

The Ethical Professor #16

Academic Dishonesty: To Report or Not To Report?

It's midnight, and you're on your fifth cup of coffee. You're grading midterms, and you notice something in one student's work that doesn't seem right. You run a Google search and find a website from which the student copied. What should you do about this? Should you confront the student? Should you also report him or her? Other troubling questions may go through your mind at such a moment, and you may not have the heart—or the time—to find answers to them.

We interviewed Campus Disciplinarian Judy Penschansky in order to provide you some support for the next time you're in this situation. We shared with her some of the typical reasons faculty are reluctant to report academic dishonesty. She provided answers to some of the questions that trouble us.

Q: How do I report a student, and how much time will it take?

A: Just go to the website <http://www.smc.edu/apps/pub.asp?Q=2278&B=1> and fill out the online academic dishonesty report; or you can send a detailed email to the Disciplinarian.

Q: Will my reporting mar a student's transcript?

A: Academic dishonesty and conduct code violations do not appear on a student's transcript.

Q: Why should I bother if there won't be any real consequences if I do report cheating?

A: There are consequences; however, usually a first incident is not grounds for suspension unless it is quite serious. On a first incident, a student is warned and a file is created in the Disciplinarian's office.

Q: If this is an international student, will he or she be deported?

A: International students don't get deported for incidents of academic dishonesty. In severe cases when students are suspended, their F1 visas can be affected; however, an SMC incident would not keep them from attending another college.

Q: What if I prefer to deal with my student in a warm, personal way rather than a cold, institutional way?

A: You can do that; however, some students need a more formal warning in order for them to take conduct code violations seriously. Also, if you report a student, the file we create for that student gives us a baseline, so if the student is a chronic cheater, sooner or later, we will know.

If a student is cheating in one class she or he is often cheating in others, and by reporting, a

pattern can be discerned and the behavior corrected. This can't happen if each incident is examined in isolation.

Also, the more accurate our measures of the extent of academic dishonesty campus-wide, the better we will be able to develop our system for dealing with it.

Q: Why should I report if it doesn't deal with the underlying causes of cheating?

A: The underlying causes of cheating are complex and multi-layered. We have to deal with the cause and effect of student's actual behavior; the underlying causes are discussed via the Senate, the Honor Council and through various departments. These discussions prompt policy change.

If you think about it, reporting cheating to the Disciplinarian is the fair thing to do. The system is unfair if we don't apply the same consequences consistently to all students caught cheating. Reporting cheating is also part of a student's due process and gives him or her a way to respond to an accusation, which may not be the case if we are dealing with cheating all on our own.

Another thing of note: In the SMC-wide brainstorming that led to our ILO's, one of the concepts that came through strongly was that we want our students to live ethical lives and to be aware of the ethical ramifications of their actions. Reporting cheating is one tool to help make students aware of these ramifications so they can learn to make better choices.