

RESOLVING
ALLEGATIONS
OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY
Is There a Role for Students to Play?

Evidence suggests that when students are asked to take responsibility for upholding academic integrity on their campus, they rise to the challenge.

THE TOPIC of academic integrity among college students has received considerable attention in the last decade. One of several emerging themes is the value of increased student involvement in developing, disseminating, and implementing campus policies and procedures designed to address issues of student cheating. In a discussion in *Change* magazine about the increasing prevalence of modified honor codes as a strategy to address issues of academic dishonesty, Donald McCabe and Gary Pavela suggest that “significant

By Donald L. McCabe and Andrew L. Makowski

A recent survey suggests students on many campuses have not been given a meaningful voice in academic integrity policies. We believe this is an issue that demands attention.

student involvement in designing and enforcing campuswide academic integrity policies, and in educating other students about the importance of academic integrity,” is perhaps the most important element of such codes (p. 35). Yet a recent survey suggests students on many campuses have not been given a meaningful voice in academic integrity policies. We believe this is an issue that demands attention.

THE VALUE OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

IN HIS BOOK *Achieving Academic Excellence*, Alexander Astin suggests that the effectiveness of any educational policy is “directly related to the capacity of that policy . . . to increase student involvement” (p. 136). If Astin is correct, academic integrity policies that are developed, implemented, and enforced by campus administrators or faculty without significant student involvement may help explain the high levels of student dishonesty heralded by the media.

In his review of changing “student behavioral rules and the passing of the *in loco parentis* model” (p. xiii), David Hoekema also speaks to the importance of student involvement in the development and implementation of campus conduct policies. Indeed, he forcefully concludes students “will no longer heed a code of conduct handed out like the pronouncements of a distant parent. They insist that their views, their modes of life, and their rights to privacy and self-determination be respected” (p. 64). Hoekema argues that placing “a large measure of responsibility on students for self-regulation is likely to bring about a higher level of compliance and cooperation than would otherwise be obtained. High expectations are often self-fulfilling, as is evident in the

Donald L. McCabe is professor of organization management at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity. He can be reached at atdmccabe@andromeda.rutgers.edu.

Andrew L. Makowski is former chair of the Honor Council at Valparaiso University and is currently a second-year medical student at the Stritch School of Medicine at Loyola University Chicago. He can be reached at amakows@lumc.edu.

relative success of student-controlled honor-code systems in limiting academic dishonesty” (p. 143).

Michael Dannells provides additional support for these arguments. In summarizing his review of the literature on academic dishonesty, Dannells echoes the theme that “students and faculty must be engaged in policy formulation and the adjudication of academic misconduct” (p. 41). Although he argues that student involvement is critical, Dannells notes there has been a decline in such involvement in formulating codes of conduct in recent years. It is not surprising then that Dannells finds “the central theme of [his] recommendations” (p. 94) in the Carnegie Foundation’s report on campus life, which comments on “the need to integrate the academic and nonacademic worlds of students through a broad-based, unified approach to student discipline that demonstrates and reinforces the importance and integrity of institutional values” (p. 94). The report asserts that “the approach must be unified through the collaborative efforts of faculty, administrative staff, and students as they seek to ascertain just what those institutional values are, and how they can best be articulated and enforced for the good of the institution, and for the growth of the individual student” (p. 37, emphasis added).

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND HONOR CODES

ACADEMIC HONOR CODES typically mandate a significant student role in the development of campus policies concerning academic integrity and in the adjudication of allegations of cheating. Thus the arguments of Astin, Hoekema, and Dannells suggest that campuses with honor codes are likely to experience lower levels of academic dishonesty.

Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino found strong empirical support for this view that the level of self-reported academic dishonesty on campuses with traditional academic honor codes was significantly lower than that of campuses with no honor code. These traditional codes usually give primary responsibility for the reporting and adjudication of cheating allegations to stu-

dents and often rely on unproctored tests and examinations. The lowest levels of cheating were found on campuses where students had exclusive responsibility for the campus honor code.

McCabe, Trevino, and Kenneth Butterfield observed similar results in a study of over two thousand students on twenty-one campuses that were surveyed in the 1999–2000 academic year. Interestingly, four campuses in this study (three public and one private) used what have been described as modified honor codes. As McCabe and Pavela suggest in *Change*, although a modified honor code “lacks such traditional elements as unproctored exams and a non-toleration clause, it mandates a major student role in the judicial system” (p. 34). Such codes also encourage “significant student involvement in promoting academic integrity” (p. 34). As our earlier discussion of student involvement suggests, we would expect this greater student role to be associated with lower levels of academic dishonesty, and this was indeed the case. For example, although 45 percent of the survey respondents on campuses with no honor code admitted to one or more incidents of serious test or examination cheating, only 29 percent did so on the campuses with a modified code, and 25 percent did so on the campuses with a traditional academic honor code.

