

Colleges must prepare to handle academic dishonesty

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It was an unremarkable week at the end of an otherwise unremarkable year. Students were taking finals, instructors were preparing for holidays, and administrators were trying to close the semester. In the midst of the chaos, I received a call from a colleague who asked a now infamous question: "If you were certain that a student had cheated in one of your classes, what would you do?"

Amazing, isn't it? How otherwise mundane moments cement themselves in your memory and replay themselves like an exaggerated newsreel? In the life of our college, this was just such a moment.

"I'd fail them," I said. "Cheating makes me crazy."

"Makes me crazy, too," the aggrieved colleague replied. "This student took a paper from the Internet and lied about it after I confronted him with the evidence."

We commiserated, gathered details and discussed her prerogative. We were fortunate about one thing: We agreed on the solution. The offense earned the student an "F" in the course. For a while, we believed that was that.

Within two weeks, I received similar notice of other incidents that had occurred in outreach and on-campus classes. They included looking at others' exams during a biology final and turning in an essay from the Internet as an exam paper. Another incident involved a class that did nothing

when a professor mistakenly handed out an economics final. The final unfortunate blow involved two students who gained entry to a teacher's office and took the final exam. They were caught with the exam the next morning.

Needless to say, the expressions of alarm echoed across campus. "What's happening?" "Aren't students honest anymore?" "What can we do?" "How can this be prevented?"

Not all of the complications could be blamed on student dishonesty. Some of the problems were our own. Specifically, we had been operating on marginally relevant policy for longer than was wise.

So there we were — a college within a community where folks seldom lock their doors and sleep undisturbed by the prospect of crime, where they look after one another and where a handshake is preferential to a contract.

Yet, in our little corner of the world, it had happened. Some students cheated. Even in the middle of the Kansas prairie, smack dab in the center of the proverbial Bible belt: there it was. So we asked our questions and grieved. And our questioning led us to action based on the question: What can be done when a college finds itself confronted with academic dishonesty?

Here are some recommendations we came up with:

- Look for help — One of our

vulnerabilities was that we were caught off-guard. But our willingness to look for help led us to resources, among which was the Center for Academic Integrity. We

found a haven of information there including statements of integrity and recommended institutional values, sample honor codes and links to other sites. We also found a "survival guide" designed to guide colleges through an introspective, research-based, fact-finding process to identify what, if any, organizational factors may be contributing to the cheating problem. We are

now a member of the center (www.academicintegrity.org).

- Address organizational weaknesses — We were unprepared to deal with dishonesty because our policy was marginally relevant. Thus, when the time came to take appropriate disciplinary action, we were unable to achieve a result that was reasonable and met the faculty's minimum expectation. The college administration and faculty identified the elements a new policy should include. Within one year, we had addressed the policy gap.

- Look for loopholes — Like many colleges, we have an academic clemency policy that allows students to have non-productive grades permanently expunged from their transcript. What if, we asked, a student received an "F" and applied for academic clemency years later? No committee, no dean — no matter how experienced — would know that such an



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"F" meant anything but failure to meet course objectives. There was no systemic way to differentiate an "F" for cheating from an "F" for failing. Given that, chances were good that the punishment, while justifiable, was not permanent.

- Learn from others — By sheer coincidence, a university two hours away had similar struggles. Kansas State University had created an impressive program to deal with academic dishonesty, including the creation of the "XF" grade which is a failing grade distinguished from a generic failing grade by the "X" which denotes academic dishonesty. The director of their academic honor program, Phil Anderson, was exceptionally helpful, answering questions and sharing experiences. That spring, our curricular committee voted unanimously to adopt the "XF" grade that will become effective this fall.

- Know your enemy — One of the most alarming outcomes of this experience was the realization that one of our best friends, the Internet, is also one of our worst enemies. Motivated by a desire to know just how many "cheat sites" exist, I went to a search engine and entered the words "term paper" and "essay." Armed with a pencil and a 5 x 7 notepad, I thought I'd log my findings and create a list. When I saw the results, I felt pretty foolish. There were far too many to record in one sitting.

Happily, I found the work of Bates and Finn who had compiled a roster of at least 305 sites offering essays and papers on subjects that look eerily similar to the curriculum in our college. And, if this is not enough to alarm, consider the sites'

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names and the defiance they demonstrate: “schoolsucks.com,” “academon.com,” “the cheat factory.com,” “evil house of cheat.com,” “lazy students.com” and “phuckschool.com.” It’s like a friend of mine used to say, “Hear me now, and believe me later.” If you do nothing else with this article but file it away somewhere, print the list at the Web site reference and make it available to everyone you know.

- Get test smart — Reconsider assigning open-ended essays and term papers; instead, assign content specific assignments that incorporate and synthesize student learning. These are much more difficult to “fake.” Know about resources like Eve2, Plagiserve, and Turnitin.com that allow instructors to submit portions of ‘suspicious’ documents and determine whether or not an act of academic dishonesty has occurred and use them (www.canexus.com/eve; www.plagiserve.com; www.turnitin.com).

- Know what you can and should

do — Like it or not, there is, at least in my opinion, only one way to deal with academic dishonesty: accept the fact that while you may not have created it, you are honor bound to stand up to it. Go on the offensive, become informed. Did you know, for example, that a recent study suggests that students rationalize cheating by citing a perceived level of indifference to it?

When was the last time you discussed academic integrity in class? Do you even know if it is a topic of discussion in your campus composition classes? Consider incorporating your college’s academic integrity policy on your syllabus, or if one is unavailable, including the penalties for plagiarism (as far as you see them) and openly discussing it with your class. You should discuss the parameters of collaboration among students so that there is no confusion as to when students may – and may not – work with each other on assignments. Whatever you do, don’t turn the page and wait for someone else to do something.