

Cheatin' Ain't the Cowboy Way

By Donald P. French

That may be the hokiest title you've read in this journal, but it is my response to a serious issue recently being addressed by my university with great zeal—academic integrity. On August 1, 2006, a new policy went into effect at my university that changed our procedures for dealing with and penalties for violation of academic integrity. This is not to say that our former policy was lax or overly stringent. Nor were our students significantly different from the national norm with regard to their frequency of inappropriate activities or attitudes toward such activities as cheating or plagiarism. We decided to adopt a new policy not because the old one didn't work or that cheating and plagiarism were rampant on our campus, but because faculty and staff found the old one to be overly cumbersome and adversarial.

Over a period of several years, the university chose to create a plan that followed the recommendations of the Center for Academic Integrity (www.academicintegrity.org). This included developing a culture that values academic integrity, promoting awareness of the standards that faculty and students should uphold, and facilitating faculty efforts to detect, penalize, and report violations as part of a system that is fair and protective of students' rights. (McCabe 2005).

The changes to our procedures and policies were substantial. Now, for a faculty member to accuse a student

of a violation, it must be more likely than not (as opposed to clear and convincing) that the action occurred and the faculty need not substantiate the intention of the student to take the action (previously, the faculty member was also required to distinguish between academic misconduct and dishonesty). More importantly, when a faculty member has determined that a sanction is in order, a meeting is arranged between the student and the faculty member in the presence of an Academic Integrity Facilitator, whose job is to promote a cordial meeting that follows university policies and to inform the student of his or her rights, including the right to appeal. If, at the conclusion of the meeting, the faculty member decides a sanction is warranted, then a form is filled out that identifies the sanction and makes clear whether the student admits responsibility or not and agrees with the sanction or not. This form is filed with university so there is a record of the violation.

Minor violations, such as copying a few answers on a homework assignment, are typically sanctioned by awarding no credit for the assignment. However, if a student repeats such a violation in the same or a future course, or commits a more serious first-time violation such as cheating on a major exam, the students would receive a failing grade for the course. The student's transcript would also note the violation of academic integrity using the notation "F!" (pronounced F-shriek).

This system of reporting and tracking makes violations potentially more serious and increases the likelihood that repeat offenders will be identified and punished. Along

with these steps, there is a campaign to make students aware of the new policy and to encourage faculty to inform and educate students as to what constitutes violations of academic integrity in their classes and what the instructor expects of students. As part of this campaign, there are signs around campus touting "Avoid the Shriek! Don't cheat." Even during resolution meetings, faculty are encouraged to explain to students the importance of academic integrity, what constitutes a violation, and why and how it should be avoided. Is this all necessary? Is cheating really rampant? Don't the students know what is expected of them?

Prior to establishing the new policy, the university held forums and surveyed the students. About 70% of students taking the survey admitted to violating academic integrity, in such ways as working with others when not permitted (48%), copying at least a few sentences of written or internet material without footnoting (about 40%), getting answers from someone who already took the test (about 40%), and falsifying lab data (25%) (Office of Academic Affairs 2006). These results appear quite consistent with those described elsewhere in the literature (McCabe and Trevino 1996).

Studies have uncovered a variety of factors that influence cheating. As reviewed by Hutton (2006), some students admit to being lazy, some feel stressed, many do not see it as wrong, and others perceive that they are rarely caught. Hutton suggests that students follow a benefits/cost analysis where the benefits of avoiding work and stress and earning higher grades outweighs the costs, especially

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if faculty are unlikely to detect the action or are reluctant to take action or report it. Passow et al. (2006) and Parameswaran and Devi (2006) found that students consider different types of assignments (homework/lab reports and exams) in different ways. Consequently, students' willingness to cheat, their perception of cheating, and the factors that influence their actions vary depending on the assignment.

Parameswaran and Devi (2006) emphasized that faculty actions were very important in discouraging cheating? They found that the students in their study were under the impression that faculty didn't object to them using other students' work to, among other things, help them get the correct answer, get an idea of the format of the assignment, or check to see if they were correct. Passow et al. (2006) found that although different factors influenced whether students were more likely to cheat on homework or exams, the most important factor influencing students' willingness to cheat was whether individuals thought that cheating was wrong in all circumstances. Hutton (2006) also emphasized the importance of social factors and concluded that making academic integrity part of the social norm is an important step in reducing violations.

As academics, we are generally appalled by students who cheat or plagiarize, perhaps because it violates our sense of right and wrong. As educators who are interested in improving college science teaching, we need be even more concerned. When assessing student learning, we make assumptions about our student population and about the conditions of our assessment. If students are less concerned about academic integrity for assignments that are not tests, they may compromise attempts at assessing learning and testing new

techniques. Furthermore, efforts to incorporate collaborative learning may confound the problem. Hutton (2006) points out that social networks built among students can increase the likelihood that students will cheat because student learn that others accept it.

Unfortunately in my own course where much is done collaboratively, many students have difficulty understanding the difference between collaborating and copying when individual work is required. On the other hand, inquiry-based labs, with their greater reliance on process and the ability to formulate arguments based on individual experiments and data, rather than getting a single correct answer, may help encourage academic integrity by eliminating the need for students' to find the one right answer (Lawson 1999, Del Carlo et al. 2006). However, even inquiry labs may be compromised.

My university's new policy appears to address the issues that threaten academic integrity. By encouraging efforts to educate, inform, detect, report, and sanction, the policy promotes an environment that encourages academic integrity as the social norm. To work in courses like mine, a large enrollment course that relies heavily on students understanding the boundary between collaboration and collusion, nurturing a personal sense of academic integrity may be the most important factor in avoiding misconduct. This is why I am concerned about the punitive nature of the university's campaign. I don't want my students and future scientists to avoid cheating because of the penalty—they shouldn't just "Avoid the Shriek," they should maintain their integrity because the reliability of their work and what they learn depends on it. College is a time for students to grow and polish their sense of ethics. Hence, in my

course, our campaign makes reference to our sports team's moniker and appeals to something my students admire. To be successful in reducing violations of academic integrity, we all have to believe that cheatin' ain't the cowboy way.

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