Communicating with Students about Academic Integrity: sample letter

Communication between instructors and students has always been an essential component of good teaching and learning. Both students and faculty face challenges as they have to adjust to the remote instruction environment. Proactive communication on the part of the instructor reduces student’s anxiety about the online environment, which in turn, can reduce the temptation to take “shortcuts” and engage in academic dishonesty.

Best Practice:
✓ At the start of class and personalize your introduction and encourage students to post introductory statements/videos. This creates a sense of belonging and trust.
✓ Get buy-in for the “rules” you create by creating a class contract/code of behavior. Explain this is done because there are diverse views on acceptable behavior and clear guidance is necessary.
✓ Make your expectations absolutely clear: “Open book exams mean A,B,C is permitted and X,Y,Z is not allowed.”/ “Using a tutor to help you with completing your assignments is not allowed. Anything you submit must be work done by you alone. See me during virtual office hours if you need clarification.”
✓ Do periodic check-ins and remind them of the class contract throughout the term.

I wish to acknowledge that many of the ideas were inspired by the UC SanDiego Academic Integrity website that included Covid resources for students and educators.

Sample Letter to students:

Dear Class:

Welcome to EASC 104- Geohazards: Earth in Turmoil

I look forward to teaching you this term. The global pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty and has required all of us to adapt to new ways of communicating and engaging with each other. Rest assured that I, and the team of teaching assistants (insert first names), are committed to providing you with the tools you need to succeed in the course.

When faced with new environments, it is important to be reminded of foundational principles as they relate to the expectations for the class. The SFU Academic Integrity website has a lot of good
information for students, and here are a few key things to know about your responsibilities as SFU members:

✓ Understand what is considered academically dishonest by reading the course syllabus for the specific academic expectations for this class and watching the AI video
✓ Set boundaries for study groups/ Facebook study sessions/ tutoring sessions: do not share assignments, exams or homework, even when asked for help by a friend.
✓ Do not participate in online “help” sites like Chegg, CourseHero, StudocU, etc. By uploading your own material that can be used by others to cheat, or downloading the work of others for submission, you risk being sanctioned for academic integrity violations. Please note that much of the material uploaded is of poor quality and instructors monitor these sites to ensure fairness in grading for all students.

Remember that if you or your classmates need help, both the TA’s and I encourage you to come to us first. There are many other excellent SFU resources that will make a difference to your success and they all continue to be available in the virtual environment. The top performing students use the following resources and every single one of you can excel in this course by:

✓ Understanding the best way to learn online: The Student Learning Commons provides one-one consultations on study strategies and gives feedback on your writing assignments
✓ Ask a librarian for help with research papers and reference services
✓ Take care of your physical and mental health by reaching out to the friendly folk in Health and Counselling Services

In closing, let me reiterate my commitment to supporting you in your learning as well as my commitment to fair grading for all students. Actions that violate the standards of academic integrity will be followed up on in accordance with the Student Academic Integrity policy and academic penalties will be applied. Students who study and seek appropriate help will have the intrinsic satisfaction that accompanies achievement and integrity.

My best wishes for your success in this course go out to you.

Professor X

*Academic integrity is a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.”*—International Center for Academic Integrity