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Tips to Increase Academic Integrity through Your Course Design

According to research conducted by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) in 2020, “[more than 60 percent of university students](#) freely admitted to cheating in some form.”

Whether cheating on an exam, paying someone to complete an assignment for them, working together on an assignment designed for independent completion, or using the internet to plagiarize entire papers, academic dishonesty can take on countless forms.

We know that will never eliminate academic dishonesty completely. However, while you may not be able to prevent every instance of cheating or plagiarism, it’s important to uphold the standards set by your school and to teach students about academic honesty by making it an intrinsic part of your course design.

What is academic integrity and why does it matter?

Chances are your institution has detailed its definition of academic integrity or academic honesty in an honor code, academic integrity code, or code of academic conduct. These contracts that students enter into with the university are an important source of information for students and a helpful tool for educators. Most definitions of academic integrity encompass a set of values and approaches toward a scholarship that may include honesty, trust, responsibility, respect, and openness.

Academic integrity isn't just about negative, dishonest behaviors like cheating and unauthorized collaboration. Academic integrity is equally about positive, honest behavior like demonstrating personal achievements, recognizing and crediting others' work, receiving feedback with humility, and more.

When accepted and acted on as standards, these behaviors not only foster trust in an individual's academic work, it supports the trustworthiness and credibility of scholarly work at large. In a time when misinformation is rising rapidly and trust in science and institutions of higher education seem to be declining equally as quickly, it's important to remind your students of what is meant by academic integrity and why it's so important. This information is relevant to their lives in the classroom and beyond.

Student motivation should be a part of the academic integrity conversation.

Students don't cheat solely because they have the opportunity to do so. They also do it because they are motivated to. Understanding student motivation is an important step in building academic integrity in your course design. Without first knowing why students might engage in dishonest behavior in your course, how can you hope to address it?

The Center for Teaching Excellence at Boston College has assembled [a collection of teaching strategies](#), including a few on academic integrity, that is incredibly helpful and well organized. In the "Cultivating Academic Integrity" resource they outline the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as follows:

Intrinsic motivation is active in a student who is personally interested in exploring the material at hand because of their curiosity and desire. Students who are intrinsically motivated assign value to doing the task itself, not to a particular outcome."

Extrinsic motivation is active in students who are willing to invest in a task to the extent that it will help them achieve 'extrinsic rewards,' like public praise or money. In the classroom, any number of extrinsic rewards may be operating: good grades, feeling accomplished in relation to peers, admission to graduate or professional school, etc."

The ultimate goal is to help students develop the intrinsic motivation to learn the course material and successfully complete the course. Not all students start a course with this type of motivation, but that doesn't mean it can't be built. Some students might not be passionate about the subject matter, and sometimes students who are may still be inclined to cheat.

Here are a few factors that might motivate students to act dishonestly.

- High-pressure academic environment
- Stress from large courseloads and overlapping assignments
- Stress from external environments like work, home, or community
- Disinterest in course material and/or a failure to see the relevance of the material to their lives
- Lack of confidence in one's own ability to successfully do the work

6 Steps to Building Academic Integrity into Your Course Design

1. Reflect on your students, their challenges, and how your course relates to their broader educational goals.

This goes hand in hand with knowing students' motivation to cheat. As you work to make academic integrity an inherent part of your course, try thinking through what this course means to your students and what their goals and challenges may be. Here are a few questions you can ask yourself.

- **Check your knowledge of your students.** How many students in your course have a strong high school background? How many students in your course are first-generation university students? Do your students understand the purpose of office hours? What is happening in my community and the world that may lead to increased stress and pressure for my students?
- **Question your course.** Is this course a prerequisite to more advanced courses? Is this a first year course where students might be learning about plagiarism for the first time?

