Student-Led Sessions on Academic Integrity in Orientation: An Innovative Response to Academic Misconduct

Mark C. Baetz and Detlev Nitsch

This paper describes the rationale for involving students as facilitators of sessions on academic integrity during orientation as an innovative institutional response to academic misconduct. Based on literature related to ethics and academic integrity, the feedback from participating students yielded both expected and unexpected results. Comments from the participating students also became useful in subsequent classroom presentations by faculty as part of class discussions of issues associated with academic misconduct.

According to Christensen Hughes and McCabe (2006), "institutions of higher education need to develop comprehensive strategies for dealing with academic misconduct [such as] special educational programming for incoming students…to reinforce the message that academic misconduct will not be tolerated" (p. 17–18). This paper describes an innovative approach to such educational programming, using students as facilitators of sessions on academic integrity during orientation. These students were given the title, "Academic Integrity Ambassador" (hereafter, ambassador). The academic integrity sessions were advertised as a "mandatory" part of the orientation experience and were positioned as one of the first activities of the five-day orientation week which included both academic and non-academic programming. Orientation week occurred immediately before the beginning of classes. Feedback from both the ambassadors and students receiving the sessions yielded both expected and unexpected results based on literature dealing with ethics and academic integrity. Ambassadors' feedback comments were subsequently incorporated into classroom presentations on academic integrity by faculty for encouraging further dialogue between faculty and students about the various issues associated with academic misconduct.

The university involved in this new approach to orientation is Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), a publicly-funded Canadian institution in the Province of Ontario. In 2009, approximately 14,000 students, primarily undergraduates, attended the university.

Mark C. Baetz (mbaetz@wlu.ca) is a Professor of Business in the School of Business and Economics at Wilfrid Laurier University.
Detlev Nitsch (dnitsch@wlu.ca) is an Associate Professor of Business in the School of Business and Economics at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The Rationale for Student-Led Sessions on Academic Integrity

While students do not always consider academic misconduct as unethical behavior (Cole & Kiss, 2000), there is an obvious connection between ethical values and academic integrity. However, in order to make the connection, "the learning environment should be highly interactive … [and] discussion-oriented and focused on the active exchange of ideas" (Felton & Sims, 2005, p. 384). One way to encourage discussion is to ensure a "safe, receptive space" (Sims, 2004, p. 204). Incoming students are more likely to perceive a "safe and receptive space" for discussion if the discussion leader in this "space" is a student rather than an individual in an authoritarian role such as a faculty member or university administrator.

A key premise of these orientation sessions relates to the literature on codes of conduct. It has been suggested that there are three possible methods for implementing an ethical code of conduct: formal, informal, and personal control (Adam & Rachman-Moore, 2004). It was expected that student-led sessions on academic integrity could be effective because they had the potential for implementing the university's codes of academic misconduct using all three methods. As a "formal" method, these sessions represented formal training about the details of the written code and enforcement processes. As an "informal" method, it provided the students leading the sessions the opportunity to contribute to the "social dimension" and "social norms" of the university "through everyday interaction" in non-formal settings with other students following the sessions. Student leaders were also able to set an example through positive role modeling during and after the sessions (Adam & Rachman-Moore, 2004, p. 228). Finally, while implementing the "personal control" method, the ambassadors could be affected by their role as they attempted to reflect in their behavior both their personal values and the university policies. At the same time, the personal control method can be problematic if there is a "personal realization of a gap between what is preached by the organization and what is practiced [which] could bring about not only a sense of disillusionment, but also disappointment in the organization's ethical capacity" (Adam & Rachman-Moore, 2004, p. 239).

Another reason to have students lead these sessions is that the incoming students will view them as peers, which is significant since "students about to come to college are intensely interested in the peer culture they will encounter" (McCabe & Pavela, 2000, p. 36). In one study assessing various institutional variables which affect academic misconduct, perceptions of peers' cheating behaviors had the strongest association with student cheating levels (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Later research found that observed peer behavior has the largest effect on cheating among graduate students (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2006). Furthermore, "peer training is better than consultant-led training" for educating about ethics codes (Nitkin, 2004, p. 95). According to culture conflict theory (Eve & Bromley, 1981), if students accept the notion that everyone in their culture (i.e., university) cheats, they will be more likely to do so themselves. When senior students, who are clearly a part of the student culture, indicate in no uncertain terms that cheating

is unacceptable and not part of the culture, new students will be encouraged to choose not to cheat.

