

Preventing Academic Dishonesty and Designing Assignments

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See <http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/home.html> for more information.

Introduction

This guide covers preventing academic dishonesty before it occurs through the syllabus, faculty discussion with students, and best practices in designing assignments.

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Setting the Stage

Reflection on the meaning of academic integrity

A good place to start in your work to prevent academic dishonesty is to reflect on the meaning and importance of integrity in general. Think, too, of the importance of *academic integrity* in particular for the student, the faculty, the institution, and society. You can view this reflection as an opportunity to recognize and appreciate your own commitment to the important work of education and character development. It will also help prepare you to answer any objections students may raise about its meaning and importance.

Preparing your syllabus with academic integrity in mind

Now that you've prepared yourself mentally for another round of teaching, you can do much to prevent academic dishonesty with your syllabus, your design of assignments, and your making students aware that the institution fosters academic integrity and does

not tolerate academic dishonesty. Research shows that there is a correlation between students' perceptions of faculty attitudes toward academic dishonesty and the incidences of academic dishonesty within their courses (McCabe, 1997). A well-worded statement in your syllabus about your commitment to academic integrity can go a long way. Students respond to a clear syllabus outlining expectations and consequences (Leeds, 1992). Assignments can be designed to be plagiarism-resistant, if not plagiarism proof, and can teach important ethical concepts such as integrity and respect for the works of others at the same time (McMurtry, 2001; see also Haas, 1995).

Having THE Discussion

Faculty may want to discuss the four topics below *at the beginning of the semester or school year*:

1. Encourage students to recognize the value of individual effort in the academic setting.
2. Encourage students to respect their readers and the culture of learning by providing the documentation needed to do further research.
3. Encourage students to respect the institution's reasons for academic integrity.
4. Encourage students to respect their fellow students and compete on a level playing field.

1. Encourage students to recognize the value of individual effort in the academic setting.

Students may not be aware of the high value the academic community in our culture places on individual effort. Attitudes toward individual work and what we call academic integrity can differ from culture to culture. In some contexts such as the corporate world, collaborative writing is the norm. Teams of people may collaborate on documents, with no particular author getting the credit other than the company or organization. This is accepted and expected. But the academic environment is competitive, and we place a high value on recognizing and honoring the work of the finest individual or team (Ashworth, 1997; see also Martin, 1994)

In some contexts, copying the works of others is deemed a sign of respect. Some student may come from cultures where using someone else's work is the norm (Georgetown Honor Council, 2003).

It can be very helpful to elaborate on the meaning of our academic setting and how it differs from other settings. It can also be helpful to let students know you recognize them

as creators of intellectual property covered by copyright protection, and that the works of other creators is copyright protected and needs to be respected. The VAIL Guide to Student Copyright can be enlightening on this subject.

2. Encourage students to respect their readers and the culture of learning by providing the documentation needed to do further research.

Students may indeed be tempted by the competitive nature sometimes present in the academic setting to claim the words of another as their own. They may see it as a quick means to a higher grade, greater prestige, and so on. Additionally, they may underestimate the value of their own work within the academic setting and fail to see that *we highly value* accurate documentation and attribution of the words of others! While we value the student's own creativity, students need to recognize another aspect of our competitive scholarly culture they may not have thought of before, i.e. preservation!

Faculty can help students recognize that they are part of a community, and in that community we assume different roles from time to time. At times we are the creators, and at other times we preserve the culture and help it grow when we document and give attribution. When we preserve the words of others and accurately point to their location and origin, we are also fostering further scholarship. This feature of scholarship would be easily lost without attribution.

3. Encourage students to respect the institution's reasons for academic integrity.

Students need to recognize that the institution is responsible for certifying genuine learning outcomes, and that the grades and diplomas institutions award are based on their student's true knowledge and skills. In fact, in some cases, documentation of genuine learning outcomes is needed in order to obtain or keep accreditation. Academic dishonesty threatens the institution's mission and cannot be accepted.

