

Campus Report

University statistics for 2005-06 on academic dishonesty

Statistics from 2005-06 on academic dishonesty at the University of Saskatchewan unfortunately show some increase over last year's figures. This is the fourth year in which the University has gathered and reported on these statistics.

The term "academic dishonesty" 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 Office of the University Secretary is now maintaining a statistical database of the academic dishonesty cases handled by colleges.

For the last academic year, from July 2005 to June 2006, the university had 75 cases heard by college and university panels. Of these, 74 students were found to be guilty. Four were suspended for periods of one term or more, and two were expelled. The remainder were penalized with either outright failure in the class or with a grade reduction in the class.. About two-thirds of the cases were plagiarism on essays and assignments, while the rest involved other forms of cheating such as using notes in an exam, submitting the same essay in two different classes, fraudulent documents, and falsifying research data.

Here are university statistics dating from 2002, when the University Secretary's Office began keeping track of these figures:

2005-06: 75 cases heard; 74 guilty. Penalties included 4 suspended, 2 expelled.
2004-05: 52 cases heard; 47 guilty. Penalties included 1 suspended, none expelled
2003-04: 73 cases heard, 60 guilty. Penalties included 4 suspended, 3 expelled
2002-03: 79 cases years, 67 guilty. No data on penalties.

Compared with last year, the University experienced an increase of 23 cases. Of these, 12 were in the College of Graduate Studies & Research; most of the remaining increase was in Arts & Science.

2006-07 Initiatives

The College of Graduate Studies & Research usually sees very few or no cases of academic dishonesty, so with 12 cases this year it was a very unusual year for the college. The 2005-06 cases were all individual cases, rather than the result of systemic problems or of group cheating. In the wake of this increase, the College has developed several initiatives to assist students and faculty:

1. CGSR Publication on Academic Honesty and Integrity.

At its Oct. 10, 2006 meeting, the Graduate Council approved a document which summarizes the university's policies for academic conduct and describes the penalties which graduate students can expect to receive for cheating or plagiarizing. The document clarifies that graduate students

can be expelled for plagiarism in coursework, even on a first offense, and that plagiarism in a thesis or falsification of research data will almost inevitably result in suspension or expulsion.

2. Workshops on academic integrity.

CGSR put on an open workshop in the fall on academic integrity, and a session on research integrity. As well, the College has made itself available to academic units and programs for targeted sessions on academic integrity relevant to the program or discipline, and to meet with cohorts of incoming graduate students to address issues of academic integrity. These invitations have resulted in a number of dedicated sessions with programs, departments, and colleges.

3. Workshops on academic writing for International students.

The University Learning Centre, the University Language Centre, the International Student Advisor, the Office of the University Secretary, and the College of Graduate Studies & Research presented special workshops in the fall and winter terms to assist International students in improving reference and attribution for academic writing in English.

Writing It Right Week

This year, on Jan 29 to Feb. 2, the university is sponsoring its fourth annual Writing it Right Week. During this week, speakers will discuss both the theoretical and practical aspects of ethical actions and behaviour in an academic setting.

University academic integrity programs

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.

One of the contributing factors in students' decisions to plagiarize is 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 do know their students' writing abilities through in-class assignments and exams, and can identify phrases which appear “canned” or overly 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 whether an essay or assignment has been plagiarized.

Most plagiarism cases are discovered 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.

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

Over the last four 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 which provides tools for faculty and students to encourage honesty. The site includes guidelines for correct citations of sources, resources for faculty in designing course assignments, and guidelines for academic conduct and on how accusations of dishonesty 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 4,000 “hits” a month.

This fall, the College of Graduate Studies & Research and the Associate Vice-President for Information and Communications Technology collaborated on a PAWS channel through which students were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the University policies for academic integrity and for computer usage. As a result, more than 18,000 hits were recorded for the Honesty website in September, 2006.

Faculty are also encouraged to discuss academic dishonesty in class, and to provide information about plagiarism and cheating in class outlines. Handout sheets describing university policies are available on the Honesty website.

University penalties

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.

As the college which has dealt with the most cases of academic dishonesty, Arts and Science has articulated its rationale for penalties. Their penalty for a first offense of plagiarism or cheating is a zero on the assignment or exam in question, plus an additional final grade penalty of between five percent to 15 per cent. The severity of the 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 note in the course outline about academic honesty. The penalty is discussed with the instructor and student. If a student is found guilty of a second case of plagiarism or cheating, usually that student is suspended or expelled.

As noted above, the College of Graduate Studies and Research (CGSR) has also published a document on academic honesty which describes the range of penalties that will apply in cases including plagiarism and research dishonesty. The document clarifies that graduate students can be expelled for plagiarism in coursework, even for a first offense, and that plagiarism in a thesis or in research data will almost inevitably result in suspension or expulsion.

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

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