Academic Integrity Pledges – Acculturating Students to Integrity within Canadian Higher Education

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Abstract

Academic integrity, and its associated values, are an essential aspect of cultures that provide a foundation for conduct and behaviour of all members within higher education. Establishing such cultures support the quality of student learning as well as their ethical deportment within their programs of study. The merits of acculturating students within academic integrity has implications for their performance and commitment to similar conduct and behaviours in their chosen professional fields as positive, ethical, and caring professionals benefitting all who receive their care and service. Creating and sustaining such learning cultures requires a multifaceted approach and an understanding and appreciation for the complexity of nurturing such environments. Academic integrity pledges situated across the learning trajectory at meaningful times during students' developmental paths, serve as one strategy that can be effective to academic integrity efforts. How one School of Health Sciences has approached and realized academic integrity pledges are discussed, and may serve as an example for others. The successes and opportunities for future development are outlined and reviewed.

Keywords: Canada; academic integrity pledge; higher education; academic integrity culture; Health Sciences

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Background

Academic integrity (AI), defined as the unwavering commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage (International Centre for Academic Integrity, 2013), is considered foundational to the higher educational experience. The values associated with AI align with the mission and purpose of Canadian colleges and universities within the contexts of teaching, learning, and research. Additionally, academic organizations play a pivotal role with the social development of students to honest, ethical, global citizens that has become an expectation of employers and members of society (Fallis, 2004; Murray, Dutton, McQuaid, & Richard, 2016; Velasco, 2012).

Introduction

Departures from AI, described as acts of academic dishonesty (AD) or academic misconduct, are the antithesis of AI and pose threats to the mission of higher educational organizations (Klocko, 2014; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012). Departures from AI

are described in terms of "behaviours that undermine the common rules and norms governing learning at higher education institutions" (Yu, Glanzer, Sriram, Johnson, & Moore, 2017, p. 403). Such departures affect the quality of education and learning carrying great costs to students, faculty, educational organizations, and the public when graduates receive credentials through fraudulent or dishonest means. Efforts to support an acculturation to the values of AI therefore have been a focus of interest, discussion, debate, governance, and research for faculty and educational administrators.

Academics have suggested that departures from AI are occurring at epidemic proportions with studies reporting varied rates of occurrence around the world and across student populations (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Ives et al., 2016; Lin & Wen, 2007; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Scanlan, 2006). Comprehensive approaches to creating cultures of AI include combined efforts to promote integrity and deter dishonesty. Evidenced by regular news reports, departures from AI are common to every profession, and may look different from student to student for a variety of reasons. As such, Scanlan (2006) suggested such efforts to promote AI should include early student AI education--reinforced at the course level, faculty role modelling, preventative strategies with test taking, clear, consistent, rigorous applications of sanctions for infractions to AI, and finally student honour pledges. Robinson and Glanzer (2017) described a multi-system approach to building cultures of integrity that includes the cooperation and involvement of both formal (administration, policies/procedures, educational efforts) and informal systems (role models, rituals, language). Educators and administrators continue to purport that promoting AI requires a multifaceted approach (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Bretag, Mahmud, & Wallace, 2011; Dufresne, 2004; Lang, 2013; Lathrop & Foss, 2005).

One approach to promoting cultures that embrace and embody AI is the application of an honour code. Honour codes have been described in terms of a "priceless heritage…a positive assertion of belief…in a response to the highest of values—personal integrity" (Mary Washington College of the University of Virginia, n.d.). Honour codes adopted through traditional and modified approaches across higher educational organizations help to establish ethical moral principles for learning communities. One component of honour codes includes the honour or academic integrity (AI) pledge. AI pledges require students to make a promise of integrity and a commitment to learn and behave ethically. AI pledges are one effective deterrent to AD keeping members of the learning community aware of integrity expectations (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to examine Humber College's School of Health Sciences (SHS) experience with student AI pledging initiatives. To begin, an overview of literature focused on the honour code, which is the foundation where AI pledges originated, is offered. A description of the pledging initiatives undertaken at strategic educational and developmental touchpoints for SHS students will follow along with a description of why these touchpoints were selected. Lessons learned and recommendations for planning and executing AI pledges are also discussed.

