

Cheating students punished by the 1000s, but many more go undetected

CBC survey shows 7,086 students disciplined for cheating at Canadian universities in 2011-12

By Holly Moore, [CBC News](#) Posted: Feb 25, 2014

A CBC survey of Canadian universities shows more than 7,000 students were disciplined for academic cheating in 2011-12, a finding experts say falls well short of the number of students who actually cheat.

In the first survey of its kind, CBC News contacted 54 universities and asked them to provide the number of 2011-12 academic misconduct cases that went through a formal discipline process.

Forty-two institutions supplied data, showing less than one per cent of total students were affected.

“There's a huge gap between what students are telling us they're doing and the numbers of students that are being caught and sanctioned for those behaviours,” said Julia Christensen Hughes, dean of the College of Management and Economics at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

Hughes said surveys of students show that more than 50 per cent admit to different forms of cheating.

David Harpp, a chemistry professor at Montreal's McGill University, calls the results “microscopic” compared with the number of students who are actually cheating.

'We just had to get it done'

A Winnipeg university student who is planning to go into law school told CBC News he doesn't feel guilty for cheating during an exam.

“The professor left the room,” said the student, speaking on condition of anonymity. “I reached into my bag and I looked at some keywords to help me.

“I'd challenge anyone who can say that they haven't broken the law,” he added. “So for me to have cheated on an exam to get ahead in life, I think it's wrong, but I don't think it's the worst thing that could be done.”

Another Winnipeg student told CBC News he wasn't really thinking about guilt when he cheated on a computer technology course by taking another student's code to complete a test.

“We just had to get it done,” he explained. “I had to get these assignments done and they had to be right.”

Christensen Hughes said the cases of students who take every opportunity to cheat must be punished severely.

“That's where I think we need to have very significant penalties,” she said. “It's essential that we do that to maintain the integrity of the academy.”

Harpp explained that sometimes the penalties can act as a deterrent, but not in every case.

“The penalties are probably a little bit soft,” he said.

Harpp finds universities are “generous” with their penalties, but added that professors have a role in overlooking cheating as well.

“We want to trust our students. No instructor and no administrator really wants to catch any student,” he said. “I think they would rather adjudicate it themselves or let it pass.”

Plagiarism alleged in over half of cases

Ottawa’s Carleton University had the highest punishment rate, at 607 cases or 2.6 per cent of its population.

University of Manitoba punishment rates affected one per cent of the student body, with 286 cases.

More than half of the universities surveyed tracked the statistics by the type of offence committed.

Plagiarism was charged in more than 50 per cent of all cases, unauthorized aid including inappropriate collaboration accounted for 22 per cent, and 10 per cent involved cheating on tests.

Getting another person to write an exam came in at three per cent, and the re-submission of previous course materials accounted for two per cent of the offences reported.

A third of universities surveyed provided data on how students are disciplined for academic offences.

The most common penalty handed out was a grade reduction, which includes a zero on the assignment or in the entire course. Other penalties included notes on transcripts, suspensions and expulsions.

Brandy Usick, the director of student advocacy and accessibility at the University of Manitoba, said catching cheaters is essential.

“If other students are seeing that cheating is happening and nothing is happening, that is sending a really bad message to the students,” she said.

Usick added that increasing detection rates are essential to protect academic integrity, a cornerstone of all academic institutions.

“We are concerned about the integrity of your degree, and you should be too,” she said. “We want to protect that.”

Detecting cheating can be hard

Christensen Hughes published a study in 2006 that found that more than 50 per cent of undergraduate students and 35 per cent of graduate students admitted they had cheated on written work.

“I think that students have ingenious ways of cheating,” she said. “And again, it can be difficult to detect.”

Christensen Hughes said class sizes can also be an issue in detecting cheating.

“We have large classes, faculty are not necessarily familiar with their students' writing, for example,” she said. “There's a lot going on and it's difficult to detect.”

She added that the risk of not detecting those cheaters can be serious.

“For those degrees to continue to have value, they have to stand for something. They have to represent that a student has engaged with a curriculum, with a program, has achieved a certain level of mastery,” said Christensen Hughes.

“If we can't be assured when we confer that degree that it has actually occurred, then our integrity as an institution is in question.”

Helen Murphy is with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, which represents 97 universities and degree-granting colleges across the country.

“Canada's universities take matters of academic integrity very seriously,” Murphy wrote in an email to CBC News. “We all have an interest in promoting the highest standards in academic integrity.”