Toward Enhancing a Culture of Academic Integrity at St. Petersburg Community College

by

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Introduction

In 2007, due to evidence of a cheating scandal at St. Petersburg College, President Dr. Carl M. Kuttler, Jr. formed the Academic Honesty Committee with the task to determine how well members of the college community were adhering to the College’s Academic Honesty policies and how effectively those policies were being enforced. The findings from the committee’s investigation prompted the creation of various recommendations to improve academic integrity within the college, of which, the most salient being those that would contribute to a change in culture. Although these recommendations were well-conceived and meant for adoption, it has been six years since the committee’s final report was released with there yet to be a significant change to the college’s practices, policies or procedures regarding academic integrity.

The continued absence of meaningful reform undermines the ability of St. Petersburg College to foster an increasingly supportive and secure learning environment concerned with the intellectual and personal growth of every student. This paper represents a strategic initiative between students, faculty, and administration to shape institutional practices, improve policies, and design procedures that will create and sustain a strong culture of academic integrity. The specific aims of this initiative are to 1) adopt a new Honor Code 2) institute an Honor Board and Council 3) introduce an academic integrity learning module, and 4) develop an SPC Academic Honesty webpage. Included below is a descriptive analysis of the problem, the goal of recommended solutions, and how these proposed solutions would be implemented.
Descriptive Problem Analysis

Within institutions of higher education, there are two dominant approaches to maintain academic integrity on campus – rule compliance and integrity (Garrett, 2011). The rule compliance approach is a traditional method used to regulate student behavior through the enforcement of legalistic policies and procedures. Whereas this method primarily emphasizes a reliance on discipline to discourage student misconduct, the integrity approach is fundamentally different in goal, method, and tone. The integrity approach is primarily concerned with ethical development and seeks to harness a campus environment that encourages students to take an active role toward academic integrity. In addition to these two main approaches, a third and less common noncoordinated approach mainly applies to schools that have a decentralized structure (Garrett, 2011). Under this approach, responsibility for addressing and resolving issues of academic integrity fall to individual faculty and campus departments.

St. Petersburg College retains an approach to academic integrity that incorporates both noncoordinated and rule compliance strategies. These organizational responses compliment the college’s system of decentralization and also reflect underlying institutional norms. Although efforts to promote and maintain academic integrity within the college may be considered acceptable on some levels, more can be done to develop an inclusive student culture.
Given St. Petersburg College’s highly decentralized campus structure, noncoordinated strategies that divert decision-making to different members of the college community are necessary in the attempt to increase efficiency and effectiveness, but often run the risk of being unfair, opaque, and inconsistent (Garrett, 2011). Leaving matters of academic honesty and integrity to the discretion of faculty without clear and well-defined goals or procedures for guidance can cause situations in which students experience improper disciplinary and educational interventions. It is impossible to guarantee, for instance, that all students will receive some form of instruction about the importance of academic integrity within the classroom. It is also hard to ensure that a student who is accused of cheating is given fair due process and is made aware of their rights. Allowing professors and administrative personnel to handle issues of academic integrity is appropriate in certain respects, but this method is essentially flawed from the point of view that student behavior is something to be managed by faculty.

As indicative of a school that utilizes rule compliance to curtail academic violations, St. Petersburg College promotes policies that disproportionately stress student obedience. For instance, the Honor Code is written in language that onerously expresses a privity of contract between the college and the student. The strong emphasis put on consequences is intended to assert the severity of disciplinary action, in turn, discouraging students from committing any misconduct. In further compounding problems, the Honor Code Pledge is treated as little more than a formality needed during the enrollment process to complete class registration. The limited exposure of the Honor Code and the passive acceptance casually inferred by the Pledge do not afford the student any opportunity for critical
reflection on the importance of being honest and respectful. In short, a lack of knowledge and responsibility on behalf of the student pervades their whole understanding of academic honesty and integrity.

The combined effect of both noncoordinated and rule-compliance strategies reveals an implicit institutional attitude toward academic integrity that is reactionary, rigid, and restrictive. Impediments of St. Petersburg College’s current norms are detrimental in the treatment of student behavior as a problem to be controlled through rule enforcement and faculty prevention. Neglected as a result of these policies and procedures, is the belief that students are first and foremost responsible for their own behavior and that the college should encourage morale and ethical development by creating an inclusive culture. Although underlining principles of vigilance and deterrence are not entirely meaningless, attempts to significantly reduce cheating and misconduct will continue to stagnate unless a student-centered culture is established.

Creating campus environments that foster academic integrity will take the effort of the entire college community. Once achieved, however, the result will have a meaningful and sustained impact. In a highly cited empirical study conducted by Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino, their conclusion asserts that, “the climate or culture of academic integrity found on a campus may be the most important determinant of the level of student cheating on that campus” (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). In order to shift the existing college culture to one that more aptly addresses academic misconduct on the fundamental
level of students’ ethical and moral development, a comprehensive strategy that enhances student awareness, involvement, and commitment toward academic integrity is needed.

Recommendations

Through a collaborative and student-driven initiative devoted to aid in the emergence of a well-established culture of integrity, this section outlines four recommended solutions that encompass specific practices, policies and procedures needed in order to achieve this goal.

