

Can student cheating be weeded out?

New research on academic integrity at universities.

by Cathy Bolton, Mebs Kanji and Soheyla Salari

To cheat or not to cheat? It's a question scholars have grappled with for generations. For the majority of students, cheating is out of the question because success can only be achieved through honest and hard work. We call that academic integrity.

Yet there remains a minority of students who violate university charters and engage in cheating. That's called academic misconduct.

According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, there are more than 1.2 million full-and-part-time students enrolled at 95 institutions of higher learning across the nation. How many of them might cheat on their way to graduation isn't clear. But we're getting closer to answering such an important question.

At Concordia University's faculty of arts and science, we have just begun to systematically examine ways to bolster academic integrity and weed out academic misconduct. We've also undertaken a study on the topic and presented our preliminary findings at the [2011 International Conference on Academic Integrity in Toronto](#) (held October 14 to 16).

So far, the data we've collected is heartening. We found the vast majority of students earn their degrees without ever being accused of cheating. Most don't cheat because of their desire to learn, work hard and succeed. We also found that Concordia ensures the highest standards of academic integrity.

Still, at this early stage, our data reveals remarkably consistent patterns that warrant closer attention. We found most cases of academic misconduct are reported among students enrolled in social science programs. What's more, our evidence suggests these academic violations typically occur during first-year courses.

Incidents of academic misconduct are reported by a relatively small contingent of professors from a few departments. Could it be that professors are underreporting? If so, universities would require an alternative plan of attack. We need to establish mechanisms to verify whether any cheaters are, in fact, being missed.

Additional evidence suggests the bulk of academic misconduct stems from non-exam related incidents. This shows that Concordia University's faculty of arts and science has a solid examination culture that's taken seriously by the majority of students.

So how does cheating happen? Most often, it occurs when students plagiarize and present the work of others without properly acknowledging a source. Plagiarism continues despite consistent warnings, on course outlines and in memos to new students, spelling out that appropriating the work of others will not be tolerated.

While the reasons students give for committing plagiarism vary, most of these infractions are entirely preventable. To significantly reduce the problem, universities should offer time-management training to students, clearly define proper citation practices, and provide exact guidelines in what's expected for assignments.

Regardless of how much is done to bolster academic integrity, or how much research is conducted on the topic, cheating will never be entirely eliminated. Hence the critical need for universities to have effective measures to identify and correct cases of academic misconduct.

Disciplinary measures, our data shows, can have rehabilitating results. When caught, alleged cheaters are usually charged and punished. Few students, surprisingly, contest such charges. When given a second chance, most students opt to continue with their program and few reoffend.

It's essential that universities consistently remind students that cheating is unethical, is punishable and has consequences for society. After all, by promoting the importance of academic integrity in higher education, we help shape today's thinkers into tomorrow's leaders.

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