Honour in Academics

Honour code schools have a rich history and tradition. One of the first academic honour codes traces to the late 1700s and established an ethical community for learning with clear expectations for honourable behaviour (University of William and Mary, n.d.). Honour codes help to establish ethical communities based on the premise that educational organizations serve as social systems wherein members shape and learn behaviour through the example of others (Dale, 2009; McCabe & Trevino, 1993). Benefits to establishing honour codes include: expectations for honourable behaviour are clearly articulated, responsibility for maintaining honour becomes personalized to individual members of the learning community, and accountability for honour becomes a shared responsibility with all members of the learning community (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Robinson & Glanzer, 2017). In fact, honour codes are defining elements to establishing cultures of AI (Stanlick, 2006). The positive dual effect for students and faculty is an attributed strength to honour codes (Caldwell, 2009).

Honour codes are realized in educational organizations in different ways. Traditional honour code (THC) schools have specific student roles and responsibilities that include students: committing to an honour pledge, sharing dual responsibility with faculty to manage AI, and playing a significant role in adjudication of AD infractions (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2003; Schwartz, Tatum, & Hageman, 2013). Trust and autonomy for students is core in THC schools as demonstrated through practices that may include un-proctored, take-home, and self-scheduled examinations. While modified honour code (MHC) schools do not have all the same components as THC schools, they do share two specific criteria: clear communication about expectations with AI; and active involvement of students in matters related to AI (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). THCs are generally enacted in smaller colleges and universities while MHCs are adopted in larger educational organizations (Schwartz et al., 2013). Additionally, MHC schools have some form of honour or AI pledge and a faculty led adjudication system (Schwartz et al., 2013).

Both THC and MHC schools have positive effects on reducing acts of AD when compared to non-honour code (NHC) schools (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002). Having students complete something as simple as signing an AI pledge before tests or exams has demonstrated students cheat less than counterparts who do not sign an AI pledge (Ely, et al., 2014). Students (N=758) in THC schools reported less cheating (p<.001) when compared to both MHC and non-honour code schools (NHC) schools with both THC and MHC students understanding AI more than their NHC counterparts (p<.00: p<.03: Schwarz et al., 2013). O'Neill and Pfeiffer (2012) found differences with the incidence of AD with students (N=686) in a school that "embraced and advertised its code". Student self-reported acts of AD were significantly less than at a THC organization that promoted its honour code (p<.03). Finally, student satisfaction with an honour code (N=286: p<.001) and increased student investments in integrity, believed to be articulated through honour codes, have been associated with reduced acts of AD (Dix, Emery, & Le, 2014). Injunctive norms (what people think you should do) also influenced students' commitment to the honour code that speaks to the influence of social norms articulated through an honour code (Dix et al., 2014).

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Academic Integrity Pledges

AI pledges are one initiative that have emerged from honour codes. These pledges serve to function as promissory oaths for a specific promise and commitment to learn and practice within the values of AI (de Bruin, 2016). Such pledges speak to the dignity and honour associated with academic studies, increasing the moral weight and creating a binding force for members of the learning community to AI. They can also serve to establish the belief that non-adherence is an unacceptable behaviour—helping to create a culture of norms and values that support AI. AI pledges are one example of normative guidelines (expectations for behaviour) that when combined with other initiatives support a value led approach to AI.

Several characteristics of promissory oaths, as described by deBruin, (2016) are applicable to effective AI pledges. First, pledges should be public in that any interested individual should be able to attend or understand the intent of the pledge. Second pledging initiatives should include a ceremony that incorporates the student committing to a moral standing—in this situation the promise to learn and practice consistently with the values of AI. Third, these pledges should express a function that will be fulfilled—i.e. a promise to study and practice with the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.

