

Academic Integrity and Student Support During COVID-19

Loie Gervais, University of Manitoba

Keywords: academic integrity, Canada, COVID-19, reflection, student support

Like my friends and colleagues across the country, in March, I scrambled to figure out how to transition my work to a remote environment when COVID-19 hit, and the University of Manitoba physically shut down. I anticipated that this shift would pose challenges, but like many, I didn't fully grasp the duration, creativity, time, or energy that would be required as the university community grappled with navigating academic integrity during a global health crisis.

To my surprise, some aspects of my work seemed to benefit from the shift online. Because working, living, and studying remotely was new for all of us, I found that participants were engaging more meaningfully in a workshop over Zoom than I would typically see in-person. Attendance was up, often due to greater accessibility, and a renewed interest in academic integrity and engagement was high, with many people asking questions they may have been hesitant to bring up in a traditional classroom setting. At one point, I asked a group of students how many were joining us from outside Winnipeg, and the overwhelming majority were in completely different time zones.

On the other hand, another aspect of my work - meeting with students (within the disciplinary process) to identify educational programming that will help them build the skills to be successful and avoid a repeat allegation - posed a significantly bigger challenge. In my experience coordinating this programming over the past few years, students usually presented to their meetings with trepidation. Often, they were angry, embarrassed, or anxious. They were almost always hesitant to talk about what happened and explore what led to the misconduct, for fear of judgement or further incriminating themselves.

Meeting in-person with a student to discuss academic integrity allows them to physically enter a space that is entirely separate from the discipline process. In this space, I aim to facilitate an interaction that helps students to understand that academic integrity is an ongoing learning process, and to focus on the skills and knowledge they can build, rather than the misconduct that occurred. Over the course of these in-person meetings, more often than not, even hostile or resistant students would open up and reflect on the importance of academic integrity and how they could approach their studies moving forward. However, the sensitive nature of these meetings requires building a relationship of trust, which I've found to be particularly challenging over email, phone, or video chat.

Moving into our ninth month of working from home, I've become more comfortable with online brainstorming sessions, presentations, and my cats strutting in front of the camera in the middle of a meeting, but I haven't yet narrowed in on the most effective ways of remotely helping students to work through the emotional aftermath of the discipline process. While a discussion of personal difficulties often emerges naturally during these meetings, most students are still reluctant to talk about their challenges related to academic integrity. The fact that students are often more willing to talk about their financial difficulties or mental health struggles than the accidental plagiarism that occurred in their essays is indicative of the barriers that still exist when it comes to our work in this field.

Now that traditional in-person approaches are not an option, and we've found creative ways to talk about academic integrity in a variety of settings, I'm encouraged and motivated to explore the ways that we can meaningfully support students through difficult circumstances, such as recovering from an academic misconduct allegation. I tell my students that academic integrity is an ongoing learning process, and that the "right" answer is not always clear. I think this is a message that those of us in post-secondary education can also take to heart during these trying times. The year 2020 has pushed us to adapt quickly and think beyond what we have imagined was possible. Even though there are questions for which we still don't have the answer, I believe the skills and practices we have developed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to serve us in our academic integrity work long after we make the return back to campus.