

Campus Report

Sept. 29, 2004

University statistics for 2003-04 on academic dishonesty

Statistics from 2003-04 on academic dishonesty at the University of Saskatchewan show some reduction from last year's figures. This is the second year in which the University has gathered and reported on these statistics.

The term "academic honesty" includes both plagiarism, which is the use of other people's ideas or writing without credit, and other forms of cheating, such as taking notes into an exam or lying about admission qualifications. The University Secretary's office is now maintaining a statistical database of the academic dishonesty cases handled by colleges.

For the last academic year from July 2003 to June 2004, the university had 73 cases heard by college and university panels. Of these, 60 students were found to be guilty. Four were suspended for periods of one term or more, and three were expelled. The remainder were penalized with either outright failure in the class or with a grade reduction in the class.

For the previous year, 2002-03, there were 79 cases heard, of whom 67 were found to be guilty.

Similarly to last year, about two-thirds of the cases were plagiarism on essays and assignments, while the rest involved other forms of cheating such as using or passing notes in an exam, or handing the same essay in to two different classes.

The lower numbers last year, compared to the year before, may be an indication that the University's efforts may be making some difference in teaching students how to use academic sources properly. Over the last two years, the university has set up a special website on academic honesty, advertised in computer labs around the campus, and had sponsored Writing it Right Week and other public presentations about academic integrity.

The basic problem found in a number of the plagiarism cases last year was poor time management – students who had not allocated enough time to work on an essay or assignment, taking what appeared to be the easy way out by cutting and pasting material from the Internet. However, faculty know their students' writing abilities through in-class assignments and exams, and can identify phrases which appear "canned" or too sophisticated. Instead of having to search through books and articles in a library to find the source, faculty can now use simple exact-phrase Google searches to find out if an essay or assignment has been plagiarized.

Most of the cases are being found in classes taught by the College of Arts and Science, particularly in classes such as humanities and social sciences which require submission of a significant amount of written work such as essays, reports and other assignments. Almost all of the 20,000 students at the university take classes in Arts and Science, particularly in their first and second years. About a third of the dishonesty cases in Arts and Science classes involve first-year students.

News accounts from other universities indicate that most other universities comparable to the University of Saskatchewan in size penalize about 80 to 100 students a year.

The University of Saskatchewan policy on academic dishonesty requires that accusations of cheating are dealt with by faculty committees at the college level. Penalties are not prescribed in the policy but are left to the discretion of the faculty committee hearing the individual case.

Penalties being given to students found guilty of cheating are increasingly severe. While in years past, colleges might have just given a plagiarized essay a mark of zero, now students will receive both a zero on the essay plus a reduction in the final grade of the course. Colleges feel now that students who cheat should receive a much greater penalty than students who just do not turn in an assignment. If a student is found guilty of a second case of plagiarism or cheating, usually that student is suspended or expelled.

As the college with the most experience in dealing with academic dishonesty cases in its classes, Arts and Science has articulated its policies it uses for assigning penalties. Their penalty for plagiarism is a zero on the assignment or exam in question, plus an additional final grade penalty of between five percent to 15 per cent off the final grade. The amount of final grade penalty is decided through committee discussion of the following factors: the year of the student; the student's understanding of the offense and of the general academic rules of the university; the student's accountability for their actions and their cooperation with the committee in the hearing; and the degree to which the instructor outlined relevant issues such as including a brief note in the course outline about academic honesty, in particular plagiarism. The penalty is discussed with the instructor and student.

In the other professional colleges penalties may be more severe even for a first offense, because the professions for which these students are being trained require professional certification including high standards of ethical behavior.

The Office of the University Secretary organizes regular meetings with college and university faculty and staff who deal with academic dishonesty cases to discuss issues and concerns.

One concern identified at these meetings was the importance of taking a pro-active approach to educating students about honesty and integrity, so that students can be recognized for earning their degree honestly. Over the last two years, the Office of the University Secretary has embarked on a campaign to educate students about honesty, and to give students and faculty access to resources to avoid plagiarism.

The "Writing it Right" campaign began in the fall of 2002, with posters advertising a special website (www.usask.ca/honesty) which provides tools for faculty and students to maintain honesty. The site includes guidelines for correct citations of sources, resources for faculty in designing course assignments, and information about university policies on the academic code of conduct and on how dishonesty accusations are handled. The website is designed to be accessed by students online, to offer immediate help as they are writing their essays and assignments. This website now records about 2,000 "hits" a month.

This year, on Oct. 18 to 22, the university is sponsoring its second annual Writing it Right Week. During this week, speakers will discuss both the theoretical and practical aspects of ethical actions and behaviour.