervasiveness of misconduct in any population of interest.

Studies focused on where misconduct differs across disciplines have found that it is equally if not more likely to occur in business schools and accounting programs. McCabe, Butterfield, and Trevino (2006) found that 56% of graduate business students admitted to lapses in academic integrity compared with 47% of non-business graduates. It seems naïve not to assume that these behaviors began well before students' post-secondary experiences. For an interesting perspective of some root causes, see Baird (2012).

This finding is especially troubling in accounting departments because many students go on to obtain professional licenses such as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) or Series 7/ General Securities License, as well as other professional certifications such as a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), Certified Internal Auditor (CIA) and Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA). This is not to diminish the need for ethics elsewhere, including the realms of legal, medical, government and journalism programs.

Core to such designations are codes of ethics licensees are required to abide by at all times. Importantly, as professionals, many embark on careers that are directly or indirectly involved in the capital markets throughout the world. Walter Schuetz, a former FASB board member as well as former chief accountant of the SEC, cited in Miller & Bahnson, (2003), underscores the weight of such responsibilities: "The capital markets are a figurative crystal vase, highly valuable but dangerously fragile. This vase has been entrusted to the accounting profession for safekeeping, and all that we do must be aimed at protecting it."

Responsibility for Achieving Integrity Ideals

The purpose of this section is to discuss roles that different entities should play in the process while noting that all are necessary and none is sufficient. Our discussion begins with students since academic integrity begins and ends with them, followed by a discussion of the role of various institutional representatives.

Students
The first group to play a role in academic integrity is students. They need to actively participate in the process because they are ultimately accountable for upholding the academic integrity standards specific to their institution. One of the institution's challenges is that the typical student body reflects a diverse mix of cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, regions or countries of origin, and religions that likely result in differing attitudes and understandings when they arrive on campus (Flynn, 2003; Holmes, 2004; Smith, Hume, Davis, & Zimmerman, 2005; Broeckelman-Post, 2008). Holmes (2004) for instance, points to significant culture-based differences regarding text- and idea-ownership, and requirements for citing sources. In addition, Flynn (2003) recounts an experience where in response to a verified academic honesty violation, the student's spouse told him he did not understand the student's culture. To gain a common understanding of the institutions expectations, it is imperative to design communications that are clearly understood by all. An example of developing broad based communications is St. Louis based Washington University. They have recently created an academic honesty policy video that is required viewing by all freshman – followed by receiving a 100% on a quiz – before they arrive to campus (Keaggy, 2013).

Another role for students is in developing and enforcing integrity policies. The former role helps ensure that student perceptions, or misperceptions, are incorporated into the process – an important step since there may be perceptual differences between students and faculty/administrators on what constitutes inappropriate conduct, as well as the severity of certain behaviors. Smith & Verschoor (2004) describe the student-led development of Northern Illinois University's accounting department's code of conduct. To further bring students into participating in an integrity culture, many schools, including George Washington University form student hearing boards to help evaluate cases in which serious allegations have been leveled (The George Washington University).

Instructors
The second group to play a role in academic integrity is instructors since they have front-line student contact. One of their key responsibilities is to clearly and consistently communicate policy information to students, including potential sanctions. This is not meant to imply that instructors should not have the flexibility to tailor policies to suit their course requirements and intended learning processes. For instance, the issue of whether student collaboration is a policy violation has received recent mainstream media attention after Harvard suspended dozens of students for a year for cheating on homework (Perez-Pena, 2013). Therefore, instructors must be allowed to be responsible for establishing and communicating additional guidelines. Once communicated, instructors must take appropriate actions to prevent violations. There are many tools and techniques available to accomplish this goal such as monitoring live exams using proctors, avoiding using verbatim exam questions from test banks since they are widely available on the internet, creating exam question pools, and using open-ended questions. However, when best efforts fail, instructors must also be prepared to consistently levy sanctions when violations are detected. Here we assume that violations are not just suspected but are determined to be instances of violations. Methods for determining this are beyond the scope of this paper. This is not to imply there is a "one-size-fits-all" consequence for violations. Copying two sentences verbatim from a published source without attribution may not warrant the same sanction as using a test bank as an exam aid.