The students leading the sessions can give personal messages to other students about academic integrity that no one else can, resulting in an important emotional connection to the session content (Kuhn, 1998). For example in describing the consequences of academic misconduct, they can say, "If you cheat, you are devaluing my degree." If they have been caught, they can describe the personal consequences (e.g., being embarrassed to tell parents and/or friends about what happened). If they observed other students engaging in academic misconduct and not being penalized, they can describe a personal temptation to cheat in self defense (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Or, if the other student is a friend, they can describe the personal conflict of interest involved, as noted in Exhibit 1.

With this rationale and these premises, new sessions on academic integrity were introduced. In order to encourage an active exchange of ideas, each group was limited to 20–25 students. The students leading these sessions attended a two-hour training session to review a PowerPoint presentation developed by both faculty and staff. The training session also included an overview of the various premises for these sessions based on the literature as described in the preceding paragraphs. Various administrators attended this training session to reinforce the importance of academic integrity to the institution. The prepared PowerPoint included slides illustrating how fundamental ethical values could be connected to academic integrity issues (see Exhibit 1). The presentation also included a review of the various stakeholders harmed by cheating, academic misconduct policies including a definition of academic misconduct, some penalties associated with academic misconduct, and university resources available for ensuring academic integrity.

EXHIBIT 1

Connecting Fundamental Ethical Values to Academic Integrity

(1) Trustworthiness

    Honesty:
    Be honest (e.g., don't pretend the work of others is your own).

    Integrity:
    Stick to your values, despite short-term loss (e.g., avoid academic misconduct even if it means loss of grades).

    Reliability:
    Fulfill commitments (e.g., meet deadlines for assignments and group contributions).

    Loyalty:
    Avoid conflicts of interest (e.g., do not assist a "friend" who is seeking unauthorized help).

EXHIBIT 1 (CONT.)

(2) Respect
Respect the rights of others (e.g., acknowledge the ideas and work of others).

(3) Responsibility
Take responsibility for:
a)   your own actions (e.g., if you cross the line, accept the consequences without blaming others or resorting to excuses: don't search for loopholes to avoid punishment).
b)   the actions of others (e.g., take measures to discourage or prevent misconduct by classmates/friends).

(4) Fairness
Treat stakeholders fairly (e.g., ensure that you and your classmates have a level playing field in the quest for scholarships, job interviews).

(5) Caring
Avoid unnecessary harm; act benevolently (e.g., avoid harming yourself and others through academic misconduct).

(6) Citizenship
Obey the law (e.g., as a member of the WLU community, follow university policies and rules).

Note: The list of the six fundamental values were adapted from Schwartz (2002) and interpreted in the academic integrity context by the current authors.

Assessing Student Feedback on Orientation Sessions

A total of 108 students out of the 454 participating in the sessions in the launch year provided open-ended feedback on a form distributed at the end of the session. Twenty-four ambassadors out of 84 involved in two subsequent years of this initiative also provided feedback through an e-mail survey questionnaire. The following questions were included in the survey:
•   Describe why you agreed to be an Integrity Ambassador in orientation week.
•   Did you speak to your friends (positively or negatively) about being an Integrity Ambassador?
•   Since you led the orientation week sessions last September, have you had any opportunity to reinforce the messages about academic integrity to other students?
•   In your role as an Integrity Ambassador, what did you learn about

academic integrity that affected you the most?
- Did this role influence your behavior or actions in your course work?
- Since undertaking this position, how would you describe its overall impact on you?

The results were then categorized using the three categories of formal, informal, and personal control impacts. Other feedback was also categorized in terms of additional issues raised, such as the role of the faculty.

Feedback from Ambassadors

Ambassadors provided evidence that the sessions had a formal impact. Nine ambassadors (38%) indicated increased awareness of the details in the formal policies and enforcement procedures related to academic misconduct. (e.g., "previously unaware that submitting the same assignment in two different courses is plagiarism").

