

Academic Misconduct Penalties: Rationale and Guidelines

Prepared by the Office of the University Ombudsperson
Spring 2015

Many faculty find it difficult to determine an appropriate response when a student commits an act of academic dishonesty (AD) in their class. This guide aims to make this determination a bit easier by providing a rationale for the action as well as some options faculty may consider.

Rationale

The best responses to a student's academic dishonesty address two goals: teaching and discipline. These two goals are equally important and are a part of all good solutions.

It's a teachable moment: When you confront a student with evidence of their academic dishonesty, it is typically a moment of high emotion and concern. It is also a powerful teaching opportunity. As the instructor, you can help the student understand what they did, why it was wrong, how this action reflects on their choices and character, and how they need to reflect on the path that led them to this moment. Long after they forget most of what was taught in your class, the student may well remember the lesson you teach in this encounter. Be mindful of the message you are sending and the lesson you are trying to impart. As part of the university's response to academic dishonesty, all reported first-time undergraduate offenders are enrolled in a mandatory online course focused on academic integrity so that the student can maximize the learning that flows from this incident. Graduate students are given an academic integrity assignment by the Dean of the Graduate School.

Protection of the integrity of scholarship and grades: Academic dishonesty strikes at the core of the academic enterprise. If grades are not earned with integrity and honest work, they become meaningless. Degrees that are based on these grades, as well as the university that confers them, become equally suspect. We all have a stake in protecting the meaning and integrity of what we are doing. Because of the importance of this mission, we must respond to the discovery of academic dishonesty with a sanction that reflects the seriousness of the offense and is proportional to the nature of the transgression. As an instructor, you have the power to give a penalty grade – either for the assignment/exam in question or for the entire course.

Context matters: Our response to academic misconduct may be quite different for graduate students compared to undergraduates. In general, we have higher integrity expectations for graduate students and lower tolerance of academic misconduct. Many graduate programs address this issue explicitly in their graduate program handbooks and many of these handbooks specify dismissal from the graduate program as the penalty for academic misconduct. Therefore, the guidelines offered below may be more appropriate for instructors of undergraduate classes than for graduate classes. When graduate instructors do have some flexibility in crafting their response to cases of academic dishonesty, they may find themselves drawn to some of the more consequential responses.

Guidelines

The examples below are intended to help faculty determine appropriate sanctions for acts of academic misconduct. Both the *Students' Rights and Responsibilities* document and the *Graduate Students' Rights and Responsibilities* document contain the same two principles offering guidance on this issue:

Procedures and penalties for the violation of regulations shall be primarily designed for guidance or correction of behavior. (SRR, Article 1.H and GSRR, Article 1.5.7)

Penalties shall be commensurate with the seriousness of the offense. Repeated violations may justify increasingly severe penalties. (SRR, Article 1.I and GSRR, Article 1.5.8)

These are guidelines only. As faculty, you have the right and responsibility to determine the penalty for academic dishonesty in your classroom. Please note that if you assign a penalty grade, you must also complete an Academic Dishonesty Report (see *Integrity of Scholarship and Grades*, item 3). If you have questions/concerns about the penalty you are assigning or about filing an academic dishonesty report, please visit the Academic Integrity FAQ for faculty on the Ombudsperson's website (<https://ombud.msu.edu/academic-integrity/faculty-faq.html>).

Academic Integrity Assignment - Faculty may encounter situations where academic integrity has been breached, but there remain questions around individual culpability, intent, or the students' understanding of integrity itself. In such situations, prior to the decision to assign a penalty grade and file an Academic Dishonesty Report, the instructor may offer the student an opportunity to voluntarily prepare a report, reflection paper, or similar assignment. This assignment may request the student to reflect on their action or discuss the ramifications of violations of integrity in the intended profession or workplace. Other assignments that achieve similar goals or forward the cause of student understanding are also possible. Following the review of this voluntary submission, the faculty retains the right to assign a penalty grade if still considered warranted.

You might use this option for:

- situations where you don't have sufficient evidence to support an accusation of AD;
- situations where the student only had tangential involvement in someone else's AD; or
- situations where the student's action reflects a lack of understanding as opposed to an intentional act of academic dishonesty.

Grade Reduction on Assignment/Exam - This can either be a partial or complete (i.e., zero) grade reduction on the work where the academic dishonesty occurred. A grade reduction on the assignment is the sanction most often selected by faculty for minor acts of academic misconduct.

You might use this sanction for:

- unintentional plagiarism (e.g., student does not follow proper citation procedures);
- sharing files/work with another student (unauthorized or inappropriate collaboration); or
- minor cheating in a test or exam (glancing at an exam with no apparent premeditation).

Grade Reduction for the Course – This can be a partial or complete (i.e., 0.0) reduction of the student's semester grade in the course. This penalty grade is often chosen for those offenses that are

pre-mediated, affect others, are a serious breach of professional ethics, or occurred in an upper division or graduate course.

You might use this sanction for:

- major plagiarism (e.g., student places name on something s/he did not write);
- enlisting someone else to do an assignment or paper;
- using another student's clicker to submit responses for them in class;
- taking another student's quiz or examination for them;
- submitting another student's work (in whole or part) without his or her knowledge;
- fabricating data or information about a patient or client;
- cheating or plagiarizing in an upper division or graduate course;
- lying or supplying false information; or
- major cheating in a test or exam (e.g., cheat sheet / prearranged sharing of answers).

Recommendation of Additional Sanctions - Faculty may request the consideration of additional sanctions (e.g., probation, recess, or dismissal) if the faculty member believes that the student needs to take time off to resolve other issues or reassess their role as a student or if the incident affected many others (large-scale cheating situation). The Dean of the student's college, the Dean of the Graduate School, or the Dean of Undergraduate Studies would have to call for a disciplinary hearing to impose these additional sanctions.

You might request additional sanctions when a student:

- enlisted outside professional services to complete work;
- plagiarized a major graduate requirement (e.g., dissertation, thesis)
- aided others in large-scale cheating;
- lied or provided false information;
- stole an exam;
- stole another's work and submitting it for grading; or
- altered official documentation.

Reports on students who are not in your class – Occasionally, you will become aware of students committing acts of academic dishonesty who are not enrolled in your class. For example, a student in your class may have received unauthorized help on an exam or assignment from another student who took this course in a previous semester. In such cases, you are encouraged to send this information to either the Dean of Undergraduate Studies or the Dean of the Graduate School depending on the student's level. They will take appropriate action.

For Further Information & Questions

Office of the University Ombudsperson
Michigan State University
354 Farm Lane, Rm. 129 (North Kedzie Hall)
East Lansing, MI 48824
(517) 353-8830
ombud@msu.edu
<https://ombud.msu.edu>