

relative to teaching...

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS, FAYETTEVILLE

APRIL 1999



Let's be honest about this . . .

How serious is the problem of cheating on our campus? Researchers at the University of Arkansas conducted a survey in 1992 and found that 48% of U of A students questioned admitted that they had cheated at least once while in college.¹ The same researchers questioned faculty and found that 56% of them thought that fewer than one-quarter of students cheat.

Perceptions

In a recent issue of the *Arkansas Traveler* a graduating senior offered some reflections on the University of Arkansas as part of an exit interview. One of his responses is particularly pertinent to the issue of academic honesty:

Another question asked if I thought the school stood by the policies it stated. If academic honesty is included, then I must say no! Plagiarism, cheating or simple intellectual laziness have been condoned, pardoned and purposefully overlooked. "Bending the rules" goes from the lowest paid T.A. all the way to the top, missing no steps in between. If you are going to include this issue in every syllabus of every class, have the courage to carry it out. I don't care who his or her parents are.²

That's a serious charge which may or may not be well founded. The perception, apparently, is that faculty (and teaching assistants and

administrators) are *soft* on plagiarism and other offenses against academic honesty.

If it is *believed* that the faculty look the other way when students are suspected of cheating, the serious students become indignant and lose respect for the institution and its faculty.

The less serious students who might have some temptation to borrow the work of others without attribution during an exam or assignment are emboldened by our apathy into giving in to that temptation. "If the faculty don't care whether I plagiarize, why I should I care?" they might ask.

The perception, apparently, is that faculty (and teaching assistants and administrators) are soft on plagiarism and other offenses against

What is academic dishonesty?

The University's statement on academic honesty appears in the undergraduate catalog, on the University's web site³, and in brochure form from the Office of Judicial Affairs. Its definition reads:

Generally, any act by which a student gains or attempts to gain an academic advantage over another student by misrepresenting his, hers, or another's work or by interfering with the completion, submission, or evaluation of work is considered to be dishonest.

(Continued on page 2)



Honest...

(Continued from page 1)

The policy lists several examples of academic dishonesty, including using unauthorized materials during an exam and copying from, or collaborating with, someone else during an exam, and also “submitting as one’s own, any ... work prepared totally or in part by another.”

The policy even defines plagiarism: “offering as one’s own the words, ideas, or arguments of another person without appropriate attribution”

Why cheating is wrong

Some may try to justify acts of dishonesty by claiming no one gets hurt. I’m not sure this would be an adequate defense even if true.

But it isn’t true. And it is not mainly the teacher who is hurt by academic dishonesty. The honest students feel wronged. They feel their hard work has been cheapened.

One student studies hard for an exam and earns an “A.” Another student doesn’t study so copies from the more prepared student and also receives an “A.” Honest students are proud of their good grades until they find out that such trophies are given out even to those who don’t deserve them.

Some may liken plagiarism to *stealing*. It seems to be taking something (intellectual work, in this case) that is not one’s own. I think the wrongness of plagiarism is more akin to lying than to stealing.⁴ After all, *quotation* is not dishonest. One difference between plagiarism and quotation is that a quotation comes with an *attribution*. By quoting, one is up front with a disclaimer: “I didn’t write this.” But to use the words or ideas of another without acknowledging the source is to say, in effect, “Hey, I wrote this!”

when the truth is otherwise. That’s lying. And that, at least in part, is why it is wrong.

Why we should care about cheating?

So lying is ethically wrong. So what? Why should we as teachers care? Our concern, you might say, is with what our students learn about the subject matter, not with whether they are ethical people.⁵

To the extent that our students are not working out answers for themselves but merely copying from their fellow students (or other sources) they are not learning. Okay, if they merely need to learn some facts, they can learn by copying. But that’s no way (at least by itself) to learn how to do a calculus problem or how to analyze a sonata.