Thus greater student involvement and participation do indeed seem to encourage students to accept greater responsibility for their behavior and appear to be associated with lower levels of self-reported cheating. Such findings led McCabe and Pavela to conclude, “What students need is creative and courageous leadership, grounded in the belief that students—with proper guidance—should play a vital role in designing and enforcing standards of academic integrity” (p. 38).

Unfortunately, data we recently collected from chief student affairs officers at 190 state universities suggest this ideal is far from the reality. These data were generated in a survey mailed to the chief student affairs officer at 421 state universities in the summer of 1999. The undergraduate enrollment at responding institutions ranged from 916 to 35,486, with a mean enrollment of 6,971 students. Sixty-one schools were located in thirteen southern states, 46 were located in thirteen mid-western states, 45 were located in eight northeastern

states, and 38 were located in twelve western states. (No responses were received from four small states in the Northeast.) A number of schools returned surveys with missing data, and, where possible, their responses were supplemented with information from the schools’ written policies or Web sites. These combined approaches yielded data on the role of students in the judicial process on 130 of the 190 responding campuses (68 percent).

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN RESOLVING ALLEGATIONS OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

ALTHOUGH not present on all campuses, hearing boards responsible for resolving allegations of academic dishonesty form one of the primary vehicles through which students become involved in the judicial process. The role students play on these boards is critical because it is typically the first, and often the only, role that gives students real authority in the process.

Perhaps the most telling summary statistic about the student role on these boards is that, of the 130 campuses for which we were able to generate data on the composition of hearing boards, only 16 campuses (12 percent) give students enough votes to render a finding of responsibility or innocence without support from at least one faculty member or administrator on the board. In contrast, faculty or administrators on the hearing board may find a student responsible or innocent of an allegation of academic dishonesty without any student support on at least 76 of these 130 campuses (58 percent). At the remaining 38 schools, some combination of student and faculty or administrator votes seems to be required for a finding of responsibility. Of course, we lack data on board composition at some schools because they do not use hearing boards. Students apparently have no role in the judicial process on these campuses.

The strong role of faculty and administrators in the judicial process is also reflected in data about who may serve as chair of the judicial hearing board. In our sample a faculty member serves as chair on 47 percent of the campuses surveyed, an administrator does so on

The lowest levels of cheating were found on campuses where students had exclusive responsibility for the campus honor code.

In light of the growing evidence that higher levels of student involvement in campus activities are associated with positive outcomes, it is difficult to understand why more campuses have not expanded the role of students in their judicial process.

27 percent, and a student occupies this role on only 10 percent. On the remaining campuses (16 percent), the chair is either elected or appointed and apparently can be a student, although it is not clear whether this happens very often.

The dominant role of faculty in addressing allegations of student academic dishonesty may be even greater than these data suggest. When asked how faculty members are expected to address incidents of suspected student cheating in their courses, the majority of campuses responding to this question (58 percent) indicated that faculty members are either encouraged or allowed to deal directly with such allegations. Another 18 percent indicated that their policy makes no statement about faculty reporting of such incidents. Anecdotal evidence obtained in previous student surveys of academic dishonesty suggests that on at least some occasions students feel faculty abuse this privilege. For example, some faculty members will apparently “negotiate” a resolution with a student by explaining that the dean or hearing board is likely to administer a much harsher penalty. Even an innocent student often will decide not to risk a possible finding of guilt in such circumstances. Furthermore, such a faculty-brokered penalty essentially eliminates a student’s right of appeal. Because few campuses that allow direct faculty resolution require faculty members to report such incidents, it is not clear what level of abuse, if any, may be occurring.

Clearly, students on the majority of campuses responding to our survey play a relatively minor role in the judicial process. Indeed, our data suggest that students play a relatively minor role even on campuses that use hearing boards. On these campuses students can be found responsible for academic dishonesty even if their peers on the hearing board unanimously agree that an accused student is innocent (that is, faculty or administrator votes alone are sufficient for conviction). Students on only 12 percent of these campuses have the ability to render a decision without some faculty or administrator support. In addition, on many campuses hearing

boards apparently play no role in resolving allegations of academic dishonesty, and students seem to have no voice at all in the judicial process.

