

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

A Primer

In the School of Business we are committed to helping you acquire the skills and knowledge you need in order to be successful in your careers and personal lives. Above all, we believe this means having a clear understanding of the importance of ethical and honest behavior in all your work, and the ability to exercise good judgment.

Before you begin to devote time and energy to the assignments, projects, and papers for your courses, you should understand clearly the standard of work—and the standard of honesty—you are expected to maintain. So let's talk about academic integrity, and academic dishonesty.

What is Integrity?

It's about making a conscientious effort to be honest and fair in your personal and professional actions, and having a clear understanding of the difference between making mistakes and being dishonest.

Mistakes are a fact of life, and of learning. Acknowledging and correcting your errors (that is, accepting responsibility for them) can be a critical step in mastering new information or new practices, learning how to work more effectively, and doing things correctly the next time around.

Accepting responsibility for your mistakes also means accepting that errors will affect your performance evaluations.

In a university class, that may mean a lower grade than you hoped for. In a business, it may affect the level of supervision you receive; delay a raise or promotion—or, of course, if it's a big mistake, cost you your job.

However unpleasant the consequences, you can overcome setbacks of this kind, if you learn from your mistakes and use that knowledge to improve your performance in the future.

Dishonesty

Dishonesty is a different matter entirely, and has much more serious consequences both at the University and in business.

What do we mean by dishonesty? Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unapproved collaboration, interfering with the work of others—all these are forms of academic (and professional) dishonesty, the opposite of integrity.

How can you demonstrate integrity at Montclair State University? What is involved in making a commitment to honesty and fairness when we're talking about your education?

Let's define our terms

Cheating

What is **cheating**? Broadly speaking, it's when you don't do the work required to earn the credit—and here, we don't just mean academic credit.

Cheating includes, of course, copying from someone else's exam, report, or assignment, or allowing someone else to copy from yours.

It includes using or trying to use unauthorized materials or information in an assignment or exam—such things as preparing secret notes for your use or someone else's; text messaging or calling a friend when on a 'restroom break'; or helping someone else do these things.

Cheating includes taking an exam for someone else, or having someone do this for you. It includes getting, or giving someone else, access to an exam's content before it is officially held.

It includes collaborating with anyone else to violate the guidelines for completing an exam or assignment, as well as working with others on assignments or projects that were intended to be done individually.

If you're not sure whether an assignment is meant to be completed independently, or can appropriately be a group effort—**ASK YOUR PROFESSOR.**

Failing to do your fair share of work on group assignments is cheating, too. If you are supposed to work with others, integrity requires that you do your part.

Accept a reasonable proportion of the work; do it to the best of your ability; meet the deadlines agreed upon; and communicate actively with the members of your work group.

Don't expect others to shoulder the responsibility for getting the job done. Putting your name on a project or paper for which you did little or no work is cheating.

Submitting the same work over and over isn't honest, either. Turning in the same project or paper to different classes is wrong—you are not doing the work you were required to do to earn a grade in each course.

Avoiding trouble

There are some cases where it may be OK to use work you did for one course as a source or foundation for new work in another class—but you must ASK!

If you think you can make a case for building on previous work you've done, show it to your professor, and talk about whether you can use it as a basis for your new project and HOW.

That, by the way, is a good working rule at the University or on the job: make sure you understand what you need to do to meet the requirements of THIS project or assignment; and make sure the person in charge—your professor or supervisor—knows and approves of your plan to get that work done.

To avoid cheating, you simply need to make the commitment to do your own assignments, projects, research, and writing—and to follow the rules for any evaluation exercise.

Meet course requirements honestly—and don't help or encourage anyone else to think it's all right to do otherwise.

By the way, meeting the course requirements honestly also means making a good faith effort to give your full attention to a course and all its parts.

That means, among other things, doing the required reading and/or course exercises, not trying to wing it. And it means paying attention to course lectures and discussions.

We all occasionally find it difficult to focus or concentrate in meetings or classes, but if during a class you're using a laptop or PDA or cell phone for messaging, or surfing the web—or you're working on things unrelated to the course—you're NOT doing the work required to earn the credit.

Don't be surprised if this is reflected in your evaluation—just as it would be if you devoted your time in a business meeting to anything other than the business at hand.

Fabrication

Next, remember that truth is better than fiction.

Fabrication is when you present something as real or true when you know it isn't.

Don't make up quotes; don't invent sources; don't create fake data or "facts," don't falsify dates.

It's wrong—and it's not very smart, either, when you're going to be handing this work to someone who actually is an expert in this area!

Tell the truth—the quality of your conclusions will be much better, and you will gain a reputation for reliable and accurate work. That means a lot in career advancement, just as it does in your courses.

Make a commitment to do your own research, and to stick to what can be verified when you make statements of fact.

By doing so, you'll gain practice in finding truly useful information more quickly and effectively, and learn from experience how to tell weak sources from strong ones, good data from unsubstantiated arguments. These are valuable skills in any line of work.

Furthermore, learning how to identify uncertainty, confusion, or even misinformation in sources is a very useful skill, too. After all, we learn not only from our own mistakes, but from correctly identifying the mistakes of others.

Another form of fabrication, by the way, is altering your test answers after the fact, and then claiming the instructor improperly graded the work. The same holds true for written assignments or other work you have submitted.

Accepting responsibility for your own work includes accepting the evaluations you receive, as a necessary step in improving your future performance.

Plagiarism

Now, the term that confuses people the most: what is plagiarism, and how is it avoided?