Instructors must play an additional role in upholding classroom integrity -- safeguarding information such as problem solutions, exam content and solutions. Jones & Spraakman (2011) recount in detail an incident where an instructor's actions led to student misconduct. To summarize the case, a student complained to a dean that a contract instructor (non-tenure track) had allowed fellow students to copy each other's answers on a quiz. Despite additional concerns expressed by another contract instructor teaching the same course that the first instructor also showed students the final exam, no action was taken until an empirical analysis of student performance across all course

sections showed considerable (87% final average vs. 68% average, respectively) performance differences. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who realized they had an unfair advantage did not think reporting the instructor was their responsibility. More recently, Columbia University students taking one section of a required core humanities literature class distributed and posted on social media their instructor's handout containing information about material to be tested on an upcoming exam standardized across all sections. Students in other sections did not receive this information except through informal channels, further disadvantaging honest students. Both these incidents underscore the importance of instructor's role in the process – as an upholder of policies and as a positive or negative role model – and the fact that integrity violations are not a victimless crime. In the first example, all students in the affected section had their grades reduced, but not those in other sections even though there was reason to believe that exam information was distributed to students in other sections. In the second, the affected section of the exam was excluded from grading regardless whether students had prepared for the exam without additional information (Tolan, 2013).

Administration

The final group to play a role in academic integrity is the various levels of an institution's administration, including instructors' supervisors and department heads, deans, provosts, and executive officers. Here we introduce a key concept from the accounting literature: internal controls over financial reporting (PwC, 2013; McNally, 2013; Committee of Sponsoring Organizations of the Treadway Commission, 2011). The framework is designed to assist entities with achieving various key objectives through principles for designing, implementing and conducting effective internal controls necessary to achieve those objectives. The framework also provides organizations guidance on: identifying risks that could impair objective achievement; developing appropriate control activities to mitigate, identify, and rectify those risks; ensuring necessary information is communicated to those who need it; and monitoring activities to ensure that the controls are functioning effectively.

The framework translates easily to academic institutions in their quest to develop and uphold academic integrity standards. In the context of the role of administrators, we focus on one of the key indicators auditors consider when assessing an entities internal controls – the control environment, including the "tone at the top". "Tone at the top" refers to the ethical environment created by senior management regarding the expected standards of conduct and importance of internal control. The control environment provides discipline, process, and structure (COSO, 2011, page 11.) Analyses of recent corporate scandals such as Enron, Bear Stearns, and the Bernie Madoff affair demonstrate the key role that an inappropriate tone at top can play.

Similarly, successful achievement of academic integrity goals needs senior management's involvement and support. Without them, policies may not be taken seriously. In the extreme, faculty may not perceive they will be backed by their superiors and therefore may not feel it is worth the hassle to enforce (Jones & Spraakman, 2011; Burke, Polimeni, & Slavin, 2007). In turn, students may quickly discern that there are no risks to violating academic honesty policies (Burke, Polimeni, & Slavin, 2007).

Tone at the top also means that administrators must adhere to integrity standards as well. While undoubtedly the majority of administrators do, recent media reports recount numerous instances of questionable senior administrators' behavior. For example, the president of Westfield State College, Evan Dobelle, has come under scrutiny for questionable habits involving the expenditure of state funds (DeSantis, 2013) and led to revelations that his tenure as president of the University of Hawaii was cut short due to the same (Ruark, 2013). In the wake of the recent Harvard cheating scandal discussed above, Perez-Pena (2013) reported that to identify the source of leaks about the cheating investigation, administrators admitted they searched faculty e-mail accounts. In doing so, the administration signaled to various stakeholders that a double standard applied.

To conclude, institutions wishing to successfully address academic integrity issues need to identify and acknowledge the roles of the students, instructors, and administrators. A broad-based assessment of the current ethical climate and perception will be needed in order to properly address areas of weakness, particularly those that involve inconsistent conduct at all levels. As ethical climate is driven from the executive level, particular importance should be placed on assessing and rectifying integrity breaches exist in within the highest levels of the administration.

Policies and Policy Development

Empirical research has found an inverse correlation between integrity policies and instances of academic dishonesty (McCabe, Travino, & Butterfield, 2002). McCabe and his colleagues (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2003) document the use of academic honor codes and modified honor codes to reflect institutional frameworks designed to create an environment in which academic dishonesty is socially unacceptable. Traditional, encompassing honor codes clearly communicate definitions and expectations regarding academic honesty, charge students with responsibility for maintaining academic honesty and require written pledges from students, involve students in the judicial process, provide privileges such as unproctored exams, and obligate students to report violations they observe (McCabe, Travino, & Butterfield, 2002). McCabe also notes that many campuses have not sufficiently established an integrity culture to implement and support such a code and instead adopt modified honor codes, which include fewer components than the traditional code. Regardless, two essential elements of codes are effective communications regarding the nature and importance of academic integrity and student participation in the development, implementation, and enforcement of the code (McCabe & Trevino, 2002). As many campuses become increasingly diverse, a modified honor code may be the best course of action.