Insofar as assignments are intended to further our students’ learning and not *merely* to evaluate what they have learned, cheating on assignments undermines our teaching efforts.

How we can show the students that we care?

It is not enough for us to care that our students don’t cheat. At least part of the problem is the *perception* of faculty apathy about cheating.

So we must *show* students that we care. We must make sure that future classes of graduating seniors don’t share the feelings expressed by the student quoted above.

We’ve got to make it clear that we hold sacred academic honesty. We need to do that in *word* and *deed*.

Obviously a statement on our syllabus, while a worthy first step, is not sufficient to make the point. It can be useful to take a minute when

(Continued on page 3)

Insofar as assignments are intended to further our students’ learning and not merely to evaluate what they have learned, cheating

How to show students we care about cheating

- **Explain** the academic honesty policy at the University. This is just a first step.
- **Pay attention** when proctoring an exam. There are fewer speeders when police cars are present.
- **Design assignments** which make it difficult for students to use turn in material from elsewhere. Don't simply say, "Write a paper on abortion."
- **Clarify expectations** on assignments up front. If we expect them to work separately, tell them that.
- **Teach** students proper methods of attribution. If they know *how* to indicate what ideas they have borrowed they may be more likely to do so.
- **Ask** for two copies of submitted work. If someone in the future copies a student's paper,



Honest...

(Continued from page 2)

making some new assignment or announcing a test to explain to the class again that each student must do his or her own work. After all, in some classes students are *expected* and *encouraged* to work together. If you want them to write their own essays, maybe they need to be told.

I believe that in some cases simply letting the students know we care about academic honesty helps to prevent cheating. It at least defeats that "Hey, if the teach doesn't care ..." excuse mentioned above.

Another way of sending the message is to teach students proper methods of using other people's ideas (e.g., by utilizing footnotes). Seriously proctoring exams (without assistance from teaching assistants or other faculty) also lets students know that you don't want them to cheat.

Finally, when you *do* catch someone cheating, don't just look the other way.

Maybe some faculty would be more aggressive about handling suspected cases of cheating if the system gave them more freedom. But the same policy that lays out definitions and examples of academic dishonesty also specifies procedures that need to be followed.

These procedures are not convenient. But students need recourse against false accusations. And a system that allows individual faculty members to be the final arbiters of sanctions against students for academic dishonesty could be misused.

So faculty are required to report any grade sanctions they impose, and students have the right

(Continued on page 4)



Honest...

(Continued from page 3)

to appeal. That sometimes leads to a hearing that can be unpleasant and time-consuming. Fairness is not always efficient.

But to the extent that we ignore dishonesty in our classes, we undermine the integrity of the institution. As our student has asked of us, let us have the courage indeed to stand up for academic honesty here at the University of Arkansas.

Richard Lee, TFSC Co-Director

References

¹ M. Davis, D.C. Wolf, and K.J. Davis, "Three Viewpoints on Academic Integrity in Agricultural Classes," presented at the 1992 meetings of the American Society of Agronomy, Minneapolis, Nov. 1-6, 1992.

² Jason Hight, letter to the editor, *Arkansas Traveler*,

April 12, 1999, p. 2

³ <http://pigtrail.uark.edu:80/CatalogofStudies/97-98/01/6AcadRegs.html#anchor5006733>

⁴ See J.O. Urmson, *Times Literary Supplement*, April 8, 1982, p. 415.

⁵ But see Craig Beyrouthy's article in the March 1999 issue of *relative to teaching* for a much more holistic approach to what we want our students to get out of our courses.

relative to teaching is published six times a year by the Teaching and Faculty Support Center at the University of Arkansas, 241 N. Buchanan, Fayetteville, AR 72701 (501-575-3222). It is distributed free of charge to U of A faculty. Comments and suggestions may be e-mailed to tfsc@comp.uark.edu or faxed to 501-575-7086. Visit the TFSC home page at—
www.uark.edu/misc/tfscinfo/TFSC.html.