Preserving and Promoting Academic Integrity in a Changing Post-secondary Landscape

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Abstract
Rapid and necessary changes to the delivery of education in the post-secondary setting during COVID challenged our traditional ways of thinking, being, and doing within higher education. Preserving and promoting academic integrity during these uncertain times were challenging and required a focused, thoughtful, and deliberate shared approach. One faculty within a large urban Canadian post-secondary setting set out to strategically plan efforts that would support and promote integrity within their Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellness. A framework co-created by one of the authors served to anchor the discussions and planning, ensuring initiatives that effectively reach out to students, faculty, staff, and leadership are being realized through deliberate actions that engage the different groups within our community. Examples include an extended membership with the International Centre for Academic Integrity for our leaders, a newly established Community of Practice for interested faculty and staff, and focused campaigns like the Boost and Bolster fall campaign for students, faculty, staff, and leadership. Lessons from this work could offer other higher educational organizations suggestions for similar work.

Introduction

Dramatic changes to how post-secondary education is delivered can be directly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the initial upheaval and chaos were sources of stress for all members of the learning community, the pandemic also served as a catalyst for an overall discussion about our approach to post-secondary higher education and the need to revitalize our thinking and educational efforts (Goldberg, et al. 2021; Steinberger et al., 2021). The pandemic dictated an urgent, abrupt, and immediate change to the delivery of educational programs through virtual online platforms that ran both synchronously and asynchronously. This dramatic shift did not negate the need for quality educational offerings, nor did it preclude the need for our continued educational efforts with content and processes that remained anchored in academic integrity (Reedy et al., 2021).

The merits of learning within post-secondary organizations that value and cultivate integrity include the ability to achieve high standards of excellence so

that students obtain the required knowledge, skills, and ethical comportments important and necessary to their future careers (Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020; Miron, 2016). While there is debate on how academic integrity is best or most effectively preserved through the online delivery of education, the benefits, importance, and need for the work of promoting learning cultures of honesty remains undeniable. This article outlines the work of the Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellness (FHSW) Academic Integrity Council (AIC) at Humber College ITAL, to promote the shared responsibility of integrity across our teaching-learning settings. Specifically, a description of the FHSW - AIC's strategic planning efforts undertaken using the Promoting Academic Integrity Framework (Figure 1), the outcomes of the strategic planning efforts, and commentary on future opportunities will be discussed.

Review

An overarching definition of academic integrity includes the notion of an unwavering commitment to values that support educational integrity like honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (International Centre for Academic Integrity, 2021). Such commitment is expected throughout the learning experience, despite adversity and regardless of location for learning. Breaches or departures from academic integrity have been described in terms of academic misconduct and academic dishonesty. Such breaches include deliberate acts aimed at evading set expectations for evaluation and include acts of plagiarism, fraud, unauthorized sharing, test cheating, and contract cheating, to name a few. Such acts create circumstances that are unfair to other students and threaten the integrity of learning and the work done within post-secondary settings.

It is important to note that the pandemic created challenging and unprecedented circumstances that pushed educators and learners to a virtual world that not all were completely prepared to embrace (Butnaru et al., 2021; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021; Sands & Shushok, 2020). It has been argued that our lack of preparedness for the catapult to virtual learning jeopardized integrity across learning settings with reports of an increase in departures from academic integrity with students from across a variety of programs in post-secondary settings (Amzalag, et al., 2022; Comas-Forgas et al., 2021; Dodak et al., 2021; Ikram, 2021; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Steinberger et al., 2021; Verhoef & Coetser, 2021).
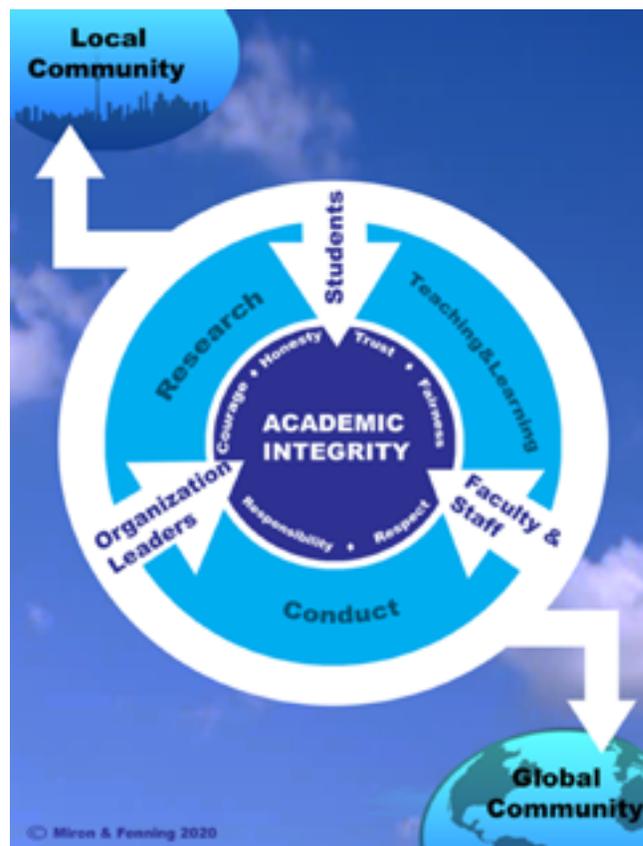

