

My Journey to Becoming an Academic Integrity Specialist

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I began 2020 as an EAL Specialist, supporting students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), in a three-year college diploma program. Most of the students I was working with were international students, who had left their home countries and moved to Canada to study. Others were permanent residents or Canadians, and all needed help building the language skills required for their programs and workplaces. The role was enjoyable and meaningful, and I was nearing 20 years of professional work in the field of English language teaching and support for newcomers to Canada.

Three years earlier, I had taken on a small contract at my college, which involved qualitative and quantitative research on academic misconduct among international students. It was not a topic to which I had given much thought prior to taking on the project. In the four months I spent completing the research, I couldn't determine conclusively why rates of academic misconduct were statistically higher among international students, compared to domestic students. Nor could I shake the memory of emotionally raw students who spoke of broken relationships with instructors and classmates after being reported for academic misconduct. I referred multiple students to counselling, some not able to finish our discussion before running out of the room. I knew then that there is more to academic misconduct than teaching students about plagiarism.

In June 2017, as I was wrapping up my research report, I attended the first Academic Integrity Inter-Institutional Meeting (AIIIM) for Manitoba post-secondary institutions. On that day, I connected with instructors, support staff, and faculty development leaders who were looking at academic integrity holistically, as a responsibility held by the entire institution. That day was a game-changer for me, as I realized that post-secondary institutions were reframing the way we teach academic integrity and respond to academic misconduct.

After submitting my report, academic integrity remained as a side-of-desk project. In 2018, I spoke at the second AIIIM, sharing my observations of the shame response expressed by students in my research. I posed the question – Could destructive shame be transformed into productive guilt? This question caught the attention of others, and a cross-institutional collaboration began in hopes of understanding the international student experience more deeply.

In the years that followed, I integrated these new perspectives into my work with students, looking for themes on what makes students successful and what might lead students away from

academic integrity. I connected with colleagues who were also interested in building academic integrity into their work, and found not only instructors, but also librarians, academic specialists, and accommodation specialists eager to support integrity in their work. At every opportunity, I advocated for a coordinated institutional approach to academic integrity, and I connected with provincial and national community practitioners and researchers.

When COVID-19 caused the college to quickly pivot to remote learning, I did all I could to support the cohort of international students with whom I had worked. Faculty were concerned about cheating, and I spoke to senior leadership to encourage clear institutional expectations for students in the remote learning context. At the start of September 2020, I received notice that the enrolment of international students in my assigned program was too low to fund an EAL Specialist. COVID-19, which brought about travel restrictions and health concerns, had cut the expected number of international students in half, and about a third of those who enrolled remained in their home countries. I was laid off.

For 2.5 years, I had been advocating for a dedicated academic integrity position, and the director in our area had been working to make this a reality, noting that remote learning likely sped up the process by making academic integrity a high profile discussion. The time had come to give my attention to that side-of-desk project, which had already been creeping its way into every workday. I became the first Academic Integrity Specialist at my college, and one of a small number who hold that role in Canadian post-secondary. I entered the position with over 3 years' experience in the academic integrity community but started from scratch in building a coordinated institutional response at my college. I have set broad goals for my first year that include revision of academic integrity policy, growing capacity through a committee of stakeholders, and creating practical resources for students and staff. It is no small task, and after each week, I turn off my computer (which is situated between my dining room and living room) and take stock of what has been accomplished. The leaders in my department remind me that the work is a marathon and not a sprint.

I could not have expected the direction my career would take when I graduated from post-secondary 20 years ago. My core goal of teaching and learning has remained the same, but my work has flexed to meet demands. A significant cultural shift, fueled by technology, has changed our lives in the past two decades. It is the reason we are now able to operate colleges and universities from our homes. As always, the responsibilities of a post-secondary institution go beyond delivering subject matter and assessing knowledge; we are developing students into leaders, professionals, and scholars. Building integrity into learning will continue to be important in the coming years, and although an Academic Integrity Specialist can guide the initiative, it will take a village to achieve it.