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work as if it were your own, or failing to make a clear distinction between your work and someone else's. This is wrong even if the other person agrees to it.

Similarly, copying somebody else's assignment and changing every few words (or re-arranging paragraphs) does NOT make it your own work.

If someone else wrote those words, proposed that idea, or did that research, SAY SO, using the rules of citation (also known as 'attribution').

If you're not sure you understand how to do that correctly—ASK!

In most classes that require this kind of work, you'll be given guidelines for citation, but if you find any of those instructions confusing, ask for clarification.

Your professors want you to understand these rules, both so that YOU don't make mistakes, and so that other people get appropriate credit for the work THEY have done.

Giving credit

Giving credit where credit is due to the work of others is a very important value among academics, because we want others to give us credit in return for ours. This is why we give so much attention to citation guidelines.

It's an important value in the business and professional worlds, too, where you'll find that issues surrounding intellectual property command great interest and attention...and can have both economic and legal consequences.

Remember, too, that stringing together a paper that is nothing but quotes from other people's work—even if you correctly footnote every single quotation—is NOT doing your own work either.

You need to provide the analysis that connects such quotations to the subject of your assignment, and that demonstrates their relevance to the case you want to make.

Learning how to write reports in your college classes is practice for learning how to write reports on the job.

As we emphasize in our School of Business Educational Philosophy, this includes mastering the skills to distinguish useful information from irrelevant details; correctly identify key issues; evaluating alternative paths; and otherwise demonstrating the ability to think and act as a creative problem-solver.

No one can do this for you, whether in a university course or a business setting.

Please, don't imagine that we are fools. Paper mills are OLD, OLD news to us.

In fact, now that so many of these term paper "services" are online, finding evidence of scams is just as easy for us as it is for you, and so is tracking down cases of cut-and-paste plagiarism.

We know about the files of term papers in certain student organization offices, too.

If you are tempted to use such resources, stop and think about the fact that someone has turned that paper in before —very possibly to THIS professor.

On a related note: it's common to ask others to proofread and critique written work, because often it's hard to correct your own grammar or to spot your own typos.

But this does not mean “totally re-write it”—and you should ASK first if your professor considers this kind of help acceptable.

If yes, be sure you include an appropriate acknowledgment—a footnote saying something like “*Jane X, my classmate, proofread this paper and pointed out several errors—thanks, Jane!*”

Interfering

A warning on a particularly nasty kind of dishonesty: interfering with other people's work.

Don't let your healthy competitive instincts become distorted into trying to keep other people from succeeding. People with integrity give others a fair deal.

If you interfere with someone else's assignments, such as by giving fellow students false or inaccurate information about completing their course work or preparing for an exam...

If you hide, destroy, or alter library materials or class materials...

If you disable lab computers, hack into course databases or alter a course web page, so that other people can't use these things effectively to complete THEIR work...

...that is not cleverness or healthy competitiveness. It's cheating. And the consequences when you are caught may be very grave.

Deadlines

A final few words of advice:

Don't procrastinate on assignments and projects and papers. Think about all your course assignments, pace yourself, and try to keep ahead of the work.

Deadline pressure can be very stressful, and too often when we have to discipline someone for cheating, it has been because she or he waited until too late to start working on an assignment, and then took “shortcuts.”

If you DID leave things too late—or if for any reason you feel overwhelmed, or start falling behind on your work, or you feel unsure about your ability to make a deadline—TALK TO YOUR PROFESSORS.

You can work something out. Don't tell yourself that being behind schedule is a reason to be dishonest. It isn't.

Yes, this is the sort of mistake that probably will affect your performance evaluation—your course grade—but there are far worse consequences than that.

Accept Responsibility

Remember that accepting responsibility for mistakes and correcting them is a crucial part of learning.

This kind of experience can help you master how to pace your work more productively, how to set priorities, and how to better determine what constitutes a “good enough job” when you may not have the time or resources to do the “best possible job.”

Another thing: if you're ever tempted to spend time and energy on ways to “beat the system”—any of the forms of dishonesty we've outlined, that is—stop and ask yourself if it wouldn't be a lot easier (not to mention smarter) just to do the work that's required.

You certainly will learn more—and isn't that what you're paying all that tuition for, after all?

Above all, remember: your faculty has a lot of experience with both innocent errors and with cheating. We all make mistakes ourselves, and we don't expect you to be perfect.

But we take cheating VERY seriously.

Our Bottom Line

We want to make this very clear: the Deans of the School of Business will support your faculty in their efforts to maintain and enforce the standards of academic integrity.

We all want to believe that you are trustworthy, that you have the personal and professional integrity that keeps you from turning mistakes into dishonesty.

But if one of your professors has any reason to suspect otherwise, we WILL support the investigation of your work...

...and if that turns up any evidence of cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, or the like, we will do everything in our power to see that you do not profit from that dishonesty.

You should be aware that the possible penalties range from something as mild as a course grade of F and a note in your student files, to the very harsh—but very real—possibility of immediate expulsion from the University, and the loss of all your academic credit.

Please don't risk your degree—and your professional future. It's not worth it, we assure you.

Please believe that your School of Business faculty—indeed, ALL your professors—wants you to be successful in your studies and in your careers.

We want to help you to a high level of knowledge and skills, and a high level of personal and professional integrity as well, because we truly believe that this is the best path toward achieving success, now and in the future.

Commit

We call upon you to make a commitment to ethical behavior, to honesty and fair dealing, in all your work, both in college and beyond—and we promise to do our part to help you achieve that standard.

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