

*Academic Honesty Survey*  
*Florida Gulf Coast University*  
*Student Affairs Team*  
*Faculty Senate*  
*Fall 2009*

**Introduction:**

During the fall of 2008, discussions between student leaders and student affairs administrators during a revision of the Code of Student Conduct, led to some on-going debates related to the nature of academic honesty and cheating at FGCU. There was wide discrepancy between the perceptions of what was appropriate behavior by the faculty, the staff and the students. These discussions led us to ask more questions about the nature of the way our students are currently viewing the status of academic integrity on campus. As a result, the Division of Student Affairs communicated these perceptions to the Student Affairs Team (SAT) of the Faculty Senate and asked for their support to develop a survey to address student perceptions and experience with academic honesty at FGCU.

**Process**

In spring 2009, after receiving approval from the IRB, the Student Affairs Team distributed a web-based survey to the entire undergraduate and graduate student population of 9,640 students using an online assessment management tool provided by Studentvoice.com. The survey had an 8.5% return rate (823 students).

The survey questions can be grouped loosely into four areas that address: how students define cheating; the types of penalties perceived as appropriate; the various values students have as it pertains to cheating; and a section for comments and suggestions to improve the environment for academic honesty at Florida Gulf Coast University.

**Results and Discussion**

Of the respondents to the survey, slightly less than half of them had read the Code of Student Conduct at FGCU. While this may not be surprising as codes are typically only read by individuals who have a specific need for the information in them, it may guide us in developing

materials that we might want students to read proactively if there is specific critical data that we expect them to be familiar with. Overall, most notable was not the total lack of knowledge or values regarding cheating in our students, but that such a large percentage of the respondents did not identify most commonly recognized descriptions of cheating as violations. When asked whether getting help on a class quiz or test (even when asked not to do) was cheating, 12% responded that it was appropriate to receive assistance. More importantly, over 27% said it was not cheating to receive help (even when asked not to do so) on an online quiz or test. This type of discrepancy showed up repeatedly as it appears our student's perception of the importance of academic integrity in on-line classes vs. in class experiences is substantially different. Over 14% of the respondents said it was appropriate to use the textbook during a quiz when not permitted to do so, while over 44% said it was permissible to use a textbook with an on-line test or quiz when specifically not permitted to do so.

When asked if it was appropriate to pay someone to write a term paper for them, 10% of the respondents responded that it was appropriate. Additionally, 14% said it was appropriate to give false information about their level of involvement in a group project or when submitting another student's work for credit as their own. While it should be noted that the significant majority of students did not see this as cheating, the response that 10%-14% did acknowledge that it was appropriate and that they should be permitted to do so was surprising.

One of the issues on which faculty and students disagreed, was the submission of term papers and projects in one class being submitted during a subsequent semester for a different class. Of those responding, 32% said that it was appropriate to submit work done for another class without the instructor's knowledge. In addition, 75% of the respondents stated that it was appropriate to give their exam from a previous term to another student who is currently taking the course. Test files and sharing copies of previous exams with other students has long been a practice on college campuses. The difficulty comes in courses where instructors do not change their examination questions from semester to semester, making the shared test much more valuable as a study/cheating tool. If this is a common practice of faculty at FGCU, some thought should be given having faculty who persist in doing this to retain their exams after grading so they do not circulate among the student body.

When asked if sharing ideas or helping each other on an assignment (even when it was an individual assignment) was considered cheating, only half of the respondents identified the behavior as cheating. While only 7.7% said it was appropriate to steal another student's work and submit it as their own, it is surprising that such a large a number would in fact think it is appropriate to steal from each other at all.

The survey asked respondents to identify the types of penalties that should be imposed if a student was caught cheating. There was a marked difference in how they responded when the class was on-line (less serious) as compared to if a student was caught cheating in an on-campus class (more serious). Despite saying it was permissible to share exams from previous terms with others, most thought the penalty should be heavier if they did and when renaming another student's work as their own, (i.e., term papers, computer programs, etc...) the penalties tended to be harsher. This response would put the almost 8% of students who thought this was permissible to share resources at odds with other students who saw it as rather serious cheating.

At least 69% of the respondents felt that 2<sup>nd</sup> offenders should be suspended from the university. When asked about their experience at FGCU approximately 40% state that they have observed academic dishonesty occur and roughly 35% have observed cheating in an on-line class. Possibly as troublesome, 39% of the respondents have witnessed other students cheating and have chosen to ignore their actions by not reporting, them and 11% stated that they have seen instructors ignore obvious academic dishonesty. Only 7.7% claim to have reported academic dishonesty to university officials. When asked specifically if they believed that cheating is a problem at FGCU, only 22% agreed with that statement. Though approximately 70% of our students believed the university should take a strong stance on addressing cheating as an issue, roughly 80% of the respondents see no difference in cheating by students in professional fields vs. other undergraduate programs, nor do they see a difference if cheating is perpetrated by seniors compared to students in earlier years of their studies. Surprisingly, despite their answers regarding the perception and definition of plagiarism, most agreed that plagiarism is cheating. When asked if there are ever times when cheating is permissible only 15% moderately disagree that cheating is permissible.

