

Strategies for Combating Academic Dishonesty in Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty in tertiary education poses notable challenges to the integrity of academic institutions, undermining the value of educational credentials and compromising the learning experience. This paper explores the various forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, cheating in exams, and examines their detrimental effects on students, educators, and the broader academic community. The analysis reveals that such misconduct not only erodes trust but also hampers the development of critical thinking and ethical standards among students. This research is carried out using a doctrinal methodology. This involves both library and desk research. The author made a detailed and comprehensive review of statute, text books, journals, articles, conference papers and internet materials. To combat this pervasive issue, the paper proposes effective strategies for minimizing cheating, including fostering a culture of integrity, implementing technology-driven solutions, and enforcing academic integrity policies consistently. By adopting a comprehensive approach that emphasizes prevention and education, institutions can better safeguard academic integrity and promote a more honest and enriching educational environment.

1.1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a plague that poses a significant threat to the integrity of education. Douglas College defines academic dishonesty as any act that breaches one or more of the principles of academic integrity (Douglas College Academic Integrity Policy, 2022, p. 1). The global outcry over corrupt, unethical, and questionable practices within the academic community has made it a topical issue in higher institutions worldwide. Hence, there is a tacit understanding within the academic community that scholarly publications and the degrees conferred by higher institutions should be devoid of intellectual theft. Academic dishonesty may occur in various ways, such as fraud, cheating, plagiarism, self-plagiarism, misuse, or misrepresentation of sources (Douglas College Academic Integrity Policy, 2022, p. 2). However, the most frequently occurring unethical academic behaviors are cheating and plagiarism. Little wonder Eaton et al. have observed that “academic misconduct and plagiarism are widespread in Canadian educational contexts, with between 50% to 90% of students self-reporting academically dishonest behaviors” (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 6). Given the rise in academic dishonesty, it is arguable whether most students adhere to academic integrity policies. Undoubtedly, technological advancements have exacerbated the problem (Deranek & Parnter, 2015, p. 14). For example, beyond simply cutting and pasting from web pages, students can send screenshots in a group chat to cheat. Also, technology helps students to collaborate and check for answers online. On the other hand, software technology also has the potential to prevent academic dishonesty by controlling students’ internet activities during exams, surveilling the exam environment, and searching for plagiarism in scholarly works. The pertinent question is, what strategies should tertiary institutions employ to combat this menace? To effectively minimize academic dishonesty, colleges, and universities should use test proctoring and plagiarism detection software and enforce academic integrity policies consistently.

1.2. Common Unethical Academic Behaviors

1.2.1. Cheating

Cheating is a very persistent and ubiquitous behavior in higher education. Dr. Donald McCabe, one of the founding fathers of the International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI), conducted research in 1990 to determine the extent of cheating in universities. McCabe's original research and subsequent studies in 2020 by ICAI researchers showed that more than 60% of university students cheated in some form (ICAI, 2022). Cheating occurs in diverse forms, "such as copying or attempting to copy the work of another during an examination, communicating work to another student during an examination, possession of unauthorized aids, notes, or electronic devices or means during an examination" (Douglas College Academic Integrity Policy, 2022, p. 2). Cheating is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of higher institutions.

An effective way to combat cheating is through test proctoring software. Generally, this software detects cheating by identifying suspicious actions undertaken by the test taker. According to Wolfe, "Proctor software, such as Proctorio, ProctorU, or Examity, have features that deter cheating on exams, such as identification verification, automated monitoring, and/or live webcam monitoring" (Wolfe, 2019). Also, proctor software has computer or browser lockdown, which can shut down a classroom's access to the internet during exams and prevents students from searching for answers online (Hussein et al., 2020, p. 1). There is no gainsaying that "proctored exams that are videotaped or monitored during the test discourage cheating because cheaters get caught, and students know that they are monitored; students who cheat on an online exam won't cheat again" (Dimeo, 2017). In 2017, Alessio and his colleagues conducted a study at Miami university where they compared test results from proctored versus unproctored online tests. On average, students scored 17 points lower and used significantly less time in online tests using proctoring software than unproctored tests (Alessio et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that proctoring services minimize cheating by using artificial intelligence to monitor students while taking exams. Therefore, a proctoring mechanism inculcates in students the importance and value of ethical behavior.

Although the test proctoring software has proved to be a potent way of detecting cheating, critics have argued that it has profound privacy implications, among other concerns. Swauger's argument implies that proctoring software monitors students' surroundings while taking exams and allows course owners to view the recordings of their students multiple times (Swauger, 2020). But this analysis is flawed because under the British Columbia Personal Information Protection Act (current to November 23, 2022), schools can collect personal information only as necessary for a legitimate purpose (Personal Information Protection Act, 2003). Of course, surveillance of students' surroundings while taking exams and countless reviews of the videotaped examination by the proctor qualify as legitimate purposes under the provision of this law. The usual practice is for the instructors to carefully examine the proctoring software privacy policies and applicable institutional policies before using the software. Additionally, online proctoring services usually comply with strict security measures to protect students' data and privacy.

1.2.2. Plagiarism

Another example of academically dishonest behavior bedeviling tertiary institutions is plagiarism. It is defined as submitting a document that belongs partially or wholly to somebody else without making the appropriate reference and therefore undermines the efforts undertaken by the submitting author (Perkins et al., 2020, p. 2). Simply put, it is stealing another person's work or ideas without attribution. Plagiarism rates across higher institutions are increasing.

