

Goals of Course – Creating a hierarchy

Where does stamping out academic dishonesty rate in your hierarchy of course goals? This may or may not be something you think about, but it is something which students read via your syllabus, your lectures, and your body language.

Too low of a priority, perhaps you are inviting cheaters to thrive. The best students want cheating stopped; they want only the best efforts to be rewarded. Are you protecting the interests of the best students? A culture that rewards cheaters is a culture that entices good students to cheat.

Too high of a priority, perhaps you are creating a paranoid classroom environment that is stifling learning. Most students do not cheat, nor do they want to cheat. Most students do not want to be treated as cheaters. A culture where everyone is presumed a criminal is a culture where good students second guess every action.

Employers and graduate schools are our customers, and our graduates are our products. Do your classroom priorities meet the wishes and/or needs of the customers? No one thinks cheating is acceptable, but is it the most or least important issue?

Possible classroom objectives to consider:

- Stopping Academic dishonesty
- Teaching the basic concepts and terms
- Providing a context for use of the terminology
- Teaching research techniques
- Understanding how to solve basic quantitative problems
- Solving complex quantitative problems
- Making and explaining student decisions based on analysis of data
- Fostering a creative atmosphere for advanced problem solving

Each course is unique. Each course has limited contact time between student and instructor. As such, instructors should take some time to consider how they will use their time to maximize student results.

Why students may cheat – Effort and Competency

Before one begins to thwart cheating perhaps the most obvious question to consider is: Why do students cheat? There are many valid answers. An investigation of the answers to this question reveal that perhaps a large percentage of cheating can be reduced through better communication and assessments. Consider the following:

Group 1: The most common answers to the question “Why do students cheat?” deal with bad intentions and bad behavior:

Lazy
Unwilling to do the work
Unwilling to conform to group norms
Entitlement
They want to see if they can do it and get away with it.

Remedies: Explain barriers to cheating in your course. Explain ramifications of getting caught. Adjust their attitude via sound reasoning. Explain the value associated with doing things the “right” way.

Explain that you understand that most people do not cheat – shame can sometimes be a deterrent. In addition, this also makes the non-cheater feel as though they are the norm, not the exception.

Group 2: Not competent in subject matter. Fear – Students, perhaps, are simply trying to push the odds in their favor. These students may not be “bad” people, they simply may be students that through a series of bad decisions have put themselves in a bad situation. Efforts should be made to guide these students toward making good decisions.

Remedies: Is additional assistance available? Are students aware of the help offered by instructor, teaching assistants, student groups, on-campus tutoring, off-campus tutoring, online groups, online videos...Do you have exhaustive problem sets, study guides, research tips, etc. such that students that need help have some tools to find their way?

Do students understand the risk level? Do they realize that a low grade, a grade of “XE”, or expulsion will be much better than a zero?

Conversely, are assignments so heavily weighted that students that are not presently competent will see the price of getting caught similar to the price of doing poorly on the assignment? Students in desperate situations will try desperate things. Perhaps limiting or eliminating do-or-die assessments will help in curbing attempts at cheating.

Group 3: What is the Value to Work ratio of your assignment? Students may not see any value in the assignment, or perhaps the value associated with the assignment is low and the workload is deemed too high.

Like all of us, students are busy, or at least, they perceive themselves as busy. In many cases, the best students want to organize their lives based on the value associated with the task before them. If tasks have low value, those tasks will be ignored, put at the bottom of a priority list, or perhaps students will look for easier ways to complete the task.

What do students perceive as valuable? What signifies value to students? Assignments that:

- Have high point values
- Will help develop important skills that will be tested on a future assessment of high value.
- Will develop a skill that can be showcased on a resume
- Will develop specific skills that will help them in an interview

- Can be directly applied to impress their superiors at their present or future job or internship
- May help them in making better personal and/or professional decisions

Remedies: In some cases the student's perception of value is inaccurate. Perhaps explaining, at least in part, the value associated with the assignment will help them see that they will benefit from doing the assignment.

Are all of your assignments in fact valuable or are they more akin to hoops for students to jump through to prove their dedication to the instructor, not necessarily their dedication to learning. Instructors sometimes simply assign homework, quizzes, short essays, etc. simply because it will track engagement, but not necessarily stimulate learning.

