

Can plagiarism be weeded out?

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To cheat or not to cheat? It's a question scholars have grappled with for generations. For the majority of students, cheating is out of the question because success can only be achieved through honest and hard work, i.e. academic integrity.

Yet there remains a minority of [students](#) who violate university charters and engage in academic misconduct.

According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), there are 1.2 million full- and part-time students enrolled at 95 institutions of higher learning across our nation. How many of them might cheat on their way to [graduation](#) isn't clear.

"But we're getting closer to answering such an important question," says Catherine Bolton, associate dean of student academic services for Concordia's Faculty of Arts and Science. She is currently investigating the topic with Mebs Kanji and Soheyla Salari, who are associate professor and research associate in the Department of Political Science, respectively.

"At the Faculty of Arts and Science, we have just begun to systematically examine ways to bolster academic integrity," she continues.

Bolton and her colleagues have undertaken a new study on academic integrity. They presented their preliminary findings at the 2011 International Conference on Academic Integrity, which occurred in

Toronto from October 14 to 16.

Data collected, so far, is heartening. "We found the vast majority of students earn their degrees without ever being accused of cheating - most don't cheat because of their desire to learn, work hard and succeed," says Bolton. "We also found our institution ensures the highest standards of academic integrity."

Still, at this early stage, the investigation has revealed remarkably consistent patterns that warrant closer attention. "We found most cases of academic misconduct are reported among students enrolled in social science programs," says Bolton. "What's more, our evidence suggests these academic violations typically occur during first-year courses."

The research team found incidents of academic misconduct are reported by a relatively small contingent of professors from a few departments.

"Could it be that professors are underreporting? If so, universities would require an alternative plan of attack," says Bolton. "We need to establish mechanisms to verify whether any incidents are, in fact, being missed."

Additional evidence suggests the bulk of academic misconduct stems from non-exam related incidents, which shows that the Faculty of Arts and Science does have a solid examination culture that's taken seriously by the majority of students.

What is the most frequently cited charge in the Faculty? "Most often, it occurs when students plagiarize and present the work of others without properly acknowledging a source," says Bolton.

Plagiarism continues despite consistent warnings — on course outlines and in public materials directed to new students — spelling out that appropriating the work of others will not be tolerated.

While the reasons students give for committing plagiarism vary, most of these infractions are entirely preventable. "To significantly reduce the problem, professors should clearly define proper citation practices and provide exact guidelines in what's expected for assignments," says Bolton.

Regardless of how much is done to bolster academic integrity, or how much research is conducted on the topic, cheating will never be entirely eliminated. "There's a critical need for universities to have effective measures to identify and correct cases of academic misconduct," says Bolton.

So far, the research team has found disciplinary measures can have rehabilitating results. "When caught, those who are alleged to have broken the code of conduct are usually charged and punished," says Bolton. "Few students, surprisingly, contest such charges. When given a second chance, most students opt to continue with their program and few reoffend."

It's essential that universities consistently remind students that cheating is unethical, is punishable and has consequences for society. "After all, by promoting the importance of academic integrity in higher education, we help shape today's thinkers into tomorrow's leaders," says Bolton.

More information: 2011 International Conference on Academic Integrity: [www.academicintegrity.org/conf ... nces/2011_Conference](http://www.academicintegrity.org/conf...nces/2011_Conference)

Provided by Concordia University

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