Like honour codes, AI pledges take on different forms. Some schools require students to write or sign a pledge at the start of each term or with each piece of evaluation. Other organizations require students to complete an AI educational session that culminates in a pledging initiative, while still others hold ceremonies that require students to recite a pledge as a learning community. Timing for these pledges can occur prior to acceptance of a student to an organization, at the start of first year, start of each semester, or are weaved throughout the post-secondary educational experience.

Pledging Ceremonies in the School of Health Sciences at Humber

The planning and implementation of the AI pledging ceremonies in the School of Health Sciences (SHS) at Humber College incorporated a constructive-developmental approach to support student acculturation to the values of AI (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Jones & Baxter Magolda, 2013) . Research supports the argument that early in the educational journey students rely on faculty for knowledge but will evolve in their understanding and learning through their interactions, challenging of their personal belief systems and exposure to new viewpoints (Barber et al., 2013). There is also evidence to suggest that freshmen students are new to learning about the expectations about AI compared to students in the upper years (Beasley, 2014). Understanding how students construct meaning about AI and develop or evolve in their meaning of AI helped identify crucial touchpoints throughout the academic journey to begin, anchor, and support students in understanding the values and importance of committing to AI. It is believed that these touch points coincide with meaningful points in the development of students' identities within the SHS. The co-chairs, and leaders of the pledging initiatives for the School of Health Sciences Academic Integrity Council, share an extensive background,

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interest, and expertise in AI. Jennie Miron is doctoral prepared and has specialized in the area of AI content, leading several research-focused initiatives across the School of Health Sciences. Kristine Fenning has extensive writing experience and has participated as a co-investigator in research activities focused on AI. Both co-chairs have national and international experience in conference presentations.

The introduction to the values of AI with examples are initially introduced through a short, student led, interactive exercise at the SHS' student orientation, in which new students are expected to support the safe and accurate movement of an AI ball (a large beach ball) to specific people located in a large auditorium. Senior students lead the activity by enacting leadership roles in introducing and managing the interaction with the freshmen students. At different locations within the auditorium, the ball will rest with an identified student, faculty, or school leader for a brief introduction of an AI value and its application to academic contexts. With this exposure, students begin to understand that through their acceptance to the school, their pledge to the values of AI are part-and-parcel to their studies. This introduction to the values serves as a metaphor to help students appreciate that as a community we must work to keep the AI ball up and moving—and that while the ball may take a different direction that co-operation of everyone can keep the ball on track. This touchpoint coincides with the beginning of the student academic journey believed to be the foundation for their academic experience.

The second experience with pledging comes through a postcard that is hand delivered to first year students in the first month of classes in the fall semester. Each student receives a colourful postcard from the Dean of the school that welcomes them to their studies and reintroduces them to the values of AI. This second pledge is positive and encouraging and invites them to study and practice with integrity. The touchpoint for the postcard coincides with students establishing themselves into academic routines and relationships with classmates and teachers. These values mean to establish a subjective norm for the culture in the SHS, and the postcard intends to encourage students to embrace the AI values by forging relationships with others who will help them in their pursuit of learning in an environment that values integrity.

The third pledge occurs with their first evaluation submission. All evaluations, including group work assignments, tests/exams, papers, reflections, lab results, or on-line work must include a signed AI pledge. Essentially, the signed integrity pledge confirms the student's commitment to the values of AI through the work they submit for a mark or grade. Moving forward, the expectation is set that these signed pledges are included with every assignment, with all students, in all programs, and across all years of study. This touchpoint intends to clearly articulate the expectations for authentic, honest work and establish such work as foundational to their learning experience within the SHS.   These signed pledges serve to anchor students to the expectations for their submitted work within the values our learning community cherishes that continue throughout the students' learning experiences.

WE Pledge—The Capstone Academic Integrity Pledge

The capstone-pledging event (WE Pledge) for our students occurs in their first year, second term. This pledge considers part of the framework of a promissory oath described by le Bruin (2016).