Group 4: Cheating has become part of the college culture. Why? Perhaps it has become easy to cheat. Perhaps due to the size of the classes, the nature of the classrooms, the online nature of the course, the lack of resources...trying to stop cheating has become too difficult.

Perhaps too many instructors have stopped trying to prevent cheating. What seems as normal and perhaps accepted behavior in lower level courses may continue through the upper levels.

Remedies: The university, the college, individual departments must send a unified message of what the expectations are. Individual professors must be willing to help develop a new university culture where academic dishonesty is understood and frowned upon by all.

Not all instructors have to agree upon all aspects of the academic integrity issue but there needs to be common ground and a set of unified goals that are communicated and understood by all.

How you may contribute to the development of a cheating culture

Time – Employers likely desire employees that work both effectively and efficiently. As a result, many instructors seek to create assessments that will push students to not only develop good answers, but to do it in a relatively short period of time.

Nonetheless, assessment time limits can be play a significant factor in the amount of cheating that might occur. Too much time provides opportunities for students to find answers in inappropriate ways, copy answers, and collaborate with other students. Too little time creates a feeling of desperation that may motivate even good students to gain an unfair edge.

Remedies: Consider the appropriate amount of time it should take to complete each question, problem, essay, etc. Add together all of those times to come up with a reasonable assessment time limit.

Sometimes these time limits seem short to students. Provide preliminary assessments that are similar, so students can realize that the time limit on the larger assessment is very reasonable. These preliminary assessments also provide instructors the opportunity to reassess the planned time limit and/or the nature of the assessment.

Language, Body language, Actions –

How do you address and confront academic dishonesty (AD)?

- If the syllabus and the instructor are vague about defining AD, students may see an opportunity. It is also possible students may actually be confused about what is and is not acceptable.
- AD consumes you and the syllabus. Students realize how important the issue is to you, but now, even the honest students become focused on AD versus focusing on learning and creativity.
- Do you convey that all students are guilty until proven innocent? Being assumed a cheater does not endear the student to the instructor.

How do you address the issue of AD in the introductory lecture? How do you address AD when presenting a new assessment?

- Are you mean and angry when discussing AD? Some cheaters will be frightened; some will see it is a challenge. Good students will feel uneasy about even acceptable behavior.
- Do you spend long periods of time discussing AD? Does it take up pages and pages in your syllabus? Does each assessment have hundreds of words explaining AD? They may see you as obsessed and just tune out. They may see AD as a more important issue than the course material.
- Do you address AD at all? Is this only in the syllabus? Perhaps assuming they already understand the importance of understanding AD is a reasonable approach. Nonetheless, instructors need to be prepared for dealing with cheaters. Did the syllabus define AD and explain the consequences of getting caught in academically dishonest behavior?

Remedies: Consider a balanced approach:

1. APPRECIATION OF POSITIVE CULTURE - Make the honest students feel appreciated. Make them feel that they are the majority. This is an important message that demonstrates that the culture is one of honest students, not cheaters.

2. JOINT COMMITMENT AGAINST CHEATING - Inform the honest students that you are committed to finding those who are being dishonest. Perhaps even consider explaining that the instructor and the honest students are creating a coalition against cheaters.

3. VALUE OF THE COURSE - Explain the importance of the course to them in terms of their life and career. How might not learning this material and the associated skills negatively impact their career or even their personal development? Provide professional testimonials to back your claims. This can tie in nicely to why cheaters are very likely hurting their employment opportunities and their potential for career advancement.

4. PERSONAL APPROACH TO ACADEMIC DISHONESTY - After establishing that there is a positive culture of learning amongst most students, and that the course will add significant personal and/or professional value, even the strictest instructors can present a defensible explanation for their hard-line approach to finding and catching cheaters.

Not Updating the assessment – Old exams, quizzes, papers, and reports are everywhere. It is best to assume that your old materials are available to some of the students. They are shared and bought. Past students or even professional paper writers are hired to write papers.

Remedies: Update your assessments. Add new questions. Tie the assessments directly to the material discussed in the lecture.

Some instructors believe that the students should not engage in this type of dishonest behavior, and they shouldn't. They believe it is not their responsibility to update the assessments, but rather it is the responsibility of the students not to cheat. This is wrong. It is true that students should not cheat, but it is also true that instructors need to grow their course by updating and improving assessments.

