

Campus Report

Oct. 27, 2005

Statistics Show Reduction in Plagiarism Cases at U of S

Today, the University of Saskatchewan released its annual set of statistics on cheating, showing that for the third consecutive year, the number of cases has dropped.

University Secretary Lea Pennock announced that between July 2004 and June 2005, the University had 52 cases of academic dishonesty heard by college and university panels. Of these, 47 students were found to be guilty (one student was suspended for a term, none were expelled, and the remainder were penalized with either failure in the class or with a grade reduction in the class).

“The reduction in cases this year appears to be due primarily to fewer charges of plagiarism, in contrast to other types of academic dishonesty,” said Pennock. “Last year there were 45 plagiarism cases while this year there were fewer than 30.”

This is the third year that the University has released its academic dishonesty statistics. In 2002-03, there were 79 cases heard, of which 67 were found to be guilty, while in 2003-04, there were 73 cases heard, of which 60 were found to be guilty.

“The U of S takes a proactive approach in educating students about honesty and integrity so that their degrees are earned honestly and are respected by their future employers,” added Pennock. “The University has focused particular attention on plagiarism issues over the last three years and I am very pleased to see that our hard work is paying off.”

Faculty discuss plagiarism issues in class, and information about plagiarism and cheating is included in class outlines. The University Secretary’s Office began a campaign in 2002 using the catchphrase “Writing It Right” to educate students about plagiarism and provide resources so that students could cite sources correctly when writing essays.

Another improvement made at the U of S last year deals with the problem of copying laboratory assignments. A new procedure developed by computer science professor Mark Eramian, was used in computer science classes to educate students about the importance of doing their own software assignments.

The computer science department uses one of two software detection programs to identify similarities in software writing assignments in computing and computer science courses. A departmental panel, which includes a student representative, then determines whether a warning letter should be sent to alert the student that they should not be sharing software writing with other students. Last year, 105 warning letters were sent; only two students became repeat offenders who were then charged with plagiarism.

The basic problem found in a number of the plagiarism cases has been 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 three 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/university_secretary/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. 31 to Nov. 4, the university is sponsoring its third annual Writing it Right Week. During this week, speakers will discuss both the theoretical and practical aspects of ethical actions and behaviour.