Students were asked to provide up to three comments or suggestions in ways the university could make the campus a better environment for academic integrity and to help the university address this issue formally. Over 307 students submitted a total of 739 different suggestions and their answers were reviewed and grouped into several categories and are reported as follows.

A little over half of the students (155 students), felt that better guidance and direction from the faculty would be helpful. Two hundred (200) students requested that strict rules and penalties be enforced on a consistent basis. Less significantly, almost 1/3 of the respondents suggested that closer monitoring of testing, as well as closer engagement by faculty on projects and closer oversight of term papers (especially in group work) would be a positive change for our campus. This closer oversight specifically pointed to testing environments where close proximity to each other in exam space was considered problematic, as well as a number of suggestions that examinations for on-line classes be held on campus in a monitored testing

environment. There were smaller groups of responses that felt the sanctions for students found responsible for cheating should be advertised widely in terms of public humiliation for offenders and having their names published in the newspaper to deter cheaters. Of course reporting names of individual students found responsible for cheating is not permitted under FERPA, however it is important to note the passion that some students have regarding how seriously we should treat those who cheat. A smaller number of respondents felt that an Honor Code would be helpful on our campus and an interestingly, an equal number of respondents felt that easier testing and having less work assigned by faculty would reduce the amount of cheating on campus.

## **Findings**

It appears that based on the responses of this survey, students would welcome better and clearer guidance from the university and the faculty on addressing academic dishonesty. Clearer information regarding class expectations in syllabi, the development of an Honor Code or inclusion of Honor Statements on exams, some sort of public sharing of information about offenses that were reported and the outcomes, stood out in their written responses as acceptable ways for the faculty and campus to address cheating. Despite the noted instances of substantial numbers of students who appear to rationalize or accept cheating behavior on campus and on-line, the large majority of students responded that they believe cheating is wrong and should be dealt with formally by the university. The distinction may be between those who believe cheating is wrong and how strongly they feel about it, versus so many individuals who don't seem to think it is wrong at all or that it is not that large of a problem. Between those two opposing viewpoints, lies a large area of confusion and disagreement among our students as to the nature of cheating and academic integrity. To gain a better understanding of these cultural realities at FGCU, the nuances could be explored further in focus groups or in small discussions with students. Some form of guidance from the university recommended by students seems to focus on three main themes:

- 1) *The need for clear expectations and guidelines from faculty that informs students of class and institutional expectations regarding cheating using course syllabi and verbal statements by instructors at the beginning of each semester;*
- 2) *The development of a university Honor Code that can support other initiatives to guide the student body and the faculty in accepted campus standards, and;*

*3) The consistent use of the Code of Student Conduct by the faculty and the university to enforce clearly communicated standards of academic honesty.*

It appears from the data that a significant number of students at FGCU are concerned that cheating occurs in class and on-line. While there is varied response as to what should be done, fairness and consistency for all students is expected and desired. The establishment of an institutional standard that is widely accepted as the norm of a campus provides a common language to use in discussion among faculty and with students. However, initiatives to establish an Honor Code or Statement of Academic Integrity on a campus can quickly stall despite the best of intentions of well meaning but disparate constituencies. Faculty and student input and buy-in, are critical to the process and ultimate success of any endeavor and the role of Academic and Student Affairs administrators are ideally positioned on campus to coordinate the process with the faculty and students. The role of faculty and students becomes one of establishing the underlying philosophy and shared values that can be incorporated into regulations, documents and publications by administrative units tasked with managing the outcomes once established. With that in mind, we recommend the following avenues to pursue to address these concerns.

## **Recommendations**

1. The Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Vice President for Student Affairs should appoint a small committee with representation from the Faculty Senate, Student Senate and staff, to formulate a plan that responds to the findings reported from these data. The committee will have an established and agreed upon timeline to complete their task and provide a final report.
2. The report of the committee should include recommendations to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Vice President for Student Affairs to address issues identified in this study and develop a document that can be used as a comprehensive Statement of Academic Integrity or Honor Code that can guide individual behavior at FGCU.
3. A final Statement of Academic Integrity or Honor Code will be submitted to the university community for adoption as the accepted standards of academic integrity for FGCU. Statements of support from the Faculty Senate, the Student Senate and the President's Cabinet endorsing this document to establish the institutional values regarding academic integrity of our learning community.
4. Upon receipt of the committee report, the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs will task staff to develop programmatic

efforts in new student orientation programs, campus wide information campaigns, student judicial affairs and in orientation of faculty and staff, to begin to impact the culture of the campus regarding the agreed upon standards.