In addition, when a growing number of students have access to old exams, even those that would not normally be enticed to cheat now consider it a survival requirement. When most of the students that cheated get high grade on the exam without consequence, students that did not get an old copy of the exam are putting themselves at a competitive disadvantage. This could hurt them in the eyes of the instructor, their peers, and even employers that value high performance in your course.

Nature of the assessment – Ask yourself the following questions:

- For online exams especially, can the answers be easily found via a Google search? Students can take acronyms, parts of questions, or even entire questions and find the answers online.
- Can the single answer to the question be argued? Some students utilize a strategy of provide a vague answer, claiming ignorance, and then asking for at least partial credit.
- For quantitative assessments, is it possible that one wrong answer can trigger a series of wrong answers? This not only makes it difficult to fairly evaluate the student, it also creates an opportunity for dishonest students to use a simple answer like 1 or 0 for the first question, thus making all subsequent questions much easier to answer.

Remedies: What can be done to avoid these issues?

1. Create questions that are difficult if not impossible to Google? This is becoming more and more difficult, so sometimes try to use the likely Googling as an opportunity for students to learn more as they take the exam or quiz.

2. Create questions that have only one answer. Sometimes by using statements like the ones below you create a question with an answer that must adhere to the course material, not necessarily to the world at large.

- According to the lecture
- According to ECON 101
- According to the textbook

3. When creating quantitative questions that utilize a common data set, find ways to make each question independent. Perhaps present a new "given" in each question:

- Using the sales data for June 2010
- If the inventory level is 600 units
- If the cost of materials increased to \$10 per unit

Syllabus Considerations

Each class is different – different culture, size, assessments, grading...You do not necessarily need to create a complex legal contract, but you may want to consider including some of the below topics in your syllabus. Consider what is most likely to occur. Sometimes saying too much can be just as problematic as saying too little.

Remember, you are not only creating a mechanism for catching and prosecuting cheaters, but you are also comforting honest students, and persuading at-risk students to choose the path of honesty.

It may sound strange to some, but consider the value of “thinking like a cheater” when you are writing your syllabus. If you were a cheater, how would you most easily exploit the system? Those loopholes need to be closed and/or addressed.

Define Cheating

Define cheating for each and every assessment category

Define what is and is not cheating for each assessment category

When is collaboration acceptable?

When is collaboration encouraged?

When is collaboration forbidden?

Provide web link to internal or external definition of academic dishonesty that you favor

Define Penalties

Clearly define penalties for each type of infraction

Clearly define penalties for each assessment

Lose points on assignment?

Lose points in an entire grade category?

Receive a reduced grade in the course?

Fail the course (E vs. XE)?

Recommendation of expulsion from college/university?

Consider the probability that your penalties will be seen as reasonable and logical by an appeals committee. Consider your actions following student infractions. Penalties should be as severe as possible, but they should not be so severe that they will not be upheld.

Explain Procedure if Student is caught cheating

Opportunities for explanation

Opportunities for appeal

Should student continue course work if the plan to file an appeal

University web links to student rights

Students Gaming the Syllabus

Some students game the system so they can do the least amount of work individually and benefit from being on strong groups/teams for class projects. In some cases students realize that C work on individual assignments coupled with A work on team assignments can result in a B, or perhaps even an A.

What can you do to prevent this?

- Game the system before the semester begins. Are there opportunities for free-riders? Alter the percentage of points in each category so that individual and team performance are more reasonable.
- Create fail-safes that require excellent performance in all grade categories. Examples: Students must get A's in all grade categories to get an A. OR Students cannot get more than one letter grade higher in the course than they did in their lowest performing grade category.

ON PAPERS

Offense: Recycling old papers or Paying others to write the paper for them

Remedies:

- Require students to start the paper during class
- Require student to personalize their paper using classroom experiences, life experiences, etc.
- Require student (without use of a device) to create and submit a paper proposal during lecture
- New paper topics and/or odd paper topics each semester

Offense: Copy content directly from the internet

Remedies: Utilize SafeAssignment or TurnItIn in your class

Offense: ALTERING PUNCTUATION FONT - When writing a paper that requires you to use a font no larger than 12 pt, you can use the find/replace feature in Word to enlarge the size of the punctuation. This is very hard to spot and can elongate a paper so that it satisfies the page requirements

Remedies: Require electronic submission of papers (perhaps in addition to hard copies). Manually change font size off all content to desired size.

If word count is important, perhaps also changing font color of all items to black to see if student hid words in an "invisible" font.