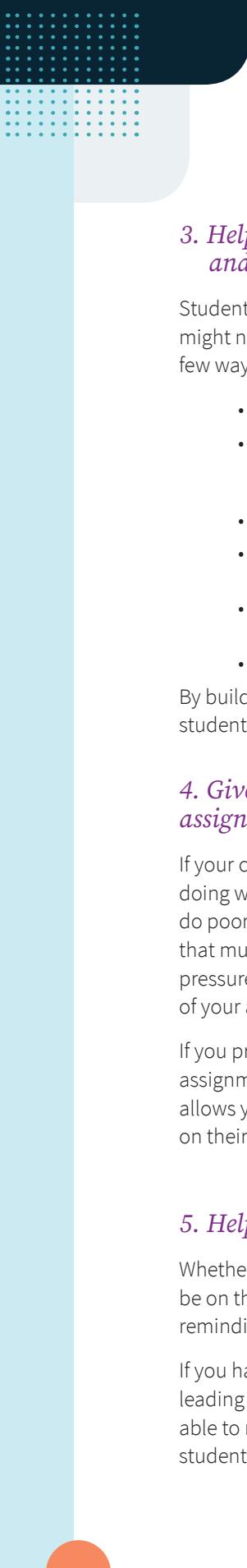
2. Set clear expectations around academic integrity and set them early.

Talk to your students about academic integrity. Define it for them and give them an opportunity to ask you questions.

Writing your own academic integrity statement

In addition to what is set forth by your university, you may also want to create an academic integrity statement. Elements to consider including in your statement might be:

- High-pressure academic environment
- Stress from large courseloads and overlapping assignments
- Stress from external environments like work, home, or community
- When and how these guidelines for academic integrity will be applied



3. Help build intrinsic motivation by showing students the value and relevance of what they're learning.

Students who don't start the semester off with an intrinsic enthusiasm for the course content might need a little nudge to see how exciting, valuable, and relevant your course is. Here are a few ways things you can do to build intrinsic motivation in your course.

- Allow students to co-create parts of the course or syllabus with you.
- Get creative with positive reinforcement instead of negative reinforcement by helping students think of their grade as building up from 0, rather than chipping away from 100.
- Share your passion for the subject with your students.
- Spend time showing students how the information will benefit their future academic and professional success.
- Use examples in your course that feel relevant to your students' lives when possible.
- Get students excited by teaching with case studies.

By building intrinsic motivation, you can work through several common factors that motivate students to engage in dishonest behavior.

4. Give students frequent, low-stakes assessments or try scaffolding assignments.

If your course is only made up of five assignments, each worth 20 percent of the final grade, doing well on each assignment becomes an enormous source of pressure for students. If they do poorly on the first assignment or exam, they may feel their only options are to either work that much harder on the second, or cheat to ensure a good grade. You can help reduce this pressure by adding more frequent, low-stakes assessments to your course or varying the value of your assessments and assignments.

If you prefer not to add assignments to your course, you could instead try scaffolding assignments by breaking down your larger assignments into smaller, sequential steps. This allows you to grade students each step of the way, across the entire process rather than just on their final product.

5. Help your students prepare for exams.

Whether you write your own exams or use pre-built assessments, you know what's going to be on the test. Shouldn't your students know too? Help your students prepare for the exam by reminding them what they should study.

If you have time and/or the support of teaching assistants, you can also hold review sessions leading up to the major exams in your courses like the midterm or the final. You may even be able to replace office hours one week with an open review. These review sessions can give students the reassurance they need to walk into the exam feeling prepared and confident.

6. Practice the academic integrity you preach.

It's important to display the same academic integrity as you ask of your students. It's a no-brainer, but it's important to keep in mind. So, even if you're in a hurry to finish your slides for tomorrow's class, don't forget to cite your image sources. You'd expect your students to do so, and leading by example helps students know what behaviors to embody.

The challenge of academic integrity in online learning environments

Remote learning environments can create unique challenges to academic integrity. It's easy for them to turn their video off or completely tune out.

It's also easier for students to feel detached in an online classroom, and when they're not invested in your teaching or the course material, they may be more inclined to look for shortcuts.

Some ways to combat these additional challenges brought on by online learning include:

- Investing more time in letting the students get to know you
- Holding virtual office hours more frequently
- Set a time limit for tests and quizzes, akin to how much class time they'd have in person
- Start with trust by making tests open book when possible
- Regardless of modality, it's important to show students the value of what they're learning, to build a connection with them, to set a strong example, and to reflect on their motivations.

Fostering academic integrity requires a multi-pronged approach, but with the right tools, and a plan to shape your entire course with it in mind, you can reduce the urge your students have to cheat, giving them a more meaningful experience in your course, no matter the content. How do you build academic integrity into your course design?