Figure 1. Promoting Academic Integrity Framework

Amzalag and colleagues (2021) noted that higher education students (N=81) in several schools across Israel reported cheating on online tests during the pandemic, when they thought there was little risk of getting caught, disliked the professor, or were experiencing academic difficulties. A search engine data review in Spain revealed that higher education students' activities increased during COVID relative to searches for ways to cheat online (p<0.05; Comas-Forgas et al., 2021). Comas-Forgas and colleagues theorized that the increase was suggestive of an increase in student cheating on online exams. Dodak et al. (2021) found that Turkish students took advantage of technology to cheat during COVID (p<0.05; N=30) in their study of economics students. A retrospective study of undergraduate Pakistani medical students (N=97) compared exam results from online versus traditional approaches (Ikram, & Ali Rabbani, 2021). The reduced explanatory power of their predictor model suggested a higher incidence of dishonesty for online examinations. The researchers also noted that the "scarcity of resources and IT infrastructure, lack of training and acceptance among students and faculty, and fear of compromised academic integrity" (Ikram,

& Ali Rabbani, 2021, e13911) may have contributed to integrity violation issues. A review of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students' requests to a file-sharing site (Chegg) over a two-year period revealed the impact of COVID-19 with a noted increase of 196% for questions asked with an expected live short turn-around response (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). This finding suggests that students can get live responses to online exam questions quickly and the researchers noted this increase corresponded with the move to online testing during the pandemic. The finding gives merit to worries that integrity of online testing is at risk for breaches. Steinberger et al. (2021) reported that in their study of social science undergraduates (N=316), limited interpersonal communication and social interaction during the learning experience intensified student stress and increased their likelihood of engaging in academic dishonesty (p. 13). Increased stress was only one reason for departures from academic integrity reported by South African students (N=10) who shared their perspectives on academic integrity during COVID while learning online. They also suggested dishonest behaviour was higher because of poor time management skills and student struggles with technology (Verhoef & Coetser, 2021). While none of these studies address the Canadian student perspective specifically, it is not unlikely that our post-secondary students are any different. In fact, this lack of Canadian literature may be more an indication of the general issue of our slow growing literature on academic integrity in Canada, and the continued need for Canadian-focused research and writing on the topic.

Tracking departures from academic integrity within our faculty has been challenging but certainly the concern of increased rates of dishonesty was anecdotally reported by faculty and students. Faculty had firsthand experiences with online testing integrity as noted through a number of different metrics like discrepancies in how long students were taking to complete one question, suggesting that they were waiting to find out how others answered once they got to that question on a test or exam. Faculty reported students sharing assignments despite clear directions that prohibited such sharing and concerns about the accuracy of who was in fact writing or completing assignments that would be graded. Students anecdotally shared examples where they felt pressured to participate in groups that were working together to circumvent a particular test or assignment through shared social media sites. It is also important to note that both groups shared how stressful these events and interactions were and how challenging it was to maintain integrity within the evaluation processes. Externally, the surge of incidences of departures from academic integrity during the pandemic was national and international realities, sparking concern for the quality of our educational programs and future educational offerings (Cullen, 2021).

These experiences and the literature made it clear that creating and sustaining cultures of learning integrity dictate the need for a multi-dimensional undertaking, with cooperation and commitment of all learning community members (Gamage et al., 2020). These realities inspired the strategic planning efforts for the Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellness – Academic Integrity Council (FHSW – AIC).

