



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## WHEN ACADEMIC DISHONESTY HAPPENS ON YOUR CAMPUS

Last year, our college experienced a rash of cheating incidents that caused us to re-evaluate how prepared we were to deal with academic dishonesty. Within two weeks after a seemingly isolated incident in which one of our professors discovered a student cheating on a written assignment, four separate incidents of academic dishonesty were reported in our on-line program, in outreach and community education, and on-campus programs, as well.

What had happened? In no particular order, the incidents included one student copying answers from another during a biology final; three students turning in essays downloaded from an Internet term-paper site and the teacher re-evaluating their essays and, thus, their grades; a teacher mistakenly handing out a draft copy of the final exam while distributing graded quizzes and, upon realizing the error, giving the unwitting recipient the opportunity to return it without assumption of dishonesty (no one stepped forward, and he had to revise the original); and, two otherwise average students gaining entry to a teacher's office in an unguarded moment, spotting a folder containing the final exam for their algebra course, liberating it, and caught studying it in the library the next morning. Needless to say, the expressions of alarm and disdain echoed across the campus: "What's happening?" "What can we do?" "How could this have been prevented?"

But not all of the complications could be blamed on dishonesty. Some of the problems stemmed from our own neglect. We had been operating on an outdated and semi-relevant policy that clearly affected the punishment that could be meted out. However, in our defense, it is easy to see how it happened. It may have been that some of us would have preferred to remain unfamiliar with the ugly and inevitable truth. Some students will cheat!

So there we were: a college within a community where folks seldom lock their doors at night, where sleep is undisturbed by the prospect of crime or crimi-

nals, where they look after one another's children with a casual neighborliness that could only be the result of many generations experiencing hardship, and where a handshake is an acceptable expression of honesty.

Yet, the unthinkable had happened here, and so we asked: *What is to be done when a college finds itself confronted with dishonest behavior?* And then we focused on seeking answers and taking action.

### Know Where to Get Help

We were caught off-guard, but our willingness to conduct research on the topic of integrity led us to valuable resources, not the least of which was The Center for Academic Integrity, where we found a haven of information: a statement of academic integrity and recommended institutional values, sample honor codes, and links to other sites regarding academic integrity ([www.academicintegrity.org](http://www.academicintegrity.org)). We also found an organizational "survival guide," designed to guide colleges through an introspective, research-based, fact-finding process for the purpose of identifying what, if any, organizational factors may be contributing to the crisis.

### Admit and Address Relevant Organizational Weaknesses

College leadership—including our president, administrative team, and Faculty Council—identified the elements they wanted an academic integrity policy to incorporate; and, in less than one semester, we had reached consensus as to its content. Specifically, we now have two interim policies; the first addresses basic violations (first-time offenses, etc.), and the second addresses capital offenses (repeat violations of academic integrity or first-time offenses committed in the context of other offenses). We intend to hold yearlong discussions on the topic of academic integrity for the purposes of increasing awareness and determining if the interim approach is workable and sustainable.

### Review Existing Policies for Loopholes

Perhaps not unlike many other institutions of higher education, our college has an academic clemency policy that allows students to appeal having non-productive



grades permanently expunged from their transcripts (and replaced with a “CL” designation). What if, we asked, a student cheated, was awarded an “F” for the class, and then—perhaps years and administrations later—applied for academic clemency? No committee, no dean, would know that the “F” meant anything more than the student’s inability to meet the expected level of learning for the class. We had to admit that, under those circumstances, all “F’s” looked alike; there was no systemic way to differentiate a failing grade for cheating from a failing grade for, well, failing. Given that, chances were good that the punishment, while justifiable, would not be permanent.

### Learn from the Lessons of Others

By sheer coincidence, nearby Kansas State University (KSU) had created an impressive program to deal with academic dishonesty ([www.ksu.edu/honor](http://www.ksu.edu/honor)), including the creation of the “XF” grade—a failing grade, distinguished from a generic failing grade by the “X,” denoting a violation of academic integrity. After visiting with the director of KSU’s academic honor program, our instructional integrity committee voted unanimously to adopt the “XF” grade.

### Know Your Enemy

One of the most alarming outcomes of this experience was the realization that one of our best friends is also one of our worst enemies: the Internet. Consider, for example, my research project: Motivated by a desire to know how many “cheat sites” were “out there,” I went to a generic search engine and typed in “term paper” and “essay.” Armed with a pen and a 5x7 notepad, I intended to write them down and share them with the faculty. After conducting multiple searches on multiple sites and cross-referencing the results, I felt pretty foolish. There were far too many to record by hand. In fact, there were far too many to alphabetize in one sitting.

Happily, I found the work of Peggy Bates and Margaret Fain who, during a Teaching Effectiveness seminar on cheating and plagiarism, compiled a similar roster identifying at least 305 sites offering a remarkable variety of essays and term papers on a variety of subjects that look eerily similar to any college curriculum. And, if their existence is not enough to give you pause, consider their names: “schoolsucks.com,” “academon.com,” “the cheat factory.com,” “evil house of cheat.com,” “lazy students.com,” among other titles. Print the list from the following website reference and share it with your colleagues ([www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm](http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm)).

### Know What You Can and Should Do

Like it or not, there is no “quick fix.” For starters, become an informed member of your academic community. Find sources of good information and share them. For example, some very good research exists which attempts to illuminate, if not explain, the phenomenon of academic dishonesty. One recent study suggests that students often rationalize cheating by pointing out that they perceive (perhaps rightfully) that colleges—specifically, classroom instructors—are indifferent about it. *When was the last time that you—as an instructor—discussed academic integrity in your classroom or clarified what it was? Do you know if it is a topic of discussion in composition classes?*

Consider including your college’s academic integrity policy in your syllabus, or if one is not (yet) available, include the penalties for plagiarism (whatever they may be) and openly discuss them with your class. Discuss the parameters of collaboration among students so that there is no confusion about when students may work with each other on assignments. Design content-specific assignments that incorporate and synthesize student opinion (these are far more difficult to find on cheat sites). On a broader basis, there are other resources—“browser”-based programs (such as Eve2, Plagiserve, and Turnitin.com)—that allow instructors to submit portions of suspicious documents and determine whether or not an act of academic dishonesty has occurred.

Finally, I can almost hear the choruses of exasperation: “I didn’t become a teacher to be a law enforcement official or a private investigator; I want to teach. Why should we have to do all of the work?” The response is simple: No generation confronted with the ethical challenges of its time has ever felt as if the situation *should* exist. But, given what you now know about the extent of the problem, consider this: No one should have to *teach* integrity; we should be able to trust that students come to us fully respectful of the academic community of which they are a part. But if that is *not* the reality of the situation, *what happens if we do nothing?*

**Karén L. Clos**, *Dean of Learning & Instruction*

For further information, contact the author at Barton County Community College, 245 NE 30th Road, Great Bend, KS 67530-9283. e-mail: [closk@barton.cc.ks.us](mailto:closk@barton.cc.ks.us)