One of the primary reasons for this upsurge is the easy access to internet sites by students, which provide an endless amount of information for them and encourages copy-and-paste plagiarism. Also, students may need help incorporating scholarly sources into their arguments and feel that the easy way is to summarize or paraphrase without quoting the source material.

Using plagiarism detection software like Turnitin is efficient in identifying plagiarism. Turnitin compares students' submissions against the internet, a database of past work, or both, and then identifies matching words and phrases (University of Chicago, 2020). Also, it detects whether an academic paper is unoriginal and identifies the source material (Fordham University, n.d). Research has shown that students' knowledge of such software will dissuade cheating behaviors (Deranek & Parnter, 2015, p. 18). In 2013, Matheson and his colleague carried out a study at the Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, on the efficacy of Turnitin in preventing plagiarism among students. A quarter of students surveyed who use the software commented on its value in helping them to avoid plagiarism (Matheson & Starr, 2013, p. 10). Furthermore, it was clear from the interviews with the academic staff that Turnitin reduces the work involved in detection (e.g Googling) and provides documentary evidence for panels (Matheson & Starr, 2013, p. 7). Also, it teaches students how to understand and avoid plagiarism (Matheson & Starr, 2013, p. 11). Based on the above, it is evident that Turnitin is an indispensable tool in identifying substantial plagiarism in academic works, helps educate students about the importance of academic integrity, and makes them fully responsible for their work.

Like the proctoring mechanism, the most significant criticism against plagiarism detection software is a violation of students' privacy rights. Central to this concern is that students' academic works are permanently archived in the database and reused for plagiarism detection (Brinkman, 2013). Unger et al. observed at the University of Waterloo that centralizing plagiarism detection gives rise to privacy violations and security compromises. Hence, "documents checked for plagiarism may contain confidential information that must be revealed to the central authority in these schemes" (Unger et al., 2016, p. 1). But what these critics fail to acknowledge is that instructors usually remind students to remove their names and other identifying information from documents before submitting them to the Turnitin system to protect the privacy of the student author (Rochester Institute of Technology, n.d.). Also, Turnitin complies with the relevant security standards of the US, EU, and Switzerland (Turnitin's Privacy Policy, 2022, p. 1). Regardless of the controversies surrounding plagiarism detection software, tertiary institutions are duty-bound to preserve students' privacy while checking academic papers for plagiarism. Also, Turnitin does not have any direct relationship with individuals whose personal data is processed, and its privacy policy follows the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Besides software technology, most higher institutions have firmly entrenched academic integrity policies regulating students' educational affairs. The question is whether these policies produce the desired results. The key is to focus on their consistent enforcement. To ensure strict compliance with the policy, Douglas College recently introduced an Academic Integrity Education Module (AIEM) that every student must complete on blackboard. However, this is a very new approach, and there are no collated data on the effectiveness of the same. But there is only anecdotal evidence that this approach is efficient. Similarly, in April 2016, British University Vietnam (BUV) launched an Academic Purposes Programme intervention designed to reduce plagiarism and detect contract cheating. Results from twelve semesters of academic misconduct data demonstrate a 37.01% reduction in cases of plagiarism but cannot prove its direct impact on contract cheating due to limited data (Perkins et al., 2020,

p. 1). Furthermore, “some institutions are responding with the creation of dedicated academic integrity offices and committees, enhanced deterrence and detection initiatives, and robust policy revision” (Eaton & Hughes, 2022, p. 520). Punishment for academic dishonesty may include cancellation of the course registration, failure of the course, a reduction in the grade earned for the subject, a grade of zero on the assignment, suspension, and expulsion of the student from school, a recommendation to Senate to rescind the student’s degree and a formal letter reporting the occurrence of academic dishonesty will be placed in the student’s academic file as well as in the student’s program/department file (McMaster University Academic Integrity Policy, 2024, p. 18). Consistent enforcement of academic integrity standards will reduce scholastic dishonesty to the barest minimum. Appropriate punishment by faculty members is a step in the right direction.

While using sanctions will deter others, there is an argument that the punitive approach offers a very dim view of academia and creates an undesirable classroom culture predicated on the mistaken belief that all students are dishonest (Simon Fraser University, 2021). These critics have proposed a paradigm shift from the traditional approach (punishment) to a restorative justice approach. Restorative justice holds students accountable by making them accept responsibility for their actions and do their best to remedy the harm caused (California State University, n.d.). But this analysis is flawed because, without punishment, the student may not understand the gravity of the offence, and “the process may incentivize recidivism” (ICAI, 2022). While this approach could work in theory, it gives room to more academically dishonest behaviors. Students may continue to breach academic integrity policies if they know the school will not punish them. Strict enforcement of these policies will automatically instill the spirit of intellectual honesty in students.

1.3. Conclusion

Academic integrity is pivotal to higher education. Without it, credentials become worthless and institutional reputation becomes ruined. Intellectual honesty is a broad-based institutional priority and a holistic approach towards entrenching the ideals of honesty, transparency, equity, and fairness in our citadels of learning. The need to nip academic dishonesty in the bud is overwhelmingly evident. We have various means of doing so, which cannot be discussed extensively in this paper and presents an opportunity for further research. Academic integrity is the cornerstone of our educational system. Engaging students in discussions around the importance of academic integrity and providing support for those struggling with academic pressures can further reinforce ethical behavior. Ultimately, a collaborative effort involving faculty, administration, and students is essential to create an environment where honesty is valued, and academic achievement is celebrated through hardwork and originality. Therefore, colleges and universities should adopt a software-based approach to eradicating scholastic dishonesty and enforce academic integrity policies more consistently to maintain the sanctity of education.

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