Academic Integrity
Syracuse University/SUNY-ESF
Teaching Assistant Survey

Do you have any suggestions on how your campus might improve its policies concerning issues of academic integrity or any additional comments you care to make?

Forty-five teaching assistants (TAs) provided responses to this question, with many offering multiple suggestions for improvement in a variety of areas. Two primary themes emerged from their responses. The predominant theme focused on educating students on academic integrity and the specifics of the policy. The second significant theme addressed enforcement of the current academic integrity policy.

Education

The primary theme emerging from the teaching assistant responses, representing approximately one-half of all responses, identified the need for educating students on issues relating to academic integrity and the specifics of the academic integrity policy.

Teaching assistants suggested a range of ideas for educating students on the academic integrity policy. Some TAs commented that the policy needs to be readily available to students, with a few suggesting the policy should be on the website. Other TAs admitted that they are not aware of the policy and were not able to locate a copy of the policy. Those TAs aware of the policy recommended explaining the policy to students at the beginning of the course and including it in the course syllabus. Suggestions included:

- Reinforce information given at the beginning of the semester. Make it mandatory for faculty to put it on the syllabi.
- There doesn’t seem to be enough conversation about this topic. Students rarely look at the policies, if they are even detailed in their course syllabus.
- Whatever it does, it needs to make the policies and process clear and readily available. It is far too difficult to find information about the policies at SU.
- Where is there a clear policy on cheating and plagiarism? I have looked, but have been unable to find a standard policy for the University.

Some teaching assistants focused on strategies for educating students on academic integrity. They suggested teaching students proper citing of sources, better test taking skills, and time management skills. A few TAs noted that students, particularly freshmen, are not aware of what plagiarism fully entails and what behaviors encompass academic dishonesty. Some TAs suggested that academic integrity education should be included in either freshman forum or new student orientation. Representative suggestions included:

- Focus on prevention, and not buying cheating detection services. We should worry less about police work and more about teaching to set students up to succeed at doing their own work. I suspect that very few students cheat
because they are cheating their way through school. Most run into a problem that they feel cornered into and don’t see any other way out of, unfortunately.

I think offering an orientation to undergraduate students on several academic issues is a good idea. They should be made aware of the academic integrity and student contract by the University at the very beginning of the semester. The responsibility should not be just left to the faculty or TA.

Many of the instances of plagiarism were unintentional and found in the papers of students who came to me with drafts; they were present because the student didn’t know how to properly cite.

**Enforcement**

Approximately one-fourth of the teaching assistant comments focused on enforcement of the current academic integrity policy. Several TAs shared their awareness of professors and teaching assistants who ignore academic dishonesty, while others commented that the process of reporting and following through with an academic integrity case is strenuous and time consuming. Some felt it was not worth their time because the sanctions are minor and the university buckles to parental and financial pressure. A few teaching assistants commented on the cheating attitude of some students, noting that students rationalize cheating to obtain the grade they pay for as customers of the university. Their suggestions included:

From what I’ve heard from another TA’s experience, the official process of defending a lower grade due to plagiarism seems very strenuous for the TA, and also demoralizing when that student actually does get a bump up on his/her plagiarized paper.

I hate the idea of making an example of someone, but students here are just not that concerned about what will happen to them if they get caught.

I have heard stories about academic dishonesty going unpunished except for a slap on the wrist. Where I went to undergrad, if you got caught cheating, you got kicked out of school.

Reporting dishonesty is seen as a time-sink by researchers.

The faculty must push this issue harder, even though it makes life tougher for them. There is a minority of students who cheat and they, for the most part, get away with it. Some faculty members do not want to bother with the hassle of taking it to a higher authority.

The University has been known to buckle to parental pressure. The high cost of tuition sometimes makes students feel entitled to a good grade even if they don’t earn it, and, unfortunately, the University is aware of the “cost” of prosecuting plagiarism in tuition dollars.

**Other Suggestions**

A small number of teaching assistants mentioned that international students have different views on cheating and suggested addressing academic integrity during their orientation session. A few TAs requested free access to turnitin.com, while a couple indicated they have never encountered cheating in the courses for which they were responsible.
Recommendations included:

It should also be noted that international students have an entirely different view on what is cheating and what is not. During international student orientation, if there is one, cheating practices should definitely be stressed. Personally I have had no problems with students cheating and did not think it was a big issue on the SU campus. I think many of the students know and understand the repercussions of cheating when in college. Provide free access to sites like turnitin.com.

