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Ombuds Top Tips: *Fair Academic Integrity Decisions*

UVic's Office of the Ombudsperson



If it's not fair, it won't be finished!

Fair decisions leave students less likely to appeal and more likely to move to resolution without unnecessary upset. These tips reflect the top reasons students have visited the Ombudsperson with complaints about fairness in academic integrity.

1. Be open to new information

Students have the right to an unbiased and balanced hearing – and perception is key. If you already think the student is guilty before you've heard them, check that impulse. Put yourself in a mindset where you are willing to accept evidence that may change your mind. It is not your role to build a case against the student; rather, you are balancing evidence. Use phrases like "*allegedly*" or "*It appears that you have done this, but I want to hear from you before I decide.*" A student who thinks that you've made up your mind before you hear them will likely not trust or accept a decision – even if it is a reasonable one. Even one comment can upend this perception, and trust is hard to regain.

2. Give a *reasonable* opportunity to respond

UVic's policy requires you to ask for the student's response, but think further: is it a *reasonable* opportunity? The student shouldn't be isolated from supports or caught off guard, or feel so intimidated that they can't share with you. Ask yourself: *Have I provided enough detail beforehand so they can fully participate*? *Am I speaking to them as I would to a student who I think isn't guilty*? When a student fully participates and you meaningfully address their points, they are more likely to learn from and accept a decision.

3. Mind key words like: "*should*," "*normally*," or "*must*"

The policy can allow flexibility or impose requirements:

"[...] *normally within ten (10) business days*" or " [...] *consideration must be given to the following factors.*"

Or, it can require you to engage with the facts:

"*Single or multiple instances of inadequate attribution of sources should result in a failing grade for the Work.*"

In this last example, the inclusion of the word "should" indicates that it is your job to decide if a fail is appropriate in the circumstances and then write down your rationale. When the policy calls for a decision, acting as if you don't have to decide or failing to explain your rationale will likely result in an unnecessarily distraught student, because they will think their situation warrants the exception. On appeal, the explanation of how you came to a decision will be closely examined. If it's missing, the decision may be overturned or remitted to you with instructions to provide a satisfactory rationale.

4. Ask yourself: Do I have enough proof?

What makes me think the student cheated? *What don't I believe*? *Am I convinced cheating is the probable explanation*? Doubt about whether the burden of proof was met is a top reason students won't accept a decision or will want to appeal. A good way to find convincing proof is to speak to the student to assess their command of the material. You'll have to record what you learn, so be specific. Consider is any part of your reasoning is improper. *Is my conclusion based on prior unrelated experience or solely on a hunch*? *Am I making unsupported assumptions*?

5. Don't hide your fairness efforts – show them!

Explaining *how* and *why* you came to your decision isn't just ethical; it helps the decision stand up to scrutiny and makes it more likely to be accepted by a skeptical student. Relying only on your status or title, or something akin to Because-I-Said-So, to impose a penalty is obsolete and unacceptable in a modern Canadian context.

- Clearly communicate to the student in writing the reasons (or rationale) behind your decision.
- State that you took only relevant information into account and that your decision wasn't based on biases or feelings, but on reasoned conclusions from the information you have.
- Demonstrate that you listened to and understood the student's points and version of events. Refer to them specifically and rebut them if necessary. Not referring to them implies that you ignored them.
- Explain why any contradictory evidence did not convince you. It is okay not to believe the student, but you must explain why.