

Discussing Suspected Academic Misconduct with Student

The original entry in the Student Conduct Database (SCD) issues a Notification of Academic Misconduct which sets out their right to respond to the allegation. Although the student has the right to formally appeal an academic penalty, this part of the process provides the student with the opportunity to respond so that instructor takes relevant information student may provide into consideration before a final decision is made and before a Notification of Academic Penalty is issued. It is an important, informal, step in the process and meant to provide the student with a full understanding of what is alleged (if it is not clear to them) as well as the opportunity to respond.

The student has 5 days from the Notification of Academic Misconduct to reach out to the instructor. It is their choice to do so or not. They initiate this part of the process by forwarding a copy of the notification to the instructor by email. The student may provide information in the email response which may be sufficient for the purposes of reviewing or reconsidering the initial complaint. In other instances, the instructor may choose to address the matter by requesting a meeting, in person or virtual, to ensure they have a full understanding of the information the student wishes to rely on. In other cases, the student will request a meeting.

When a student initiates a response to the Notification of Academic Misconduct by sending an email, the instructor should reply in a timely manner. Whether the student committed the academic misconduct or is wrongly accused of it, receiving a student conduct notification is likely to be a very upsetting experience. Even if the substance of the issue cannot be addressed immediately, replying in a timely manner to acknowledge contact has been initiated can help address the stress brought on by the notification – and set a more conducive environment in which to address the issue together. In replying to the student's response for review/reconsideration, the instructor should not give a student reason to think they won't be keeping an open mind about hearing what the student has to say.

Check in with your own feelings. The instructor-student relationship is built on trust. When an instructor comes across conduct causing them to suspect academic misconduct, the instructor may feel strongly about this breach in trust. Finding and dealing with academic misconduct also requires time and attention that was not anticipated. Some forms of academic misconduct (like uploading an instructor's test or assignment to a homework site) breaches the integrity of the assessment and the instructor's own work. An instructor can feel frustrated, insulted, or angry when they discover or suspect academic misconduct. While these are all valid reactions, instructors should be mindful of them when determining how and when to best approach communications with the student, whether by email or in a meeting.

Schedule meeting in timely fashion. The academic penalty is finalized and issued 10 days after it is entered in the Student Conduct Database. A meeting should be scheduled in a timely way so that any changes are made before the academic penalty is issued, preferably within 5 working days of original notification.

Anticipate common student reactions. Student reactions will vary, Some students might show hostility or anger. Some might accuse or offend you. Other students might cry. Student reaction in relation to the validity of the misconduct also varies. Some students will admit to the conduct at first opportunity. Admissions may come with remorse or with attempts to negotiate. Other students may vigorously deny the allegations. Instructors must proceed to use best judgement and apply professional and ethical obligation to report academic integrity violations, in what can be upsetting or difficult conversations.

Reach out for support. If this is the first time you are meeting a student to discuss suspected academic misconduct or have any concerns about meeting with the student by yourself, ask an experienced colleague or contact the [Academic Integrity Coordinator](#) for support.

Entering final grade: If the alleged incident has occurred at the end of the semester and final grades are due, enter an “I” grade for this student until this issue is resolved. “I” grade represents “incomplete”. This can be changed later.

Purpose of meeting. Make some notes to keep you focused on your purpose at the meeting, which is to:

- Review the specific allegation of misconduct with the student so that student understands what they are accused of.
- Provide the student a fair opportunity to respond to the allegation, including any documentation in support of their response.

Instructor’s goal in meeting. The goal of the meeting is no to “catch a cheater” or coerce a student into making a confession. By keeping to the purpose of the meeting, the instructor should be able to come away, at its conclusion, with a determination (on a balance of probabilities) about whether the student attempted to gain an unfair academic advantage.

Prepare for the meeting with student. The instructor should be prepared to discuss the details of the suspected misconduct at the meeting, including documents and information being relied on. Consider the following questions in advance:

- How will I set out the sequence of events or observations that led me to the suspicion of academic misconduct?
- How will I convey why academic integrity is important to me as an educator?

Third parties at the meeting. The instructor and the student should mutually consent to any third parties at their meeting. The third party should not lead or intrusively engage in the discussion (but may take notes). As much as possible, the third party should be an observer at the meeting.

