

Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs

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Rethinking Academic Integrity

Draft Final Report

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I. Introduction and Overview

The charge of our committee this year was to investigate challenges posed by recent transformations in academic life to our existing norms and regulations of academic integrity, and to ask how USC might address these challenges. The 2011 USC Strategic Vision points to the changing context of intellectual production in the university: “As the influence of the Pacific Rim rises, significant demographic trends, unprecedented health, social and economic challenges, revolutions in communication and technology, growing diversity, evolving concepts of democracy, and changing ideas surrounding creativity and individual expression are transforming the global landscape.”

Our committee began from this perspective, asking: to what extent do these transformative processes—globalization, technological innovation, new student populations, and shifting cultural norms—demand that we rethink academic integrity? More specifically, the Committee addressed the following four challenges to current conceptions and practices of academic integrity:

- 1) The proliferation of digital devices and social media platforms that change the experience of the classroom and pose the question of where authoritative knowledge is “located.”
- 2) The extension of the classroom setting outside of the physical space of the classroom through distance learning innovations.
- 3) A diverse set of sub-cultures among our student body, in which there may be disparate understandings of what academic integrity means and how serious its violation is.
- 4) An increasing emphasis in our teaching on teamwork and collaboration; but at the same time, a continued expectation that student examinations and assignments will demonstrate individual achievement.

Over the course of the academic year, the Committee consulted with a number of USC administrators and faculty members with special insight into these questions, including representatives from: the Student Affairs office, the Office of International Services, the Viterbi School, the Office of Technology Enhanced Learning, and the Center for Excellence in Teaching. We also reviewed the practices of our peer institutions, looked into research on methods of enforcing academic integrity, asked what online education programs are doing to manage academic integrity issues, and analyzed recent public discussions of academic integrity violations in publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as well as national newspapers.

Our recommendations fell into two categories. First, how current regulations might be better enforced; and second, how a more expansive conceptualization of the problem of academic integrity points toward new tools of prevention.

II. Defining and Enforcing Academic Integrity: the Current State of Play

USC currently governs issues of student academic integrity within the office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards (SJACS). In its policy statement on academic integrity, SJACS emphasizes that the USC community defines success not only in terms of academic performance but also the “ability to be a positive, honest, and outstanding citizen in society.” The statement does not explicitly define the concept of academic integrity, but states: “to falsify the results of one’s research, to present the words, ideas, data, or work of another as one’s own, or to cheat on an examination corrupts the essential process by which knowledge is advanced.”¹ The statement then defines a number of common forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, cheating, unauthorized collaboration, and falsifying academic records. The university’s norms of honesty and integrity are enforced through a process in which SJACS reviews complaints of academic violations that have been submitted by faculty.

Before turning to our recommendations on how we might rethink academic integrity in the changing learning environment of the university, we begin with a brief summary of the major issues that came up in our discussions of USC’s current policies for defining and enforcing the norms of academic integrity:

- 1) **The problem of data:** It was not obvious just how serious a problem academic dishonesty (defined in the traditional sense, as instances of plagiarism or cheating) currently is at USC. On the one hand, the actual number of cases brought to SJACS is rather small in proportion to the number of students on campus: in 2011-12 SJACS handled 291 cases in total, in 2012-13 it handled 420 cases. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence from members of the Committee (as well as our colleagues) would suggest a much higher rate of instances of dishonesty. It seems likely that the vast majority violations go either undetected or unreported, but we do not have quantitative data on this.
- 2) **Differences among schools:** Individual schools may have distinctive issues to deal with; in other words, it may not be possible to develop a blanket set of recommendations for the university. For instance, Viterbi has by far the highest rate of incidence of academic integrity violation; this may be due to the kinds of examinations its courses tend to use, to the composition of its student body, to the online availability of problem-solutions, and/or to the unique reporting system it has developed and its work to raise faculty awareness of the need to report violations. On the other hand, academic integrity will be defined and enforced very differently in the arts schools and the humanities disciplines.
- 3) **Master’s degree programs:** based on the experience of Viterbi, the Committee noted that professional master’s degree programs may represent a distinctive and specific challenge: many students are paying high tuition for a credential to be achieved in a short time, and may not be focused on the experience of joining the campus community with its shared values (as the undergraduate students are), or entering into a long-term relationship with a mentor (as PhD students do).

¹ Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards, “Academic Integrity.” See www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/index.html

- 4) **Faculty disinterest:** another key challenge is how to get faculty more aware of, and interested in, mechanisms for reporting violations of academic integrity. Some faculty are concerned that SJACS procedures are overly strict (or alternatively, overly lax), and others are simply unaware of how reporting works, and address issues of academic dishonesty in an ad hoc way if at all.

