

To: University Faculty Council
From: John Snapper, Chair of the Student Affairs Committee
Date: April 10, 2007

Subject: Student Affairs Committee Recommendations

The active membership of the Student Affairs Committee is

John Snapper (Faculty, Dept. of Humanities, Member of the UFC)
Patti Bach (Faculty, Institute of Psychology, Member of the UFC)
Tom Gentry (Faculty, College of Architecture)
Mike Gosz (Faculty, Dept. of MMAE, Assoc. Provost)
Scott Justus (Undergraduate Student, Dept. of BCPS)
Avais Ghani (Graduate Student, Dept. of CS)

The UFC has asked the SAC to

- (a) Look into perceived problems with the present process for student evaluation of courses.
- (b) Make specific recommendations to lower a perceived, unacceptably high level of academic dishonesty in student work on the main campus.

(a) The SAC notes that: (i) the course-end evaluation forms are consulted on sensitive matters, such as re-appointments and promotions, (ii) the response rate on the present web-based system is too low for the evaluation forms to be reliable sources of information and (iii) although an in-class hard-copy form would generate a more meaningful response rate, the university is unwilling to deal with the expense and difficulty of using in-class hard-copy course-evaluation forms.

The SAC does not have a recommendation for an immediate solution. But the SAC has been led to understand that the University may, in the not too distant future, implement an I-Clicker technology for soliciting student evaluations of courses, which would apparently solve the problem. The I-Clicker is a technology that generates digital responses to questionnaires, and it can be an in-class procedure that generates the same high response rates as in-class hard-copy forms. The SAC looks forward to the successful implementation of this technology for soliciting student evaluations of courses.

(b) The SAC provides a list of eight specific recommendations for ways to lower the perceived, unacceptably high level of student involvement in academic dishonesty.

The SAC suggests nine policies and actions that may be taken to lower the perceived level of academic dishonesty. In addition, the SAC suggests three informal actions that may strengthen the IIT commitment to academic honesty. These proposals are meant for the main campus and for the Rice campus, not for the Kent School of Law campus that presently has its own fully-functional safeguards for academic honesty.

1. Make it policy that it is academically honest to study examinations from prior semesters.

This will eliminate dishonesty by making it no longer the case that a common practice is ever viewed as dishonesty. As a subsidiary policy, we could assist students in compiling a file of past examinations in the library or on a digital data base, in order to make past examinations equally available to all students.

2. Make it policy that if calculators are permitted during an examination, then it is academically honest to use the calculators to the full extent of their capabilities.

This policy recognizes that it is extremely difficult to police a demand for restricted use of calculators. Any attempt to police a restricted use of calculators will result in an unacceptable examination environment. On this policy, if an examiner wishes to restrict calculator use to only arithmetic functions, then the examiner must limit calculators to calculators that only perform arithmetic functions. The policy will eliminate dishonesty by making it no longer the case that a common practice is ever viewed as dishonesty.

3. Use the course evaluation forms to identify courses where dishonesty is common.

We can ask on the course-end evaluation forms if there is a perceived high level of academic dishonesty in the course, and perhaps ask for a comment on the nature of that dishonesty. If we establish that there is a particular problem in course xyz, then we can put some extra effort into proctoring tests in xyz, or into reviewing student submissions in xyz. The point of this procedure is that it guides us in concentrating our efforts to enforce honesty on the courses where academic dishonesty is most common. A focused effort is more likely to have short-term results than an unfocussed effort that looks at all courses.

4. Establish a formal means for students to report dishonesty, and a corresponding policy that such reports must be investigated.

If a student reports (perhaps anonymously through an official web-based reporting system) that there were cases of plagiarism in course xyz, then the instructor (or perhaps some designated investigator) will look for plagiarism and report the results of that investigation. (We should not accept anonymous reports that accuse particular students by name. Reports that mention individuals by name should include the name of the reporter)

5. Be more aggressive about demanding that instructors report incidents of academic dishonesty, that files be kept, and that the files be reviewed in an appropriate way.

Instructors often feel that a first incident may be excused, particularly from new students who are unfamiliar with university standards. If we keep records, we can identify students involved in multiple incidents who do not deserve to be excused. We do already keep records in the office of the Dean of Student Life, but many instructors either do not know about this practice or do not make use of it. (The Integrity Committee of the Student Government Association has expressed concern that there be clear policies that severely limit use of these files, in order to fully protect student privacy.)

6. Provide better examination environments.

Even very honest students will have a hard time keeping themselves from noticing the calculations done by a neighbor when students are crowded next to each other during major examinations. We recognize that it is difficult to find rooms where students may spread out during large examinations, but we should make every attempt to provide good examination environments. The SAC is also concerned by the apparently common practice of leaving examinations under the administration of TAs, in the absence of the instructor. This practice can create problems for both the students who have no opportunity to raise questions and for the TAs who are unprepared to take disciplinary action when dishonesty is observed.

7. Review and revise as needed the statement on academic honesty in the student handbook.

The present statement is fairly clear, but periodic reviews are a good idea. In particular, if Item 8 below is implemented, then some revision will be needed.

8. Appoint a faculty ombudsman to assist students with academic complaints.

At present, main-campus students are directed to “inform the appropriate course instructor, academic unit heads, or dean” of issues of academic dishonesty. Records are maintained in the Office of the Dean of Student Life. That office is also charged with reviewing incidents, initiating further punitive process when needed, and providing a means of appeal. Students with academic complaints are directed to the same offices. These instructions are complex, and many students have no idea where to go. The suggestion is that the university simplify the process through the appointment of a faculty member to act as ombudsman who can, among other activities, assist students in these matters. (The Integrity Committee of the Student Government Association has expressed concerns over the nature of this appointment. They ask for real input on the choice of faculty ombudsman, and they ask that the appointee have an office in the area of the present Dean of Student Life offices.)

9. Make available scanning software that can identify copied lab reports.

We hear reports that students often submit laboratory reports that are basically copies of reports from earlier years, with just a few changes in the parameters or data. There exists software that can scan new submissions against a data base of prior submissions to identify likely incidents. We should at least make that software available to instructors who wish to use it.

In addition to the above nine actions, the SAC suggests three activities that may also help create an environment of high academic integrity at IIT. .

1. Encourage instructors to teach students to acknowledge all academic assistance.

This is a far-reaching proposal for a practice that can change in the IIT academic environment. If this practice becomes the IIT standard, then students who get help from the tutors at the ARC will say on their work that they had this help. Students who discuss their lab reports with their roommates will say on their work that they had this help. In part, this practice protects students from accusations of dishonesty if they do get help. (If properly reported, assistance is not academic dishonesty, although a high level of help may be viewed as inappropriate by an instructor who assigns grades.) In part, this practice also establishes that unacknowledged assistance is dishonest. This standard teaches students to respect the academic tradition that acknowledges all forms of help in academic research and publication. The SAC does not propose that this practice become policy, for at present there can be no reasonable way of enforcing it as a policy. All the same, the SAC thinks that the practice will improve the environment of academic honesty to the extent that the practice becomes the IIT common practice.

2. Provide workshops for new faculty (as well as periodic reviews for continuing faculty) on IIT's instructional policies.

IIT must impress all instructors with the importance of the policies outlined above. The SAC is aware that we have had half-day workshops for new instructors in the past, but that these workshops were perceived as meaningless wastes of time. This suggestion depends on the creation of a meaningful workshop. Lacking such an activity, responsibility lies within the units to keep instructors fully informed of the policies.

3. Encourage the SGA in its student based efforts to raise the expectation of student integrity.