Incorporating an Honor Code into an Information Assurance Program

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ABSTRACT

Plagiarism and cheating is on the increase around the world. Academic misconduct hurts the student committing the offense, other students who know about the offense, the faculty, and the academic reputation of the school where the misconduct occurs [1]. One of the steps that a school can take to fight academic misconduct is to incorporate an honor code and its' values into their programs. The faculty teaching in ABC College's (pseudonym) Information Assurance program initiated a college-wide implementation of a simple honor code. This article presents best practices from a variety of schools, and hopefully begins a dialog on what can be done to eliminate or minimize academic misconduct from the Information Assurance educational system.

Introduction to the problem

Academic misconduct in all forms is increasing in higher education. Cheating is becoming more common in universities and Information Assurance programs are not immune from this plague of academic misconduct. Cheating consumes faculty time and can damage a school's academic reputation and destroy student morale.

A department chair/faculty member at ABC College (pseudonym) added up the number of hours spent addressing a single instance of academic misconduct. An IA student was found plagiarizing in a class. The student's work in his other three classes was examined and it was determined that plagiarism had been committed in the other three classes. The college's academic discipline process was followed and the student was expelled. The student appealed the expulsion and was reinstated into all classes until the appeal process was exhausted. After all appeals were filed and meetings held the student's expulsion was upheld. At the end of the process, all four faculty members, the Director of the Information Assurance Center, the Chair of the Information Assurance department, the director of Online Learning, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Associate Director of International Students, and the Chief Academic Officer had spent time in meetings with each other or the student. The cost to the college was easily several hundred man-hours and tens of thousands dollars.

To minimize or prevent this waste of resources, a faculty member recognized that the college needed to have an honor code. Discussions with colleagues within the IA department and college officers revealed their support of an honor code. The first problem encountered was the realization that any honor code adopted had to adopted by the entire college. This expansion of scope required a lot of changes to the original plans and paradigms. The project instantly became much larger and much more difficult with many more stakeholders than originally thought.

The faculty member was willing to advocate for an honor code to help the college with accreditation. The college has been designated as a Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance education by the National Security Agency. One of the requirements to maintain this accreditation is to practice sound security policies internally and implementing an honor code would demonstrate the college's commitment to academic integrity.

Honor Codes in Education

An academic honor code encourages ethical behavior, and requires students to commit to the values of honesty and personal integrity [1]. Honor codes place responsibility on the students and their fellow students to maintain academic standards and to provide a level academic playing field for all students. For example, the U.S. Military Academy's honor code clearly states, "A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do" [2]. Students at the Academy are given a copy of the code on a laminated card that they are asked to carry with them at all times [3]. This card serves a reminder which is necessary because in a study, 40% of university students felt that they should whistle-blow on their fellow students but only 13% said they would actually do it [4]. Turner and Beemsterboer [1] propose that an honor code must contain the following elements:

1. A statement of the values upheld by the code and school
2. A list of the academic violations and the categories of unacceptable behavior
3. A list of the potential consequences and punishments for violations
4. A description of the group that will be investigating and making any decisions based on the outcomes of the investigation
5. A description of the investigation and decision making processes
6. A statement promising confidentiality of the investigative process and the outcomes of the investigation and decision making process
7. A statement promising that records will be kept of the process
8. A statement promising a decision within a stated period of time
9. An appeals process for students to appeal their punishment

The problem of academic misconduct is not limited to students. Faculty members commit plagiarism from their own work and the work of others [5]. Schools and academic journals have often downplayed plagiarism by faculty to avoid embarrassment and damage to their reputation and brand image [5; 6]. It is important that faculty serve as role models for academic integrity to their students and the learning environment [7].

Online Pedagogy

Academic misconduct in online programs may be higher than in on-ground programs as people cheat more when they feel disconnected from their faculty [8]. Many IA programs are completely online and allow students to do everything from application to graduation without ever setting foot on a campus. Online pedagogy must take the nature of the online environment into consideration. Implementing an honor code into an Information Assurance program that is totally online and at a school that offers several online degree programs and approximately half of its course sections online must take that into consideration in developing an honor code implementation plan.