- **Student’s third party:** If the student asks to have a third party attend with them, you should meet with the student first to determine that they are freely requesting the third party’s attendance at the meeting before consenting (particularly if it is a parent or a student that may have some connection to the academic misconduct).

- **Instructor's third party:** If you ask a third party to attend the meeting, avoid asking the student's Program Coordinator or colleague who currently teaches (or is likely to teach) the student in their program.

Prepare for issues that you may encounter. Prepare on how to approach pausing the discussion if emotions run high or how to make a referral or seek support. Consider the student who:

- claims ignorance of the matter
- apologizes
- cries
- gets angry
- remains silent
- implicates others
- reveals sensitive or highly personal information

Instructor's demeanor at the meeting. The meeting with the student should be informational and non-confrontational.

- Be **clear** about the behaviour you find questionable.
- Be **candid** about your interpretations of the behaviour and your concerns about the incident.
- Be **compassionate** to the student who is experiencing distress.

Discussion Starter. After you have set out your concerns, ask questions to get the student engaging in dialogue with you. Consider:

- "Why don't we start by you telling me how you're feeling about the class/this assignment?"

Student who takes responsibility immediately. Note any factors that the student provides that led to the academic misconduct and refer to appropriate supports.

- For student support resources and referrals, see:
 - [Avoid Academic Misconduct: Get the Support You Need](#)
 - [Build Your Academic Confidence: Skills & Study Habits](#)
 - [Resources: Avoid Plagiarism](#)

Soliciting information from the student during the meeting. If, after presented with the reason for suspicion, the student denies factors that have led to your suspicion, the instructor will want to solicit some additional information to gain understanding and clarification. The instructor will want to come away from the meeting with the information they need to give the student's response their full consideration.

The nature of the questions may depend on the type of academic misconduct that is suspected. Some approaches to some of the most common forms of academic misconduct (plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and cheating) are as follows:

- **Student Suspected of Plagiarism or Unauthorized Collaboration**

- Show documents supporting the suspicion to the student (if this involves another student's work, redact the name of the other student):
 - Ask student to explain the similarities to the other student's work or to the other source.
 - How did they approach the assignment?
 - How did they do research and what resources did they use?
 - How did they keep track of information and the sources? Can they produce any preliminary drafts?
- Did anyone assist them? How?
- Ask questions of content to test their own understanding of the work they submitted.

- **Student Suspected of Cheating**

- Outline circumstances leading to the suspicion and ask for an explanation.
- Inquire about what and how they studied.
- Ask questions of content to test their own understanding of the work they submitted.

Allow student sufficient time to answer. Even if you think the student is lying, do not accuse. Provide as much opportunity as reasonable for the student to explain themselves. If the alleged misconduct involves the submission of an assessment, ask similar questions to the assessment, or ask student to explain to you their own submitted work.

Keep student focused on purpose of meeting. Some students may neither admit nor deny the allegation but instead focus on the personal impact that the decision to report has had or the negative impact the penalty will have. Listen to the student (and this may be relevant to referral for student supports) but bring the conversation back to the meeting's purpose.

You do not need to make a decision at the meeting. You do not need to make a decision while talking with the student. It is good practice to reflect on the information you have received by way of student response first. This is particularly applicable if there is any information you need to verify.

Explaining Next Steps. End the meeting by providing student with understanding of next steps:

- Where appropriate, the student should be told to take time to reflect on the discussion as a next step and that the instructor will do the same.
- The instructor's final decision will be received by the student 10 days from the original notification in an email with the subject line "Student Conduct Notification" (unless the incident is to be withdrawn by the instructor).
- The information about the process is available to the student (including their right to appeal the academic penalty) on the [College website](#) (search "Academic Integrity").
- Unless the incident involves a serious form of academic misconduct such that the student's continuation in the course is in question, encourage the student to treat this as a learning opportunity and to focus on their studies moving forward.

Adapted from the following sources:

<https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/take-action/report-cheating/talk-student.html#Prepare-for-the-conversation>

<https://words.usask.ca/gmcte/2021/01/07/ready-to-talk-to-students-about-suspected-academic-misconduct/>

<https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/academicintegrity/documents/Dealing.pdf>