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Top 5 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 why students have visited the Ombudsperson with complaints about fairness in academic integrity.

1. Be open to new information

Students have the right to an impartial and unbiased decision maker – and perception is key. Put yourself in a mindset where you are willing to accept evidence that may change your mind. If you already think the student is guilty, check that impulse. It is not your role to build a case against the student – you are balancing evidence. Use phrases like "allegedly" or "I suspect you may have did this, but I want to hear from you before I decide." A student, who thinks that you already made up your mind before you heard them, will not trust or learn a decision, even it is is a reasonable one. And, trust lost is almost impossible 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, caught of guard, or feel so intimidated that they can't share everything with you. Ask yourself: have I provided enough detail beforehand so they can fully participate? Am I speaking to them like I would speak to a student who I think isn't guilty? When the student fully participates and you meaningfully address their points, they are more likely to learn from and accept a decsion with less potential for distrust and disruption.

3. Know when you "*must*," "*should*," and "*normally*" act

The policy can provide flexibility ("[...] normally within ten (10) business days.") Or, it can require you to engage with the facts ("Isolated instances of [cheating] during an exam should result in a grade of zero for the exam" Here, it's your job to decide if a zero is appropriate in the circumstances). When the policy triggers a decsion point, acting as if you don't have to

make a decision and explain yourself accordingly will likely result in an unecessarily distraught student. An appeal will also examine whether you discharged your duty or not.

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? Doubts about whether the burden of proof was reached is the most common reason students won't accept a decision or move to appeal. A good way to find convincing evidence is speak to the student to assess their command of the material. You'll have to record this evidence, so be specific. Consider what may be improper: am I making assumptions? Is this based on prior unrelated experience? Or, just on my hunch?

5. "*Because, I think so*" not "*Because, I said so*"

Explaining *why* you came to decision isn't just ethical, it helps your decision stand up to scrutiny and be more likely to be accepted by a skeptical student. Relying only on your status or title ("because I said so") to impose a penalty is obsolete and unacceptable in a modern Canadian context.

Don't hide the efforts you took, show them!

- Clearly communicate the why (or rationale) behind your decision in plain language
- State that you only took relevant information into account and your decision wasn't based on biases or a feeling, so there are no misconceptions
- Demonstrate you listened and understood the student's points and version of events. Refer to them specifically
- Explain why any contradictory evidence did not convince you. It is okay to not believe the student, but you have to explain why.