

Academic Advisors as Valuable Partners for Supporting Academic Integrity

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Abstract

Academic Integrity is a fundamental value in higher education. Due to the increased ease of access to all types of information through social media and the internet, the lines have become blurred on what is can be “borrowed” and used. Recent proliferation of contract cheating has only reinforced that integrity cannot be just the responsibility of the Dean’s Office or the Academic Integrity offices. Advisors and learning strategists who see students regularly, can ubiquitously play a valuable role in integrating academic honesty into their conversations and workshops. This can be achieved in collaborations with campus partners on campus wide programming, starting early with integrating the conversation about honesty in academic orientations for new students and parents, and when having difficult conversations about study success and academic decision-making.

Keywords: Academic integrity, university collaboration, academic advising, proactive integrity education, Canada

Academic integrity is a fundamental value in higher education. Without academic honesty it would be difficult, nay impossible, for ideas to flourish freely. In today's learning communities, honesty is often discussed as offenses appear to be on the rise. According to the *Boston Globe (2012)*, 125 students were investigated at Harvard University for collaborating without permission on take-home exams. Academic integrity discussions have been propelled into the media when respected individuals are caught plagiarizing. For example, in 2013, Chris Spence, the director of one of the largest boards of education in Canada and a highly respected role model and leader, was caught blatantly plagiarizing and failing to credit numerous written submissions (Brown, 2013).

Due to the phenomenal access to information via the internet, lines sometimes appear blurred to some users when acknowledging the work of others. Increased use of electronic devices such as cell phones and tablets provide opportunities for those who wish to use them inappropriately. Increased use of technology such as computer programs like Turnitin™ has also facilitated the identifying of offenses. Universities are working hard to counteract inappropriate use by creating guidelines to manage and control precarious situations that may be conducive to cheating.

How can academic advisors and learning strategists contribute to and have an impact on academic integrity (AI) discussions? The purpose of this article is to examine ways in which advisors can integrate this value in their interaction with students and play an important role in promoting academic honesty.

Advisors and Learning Strategists can:

- Start the conversation early
- Collaborate with key campus partners
- Teach self-awareness, critical analysis and decision-making

Start the Conversation Early

Integrity needs to be subtly introduced at appropriate moments in a student's academic interaction with university staff. At the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC), academic advisors and learning strategists are key players during academic orientations for new students. It is important to emphasize that the academic orientation precedes the student union hosted orientation; in this way, it is the very first interaction for the students with the University after accepting their offer of admission.

At UTSC, a brochure and tip sheet on academic honesty are included in the student orientation package. The brochure refers students to the appropriate services (e.g. the Writing Centre) on campus that can help the student while the tip sheet discusses the student's role in understanding academic integrity. The tip sheet also lists examples of offenses to help students connect actions to potential consequences. This paper information is tactfully referenced in a few slides on the topic that are inserted in the orientation presentation. This can go a long way in reminding students from the very beginning that integrity is a steadfast value of the institution.

Attending parents are included in the AI discussion as they are partners in student success. According to a chilling and eye-opening Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary titled "Faking the Grade", some overzealous parents support and provide the resources to encourage their children's unethical behavior; therefore, a reminder to parents is fitting (Blicq, 2013). At UTSC, the parent package of information also includes the same AI brochure and tip sheet for their reference. Parents and students are primed to both the ideas and the terminology of AI. Such inclusion of AI material allows the advisors to be at the forefront of the conversation on academic integrity.

Collaborate with Key Campus Partners

At UTSC, academic and learning strategists, the Dean's office, and professionals from the International Student Centre, faculty from the Writing Centre and the English Language Development departments have come together to collaborate on a proactive workshop geared towards preventing plagiarism. This collaborative workshop, entitled "AIM (Academic Integrity Matters) to Meet University Expectations," allows all partners to present their expertise in a fast-paced, activities-based setting. The activities include real-life academic integrity situations and consequences, as interpreted from the University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. The workshop also compares and contrasts international communities' views on academic integrity as well as shifts from high school to university. For example, where one learning community may assume that citations from a main text source are unnecessary because the passage is commonly known, North American standards require citation. This can be a common mistake among international students if it is not discussed early and explicitly. The academic advisor then discusses strategies to address time management, motivation and resiliency, and challenges such as procrastination which can lead to stress and hurried work, sloppy mistakes, poor citation, or plagiarism. Professor Eleanor Irwin, one of two Dean's Designates for Academic Integrity at UTSC, comments that, "Often students who are suspected of having plagiarized or cheated tell me 'I ran out of time.' They panic and do something they later regret. I am convinced that if students learn to start essays long before they are due and review course material regularly rather than leaving it to the night before a test there would be far fewer students facing failure in a course because of plagiarism and cheating" (personal communication, September 13, 2013).

The collaborators have built relationships and found some champions among faculty who even give a bonus grade for attending the workshop; not surprisingly, this results in strong attendance. This workshop is offered twice a semester. The workshop is designed collaboratively while keeping the whole student in mind. It approaches the incident of academic dishonesty from various angles, leading to a more holistic solution for the student. One student may fall into the trap due to poor time management, while another student may have difficulties with writing conventions, and yet both can face AI problems. The holistic approach enables the student to understand her unique challenges and connect with the appropriate departments to grow and develop effectively. Not only has this benefitted students, but it has increased collegiality and understanding among participating departments and built better referrals.

Teach Self-awareness, Critical Analysis and Decision-making

In a university setting, good study habits and ethical academic behavior are two concepts that are not always presented together. The first is in the realm of learning strategy, while the latter is discussed in the classroom context in relation to cheating or plagiarism.

Advisors have an opportunity to *connect* these two ideas in a unique way in their one-on-one appointments.

Couched in teaching effective study habits and strategies, academic advisors teach students to think effectively and set goals and sub-goals to achieve academic success. In order to understand one's priorities, students are taught to make lists, manage their time and combat procrastination. All of this can only be accomplished by building self-awareness, critical analysis and self-evaluation. These same personal evaluative strategies are important to prevent plagiarism and cheating. When academic advisors discuss time management tools or motivation strategies they can add that these skills are also necessary for sound and authentic academic work. Good studying and ethical behavior are direct consequences of increased self-awareness and self-analysis. Advisors have a unique opportunity to tactfully fold in the importance of sound academic work and integrity within the context of teaching learning strategies without belaboring the topic. In the advising office, the student learns and builds awareness in a non-threatening environment. This leads to teachable moments that are free of disciplinary undertones, as would occur if the student is called to the dean's office for an alleged academic offense. Thus, advisors can be effective partners in promoting the value of integrity.

Through starting early, building collaborations and supporting self-awareness and self-evaluation, academic advisors can proactively support the mission of the academic institution towards academic integrity.

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