The Approval Process at ABC College

Once the decision was made to pursue implementing an honor code, the faculty member made a presentation to the department chairs and program directors. The presentation included a memo that outlined a proposed implementation plan and a copy of a mocked up poster for the honor code that every full time faculty member would sign. The response to the honor code and the poster was favorable at this level. The proposed honor code was modeled after the West Point honor code and kept as simple as possible. The wording of the proposed honor code was "A ABC student will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do"

The next step was to present the proposed honor code and implementation plan at the next academic department meeting. The academic department meetings are attended by all fulltime faculty members and representatives from the Assessment Office, the Office of Online Learning, Scheduling, and Administrative Support. The initial response was again favorable as many of the faulty felt that we needed to do something to address the problem. A committee of three faculty members was formed to develop an implementation proposal for the honor code. The committee developed an initial project plan, budget, marketing plan, and collected feedback from a variety of people in the academic community. The three member committee came back to a subsequent meeting of the academic department and requested that the faculty vote to approve the honor code.

The faculty voted against adopting the initial honor code because of the phrase "or tolerate those who do" at the end of the honor code. Several senior faculty members felt that it would be too difficult and expensive to enforce that clause of the honor code. Not having an honor code was preferable to having a non-enforced honor code. The rejection only delayed the process by about four months while the advocate drafted a revised honor code that would avoid the problematic phrase.

The honor code wording was revised to "The ABC academic community will maintain the highest ethical standards in our quest for academic excellence. We will not lie, cheat, steal, or claim credit for the ideas and work of others. We commit to respecting the intellectual property of others and will always acknowledge the authorship of intellectual property in all forms." This wording was approved by the full faculty and the project moved forward.

The revised honor code was sent to the college officers for approval. The officers were pleased with the honor code and approval was received from every officer within two weeks of sending them the honor code.

The Implementation Process at ABC College

The college moved quickly to implement the honor code. The Chief Academic Officer pointed out that the Higher Learning Commission likes to see an honor code but they need to see it publicized across the school at every opportunity. The champion for the honor code made arrangements to get this publicity done in as short amount of time as possible.

The first step was getting the new honor code incorporated into all of the syllabi at the school. The Director of Online Learning made the necessary steps to include the honor code in all of syllabi in the online course tool. Hard copies of the honor code were distributed at a faculty development event to the faculty and copies were also provided to all faculty members to hand out to their students at the start of the fall semester. The faculty members were asked to put the honor code in all future syllabi that they developed.

The honor code was incorporated into the school Website within a month of launching the honor code. Care was taken to make certain the honor code was placed in the appropriate pages on the Website. The implementation went much faster and smoother than initially expected. The school's administration, faculty, and staff seemed eager to place the honor code into use and the project received immediate cooperation at every turn. The implementation timetable is summarized in Table 1.

Some of the proposed implementation ideas were not accepted. For example, the college opted not to issue a press release about the adoption. The college also opted not to place the honor code on the back of the student identification cards. The college has always printed the mission statement on the back of the cards and adding the honor code would have placed a lot of text on the card and forced the use of a small font that would make reading either the code or the mission statement difficult.

Students coming into a school with an honor code must be informed of the honor code and be aware of the potential consequences. The admissions department worked on ways to incorporate the honor code into the new student orientation and enrollment materials. The students, faculty, and staff accepted that the honor code would be enforced and would remain in effect.

Conclusions

Stopping academic misconduct is not a simple task. There is no silver bullet or single solution. Implementing an honor code is one part of a larger solution. ABC College feels that the honor code was a necessary and effective step in slowing academic misconduct. Applying the honor code to faculty, staff, and students set a high standard for the conduct of everyone in the coming years.

What worked at ABC College may not work in your educational community. Different schools have different cultures, policies and faculty values. School culture played a large role in the ABC implementation and will no doubt play a large role at other schools. Each school must decide whether using an honor code to draw a line in the sand is what they want to do.

Table 1
Implementation Timetable

Task	Completion Month
Submission of the first version of the honor code to the chairs and program directors	March
Committee formed to draft an implementation plan	March
Submission of the first version of the honor code to the full time faculty members	March
Rewriting the honor code to a version that was acceptable to the faculty	July
Submission of the second version to the full time faculty members	August
Officer approval of the second version of the honor code	September
Inclusion in the catalog	September
Inclusion in every online syllabus	September
Printed copies of the honor code given to faculty for distribution to all on-ground students	September
Copies of the honor code distributed to all faculty at faculty development day for inclusion in future syllabi	September
Inclusion in the school Website	October

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