Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Cornish]

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Recommended Citation

Cornish, Disa (2016) "Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Cornish]," *UNIversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 6.
Available at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol11/iss1/6

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Part of the journal section "Forum: Building a Culture of Academic Integrity"

Disa Cornish "Building a Culture of Academic Integrity"

1. As an assistant professor in my third year on the faculty, I have seen academic integrity issues in the classroom and am considering strategies to reduce the number that occur. The interesting thing that I "discovered" upon beginning teaching is that most of the teachers in academia weren't trained to be teachers. I was trained how to do public health, how to do the thing, but not how to teach how to do the thing. In the midst of learning how to convey content in a meaningful way, it was easy to let academic integrity fall by the wayside while other "more important" content took priority. It was easy to take for granted that students would know what I knew about academic integrity and that we were starting in the same mental space regarding that issue. When I started teaching I was very much in the graduate school, doctoral program, academia frame of mind. And when I tried to put myself in the shoes of my undergraduate students, I unconsciously stepped into the shoes of a doctoral student, not an undergraduate. That was another factor that led to my taking some things for granted and making assumptions about our shared priorities. I was, admittedly, a little overwhelmed. There was a lot swirling around when I first started. Plagiarism, academic integrity, those were things that definitely got put on the back burner in the face of new preps and learning the ropes.

2. Before beginning my teaching career, my prior encounters with academic integrity issues were limited exclusively to the first-day announcements made by my professors as they warned us against plagiarism when I was in graduate school. Some professors didn't say anything about it at all, but there was an understanding that it was unacceptable. I recall having one professor who required an honesty pledge to be signed and included with every homework assignment or paper we submitted. I worked with cohorts of classmates who took it for granted that no one would plagiarize and that we would cite, cite, cite, and cite some more.

3. Imagine my incredible (and perhaps incredibly naïve) surprise when I encountered academic integrity issues in my very first semester as an assistant professor. I had a graduate student who had essentially copied and pasted large swaths of text in the paper they submitted, without using quotation marks. There was one (incorrectly) formatted citation in three or four pages of text. The next semester, I found portions of undergraduate assignments copied and pasted from Internet sources. The semester after that, a graduate student copied and pasted responses for a homework assignment. I was blown away. But the more I talked with my colleagues the more I began to realize how commonplace it was. It seemed like everyone had a plagiarism story.

4. I started thinking about how I talk about academic integrity with my students. I realized that I needed to be much more intentional about the conversation. We spend a lot of time as faculty thinking about how to engage students in critical thinking and about how to create student-centered learning environments. Why shouldn't ethics be a part of that? I've shifted the way I talk about plagiarism and academic integrity with my students. I still include a paragraph about it in my syllabi, but in addition to that, I started this semester by working with my students to develop shared expectations of one another for the term. We agreed on what I should expect of them and what they should expect of me. Through that conversation, I stressed the point that we share the class. It is OUR class, and its success depends on all of us working together. When I review the syllabus, I do discuss plagiarism and academic integrity. I make sure that everyone understands WHAT it is, but mostly I talk about our shared responsibility to make sure it doesn't happen. I stress that I'm not interested in punishment, I'm interested in all of us learning together how to be respectful of the thinkers who have documented their ideas.

5. I see academic integrity policies as an opportunity for dialogue and education with my students and not part of my punitive toolbox. In my experience, that change in approach from punitive to a skills-based group activity has gone a long way toward reducing the number of academic integrity issues I see.