1. *Interested Individuals Could Attend or at Least Understand the Intent of the Pledge*

An information letter is posted by faculty through the student learning management system (LMS) ahead of the event and explains what a pledge is, reaffirms what is meant by academic integrity, and explains why students are being encouraged to participate. The events are advertised through our SHS webpage, with invitations sent to senior managers at Humber, and program faculty/staff. All students receive a program specific pin with the values engraved around their future designation (i.e. Early Childhood Educator). Students are encouraged to wear their pins in service placements and talk about their meaning with members of the public in an effort to elicit public interest.

2. *Pledging Events are Part of a Ceremony*

The WE Pledge takes on the form of a ceremony with senior student volunteers, who have completed the pledge in the past, presiding over the event. Invited guests engage students to discuss and consider integrity as it relates to their learning and future professions. Pledging students receive a WE Pledge themed t-shirt that they don before standing as a community to recite the pledge. All attendees stand in solidarity and recite a pledge to study and behave with integrity in all learning environments. Students are encouraged to sign a giant banner with inspirational messages about integrity, later displayed at their graduation ceremonies as a reminder of their WE Pledge event. Finally, the pledging event culminates with cupcakes and informal socializing between invited guests, faculty/staff, and students in an effort to strengthen and celebrate a sense of a learning community committed to integrity.

3. *The Pledge Serves to Express a Function*

This pledge serves to express the commitment of students to study and work within the AI values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. The touchpoint for this pledge coincides with students embarking on their first service or practice experience and serves to reinforce that learning environments are not always just bricks and mortar, and occur in a variety of settings with a variety of people. The continuum of learning from theory to practice is an important touchpoint in that it illustrates and supports students to understand how integrity translates to ethical practice and service.

Planning and Executing AI Pledges—Lessons Learned

Organizations focused on higher education should be shifting from a punitive culture to one that is more consistent with pedagogy. Adopting a developmental approach to academic integrity allows educational organizations to develop cultures of integrity that will situate students to become ethical graduates that are likely better prepared to handle ethical challenges in their chosen careers (Bromley, 2015; McGill, 2008). Promoting integrity within academic learning environments is also a worthwhile endeavour when considering the costs inherent with managing AD, to the organization (costs and time of an investigation, reputation), faculty (stress and time of managing departures from AI), and student (stress, time, financial costs if required to withdraw or repeat a course). Articulating the values important to AI affords higher educational organizations opportunity to describe expected behaviours and "translate ideals to actions" (Milton, 2015, p. 18). If the purpose of higher education extends beyond the teaching of practical and technological knowledge into the "development of the whole, thinking person, cultivation of creativity, maturation of social and cultural sensibilities…what collectively might be called 'life and citizenship knowledge'" (Bryne, 2013, 2 para), than efforts to promote AI should be part of the curriculum and organizations' expectations. In promoting AI, educational organizations in fact, adopt a developmental approach with students appreciating and recognizing that higher education is a journey and a developmental process.

Promoting cultures of AI is complex and requires a varied approach to ensure success and sustainability. It is imperative to encourage and engage all members of the learning community to empower and intrinsically motivate their adoption of behaviours, practices, and attitudes that align to the values of AI. The AI pledge is one such practice that can unite members to a common ambition. Pledges can also support the clear communication of expectations and set the standard for ethical behaviour and conduct, both in the academic and professional setting.