Successful codes require clearly explained concepts such as what constitutes dishonesty, acceptable behaviors, roles and responsibilities, processes and procedures, and consequences. They also require recognition that the existence of an honor code is of secondary importance to the effective incorporation of a culture of integrity throughout the institution (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, we refer to these concepts collectively as an academic integrity policy. The challenge for institutions wanting to develop or revise their academic integrity policies is to: a) determine a process for developing/revising the policy, b) decide what the policy should cover and other important characteristics, and c) how it should best be implemented.

No comprehensive guide to academic honesty policy development currently exists, and there are many considerations that will help position the policy for long-term success. The inclusion of all key stakeholders in a policy's development, implementation, and enforcement were discussed in our previous section. In the remaining sections of the paper, we present some general considerations for policy development, without attempting to be exhaustive, and recognizing that each institution has its own core principles and guiding values such as religious foundations, or patriotic principles that serve as a policy foundation.

Make the process inclusive
Successful academic integrity policies require participation and buy-in from the entire institution, which is a challenging accomplishment given expected perceptual differences between and within students, faculty, staff, and administrators as to what academic integrity means. As discussed earlier, cultural differences need to be address during the development of a policy. Therefore, it would be a mistake for institutions with diverse populations to assume consistency in perceptions, including those with respect to student versus instructor/administrators. Anecdotally, one of the coauthors participated in an online discussion group in which many students argued that using exam banks found on the internet were "fair game" on exams. Policymakers need to take into account student perceptions of what constitutes consequences sufficient to help deter policy violations. This is not to say that resulting policies should, for example, allow more liberal definitions of academic integrity to reflect other culture's norms, but a proactive understanding of various stakeholders' perceptions and experiences will position an institution to address them during policy development and implementation.

Leverage existing resources
It is possible to leverage existing ethical codification resources, such as other organizations' or universities' policies, many of which are published on the Internet. Smith and Vorschoor (2004) recommend going outside of the academic sphere to organizations such as the Jaycees and U.S. Marines for exemplars that embody the institution's "spirit and culture", (page 16). Other resources may include an institution's accreditation bodies (Rowe, 2004) and organizations such as the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) housed at Clemson University. Finally, since students often wish to acquire professional designations such as a CPA, Juris Doctorate (JD), Medical Doctor (MD), all of which have developed codes guiding ethical behavior, these are potential resources as well.

Broad yet flexible
Ideally, a policy should spell out a comprehensive list of inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors. Unfortunately, history has shown this to be impossible because students are adept innovators. For example, existing policies may not effectively address current issues because they were developed prior to the advent of cellphones, smartphones, the Internet, and non-traditional educational venues. To combat the changes in the technological environment and other areas, policies should avoid overly general language and instead focus on specific and detailed behaviors that are inappropriate. This helps eliminate loopholes relating to technology and developments regarding the educational delivery method and student participation. It should be noted that the policy should be a "living document," subject to periodical changes and revisions to allow for the development of language that addresses future behaviors and techniques that attempt to thwart the policy.

Recognize a spectrum of violations
There is a broad range of academic integrity violations, with differing levels of severity. Institutions need to recognize that the level of severity of a violation may not have a consensus among instructors or administrators regarding a particular behavior. In the extreme, perhaps all violations should be deemed unacceptable and subject to one standard consequence, such as course failure or expulsion. Practically speaking, such a policy could consume far more time and other resources than available. Given a consensus that cheating is a widespread phenomenon, a "no tolerance" policy for any and all behaviors could have the unfortunate result of eliminating a significant portion of the student body. Therefore, while policies should reflect the institution's values, recognition that not all violations are equally significant may result in a more effective policy.

Allow individual discretion
Academic institutions are generally heterogeneous with respect to disciplines taught, instructional requirements, teaching objectives, and classroom pedagogies. The same behavior, for example, assignment collaboration, might be deemed both appropriate and inappropriate depending on situational variables. Institution-wide policies are not likely to be widely embraced unless they allow for discretion on the part of colleges, departments, and instructors. This likely increases the required burden to clearly communicate policies as they relate to specific situations but ultimately the policies are more likely to be successful.

Incorporate a clear disciplinary process
A policy cannot be effective unless it incorporates an effective disciplinary process. In contrast to allowing for situational discretion in determining applicable rules, there is a need for greater consistency across courses, departments and other divisions when developing policies for assessing violations and determining penalties. Suspected violators have a right to a fair assessment. The process may be easily administered, as when a student admits to using a test bank found on the internet during an exam. In other cases, it may be not be. For instance, a recent discussion among members of the ICAI centered on whether or when a student's disability might be a valid excuse for policy violation. An effective policy should also provide guidance on the range of appropriate penalties if a violation is found, in the same manner a law may specify a minimum and maximum prison times. In anecdotal conversations, instructors have recalled situations where there were significant variations in how violators were dealt with across different sections of the same course. Students can be quick to identify which instructors take a relatively lax approach to both detecting and penalizing violators.