In light of the growing evidence that higher levels of student involvement in campus activities are associated with positive outcomes, it is difficult to understand why more campuses have not expanded the role of students in their judicial process. The success of traditional academic honor codes, in which students are given significant levels of responsibility, suggests properly motivated and trained students take this role very seriously. McCabe and Trevino argue that an attitude of “we” (students) versus “they” (faculty and administration) develops on many campuses, and whatever “we” can get away with is acceptable. Compare this with what McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield have demonstrated about students on campuses with honor codes, who generally feel a greater responsibility for academic integrity than their peers at institutions without such codes. As a result, for students on campuses with honor codes there often is no “they” with regard to academic integrity, which is a community responsibility shared by all.

We believe that the level of responsibility for academic integrity placed on students on campuses with honor codes and their strong and active involvement in the judicial process largely explain this positive attitude toward academic integrity. Although it is possible to achieve such an attitude on a campus that does not have an honor code, it is significantly more difficult and does not appear to happen very often. As demonstrated by McCabe and Pavela, it appears that at least some of the positive outcomes achieved on campuses with honor codes can also be achieved through a modified honor code. The higher level of student involvement associated with most modified honor codes may well be a primary factor. Astin’s thesis that the effectiveness of any campus policy is related to the degree to which it encourages students to become actively engaged in that policy also argues in favor of

adopting academic integrity policies that call for greater student involvement and responsibility.

On the basis of these findings, one might argue that every campus should develop a student-run honor code, but we would stop short of such a recommendation, because few campuses are ready to adopt such codes. Most traditional honor codes rest on long-standing campus traditions that have developed over decades (over more than a century in many cases) and have become an integral part of the campus culture. Such traditions will not be duplicated easily or quickly on other campuses.

Thus the answer for most campuses may be movement toward a modified honor code, with a minimum objective of increasing the level of student involvement and participation to help establish a sense of student ownership of, and responsibility for, academic integrity. Readers who are interested in a discussion of modified honor codes should see the article in *Change* by McCabe and Pavela. In the context of this article, we would argue that it is essential that campuses review the role students play in their current academic integrity policies and consider expanding that role. A reasonable initial goal might be creating a process in which a hearing board cannot find a student responsible for a violation of the campus's academic integrity policy by faculty or administrative vote alone. The most typical size of the hearing boards in our sample was five members. We would recommend that students have three votes on a five-member board if a simple majority is all that is required for a finding of responsibility. This would give students real control of the process yet would also allow for faculty or administrator presence on the board, which is of value in promoting full, shared community responsibility for academic integrity. The exact details, however, are less important than the principle of sharing more control and responsibility with students.

Although we respect the role of all-student honor boards on campuses with long-standing honor code traditions, we would argue that for most campuses, boards composed solely of students or faculty have inherent limits that often can be overcome only by including the other party. A board consisting entirely of students will always lack the experience and broad knowledge of precedent that faculty members can provide, because the maximum student tenure on boards is generally four years. Boards composed entirely of faculty members or administrators do not possess the student perspective

required to discuss adequately issues in which student interpretation plays a critical role—for example, students' perception of what was meant or implied by an ambiguous definition of "authorized aid" on a professor's syllabus. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the outcome of a hearing is seldom decided by a vote in which all students and all professors assume opposite sides of the argument. Consequently, the tremendous advantage of a mixed board lies in the ability of both students and faculty to vocalize arguments that are unique to their perspective. The influence of students or faculty members extends beyond the number of votes they cast and includes the sway their arguments can have on the other members of the board, even if their opinion represents the minority.

We agree with Dannells that any approach to student discipline must involve a collaboration among faculty, administrative staff, and students. Although we feel the evidence for the efficacy of such efforts is compelling, clearly it is not the reality on many, and perhaps most, campuses around the country. All campus constituencies ultimately need to be involved in any movement to change this reality, but certainly one could argue that senior administrators and student affairs executives have an obligation to initiate or catalyze this process on their campuses.

NOTES

- Astin, A. W. *Achieving Academic Excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.
- Dannells, M. *From Discipline to Development: Rethinking Student Conduct in Higher Education*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, vol. 25, no. 2. Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1997.
- Hoekema, D. A. *Campus Rules and Moral Community*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993.
- McCabe, D. L., and Pavela, G. "Some Good News About Academic Integrity." *Change*, 2000, 33(5), 32–38.
- McCabe, D. L., and Trevino, L. K. "Academic Dishonesty: Honor Codes and Other Contextual Influences." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1993, 64(5), 522–538.
- McCabe, D. L., Trevino, L. K., and Butterfield, K. D. "Academic Integrity in Honor Code and Non-Honor Code Environments: A Qualitative Investigation." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1999, 70(2), 211–234.

