

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *2000 - 2001 Research Project: How Has Cheating Affected Teaching and Learning in Your Classroom?*

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Following a discussion of plagiarism at the Sheridan Center's Fall 2000 meeting of its Faculty Teaching Liaisons and Graduate Student Liaisons, the Center chose academic code violations as the topic for its annual research project.

### *The Survey*

In order to better understand the impact of cheating on student learning and course dynamics, a survey was compiled and sent to all faculty members and active graduate teaching assistants in February 2001. Survey recipients were asked for their responses to the following:

- Are you a faculty member or a graduate student?
- Have your experiences with cheating at Brown in any way caused you to alter the form, content or methodology of assignments you give?
- If you answered yes to the previous question, please indicate any specific changes you have made, and your perceptions of the efficacy of those changes in reducing cheating.
- In your view, how has cheating affected teacher-student, student-student or faculty-TA interactions?
- Do you think that Brown offers adequate resources to prepare instructors to deal with incidents of cheating in their courses?
- If you are a faculty member, how do you prepare your TA's to handle cheating?
- Do you think that Brown should have an "honor code"? Why?
- Would you like the Sheridan Center to provide materials or organize seminars on specific strategies to help prevent cheating in your courses?
- Please share with us any comments or insights you may have with respect to the topic of cheating at Brown.

### *Survey Results*

A total of 58 faculty members and 19 graduate teaching assistants responded to the survey. There was a very wide variety of responses regarding the incidence of cheating at Brown, its impact on learning, and the effectiveness of the mechanisms currently in place that deal with plagiarism and cheating. The main findings of the survey are as follows:

- In response to cheating in their courses, a majority of respondents altered the form or content of the work assigned.
- Many faculty members felt strongly that Brown should do more both to prepare them for dealing with cheating, *and* to inform and educate undergraduates about cheating and its ramifications at Brown and beyond.
- A significant number of respondents felt that the occurrence of cheating in their courses had eroded their trust in students.
- Almost all graduate TA's expressed concern that they were not adequately informed about how to handle incidents of potential cheating.
- A majority of faculty members and graduate TA's was strongly in favor of having an academic honor code at Brown, although several faculty members voiced compelling dissenting opinions.
- Most respondents indicated that they would welcome Sheridan Center materials or seminars on how to minimize cheating in their courses.

Respondents offered a range of *preemptive strategies* for discouraging cheating in their courses. Some instructors remind students of the Academic Code, either verbally or in writing, and clearly warn them of the consequences of cheating. Some respondents include a reference to the Academic Code on their syllabus and all examinations. Many instructors are explicit about the use of proper citations. In order to prevent students from "recycling" old papers or obtaining papers from the Web, a significant number of respondents alter written assignments annually. In addition, some instructors avoid generic paper topics and often assign paper topics themselves, instead of letting students choose their own. Other preemptive strategies include avoiding take-home examinations, making all homework assignments due at the beginning of class, requiring that freshman lab write-ups be done in class, and distributing multiple versions of in-class examinations.

Respondents also shared their techniques for *detecting cheating* in their courses. The most common strategies are careful proctoring and vigilant grading. Some instructors carefully compare students' in-class and out-of-class performance. Others keep files of old student papers. Several respondents indicated that they used computer programs to detect cheating. In order to prevent students from adding to already graded exams, some faculty members cross-out all blank pages in "blue books" that have been handed in.

Many faculty respondents indicated that they prepared their TA's to deal with cheating. They discuss the Academic Code with their graduate assistants and encourage them to be vigilant. Most faculty members insist that their TA's refer all incidents of cheating to the instructor in charge of the course. In contrast, 14 of the 15 graduate students who responded did *not* feel that they had been adequately prepared to deal with

incidents of cheating. It should be noted that there was no specific relationship between the faculty members and graduate students who responded to the survey.

### *The Teaching Forum*

To facilitate a cross-disciplinary discussion of cheating, the Center offered a Teaching Forum on April 19, 2001. Led by Professor Luther Spoehr of the Education Department, the panel included Professor John Stein from Neuroscience, and graduate Teaching Assistants Amanda Burdan from the History of Art and Architecture and Victor Zabielski of Geological Sciences. Also in attendance was Dean Carol Cohen, who heads the Standing Committee on the Academic Code.

Panelists and attendees examined the apparent spectrum of faculty attitudes towards cheating and the related range of faculty responses to students who cheat. Many faculty elect to send suspected cases of academic dishonesty to the Standing Committee on the Academic Code, while others deal with all cases themselves without notifying anyone outside of their departments. There was a discussion of the need to notify an academic dean in all cases, so that there is a record outside of the department in the event that the student is involved in a subsequent code violation. Participants felt that many faculty members at Brown were not aware of all of the penalties and ramifications associated with sending a case to the Standing Committee on the Academic Code. Dean Cohen explained the possible penalties for students who are found guilty. The penalties range from a letter in the student's academic file, which can be viewed only by academic deans, to dismissal from Brown.

Also discussed was the issue that many faculty members seem to be reluctant to acknowledge the occurrence of academic dishonesty in their courses. They say that there is no academic dishonesty either because they do not want to believe that there is or because they are unwilling to address it, either preemptively or punitively.

### *Future Directions*

Both the survey responses and the Teaching Forum suggest the following four points for future discussion and action:

- Establish mechanisms to insure that students are more aware of Brown's Academic Code and fully understand its implications.
- Provide seminars and workshops that instruct first-year students on the proper use and format of citations and that discuss the morals and ethics of the proper attribution of ideas.
- Include a course or section within the Values Initiative that involves a debate on whether or not Brown should have an Honor Code. This debate could also be made a part of freshman orientation.
- Revisit and update the text of the current Academic Code to make it more relevant and immediate to the use of internet sources.

*Please contact the Center if you have any suggestions for seminar topics related to academic dishonesty.*