Implementation

An effective policy requires extensive communication and educational efforts to signal their commitment to integrity (Adkins & Squires, 2007) (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006) (Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2007). For credibility, these need to originate from senior administrators; other administrators, staff and instructors must play a supporting role to ensure there is a consistent message. The message must contain detailed information covering definitions, expected and inappropriate behaviors, and the process for assessing violations and penalties.

Communication

Written communications can be incorporated into incoming student and orientation materials, student handbooks, and course syllabi, and pledges/policies signed by students. Adkins and Squires (2007) argue for using an interactive Academic Integrity Quiz, which is adaptable at the course-specific level. Brick-and-mortar and on-line libraries can undertake educational efforts, especially with respect to plagiarism (Sharkey & Culp, 2005). More active communications include videos featuring senior administration, incorporation in orientation programs, student-led dormitory sessions, and instructor-led discussions. Student organizations, such as Beta Alpha Psi, can encourage their members to endorse the policy and/or sign pledges to uphold. As experienced marketers will acknowledge, successful communication is not a one-time occurrence but a process requiring repeated exposure to a consistent message.

Education

Administrators, staff, and instructors can only fulfill their roles if they are adequately educated. In addition to the above suggestions, training regarding the various stakeholders' role in the process and addressing legal issues is required. Training is also needed to address knowledge gaps among instructors who may be unaware of the ways in which students can violate policies, as well as available preventative techniques. Unfortunately, the burden for detection has been historically left to instructors, and is not sufficient in all cases. Institutional involvement may be necessary to access certain academic honesty resources. These include readily available tools such as TurnItIn (http://turnitin.com/). Other options are more resource intensive, such as providing additional proctors to monitor exams, requiring off-site-based students to use approved testing centers or web-cam monitoring services, and adopting plagiarism detection software tools which some MOOCs (Massive Open Online Classes) are beginning to use (Kolowich, 2012). Not all online learning platforms incorporate effective tools; some may make analysis and detection of violations too cumbersome. Institutions should be pressuring their suppliers to incorporate effective tools into the platform.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring of the policy and its enforcement are crucial components of effective implementation. Students are rational decision makers and are capable of quickly assessing probabilities that they will be caught violating policies and whether they will be meaningfully penalized. Further, this knowledge travels through student networks at the speed of technology. Instructors are also rational decision makers and are capable of quickly assessing the probabilities that their administrators will back them and enforce stated policies if do they catch violators and impose penalties. Therefore, upward support through highest administrative levels is essential. Baird & Fox (2012) recount an incident where he found a high school student forged a report from the on-line plagiarism detector, TurnItIn. Although the student's parents fought the charge in the face of compelling evidence, and attempted to pressure the administration and school board, he was supported throughout the process.

Monitoring facilitates the gathering of metrics and data for evaluation of the policy's results against target goals. This helps determine whether the policy is working as intended and highlights where adjustments might be needed. For example, the use of the aforementioned quiz indicates the effectiveness of communication efforts. Low quiz scores suggests improved communications may be needed. Part of an instructor's performance review can address their efforts to prevent and detect violations. Departments, colleges, and central administration can all be responsible for continuous tracking and periodic reporting of violations and how they were handled. In monitoring, an institution must be prepared for the possibility that reported violations may initially rise. This should not be interpreted as a negative signal, but as evidence that the policy is acting as intended. Such results can be especially useful in setting target benchmarks. A lack of improvement over time, however, may be a signal to reassess the policy.

Accountability

The ultimate success of an integrity policy rests on holding individuals accountable. Accountability means people/roles must be assigned specific responsibilities, the accomplishment of which must be evaluated. Without "closing the loop", a policy has minimal chance to succeed. To hold students accountable for following integrity policies, instructors must be accountable for making reasonable attempts to prevent and detect violations and for

taking additional actions as spelled out by the policy. To hold instructors accountable, the chain of administrative command must also be accountable for their assigned roles and responsibilities. If any link in the accountability chain breaks, the policy breaks down. Therefore, to the extent that the system may not work as intended, there must be a mechanism to address perceived issues without putting a concerned party at risk for retaliation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that academic integrity is a serious issue that institutions need to confront for a variety of reasons including ensuring that the campus supports a "fair playing field for all" students, avoiding tarnishing their reputation as a quality educational institution committed to upholding values such as integrity, ethics and honor, and preparing students to enter the workforce with knowledge and skills expected by employers. There is no pretension that the process will be an uncomfortable one that is not equally welcomed by all stakeholders, and the implementation will be a continuous iterative process likely to encounter bumps in the road. Acknowledging the problem is just the beginning.

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