There are a number of practical issues to be considered when planning and implementing pledging initiatives (Figure 1). A review of existing literature that focuses on the content area and existing information related to promoting cultures of AI will inform the processes and approaches organizations take with their efforts and should be the starting point. Additionally, an environmental scan of the organization with a larger scan of other organizations will advise efforts that are meaningful and help to ensure success. Accessing others who can help with these efforts is imperative. A literature search was completed and focused on the literature related to pledging and honour codes. The focused search was supported with the expertise of the SHS librarian. Data and information gleaned from the literature search helped to focus the intended efforts of the initiative. Humber's membership with the International Center for Academic Integrity provided an opportunity to access interested and active specialists at a variety of provincial higher educational organizations who helped to inform the SHS about their current practices and efforts. This consultation proved invaluable in understanding the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead.
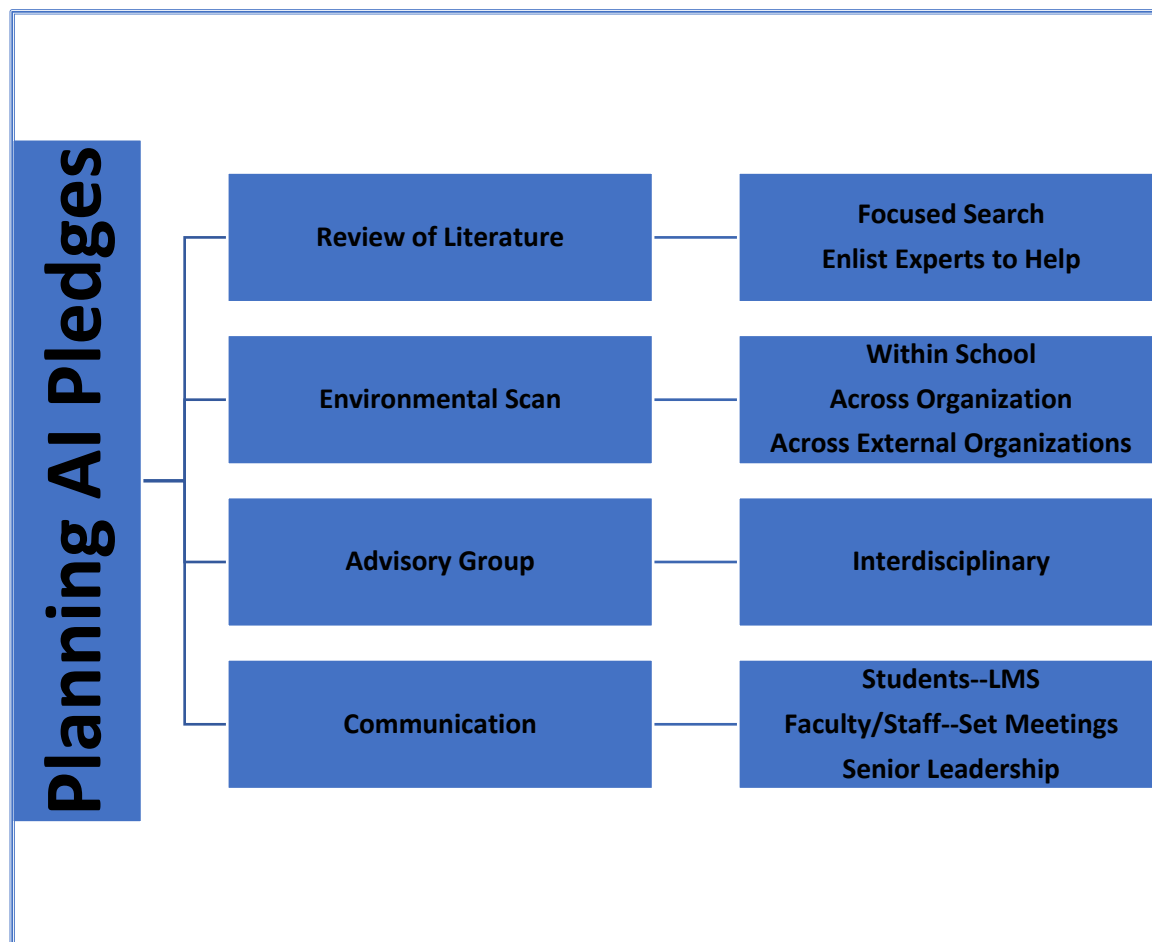
Figure 1. Process Followed to Plan and Operationalize Academic Integrity Pledges.