4. Encourage students to respect their fellow students and compete on a level playing field.

Faculty can appeal to students' sense of fairness and morality when making the case for academic integrity. Some institutions subscribe to honor codes, where students pledge that the work they turn in is their own. If your institution does not, you can still appeal to students' sense of fairness and find that most will abide by the rules and meet expectations. The issue is taken so seriously by faculty and institutions that tools and methods have been developed to detect plagiarism, for example. Faculty may want to point students to the VAIL Guide to Detection Tools and Methods to reinforce the point.

Confronting the Barriers

Below are responses to commonly expressed reasons why faculty may be reluctant to discuss academic integrity and academic dishonesty.

Myth	Counterargument
<p><i>If I discuss academic integrity, academic dishonesty, cheating, and plagiarism, I will appear to my students to be overly strict or overbearing.</i></p>	<p>Research shows that students want a level playing field. They resent other students who take the easy way out through academically dishonest practices such as cheating and plagiarism (Kennedy & Nowak, 2000; see also McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield, 1999; Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996). They feel that academically dishonest practices give some students an unfair advantage in a competitive environment where grade ranking can importantly affect their future. (Bishop, 2001).</p> <p>Also, discussing academic integrity and academic dishonesty may not be viewed by students as being overly strict or overbearing. Rather, honest students may see it as evidence that faculty care about their learning. The typical student will demand academic integrity of himself or herself when the faculty is viewed as hard working, up-to-date with course material, fair with grading, and consistent. (McCabe & Pavela, 1997).</p>
Myth	Counterargument
<p><i>This discussion belongs in some other department, not mine.</i></p>	<p>It may be true that your institution has a department or an individual with a special emphasis on the topics of academic integrity and academic dishonesty. Still, your students should at least be aware that you know of such departments and individuals by pointing to them as good resources for avoiding unacceptable practices and adopting practices that demonstrate academic integrity. You can discuss this in class or at least have such information posted in your syllabus.</p> <p>More and more institutions are taking the stance that it is <i>not</i> just the job of the writing center or a specific department or individual designated as responsible for teaching about academic integrity, academic dishonesty, cheating, and plagiarism (Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2003; see also Joy & Luck, 1999). A recent search in the database Digital Dissertations on the words “writing across the curriculum” in the title field yielded no fewer than 20 dissertations on the subject published since 1997! The titles show a wide variety of academic disciplines becoming involved in good writing practices, particularly those that demonstrate academic integrity through proper attribution of sources and avoidance of plagiarism. Even technical disciplines like computer science and mathematics are grappling with such issues. Leaving it to writing instructors alone is just not currently pedagogically sound.</p>
Myth	Counterargument

My job is to teach the subject matter of the course. I don't have time to discuss these issues in my class.

Research shows that incidences of academic dishonesty are increasing. See the VAIL Guide to Academic Integrity and Plagiarism in the Classroom for information on the scope of the problem, and the Center for Intellectual Property's Current Issues and Resources on Plagiarism: Incidence and Prevalence (http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/links_plagiarism.html).

Chances are good that if you do not try to address the problem head on by discussing it early in your class, you will be devoting some time to addressing academic dishonesty after it has occurred. The time you spend addressing the issue in advance will be time saved when incidents *do* occur and they have to be addressed. The process can be somewhat drawn out and involve finding evidence, discussing it with students, giving an opportunity for students to defend themselves, policy decisions to consider from one's department or the institution as a whole, an appeals process, etc. If you can avoid this up front by discussing the issue in advance, it will be time well spent!

Myth

Counterargument

What's the use? I heard of faculty who accused a student of academic dishonesty then were not backed up by the administration.

Your administration may have done something to address the charge but the outcome was not made public! Faculty should be aware of student confidentiality protections such as FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OI/fpc/ferpa/>). For every instance in which you may have heard that the outcome did not satisfy the faculty, there are most likely many more that did satisfy the concerns of the faculty member and addressed the student's learning.

