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Civic Engagement

Is Your Ethics Policy a
Quick Fix or a Civic Outcome?

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When Sarah, the school librarian, made an appointment to see the principal about an instance of plagiarism, she felt confident of his response. Several years ago, motivated by a flood of studies from the Center for Academic Integrity on widespread dishonesty among students, the principal had devoted a staff meeting to a discussion of cheating and plagiarism. At the time Sarah had created a policy statement for the library's home page that referenced the unacceptable behaviors listed in the technology coordinator's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Since then she had been working with English and social studies teachers to develop projects that included lessons on ethical behavior.

The faculty was generally receptive to her assignment suggestions and embraced opportunities for students to use the library resources, as more than 80 percent of the school's seniors matriculated at four-year colleges. Each fall she delivered a PowerPoint presentation on academic honesty to incoming freshmen and trans-

essays, Sarah felt comfortable that her school had developed a culture of social responsibility in which everyone supported "ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology" (Standard 8, AASL & AECT 1998).

Sarah was looking forward to expanding her role in other subjects. She had been invited to attend the planning meetings for a schoolwide science and math fair, and, now that the science projects were almost done, she had offered to help the teachers by editing student project write-ups and checking citations for APA formatting. The science and math teachers hoped that some of the student projects would be good enough to enter in local or regional science and engineering fairs. One science teacher had confided that eventually the departments hoped to have a candidate for an Eco-Hero Award.

While checking references the week before the Fair, Sarah discovered that a freshmen had modeled (but not attributed) his science project on the growth rates of three

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fer students. Throughout the year she aligned her mini-lessons on notetaking, paraphrasing, and citing sources with specific grade-level projects. During the past three years, she had developed a strong working relationship with the history teachers on a National History Day paper. The teachers required a full paper from the juniors and, as training wheels for that project, asked all freshmen to create an annotated bibliography related to the contest's theme. This year, Sarah proposed that the English teachers help her teach sophomores how to write another requirement, the Process Paper (a narrative of their research process), as the faculty had found it challenging for the juniors. Everyone was gratified to see that the history papers were improving year by year. In fact, this year one student's paper had been accepted for publication in the prestigious *Concord Review*. When she heard other librarians complain about plagiarized

types of bacteria at four incubation temperatures after a published project on the Selah Intermediate School Web site <www.selah.k12.wa.us/SOAR/SciProj2005/RachelE.html>. When Sarah showed the teaching team the similarities in wording, project design, and conclusions, she assumed that they would ask the student to revise the project. Instead the teachers argued that it was too late, and, anyway, scientists built upon the work of others. Besides, the student was only a freshman. They decided that it was sufficient for his teacher to issue a verbal reprimand and lower the student's grade by ten points. When Sarah questioned the student about the project and reminded him of her PowerPoint presentation on academic honesty that he had seen earlier in the year, he reacted defensively and professed ignorance of wrongdoing. The next day his parents made an appointment with the principal.

Although Sarah was shocked by her principal's subsequent reluctance to support her position, I'd bet you aren't surprised. No doubt you've seen faculty disagree about what is common knowledge, teach word substitution as paraphrasing, apply documentation style and

their own teaching or even beliefs emerging from parenting or cultural norms. However, inconsistently applied solutions based on intuition and misconceptions are only part of the problem. Without involving *students* in the process of collective deliberation and design,

Corporation and Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement 2003).

Given the potential for developing civic engagement and implementing the goals of Information Power, what should surprise us is that school librarians are not *initiating* the community dialogue and *leading* the schoolwide process of creating a policy developed by the entire community or institution under the guidance of a leadership team that includes the technology coordinator and key representatives of local and district administration, the school board, faculty, parents, and students. The goal of an ethics policy (also called an Academic Integrity Policy, Acceptable Use Policy, Honor Code, Statement on Plagiarism) is to clarify your school's (and library's) values and program within the larger context of the educational mission, policies, and procedures of the district or governing body. By stating the rules and identifying the norms as lived in daily practices, an ethics policy offers explicit guidance about an individual's behavior and clarifies the rights and responsibilities of the institution and its stakeholders, the community and its members, the classroom and its learners. The key, of course, is to create a living document that is periodically reexamined.

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citation formats inconsistently, and dispense inequitable consequences for academic dishonesty. In the absence of a schoolwide culture of ethical behavior and agreement among teachers and students as to what constitutes plagiarism and how questions of wrongdoing should be handled, the school—and especially the school librarian—is subject to the fickle winds of power, pressure, and personal opinion.