It should be emphasized that such difficulties are by no means unique to USC. Arguably, in many contexts of contemporary higher education, the traditional trust and self-identity based mechanisms for defending academic integrity within university communities, such as the “honor code,” no longer function to regulate student conduct.² Meanwhile, some of our peer institutions (notably Duke, Northwestern and Cornell) have recently engaged in thorough reorganizations of their mechanisms for the enforcement of academic integrity, and have also made strong efforts to increase awareness of norms and procedures among both students and faculty.³ It is also worth pointing to the work of the International Center for Academic Integrity (of which USC is a member), beginning in the late 1990s, to promulgate guidelines and assessment techniques for institutions to evaluate their academic integrity practices.⁴

A recent series of essays in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* provides a useful set of reflections on contemporary challenges and on potential solutions. In these articles, James M. Lang, author of *Cheating Lessons*, argues that the best way to reduce dishonesty is to work on the learning environment rather than to penalize instances of cheating. For example, he suggests that professors should increase opportunities for students to be assessed so that the number of high stakes assessments, which encourage cheating, is reduced.⁵ We will return to this theme of prevention through changes in the learning environment in our section on recommendations.

III. Rethinking academic integrity in an period of educational transformation

New Digital Technologies

In a 2011 survey of college and university presidents, the Pew Research Center found that 55 percent of the campus leaders said plagiarism had increased over the previous decade. Among those who saw a growing problem, 89 percent said that computers and the Internet had played a role.⁶ The Pew report did not explore the reasons behind these views. The Committee, however, found multiple reasons for concern. New information technologies have already transformed the ways we learn, how we express ourselves and many other aspects of the academic enterprise. The digital revolution should compel us to rethink the norms and practice of academic integrity as well.

At the simplest level the Internet has proliferated the number and types of sources that provide information to students. That has brought vast benefits, and yet at least three problems arise. The first involves the proper attribution protocols and citation formats for new types of material

² Jessica Cheung, “The Fading Honor Code,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2014.

³ See, for example, “Academic Integrity: A Basic Guide,” Northwestern (2013).

⁴ International Center for Academic Integrity, “The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity” (2012).

⁵ James M. Lang, “Cheating Lessons, Part I.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 28, 2013.

⁶ Parker, K., Lenhart, A., & Moore, K. (2011) *The Digital Revolution and Higher Education: College Presidents, Public Differ on Value of Online Learning*. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center Internet Project website: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/08/28/main-report-17/>

ranging from Wikipedia entries to blog posts. However, teaching students how to reference information gleaned online seems much easier than teaching them when it is necessary.

For centuries the academic pursuit of knowledge was conducted in libraries, laboratories and other distinctive venues. It involved handling materials that physically conveyed their august status. Today the most common means of acquiring information, the online search, happens all the time and everywhere. The physical process is the same whether a student is looking for gossip or gospel. Not surprisingly, students can readily fail to draw a distinction between the casual acquisition of information online and the kind of academic work that requires careful documentation. A Google search does not cue a student to build a bibliography the way a card catalogue once did, and yet our means of teaching the ethics of attribution have not changed.

Lastly, the proliferation of information sources presents new challenges in discernment. Materials appropriate for citation in a student essay were once vetted at the library door. Today, students are exposed to a much greater variety of ideological and cultural viewpoints. But search algorithms do not reward objectivity and verification. As such, the requirement to identify bias or a conflict of interest is an increasingly important aspect of maintaining the integrity of academic work. The information contained in a typical bibliographic citation seems destined to become inadequate if the intent is to document the provenance of the information cited.

Aside from the proliferating sources of information, another set of academic integrity challenges arise from the new modes of communication that are native to our students. The new media, as our colleague Henry Jenkins puts it, has led to a culture of “convergence” in which data, words, sounds and images are constantly mixed and remixed as they move seamlessly from one form of expression to another.⁷ Meanwhile, aggregation, curation and other forms of compilation are natural expression of the language of the link and the ethics of sharing. Needless to say this culture of communication is hardly conducive to careful citation in which pieces of information are isolated according to their origins. The true challenge presented by computers and the Internet is not the higher incidence of plagiarism alleged in the responses to the Pew survey. Rather, we are now obliged to expand and refine the norms of academic integrity to account for fundamental changes in the ways that information is acquired and expressed. And, however those new norms are formulated, educators will not be able to enforce them unless they meet today’s students where they live, online.

Distance education

In recent years there has been a concerted effort among higher education institutions to offer coursework to students through distance education. Currently, about 32% of higher education institutions offer fully online college degrees or certificate programs. Nearly two-thirds offer some type of online, hybrid or blended online or other distance education coursework or programs.⁸ In 2002, about 1.6 million college students in the United States enrolled in distance courses, representing approximately 2.6% of all college enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2013). By 2011, the proportion of college enrollments taking at least one distance course was at an all time high of 32%, reflecting more than 6.7 million students.⁹ This represents a compound annual growth rate of 17.3 percent between 2002 and 2011. During this same period, the overall higher education student body grew at an annual rate of only 2.6%, from 16.6 million to 21.0 million. Rates of enrollment in distance courses show no signs of abating in the near future. As the use of

⁷ Jenkins, Henry. (2006) *Convergence Culture*. New York City: New York University Press.

⁸ Hanover Research (2011).