Designing Plagiarism-Resistant Assignments: Best Practices

Faculty can help their students with academic integrity by first designing assignments that are plagiarism-resistant. Research shows that careful assignment design can go a long way to preventing plagiarism (Cummings, 2003; see also Gibelman, Gelman, & Fast, 1999); Malouff & Sims, 1996; Kloss, 1996)

Here are some techniques for designing plagiarism-resistant assignments:

1. **Consider dropping the open-topic theme.** The more specific the assignment, the smaller the universe of information students can use to search and perhaps use inappropriately.
2. **Know your field of research.** If you require your students to do research, be sure that you have done the research yourself in advance. You will be familiar with many of the sources your students are using and you might recognize suspicious wording, etc. And if you demonstrate to your students that you have done the research yourself, you show your own commitment to the topic. You also give

them reason to know that you won't be fooled, and this in itself can discourage academic dishonesty.

3. **Word assignments precisely.** It might not be enough to tell your students to cite their sources. You might also need to assign them the specific citation style, give them examples, and point out resources where they can get help. The VAIL Guide to Citation gives detailed instructions for citing common publication types, and it points to other resources as well.
4. **Incorporate information literacy standards into your assignments,** particularly the need to critically evaluate information, synthesize it and use it, rather than simply collect it and quote it, paraphrase it, or summarize it. The American Library Association has put together a fine resource defining information literacy and listing the five competencies at Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Standards_and_Guidelines/Information_Literacy_Competency_Standards_for_Higher_Education.htm). The American Association of School Librarians has put together a similar page for secondary students, The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning (http://www.ala.org/aaslTemplate.cfm?Section=Information_Power&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=19937). The relevant competencies here are:

The information literate student understands many of the ethical, legal, and socio-economic issues surrounding information and information technology.

The information literate student follows laws, regulations, institutional policies, and etiquette related to the access and use of information resources.
5. **Become familiar with the student's "voice."** Have your students write early in the semester or term. A potent signal that a student may have plagiarized is a sudden change in language, style, and "voice," i.e. the way a student sounds in their writing. The VAIL Guide to Plagiarism Alarms gives a good overview of this and other signals that plagiarism may have occurred.
6. **Structure long writing assignments in small chunks or drafts** so that students can make incremental progress and not be led down the path of procrastination and plagiarism due to panic. Procrastination is a leading reason why students plagiarize in the first place (Roig & DeTommaso, 691)
7. **Assign annotated bibliographies,** requiring students to provide abstracts of their sources in their own words. Librarians at Cornell University have put together a fine resource on the process at How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography (<http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skill28.htm>).

8. **Have students turn in a log or journal of their research**, including the names of the search tools used (catalog, search engine, subscription database) and search terms used. Sample their tools and strategies by trying to replicate a few at random. Ask questions if the search cannot be replicated. The University of Maryland University College instituted an undergraduate course, Information Literacy and Research Methods, in which the development of such a research log is a central focus.
9. **Discuss student papers in class.** Ask questions about the meaning of suspicious passages. If students cannot explain what they have written, perhaps they are not the true author. If students know in advance that they might be required to discuss their papers, this may deter some from plagiarizing.
10. **Assign oral presentations.** Have your students report on their research process. Prompting students with questions like “How did you find this article you cite? I would like to read it myself,” is a non-threatening way to begin looking into suspicious passages that are not in your student’s voice.
11. **Substitute a short written assignment for the oral presentation.** This can be a brief, one-page summary of their research process, including how they selected their sources. Ask students to sum up what they learned from their research.
12. **Require recent sources, including some that are in print.** If you only require Web-based research, this is more likely to tempt students to copy and paste the words of others since it can be easily done.
13. **Assign students roles or specific audiences to address in their writing.** The papers that can be found in most term paper mills are just that, i.e. term papers, and they are usually written in the third person with the teacher as the audience. If you assign your students roles as a researcher, someone advising an administrator who needs to make a decision, then it is unlikely that it will have the sound of a term paper.

In conclusion, designing assignments that are meaningful and challenging gives your students an incentive to learn, and when they have that incentive, they will do their own work.

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Further Resources

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Additional VAIL Resources:

Guides in Student Portal (<http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/home.html>):

- Citation, Citation, Citation
- Student Tips for Avoiding Plagiarism
- Academic Integrity
- Student Copyright

Guides in Faculty portal (<http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/home.html>):

- Knowing your policy
- Plagiarism alarms
- Detection tools and methods
- After detection of plagiarism

VAIL Tutor (<http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/home.html>)