Honor Code

Research confirms a relationship between colleges and universities that have honor codes and lower levels of student cheating (Mcabe & Pavela, 2010). It is noted that Honor Codes are able to communicate the importance of academic integrity while shaping student perceptions of cheating and misconduct. Adopting an Honor Code that promotes good behavior as well as the non-toleration of bad behavior are important factors for socializing students to a campus environment that discourages cheating and misconduct. Macabe and Pavela further state that the introduction of a modified honor code on three campuses resulted in a self-reported cheating rate (on tests and written assignments) of 33% of students surveyed compared to a 45% rate at nine colleges without a code (McCabe & Pavela, 2004). In addition, exposure of the Honor Code and Pledge is also an important factor leading to positive peer influences and an increased awareness of academic policies (von Dran, Callahan and Taylor, 2001).
To increase the effectiveness of reducing academic misconduct, a new Honor Code and Pledge should be developed by students, for students that clearly indicates positive types of positive behavior as well as an emphasis on the non-toleration of bad behavior. Along with this, exposure of the Honor Code and Pledge should be heightened through each course syllabus, orientation, pamphlets, student handbook…etc. It is also crucial that students psychically sign the Pledge during the start of a course in order to reaffirm their commitment to academic integrity and awareness of the disciplinary terms.

**Honor Board and Council**

Although retaining and promoting an Honor Code is one way to elevate a culture of academic integrity, it is not the only useful method. Empowering students with the responsibility to take ownership of their own and fellow students behavior is also a critical part of this enterprise. A student Honor Council is another important component of effective academic integrity systems that allows peers to hold themselves accountable to high ethical standards (Macabe & Pavela, 1993). The Honor Council will be designed as an organization that will ensure due process and the protection of student rights along with reinforcing the idea of providing a campus environment built on student ownership. It will further provide a way for students to report violations and promote educational activities around academic integrity.

Due to the organizational complexity of St. Petersburg College, the Honor Council must be structured in a manner that accounts for the expertise, efficiency, and effectiveness needed for long-term success. Working closely with students, faculty, and administration
in an ongoing process is crucial for the implementation of a student Honor Council. For a more detailed explanation of the Honor Council’s policies and procedures, refer to the bylaws that have already been created as a start to this project.

**Learning Module**

The learning module is primarily geared toward providing students with a deeper understanding of topics related to academic honesty and integrity. Giving new students the opportunity to learn the importance of academic integrity through active participation is one way to reduce the potential of academic violations on campus without relying on the influence of punitive action. With the introduction of a subject-specific educational program, students will be given detailed knowledge of the type of actions and behaviors that constitute a violation along with guidelines to help students make moral decisions. This will be especially helpful for international students and First Time In College Students who do not possess any knowledge to the standards of academic conduct within an educational institution.

Current technological programs designed for this purpose already exist and could be purchased for use by the college. RAISE is one such program that could be included into new student orientation or as a requirement on a new student’s “to-do list”. If the RAISE system is pursued, it would be appropriate to first create a focus group with the task of completing the program in order to determine it’s appeal to students and whether or not it will be effective.
Academic Honesty Webpage

Creating a webpage on the college’s main website as a resource guide for students and faculty pertaining to the honor code, academic policies, and disciplinary process is appropriate to ensure individuals have direct access to this information if needed. This webpage will further provide a way to display clear definitions and examples of violations related to the academic honesty policy. Along with relevant information, this webpage will serve as a tool to further promote the college’s high standards of academic integrity in relation to the college’s mission, values, and goals. Research shows that promoting academic policies, providing clear definitions and examples of cheating is one best practice contributing to a reduction in academic dishonesty (Boehm, Justice & Weeks, 2009).

This webpage can be developed similar to the college’s current online resource for submitting a student complaint, included within the “Student” tab on the college’s main website under “Student Life” or include this webpage as its own separate tab along the lines of Admissions, Academics, Students…etc. This component of the initiative is the most technologically sophisticated and as such, the individuals with the correct expertise from the college must be involved in this undertaking.

Implementation

As an initiative that targets the improvement of student educational experiences and personal development, the implementation process for institutionalizing these solutions
will be guided by student leaders. The Student Council of Presidents will be responsible for formulating solutions, facilitating discussions between students, faculty and administration, compiling resources, and conducting research. Once all logistical requirements are met and there is a consensus reached among the student presidents, a final proposal will be submitted for passage by the Faculty Governance Organization and then the Board of Trustees for institutionalization.

Involvement at all levels of the college community is necessary for the success of this initiative. The constant input and assistance from faculty and upper administration will be sought in order to ensure fidelity of the changes. In this respect, the implementation process will be open-ended until enough support is garnered for each specific component of the initiative.

**Summary**

Although not explicit goals advocated by St. Petersburg College, the moral and ethical development of students is imperative for continued scholarship, good citizenship, and a fulfilling career as a professional. In acknowledging the importance that the standards of academic integrity serve to instill honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility within students, fostering an institutional culture that better supports the goal of increasing academic integrity within students while also reducing the prevalence of misconduct. Through a concerted effort involving students, faculty and administration in an on-going process, significant changes can be made to the college community that are
meaningful and lasting. In the words of the Academic Honesty Committee Chairperson, Joseph S. Leopold, “the time for bold action is now”.

References