Method

The FHSW – AIC

The FHSW – AIC was struck in 2013 with the mandate of advising the Senior Dean for matters related to promoting and enhancing academic practices across the Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellness. The council consists of membership from within the FHSW and across Humber to ensure robust and diverse perspectives (e.g., Humber Library, Humber Testing Services). Students are an integral part of the council and while they do not sit on the council, they are engaged at different points in planning and delivering student academic integrity offerings. Students have participated in professional presentations and a variety of international activities. The council is co-chaired by a faculty member and a coordinator who herald from two different programs within the FHSW.

The Faculty of Health Sciences & Wellness (FHSW) Framework

A framework (Figure 1) developed by the co-chairs of the FHSW Academic Integrity Council served to ground the efforts of council members to create a plan to continue the building and strengthening of an academic integrity culture. All members of the learning community were considered within the context of the strategic planning to ensure that the plan would support a shared commitment and responsibility to building and strengthening an academic integrity culture. Within the integrity culture the framework supported the Council to consider teaching/learning, research, and how we might positively influence the conduct of all members of our learning community to be consistent with integrity

behaviours (see Figure 1). The FHSW Academic Integrity Council met virtually to brainstorm and discuss a strategic plan to strengthen and cultivate our culture of academic integrity across all learning locations within our faculty. The draft strategic plan was presented and approved by senior management with action plans to move ahead with different activities immediately and over the next several months.

The Council recognized that the pandemic has been stressful for everyone as we continue to navigate through our new ways of being and doing. The students are especially vulnerable as they continue to experience the loss of connections to their friends, learning communities, familiar structures, and routines to learning and learning environments. Understanding our students' stress and sources for stress are important if we consider the findings from existing research (Steinberger et al., 2021; Verhoef & Coetser, 2021) that link student stress to students' behaviours and their potential to depart from integrity in their studies. The loss of social rituals such as new student orientation, study groups, and a physical presence on campus forces students to find ways to manage their academic lives and learning differently from our past traditional in-person learning settings. The chaos, shock, fear, and uncertainty heightened by the pandemic cannot be underestimated for its far-reaching effects on the lives of our students as well as faculty, staff, and academic leadership teams. So, consideration, kindness, respect, and patience in our planning efforts were at the forefront of the Council members' thinking about strategies to promote and strengthen integrity and were foundational considerations as we constructed our strategic plan.

That being said, the pursuit of promoting and strengthening a culture of academic integrity within the FHSW, with an emphasis on ethical and professional obligations of the students and faculty is paramount and remained an unwavering goal for the strategic plan. The worry that a gap in student understanding of the expectations and importance of ethical behaviour may have widened because of the sudden shift to online learning remained a concern. A recent survey completed by FHSW students (N=246) revealed that 18% of students did not believe or felt unsure that faculty had explained academic integrity to them in their coursework, and almost 51% believed that faculty would ignore a breach of integrity (Miron and Fenning preliminary study results not yet published). These gaps must be addressed and remedied if we are to support a culture of integrity that is valued across all members of our learning community. Research has supported this worry and suggested that the pandemic has increased a lack of mutual trust between students and faculty (Amzalag et al., 2021). It is believed that anxiety, complicated by current circumstances, plays a significant role in compromising the student's moral code and is resulting in increased incidences of academic dishonesty (Steinberger et al., 2021).

Results

Existing Structures to Support Faculty and Staff

In discussing faculty's part in the development of a culture of academic integrity, researchers conclude that the faculty's "role in building an environment that supports academic integrity is essential" and is both an "obligation and an opportunity" (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012, p. 147). We would be remiss as a Council if we did not take the time to explore how to support and engage our faculty members and staff. Collectively, the AIC is working on identifying existing structures within the faculty, college, and provincial landscapes that could be used as avenues to promote awareness and engagement among faculty and staff. Our first strategic priority that we will be undertaking is increasing faculty engagement and involvement in creating, sustaining, and strengthening learning environments that value integrity. So far, the following structures were identified and will be targeted as focal points in reaching and influencing our faculty: faculty orientation, inter-professional education, curating the digital faculty handbook, and partner opportunities with neighbouring colleges and universities developing micro credentials and programming in academic integrity content.

Our second strategic priority is to strengthen the engagement of the leadership groups within the FHSW and Humber College, in our efforts. Our goal is to strengthen and anchor our learning communities within the values of academic integrity so that the notion of a shared approach to building such a culture is clearly established (Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2008). So far, we have met with success in terms of being members of the International Centre of Academic Integrity (ICAI) with multiple senior leaders as contacts registered at ICAI. These points of contact allow our leaders to receive regular updates, blog posts, and other items from ICAI.

