

Triage for the wounded – helping students who have faltered

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Academics globally are constantly faced with situations where they have to confront students who may or may not have committed academic misconduct. Academic misconduct is any action that someone commits, thereby giving them an unfair advantage over others in an academic setting. Amidst various types of misconduct exist cheating, fraud, interference, collusion, fabrication and plagiarism (UOW, 2019).

There are several reasons why students indulge in cheating. According to Whitney & Keith-Spiegel, the following are some of the factors that cause students to practice academic dishonesty:

- Peer pressure
- Performance Anxiety
- Inability to multitask / manage deadlines.
- Failing to comprehend terms such as plagiarism, paraphrasing, etc.
- Failing to understand the serious implications of being caught cheating.

(Whitney & Keith-Spiegel in NIU, 2019)

Comprehensive studies such as Khan (2014) also posited over 39 factors that might influence students' likelihood to e-cheat (electronically cheat).

Academics have tried to curb misconduct through various proactive and reactive measures such as:

- Instilling the fear of getting caught
- Talking more about academic dishonesty and the consequences
- Discussing personal consequences in the long run such as getting caught during a job interview
- Empowering honest students to influence their peers
- Introducing a class honor code for major courses, capstones and/or senior seminars in line with professional standards
- Changing assessment designs

(Weimer, M., 2018)

Regardless of the approach undertaken, there remain times when faculty members have to confront situations where students have faltered intentionally or unintentionally and committed misconduct, and “arrange for investigation and inquiry, as appropriate.” (Flinders University, 2019).

Research has posited ways by which confrontations, investigations and inquiry impact students. Some studies have highlighted the following:

- Social shame: When a student cheats or is caught cheating, word often spreads across the school or university. This “taints the student’s reputation and cause people to question his or her work in the future.” (Thompson, n.d.)
- Denial of responsibility: Students deny taking any responsibility for their actions by insisting that “their cheating was accidental” and they didn’t know they were cheating in the first place. (Olafson et. al, 2013)
- Condemnation of the faculty involved: Upon being caught cheating, “students generally deflect blame externally, blaming the instructor for unfairness or poor teaching or unclear grading rubrics.” (Olafson et. al, 2013)
- Psychological negativity: Students also experience guilt after being caught plagiarizing or cheating. (Ballantine, et. al, 2018)

In 2018, a school student accused of cheating in exams, committed suicide in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Rabbi, 2018). A series of mishandling of the situation, including humiliation of parents at the hands of the top management, led to the student ultimately committing suicide. In 2019, following a cheating scandal for the California Practice Standards and Jurisprudence Examination for Pharmacists (CPJE), thousands of students stated they had contemplated suicide (Gonzalez, 2019).

It thus becomes vital that institutions provide due support to students when alleged accusations are brought on for misconduct. Although studies have focused on falsely accused students, very little is said about support provided or that should be provided for students who may have in fact committed misconduct.

This paper tracks attempts by faculty who have adopted the concept of a “triage” to develop a support system for all students who face allegations. The word ‘triage’ stems from the French word trier, which means ‘to sort’. According to Lasky, triage is the method that is used in clinics and hospitals to prioritize patients on the basis of how urgent their need for treatment is (Lasky, 2017). When medical staff have limited resources during medical emergencies or war, they use triage as a method of “quickly assessing patients’ conditions and ensuring that those in the most serious condition receive treatment first.” (Lasky, 2017).

For a western university in a Middle eastern country, the lead faculty trained two faculty members and developed an “Academic Misconduct Case Triage”. This mimics the same process from an emergency room in a clinic or hospital to deal with students who have faltered in complying with academic integrity requirements at tertiary education levels.

The triage uses a simple model. As a pilot, the triage was rolled out in two first-year subjects across two semesters. At the beginning of the semester, the students were informed of the support system in place after the academic integrity policy was explained, along with a short over-view workshop on academic writing. During the semester, if a student received an email

informing him/her of a possible allegation, then and after their meeting they were invited to contact the triage for support. A meeting would be set up where faculty could speak to the student. Alternatively, the student had the option to request for a virtual meeting through the learning management system's "link only" option that did not require any sign in. The conversation was always positive; never accusatory. Faculty engaged students, making them feel safe to discuss the case. If, at any point, the faculty felt further assistance was required, then the faculty guided the student to approach the counsellor. At the end of the hour of consultation, the faculty provided the student with tips on academic writing, particularly on how to rectify mistakes made in previous assignment(s). If the faculty felt the student may have been accused wrongly, the faculty advised the student on the policy and to approach the faculty office to understand the appeal process.

In the two semesters that the triage was introduced across the two subjects, three faculty members were approached by students, leading to a total of 79 cases that were offered support. All cases were deemed legitimate. All 79 students used the time to speak to the faculty, and build a rapport. Faculty interview and observations recorded included feedback such as "students opened up when they felt comfortable", "some students asked for more time and came back to talk more about integrity in education", "students felt safe to cry", "students accepted they did not understand the mistake" and so on.

Students provided feedback to queries such as "how did you feel after the session", "was the session helpful", "what was the most useful part of the session", "what was the least useful part of the session" and so on. Not all students who used the triage session gave feedback. However, the rate of response was clocked at 53 out of 79, which is 67%. According to Ohme et al (2005), 66% response rate is suggested as acceptable while researchers such as Love and Smith (2003), and Liberatore et al., (2001) suggested 30% as viable and satisfactory. Based on literature, the current rate of 67% was viable and acceptable for this study.

Qualitative analysis of student comments revealed that students felt the sessions were "great", "very useful", "needed", "saved me", "got to vent". Other comments included "the session helped me see how I went wrong and how I can correct the mistake", "the session was long", "I did not feel shame", "I think this session was a great idea because I felt like someone listened to me", "I did not feel judged" and so on.

Findings show triage for academic misconduct cases is not only a success, but much needed in higher education institutions. The results highlight some very strong and positive responses from the students who attended the triage sessions. They left feeling content that they were not being targeted, but rather walking away having taken ownership of their mistake and learning integrity in the process.

The faculty plan to carry out two more semesters that will have a different set of students to see if the results are consistent with this round. If so, future plans include rolling out the

triage for other subjects.

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