

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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A Culture of Honesty Earns a Degree of Respect: Facilitating Academic Honesty at the University of Georgia

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In the February, 2002 issue of this Report, Nathan Makdad identified "Ten Challenges Facing Campus Mediation Programs." Two of those challenges were "Association with Other Campus Departments," and "Developing New Programs to Reach and Educate Students." A recent revision of the University of Georgia (UGA) academic honesty policy, while perhaps not fully conquering those challenges, does, we believe, provide an example of the creative and effective use of alternative dispute resolution in higher education.

Change is in the Air

During 1998-1999, UGA underwent an administrative organizational change from a Vice President for Academic Affairs model to a Provost model. In 1999, the new Provost created an Office of the Vice President for Instruction (OVPI) and included in that office oversight and administration of the University's academic honesty policy, A Culture of Honesty. (Administration of the policy had previously been moved from Student Affairs to Academic Affairs and was revised by a faculty committee in 1994.) The organizational changes and the changes in both substance and location of the honesty policy came together with a newly-appointed Associate VP-Instruction and a professional staff member who had somewhat unexpectedly been assigned as Coordinator of Academic Honesty, to produce a climate of high expectations -- and high anxiety.

The Associate VP and Coordinator (co-authors of this article) spent the 1999-2000 academic year struggling to administer an honesty policy which provided a solid foundation for an honest university community but whose language was in some parts too specific and in others too vague. The result was a process defined in the policy as an academic hearing which involved student investigators, opening and closing statements, witnesses, advisors, evidence, and a hearing officer. A five-member panel (three students, two faculty members) was charged to decide guilt or innocence based on a preponderance of the evidence (or, in some cases, clear and convincing evidence.)

Although this structure created a number of problems, the major problems were that the policy did not look or feel very academic (except that it involved students and faculty) and it did not serve to educate students about honesty and integrity. Additionally, it required a three to four hour block of time during which as many as twelve people were available to attend the hearing. The scheduling problem meant that it was not unusual for the resolution of a charge to take as long as three months.

If It Is Broke, (Do Your Best To) Fix It

During Spring 2000, a committee of students, faculty, and administrators was asked to study A Culture of Honesty and suggest revisions for a streamlined and more educational version. The committee members met with various administrators, faculty members, and students to hear concerns and suggestions for improvements to the policy. Faculty members expressed frustration with the existing policy because it minimized their involvement. Students wanted a policy that was easy to understand and included procedures for handling cases of alleged dishonesty more quickly. Through the discussions about the existing policy, it became apparent that a critical component missing from the process was the opportunity for the student and the faculty member to attempt to resolve the disagreement in a timely and educational manner. The members of the Culture of Honesty Policy Review Committee concluded that a modified version of a highly successful mediation process which had been initiated on campus some years before might address the concerns described by both faculty and students. The Facilitated Discussion and Hearing Model of Academic Honesty was created.

Facilitated Discussion Model

The Facilitated Discussion & Hearing Model for resolving academic dishonesty disputes at UGA was developed and subsequently approved by the University Council, the governing body of the University, on September 28, 2000. The new model provides for an immediate discussion between the faculty member and the student which is facilitated by a trained and neutral third party. No other individuals are allowed in the room during the discussion.

The first allegations of dishonesty under the new policy were reported within 3 class days after the new policy went into effect. The Associate Vice President and Coordinator, both trained mediators, facilitated these initial cases but knew that other faculty and staff members would need to be included if the projected increase of reports of dishonesty came to pass. UGA faculty and staff members who had already been trained in mediation were contacted and invited to attend a session on Academic Honesty. The Coordinator of Academic Honesty educated these potential facilitators about the academic honesty definitions, policy, and procedures so that they would be able to guide the student and faculty member through an educational and fair discussion. Facilitators observe (at least) three discussions and co-facilitate at least two before being certified by the Office of the Vice President to facilitate on a regular basis.

The Facilitator begins each Discussion with an explanation of the University's process for resolving academic dishonesty allegations, the possible outcomes to the discussion, and confidentiality issues. The four possible outcomes are that, 1) the allegation is dropped and the charge dismissed, 2) the student acknowledges the violation and receives a sanction, 3) the student acknowledges the violation but the student and faculty member cannot agree on a sanction, or 4) the student denies the dishonesty violation. If the student acknowledges guilt, the faculty member is free to suggest any (reasonable) sanction or set of sanctions. The result of outcomes 3) and 4) is that the case goes to a Hearing Panel to be heard and decided.

Following the introductory comments of the facilitator, the faculty member explains why the case was reported and why academic honesty and integrity are important to all members of the University community. A dialogue ensues and if dishonesty is acknowledged, the faculty member identifies the sanction(s) that s/he feels is appropriate. In some cases, the student simply accepts or rejects the sanction and in others, the student tries to negotiate for a different sanction. The discussion is theirs to have and the allegation theirs to resolve, if

possible. Unlike a mediator, the Facilitator does not offer opinions, solutions, or suggestions. Once the discussion begins, her role is to answer any questions about the policy that may arise, help keep the discussion on track and moving forward, and finalize the discussion with a form that is completed and signed by the student and faculty member. A [flow chart of the process and the agreement form used are available online](#).

Talk May Be Cheap, But It Can Also Be Highly Effective

We truly believe that this new model is creating a stronger culture of honesty on campus.

Since September 2000, nearly 300 cases of alleged academic dishonesty have been processed under the University of Georgia's Facilitated Discussion Model. Faculty members are reporting incidents of dishonesty at a rate of at least twice as many as before the change. Cases that used to take up to three months to be heard are being resolved on average in seven days. Concerns that the policy would provide lighter sanctions for dishonesty have proven incorrect. In the Facilitated Discussions, approximately 65% of all students charged have admitted their guilt, 28% of the charges have been withdrawn by the faculty members, and only 6% of the cases end up in the formal Hearings. (The additional 6% are pending at any given time.) Sanctions agreed upon during discussions are at least as severe as the required minimum sanctions under the old policy. Examples of sanctions under the Facilitated Discussion Model include a WF or F in the course, a notation on the student's transcript indicating that the student has violated the academic honesty policy, suspension for a term, a grade of zero on the assignment, and writing assignments on academic integrity. Faculty evaluations of the Facilitated Discussion Model are overwhelmingly positive.

Although there are some other minor modifications to A Culture of Honesty that we would like to make in the coming year(s), our experience applying a form of alternative dispute resolution to an academic process has been extremely positive. What was once an adversarial, non-educational and punitive process is now a discussion, the outcome of which is an educational, fair, and timely resolution of a serious conflict.

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