The Council also assessed resource gaps, determining a third strategic goal focusing on future initiatives to include: an online, indexed repository of short, just-in-time resources, a needs and priorities survey for faculty and staff, and a YouTube playlist of resources. It is important to note that in at least one Canadian university such endeavours were assigned a dedicated annual budget (Prins & Lathrop, 2014), reinforcing the recognition of academic integrity as a key principle. Resource support will be sought out as needed for the development of potential academic integrity resources. The planning and prioritizing of efforts are now the work for fall of 2022.

Stakeholder support and group effort are instrumental in introducing an honour and integrity program and prepare students to understand the expectations of future employers around ethics and compliance (Eury, & Trevino, 2019). Seeking to engage currently under-represented groups and build a fulsome, holistic community in support of academic integrity, the Council proceeded to pinpoint opportunities for expanded awareness, including groups from other faculties, part-time conference presentations, plus stakeholder and advisory groups. Again, these efforts will be further developed in the upcoming fall semester and will require a solid communication and marketing approach that will be undertaken in the upcoming academic year 2022-2023.

Student engagement continues to be an important strategic direction for the FHSW Academic Integrity Council. A media campaign will be undertaken in the fall of 2022 that will focus on academic integrity and coincide with the international day of action undertaken by the ICAI against contract cheating. Contract cheating is the act of submitting work that was completed by a third party and then submitted for a mark or grade. While contract cheating is the main focus for the ICAI day, our campaign will run for one week around the ICAI day and broadly work to increase the awareness of students, faculty, staff, and leaders within our school to important content related to academic integrity. The **Boost and Bolster** campaign is set to engage students by way of their student groups through Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. On five consecutive days a posting will happen that shares important academic integrity content, connected to a link where users can get more information. This is intended to **boost** their understanding of academic integrity specific to what it looks like in the post-secondary setting, what resources are available at Humber to help them with their integrity efforts, and what the expectations are for conduct, behaviour, and learning with integrity as per our procedural rules. Students will be encouraged to push these daily shares through their own personal social media platforms with the goal of **bolstering** others in our community to learn as well. Of course, we will be including faculty, staff, and leaders in the campaign and will also incorporate various media sources around our campuses as an additional way to share, including Humber televisions. Additionally, for faculty and staff we will be co-hosting an Academic Integrity Community of Practice with the Centre for Innovative Learning, that will begin later in the fall of 2022. The intent of this group is to provide an opportunity for sharing of ideas and practices that focus on academic integrity and will be open to all faculty and staff across Humber College.

Discussion

Future Considerations

Building upon the previous determinations, the Academic Integrity Council identified two major future initiatives of importance. First, there is a need to focus on ways to deliberately incorporate technology with a focus on quality, beyond its urgent implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, there is a need to advocate for the continued development of evidence-informed practices, training sessions, and information technology support for digital learning, assessment, and evaluation. We know that students are departing from academic integrity more during COVID-19 because of accessibility to online content issues, poor monitoring, academic inexperience, and increased stress (Verhoef & Coetser, 2021). Combating these factors must be a joint effort with continuous and responsive approaches to maintain and nurture cultures that value integrity. Additionally, efforts must continue to incorporate relevant research and engage in research that will continue to inform next steps or preferred practices within our faculty.

Impact

The work completed by the FHSW AIC is important and contributes to our growing body of knowledge related to academic integrity and specific to the repercussions of the pandemic in Canada. We continue to evolve in a post-COVID world, and it is important to understand that collaboration and a shared approach to our ways of being and doing are essential in order to thrive.

Conclusion

In the face of the unexpected demands of a global pandemic, this Council remains steadfastly determined to continue to holistically support and strengthen a culture of academic integrity, preparing graduates for success in both local and global communities. While many of our initiatives are in progress, and it is difficult to report the metrics associated with the initiatives, anecdotally we are receiving feedback from leaders, faculty, and students that has been positive and suggests interest and curiosity. Our systematic approach to our strategic planning offers a template for other educational organizations to consider as they work through the new challenges presented to how we deliver educational programming, and specifically how we continue to engage students, faculty, and leadership in the work of teaching and learning with integrity.

Conflict of Interest

None of the authors has a conflict of interest.

Note on Contributors

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