There was evidence of informal impact given that five ambassadors (21%) explicitly referred to themselves as being a "role model." One commented as follows: "It's a great opportunity for the students actually presenting the lesson because they also take [the university's] misconduct more seriously since they are a role model." Eighteen ambassadors (75%) indicated they had an opportunity to reinforce the messages about academic integrity to other students in the months following the sessions in a variety of settings. Some of these settings were formal, such as in a lab as a teaching assistant, tutoring, or conversing with prospective students at a university open house. Other reinforcement took place in more informal settings, such as telling friends how to handle certain situations, telling siblings, and having "more confidence to stand up to fellow students who discuss cheating." One ambassador noted, "It is amazing how often it comes up in daily discussion during the academic year."

In terms of personal control, nine ambassadors (38%) indicated being more careful in avoiding academic misconduct (e.g., "more conscious [concerning]… how far I was willing to help out others," or "more conscious of citations"). Some of these ambassadors indicated being more careful because they were role models (e.g., "it would look really bad if an academic integrity ambassador cheated or plagiarized").

There was also some unexpected feedback. Three ambassadors (13%) expressed "shock," "being upset," or "surprise" when they learned during and after the sessions about high levels of academic misconduct both in high school and at the university (e.g., "I didn't think that that kind of dishonesty was so commonplace"). Furthermore, two ambassadors (8%) were disappointed in the perceived actions of faculty (e.g., not changing questions for a deferred exam, or not penalizing students for unauthorized collaboration). In other words, these ambassadors were disappointed in the university's "ethical capacity" (Adam & Rachman-Moore, 2004, p. 239).

The feedback suggested that the sessions were not always discussion oriented. Eight ambassadors (33%) commented on the challenges of engaging the students

in active dialogue either because the students were disinterested (e.g., "I was very surprised at how many students considered academic misconduct 'no big deal,' especially in their high school communities") or because of the presentation style (e.g., "I felt like I was preaching [and] needed more relevant personal examples"). One ambassador described the frustration involved as follows: "Some first-year [students] were not interested regardless of the way I delivered my message."

One ambassador commented on the significance of having a student lead the session: "I think that it's important to get the students involved in this process. It's better hearing the message from other students than some older professor or authority figure." Among the 16 ambassadors who did not comment on the challenges in achieving meaningful discussion, one noted: "I told [my friends] that I felt very proud to be involved in the process, and that the students' response to my sessions was very positive and encouraging." Overall, different ambassadors had varied experiences in these sessions, not unlike the experience of teaching multiple sections of the same course where there may not be consistency in levels of student participation in discussion of the same material.

In terms of reinforcing the connections to ethical values (as illustrated in Exhibit 1 above), the most frequent connection involved an articulation of the harms resulting from academic misconduct (e.g., "huge life changes," "bad press is really bad," "devalues degree"). Other values mentioned included fairness (e.g., "a level playing field"), trust and respect (e.g., "I hope this role will earn more trust and respect from my peers and professors"), and responsibility (e.g., "the responsibility we all have to maintain the legitimacy of the degree"). Some ambassadors commented on the connection to ethics in different ways:

- "[This role] is like taking a class on ethics; it suddenly becomes something you see in everyday life."
- "I am more aware of how challenging ethical dilemmas can be for some people. Many of my students talked about the stress of the end of the academic year, and having many evaluations due at the same time, and how sometimes you had to cut corners just to stay on top of everything, let alone trying to get ahead. These were high school students who hadn't yet experienced university stress. I then realized how important these sessions were for students and the university."

It was not clear whether, in their references to ethical issues and their assessment of the impact of the sessions, the ambassadors made an obvious reference to the slides which had been developed for them connecting fundamental ethical values to academic integrity. In fact, in a subsequent year when the ambassadors were given a greater role in developing the PowerPoint presentation for orientation week, reference to specific fundamental ethical values was not included in the PowerPoint.

Feedback from Students Receiving Sessions

Of the 108 students receiving the sessions who provided open-ended feedback, 81 were clearly positive about the process; that is, they provided at least one positive comment and no negative comments. As with the ambassadors, there was evidence that the session had formal impact since some students indicated increased awareness of the details in the formal policies and enforcement procedures (e.g., there "was a lot I didn't know"). Some of the positive comments related to the session format encouraging interaction (e.g., ambassadors were "very easy to talk and ask questions [of];" "small size made you feel important"). One noted the significance of the student as session facilitator: It's "best to hear from a student because we realize what a temptation cheating can be, but it can be overcome."