It is crucial to recognize that schools are complicated and multifaceted organizations that rely on the interactions and interfaces of different groups and systems. Efforts with an initiative like establishing AI pledges across the SHS, need to ensure that these entities are recognized and engaged to support success and ensure sustainability. Once this initial literature search, environmental scan, and consultation with other AI experts were completed, a council with representation from students, faculty, and senior SHS administration was formed in the SHS and served to function as the school's AI council and advisors to the pledging initiatives. The council ensured and allowed for shared perspectives, strategy, and meaningful discussion around the need and implementation of the proposed pledging efforts. The council offered important insight to the timing and approach to pledging initiatives and participated actively in the planning and implementation for the capstone pledging events. Once a robust plan was drafted, the complete SHS senior leadership team was consulted for feedback. This consultation and communication allowed for the consideration of all viewpoints and helped align the

support of senior management to the pledging initiatives. It also ensured that the processes and efforts were thoughtful and applicable to all programs within the SHS.

Communication for pledging plans should cast a wide net to ensure that faculty/staff, senior leadership, and students are well informed and understand the intent and processes involved with all pledging efforts. The AI assignment and test statement was one of the first AI pledging initiatives introduced to all faculty in already set standing meetings, included in student handbooks, on course outlines, and attached as cover sheets on all tests and exams. To support sustainability and continuity of pledging practices, faculty continue to be encouraged by the council and senior leadership to discuss AI pledge statements, their intended meaning and purpose, and include these student signed pledges with all assignments and post information on their course LMSs. The AI postcards that are sent from the Dean for the SHS are deliberately distributed to set first year groups through a specific first year course. Faculty teaching the courses, are contacted and informed of the intent of the postcards, and asked to distribute them in week three or four of their classes to all first year SHS students. The capstone pledge is a large initiative that involves careful planning and depends on the co-operation and help of key students, faculty/staff, and senior leaders within the SHS and across Humber College. First year Program Coordinators (PC) are contacted in the fall to align group-pledging events that align with students' first industry practical experiences. Once dates are finalized venues are booked through the SHS school scheduler and invitations are sent to senior leaders across Humber to address the student groups about the importance of integrity within academics and the professional settings where students will be completing their learning experiences. Invitations are sent to all faculty to invite their participation in their specific program pledging events. Student leaders and student volunteers are recruited through LMS messages. Student leadership is the hallmark of these events as students almost exclusively facilitate them. This effort intends to strengthen the normative culture that all members of the learning community embrace, cherish and believe in the values of AI. It is important to note that student volunteer efforts are recognized through a formal letter from the Chairs of the SHS AI Council that students often include in their professional student portfolios.

Continuing to thread and incorporate AI through the curriculum, and supporting students to understand its alignment to expectations of professional practice, are two opportunities that continue to need development with the SHS. Currently, students who have previously participated in WE Pledge as participants are invited back to lead similar pledges with new students. The Paramedic Program in the SHS is an exemplar that has successfully completed this goal. Each winter semester the first-year students in this program attach their WE Pledge to a workshop that includes a respected paramedic expert as their guest speaker. This expert draws practical examples from the field and aligns them with each of the AI values to bring them to life and support their meaning for students. Continuing to create classroom activities and assignments that help students understand how AI behaviours align to future professional behaviour will offer great opportunities to support students' understanding of their ethical responsibilities in the future. An additional pledge that aligns with convocation ceremonies might also solidify a greater appreciation and link

AI to future ethical practice and is in keeping with le Bruin's description of a promissory oath in the context of a ceremony.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that students, and all members of higher educational communities, benefit when expectations and standards for AI are transparent and heralded. While Dufresne (2004) warns that honour codes are not a panacea to deter acts of academic dishonesty, there is evidence to support the notion that codes and their accompanying academic integrity pledges help clarify and ground expectations for conduct and behaviour. Higher educational organizations that strive to acculturate students to integrity help to ensure quality in teaching/learning practices. Benefits from quality practices, include supporting the development of competently prepared and ethically sound graduates. The adoption of the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage are foundational to vibrant, ethical practitioners, and global citizens. Efforts like AI pledges are important initiatives that offer students concrete opportunities to openly commit to a culture of learning grounded in values that will support their learning and professional success.

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