Individual responses varied and included providing larger classrooms to enhance student spacing during exams, a workshop for faculty and TAs on detecting academic dishonesty, and a university-wide policy on academic integrity.

What role do you think TAs should play in promoting academic integrity and/or controlling cheating in their courses?

This inquiry was addressed by 45 teaching assistant respondents. The role of educator and monitor were the two primary themes that emerged from their responses. A minor theme of enforcer was also represented among the comments.

Educators

Teaching assistants described their role in promoting academic integrity as educators. Some TAs commented on educating students on the policy itself. They called for explaining the policy and its consequences to students early in the semester. A few noted, however, that in order to educate the students on academic integrity policy issues, they need a clearer understanding of the policy and the associated ramifications for violations. Other TAs focused on educating students on what plagiarism and academic dishonesty are, as well as the seriousness of this issue. A few felt their role included educating students on techniques for proper citing of sources. Their responses included:

As a TA I think one should state from day one that cheating is absolutely prohibited and be sure that it is stated in the syllabus along with the consequences and what is considered plagiarism/cheating.

Consider the reasons students may “cheat” and think of ways to teach students better methods of dealing with those situations that help them avoid “cheating.” We’ve all experienced time crunches, test anxiety, writer’s block—how did we deal with them? What techniques can we teach our students?

Discuss expectations of honesty with students at beginning of semester. I think students need to be made aware of what constitutes plagiarism. I understand it’s explained in the handbook, but I would imagine that very few undergraduates actually read it. Most students tend to think that plagiarism involves copying something word for word and passing it off as your own—they don’t understand how not citing a source you paraphrase or whose ideas you draw from is also an offense. Perhaps a mandatory seminar on academic
honesty as part of a freshman forum or freshman orientation-type program might help them understand how important it is to thoroughly cite sources.

Inform students of college policies right at the outset and remind them of consequences. Tell them about proper citations/referencing procedures to avoid plagiarism.

**Monitors**

Teaching assistants saw their role in promoting academic integrity also in terms of monitoring students and reporting suspected cases of academic dishonesty. They noted their responsibilities as carefully monitoring the classroom during exams, providing more than one version of an exam to reduce the possibility of cheating, screening written work for signs of plagiarism, and reporting their suspicions of academic dishonesty to the professor. Their comments included:

If a TA is only serving as an assistant to a professor, their job is to help in monitoring the classes and students and inform the professor of any suspicions or problems.

Monitor students during exams and quizzes, and be alert for obvious plagiarism, etc., in written assignments.

Promoting and controlling should be basically the task of the course supervisor. Whoever proctors an exam should control cheating in the exam.

TAs should monitor this closely, but purchased papers are impossible to “prove” as plagiarism if they’re not on the Net. There are lots of tips on how to suspect plagiarism, but the bottom line is, unless the students admits it, if the TA has no proof, he/she is stuck. TAs can’t act on plagiarism without proof.

When giving exams, I think it is important to walk around the room during the test to deter students from possibly cheating and place the students in every other seat. Also, if possible make up more than one exam is always helpful but not always possible. I think if the TA makes it very clear that cheating will not be accepted and the proper steps will be taken if a student is caught cheating, they will not do it.

**Enforcers**

A small number of respondents indicated their role was to enforce the academic integrity policy, however, some commented that in order to do so they needed to be assured of support from the professor. A few expressed a desire to work together with the professor to resolve academic dishonesty situations. Representative comments included:

By making an effort to catch people who cheat and making sure the appropriate parties are punished, TAs, like faculty and fellow students, can discourage cheating in the future.

TAs are the front lines. They’re frequently exam and paper graders, but they shouldn’t have to feel they have to do everything on their own; their role should be to identify and isolate cheaters and cheating then, alongside the professor, resolve the situation.

TAs should have to fail any student caught cheating. They should also be given support from the faculty when it comes to confronting students and obtaining proof.
The department chairs and supervising faculty should work hard to make it clear to their TAs about the departmental policy and under what circumstances the TA will be supported if an issue of academic honesty comes up in the course of the semester.

They need to be given more power in this regard—but faculty members vary greatly on this—the ones I worked with were fairly lax—but I have friends in other departments who routinely bust people and flunk people for cheating.

**Other Comments**

Individual comments varied and included serving as a role model for students, developing a relationship with students, and reminding them of the importance of an education and not just grades.