Fourteen students were neutral in providing comments about cheating and/or suggestions for future sessions. Among these students, some were clearly disillusioned with their high school experience, as illustrated in the following comments:

- "There is more cheating in high school because of ignorance of what cheating is. Teachers do not have time/resources/knowledge to catch cheaters, and there are no penalties."
- "Numerous times, students in Grade 12 cheated on tests using obvious methods, yet the teacher did not pay attention or provide adequate supervision—I don't know or understand [this]."
- "At my high school, some of the teachers are 'old school' and seem not to care about cheaters… People would frequently leave open books or cheat sheets under the desks for easy viewing."

There were seven students who provided mixed feedback with positive and negative comments, and six students had only negative comments. One comment noted that the session was "very boring, very slow moving." Another negative comment that "there is no degree of cheating, it's just cheating" contradicted another student's comment that "cheating is a complicated topic. There are different forms…reasons for cheating…extents of cheating…."

Further Reinforcement

In order to further reinforce the content of the orientation sessions and capitalize on the comments made by the ambassadors, new classroom presentations were developed for delivery by faculty as part of their courses. These new presentations were designed to encourage dialogue between the faculty and students about the various issues associated with academic misconduct using examples of reflections from the ambassadors about their orientation week experience. It was believed that the ambassadors' words in these reflections would help to promote a more interactive environment than a lecture on academic misconduct policies. Examples of five ambassador reflections chosen for these new presentations are outlined in Exhibit 2, along with suggested discussion questions associated with these reflections. The four themes of defining academic

misconduct, detection, consequences, and importance of academic integrity were the same four themes which had been suggested by the ambassadors for the content of the orientation week sessions.

EXHIBIT 2

Reflections of Academic Integrity Ambassadors for Subsequent Classroom Discussion

Reflection #1: Defining Academic Misconduct

"I told my friends about the different ways someone can be academically dishonest, as some were surprising to me."

(1) How confident are you in knowing what constitutes academic misconduct in this course?
(2) Do you ever discuss academic integrity with your friends? If so, how often and why would this matter?

Reflection #2: Detection

"I know and have seen people cheating… Knowing that the university is trying to do something about this makes me feel better about my school and the integrity of my degree."

(1) What affects the likelihood of a student reporting another student who is observed cheating?
(2) How is academic misconduct detected in this course?

Reflection #3: Consequences

"The reality of the consequences …I never really knew that it did happen [here] and that real students experience huge life changes…."

(1) What types of "huge life changes" can result from academic misconduct?
(2) What makes for a "fair" penalty for academic misconduct?

Reflection #4: Importance of Academic Integrity

"Most people don't see [cheating] as being as big an issue or problem as it is. Some students feel that academic misconduct occurs in a vacuum, and that the misconduct of others doesn't reflect as poorly on them as it actually does."

(1) Why might some students feel academic misconduct is not a big problem?
(2) Who is affected by academic misconduct?

Final Reflection

"Being a responsible, moral, and ethical citizen of [this university] and the community are important to me… Taking more of a leadership role in the sessions has reinforced to me that I can make a difference and that everyone helps to set an example for everybody else."

(1) Do you feel that you can "make a difference" by helping to "set an example" for other students?

Conclusion

Based on student feedback, student-led orientation sessions on academic integrity at Wilfrid Laurier University had a number of positive impacts related to formal, informal, and personal control methods for implementing the university's academic misconduct policies. It was less obvious that these sessions also increased awareness of the connections between ethical values and academic integrity; as noted above, a specific connection between these values and academic integrity was not included when the ambassadors were given the opportunity to develop the content of the sessions. Furthermore, there can be some unexpected negative results, such as disillusionment about the possibility for encouraging an active exchange of ideas in orientation sessions when some incoming students appear to be apathetic about high levels of academic misconduct. There may even be disillusionment about faculty behavior in not enforcing the written code dealing with academic misconduct. Nevertheless, an important outcome of capturing the feedback from these sessions is that such feedback can become particularly useful for generating subsequent classroom dialogue between faculty and students concerning the various issues associated with academic misconduct.

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