⁹ Allen & Seaman (2013).

distance education increases, so do concerns about academic integrity in distance education programs.¹⁰

Given USC's strong efforts to increase its presence in the field of distance education, a number of important questions arise. In these settings, the norms that are promulgated and regulated by community interaction may not be as strong; and it may be easier to violate academic integrity rules. In many cases, faculty that are involved in distance learning have not been trained in how to rethink their teaching and examination strategies in this light. Finally, the companies that USC contracts with to provide online learning platforms do not necessarily share our community standards *vis-a-vis* academic integrity.

Collaboration and individual achievement

The widely publicized scandal around student collaboration on a final exam at Harvard has provoked broader concern about divergent understandings of individual versus collaborative work. But it is not simply a question of enforcing shared norms of integrity. Rather, there has been a transformation in teaching philosophy that raises new questions. On the one hand, we increasingly emphasize the importance of collaboration. On the other hand, this emphasis can make it difficult to assess collaborative work given our individually structured reward system; and it can lead to misunderstandings about the appropriate level of communication between students about individual assignments. The committee learned that in the Viterbi School, this question of when teamwork ends and individual assignments begin has been a fraught one.

New sub-populations of students

There are a number of new and growing sub-populations of students represented in our student body. These changes include an increase in international students, students with disabilities, and older students. In addition, there are diverse existing communities, including athletes and members of the Greek system, who may have different needs or norms with respect to questions of academic integrity. Meanwhile, especially in two-year professional school programs in which many foreign students enroll, there is no reason to assume that a traditional USC community "spirit" emphasizing honesty and mutual trust is inculcated in students. Of particular note, we have an increasing number of foreign students from settings where assumptions about academic integrity may differ. Viterbi, for example, has approximately 3500 foreign students, many of whom are in graduate master's programs. Training in academic integrity is not currently part of the orientation process for newly enrolled foreign students.

IV. Recommendations

Efforts to cultivate academic integrity and to deter academic dishonesty can be classified in terms of two broad approaches: policing and prevention. Arguably, much of USC's current policy focuses on the former, policing of violations once they have been committed. One of our central findings is that the changing climate of university life should direct us to emphasize the second

¹⁰ Research on academic integrity specifically in distance education has focused largely on how much cheating is going on and why cheating is occurring (Grijalva et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2000). Researchers have not yet addressed what academic integrity means to students and faculty engaged in learning and teaching in virtual learning environments (VLEs). Nor have researchers examined in a significant way the deterrents to academic dishonesty and the effectiveness of strategies for cultivating academic integrity VLEs (Myers, 2010, p. 3). A handful of studies (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Carnevale, 1999), however, have identified technology-based tools that can detect cheating online.

approach, prevention through changes in the environment and through pedagogical techniques. Here we make recommendations along both axes.

The enforcement of current regulations

- 1) **More data.** We need to know more about what is currently going on at USC: how big a problem is academic dishonesty in its various forms? One possibility would be to replicate in other schools a survey that Viterbi performed of faculty awareness around academic integrity. Such research should pose questions such as: how widespread is cheating? Do cultural differences encourage (or discourage) cheating? Is there a problem of communication of norms between faculty and students?
- 2) **Reporting methods.** The increase in reporting rates after Viterbi changed its reporting methods suggests that training in enforcement procedure and prevention should occur at both campus-wide and unit-specific levels. But we also note that different schools have different needs, so it is not a question of exactly replicating what Viterbi has done, but rather using it as a model of school-wide investigation.
- 3) **Cultural awareness.** We should institute a culture-specific program of education for international students to address cultural differences in perception of what constitutes cheating, and also to address other contextual factors that may promote cheating due to the high cost—and therefore high stakes—of international education.

The prevention of academic integrity violations

- 1) **Good pedagogy as a deterrent to academic dishonesty.** For example, increasing the number of assessments during the term and thus making them less high-stakes may lessen the need and desire to cheat.
- 2) **Relational accountability.** Differences in rates of cheating between master's students and doctoral students (in Viterbi) suggest that a closer working relationship with faculty may foster greater accountability and loyalty, which in turn may function as an inhibiting factor for cheating.
- 3) **Training and education of faculty.** Faculty need better training and education around academic integrity, both at the University and College/School level. Workshops and seminars may be offered around good pedagogical practices to deter cheating.
- 4) **Training and education of students.** Education around academic integrity needs to occur throughout the first year in particular and not just at orientation when students are overwhelmed with information. The information should be delivered using a “just in time” model in close proximity to assignments in the first year when they are most likely to encounter questions about what is and is not academic dishonesty. The approach should be educational and developmental rather than punitive. Some prevention education may need to be group-specific, such as international students, as to address particular needs and challenges of this population in light differences in culture and need for academic acculturation.
- 5) **More investment.** Finally, we suggest more substantial investment by the university in wide-ranging reflection on how to approach the new challenges enumerated in section III

above.¹¹ USC can lead the way in investigating the contemporary role of the university in promulgating an ethical culture of responsibility for integrity.

¹¹ Recent efforts to rethink academic integrity made by several of our peer institutions (such as Cornell, Duke and Northwestern) can be looked at as potential models in this regard.