As I investigated schools' responses to plagiarism, I found that many schools devoted one staff meeting to a discussion of the problem, then designed a quick fix that resulted in the purchase of detection software and the obligatory forty-five-minute lecture by the school librarian to every class in the fall. In some schools I interviewed there was a scattershot approach to written policies; some teachers and librarians added warnings to homework assignments or project guidelines, while library and technology departments reassessed the AUP or, under administrative pressure, created a statement for the student handbook. Typically, certain teachers became invested in the issue, while others went on with business as usual. Inevitably, when a serious problem surfaced, everybody performed triage. A policy was written. Students (and parents) might be asked to sign a pledge. And, after a certain point, everybody got sick of it.

One solution that some schools are adopting is to involve the community in creating an ethics policy. The process of creating that policy will allow teachers to verbalize their (often inaccurate) assumptions about plagiarism. Often, these are based on their own school experiences, misconceptions developed during

the school librarian and students are doomed to perform what I call "cat-and-mouse" behavior: the librarian will vigilantly hunt for infractions, enforce externally imposed standards, and exact ever more serious penalties on students whose only goal is to get by with "whatever."

In contrast, an inclusive process for involving students in developing school policy offers potentially large gains, as it builds students' civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes:

- Students whose opinions and ideas are heard in school are likely to invest in the school community beyond seeking good grades or peer approval;
- Students who participate in moderated discussions of issues in school show gains in critical thinking, proficient communication skills, greater interest in current events, and motivation to discuss such events outside school;
- Students who are involved in simulations of civic structures and processes related to core curricular topics increase their civic skills, attitudes and knowledge (Carnegie

Begin by bringing the policy template (see below) to your principal or leadership team. Design a process together for addressing these questions with your community in order to build a sustainable policy based on common values, principles, and practices.

You can see examples of how the questions listed in the sidebar have been enacted in a variety of school policies at The Ethical

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Template for a Constructivist Policy

1. **Inspire and anchor**: On what principles does this policy rest?
2. **Build consensus and leadership**: Who owns the problem?
3. **Clarify and resolve differences**: What concepts and strategies are taught?
4. **Convert concepts into behaviors**: What responsibilities and rights are identified?
5. **Develop a response plan**: What disciplinary process is to be followed?
6. **Develop an ongoing prevention program**: What proactive teaching supports the policy?
7. **Interrelate policies, programs and practices**: How does this fit with other work?
8. **Plan for change**: What is the policy review process?

Researcher online. If you have developed a policy that addresses these questions, I'd like to include it. And, if you have a story to share, I'd like to hear it.

Resources for Civic Education

American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology. 1998. *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning: Standards and Indicators.* Chicago: ALA. Available at <www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/informationpower/InformationLiteracyStandards_final.pdf>. Three information literacy standards (seven through nine) address areas of social responsibility in a democracy, including practicing ethical academic behavior, participating effectively in groups, and valuing a marketplace of ideas.

Carnegie Corp. and Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. 2003. "The Civic Mission of Schools." <www.civicmissionofschools.org/campaign/cms_report.html>. A fundamental overview of the goals and need for civic education, with six practical approaches that schools can take to develop competent and responsible citizens.

Center for Academic Integrity. <www.academicintegrity.org>. A consortium of K–12 and post-secondary institutions whose Web site provides longitudinal survey data, a searchable database of materials, links to member institutions, and other resources.

Concord Review. <www.tcr.org>. Highly selective quarterly history journal that publishes academic expository writing by secondary-school students.

Eco-Hero Award. <www.actionfornature.org/eco-hero>. Award for young activists who do environmental research and take personal action to protect the natural world, locally or globally.

The Ethical Researcher. <www.noodletools.com/debbie/ethical>. Resources to support a proactive approach to plagiarism and academic research.

National History Day. <http://nationalhistoryday.org/programs1.htm>. Students investigate a self-selected topic related to an annual theme and present their findings as an exhibit, documentary, performance, or paper, along with documentation describing their research process.

Works Cited

American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communication and Technology. 1998. "Information Power: The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning." <www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/informationpower/informationliteracy.htm>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2006

Carnegie Corp. and Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. 2003. "The Civic Mission of Schools." <www.civicmissionofschools.org/campaign/cms_report.html>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2006