

To whom it may concern,

I am a Texas A&M student who took FINC 409 this fall. I am writing this letter to add perspective on behalf of all students who took this class this fall and to allow those who are not directly involved in the situation to better understand what all took place in hopes of preventing a situation of such magnitude from happening again in the future. To start off this letter, I would like to state that I am one of the many students who have recently received an academic misconduct violation in FINC 409. After reflecting upon my allegation, my method of preparation for quizzes/exams, and the risks I would be taking by bringing my case to the Aggie Honor Council, I have chosen to accept my allegations in order to maintain my status as a student here at Texas A&M. This acceptance comes with serious consequences as it ruins my 4.0 GPA, prevents me from graduating with honors, places my role as a student organization leader at risk, and jeopardizes my scholarships; as well as my application for professional school.

Introducing Allegations

I would like to sincerely apologize to my University and all Aggies for not upholding the Aggie Honor Code to the level that is expected of any Aggie. The Aggie Honor Code is one of high integrity and morality—a wonderful representation of our core values. After reflecting upon the events that led to the large outbreak of hundreds of misconduct allegations within FINC 409, I came across a few realizations that I think should be fully addressed and understood by all. The goal of this paper is to create a more supportive and ethical learning environment at Texas A&M. When it comes to academic misconduct, responsibilities are split between two groups of people in the learning environment whom can prevent such unethical behavior from occurring. One of these groups would be the students who sign up to take a course. The second group would be the professors and administrators whom designate the requirements of the course. I am a third-year college student, and I realize my college experience may not be representative of all, but I have personally found there to be a great deal of gray area surrounding what constitutes academic misconduct—especially considering the evolution of the method of education delivery during these times.

This past semester, there appeared to be three different methods in which courses were delivered, including an option which was entirely online and asynchronous. With the range of course delivery spanning from in-person to completely virtual, most students have ultimately relied

upon what their instructors specifically express to them in the beginning of the course. If a student is unsure about whether something constitutes academic misconduct, they usually depend upon reference to academic material such as the course syllabus. With regards to the occurrences of misconduct within FINC 409 this fall, it appears that most students were deemed guilty of engaging in inappropriate methods of studying by using the online platform, Chegg, throughout this course. Chegg is an online educational resource that many students use by inputting a problem and receiving a step-by-step solution so as to help them learn the correct procedure for solving specific problems. The individuals overseeing the alleged academic misconduct violations have communicated that they believe the access of assessment material through Chegg at any time period throughout this course deems you guilty. Even if you encountered quiz/exam questions prior to taking your assessment, you have been determined to be in violation with the honor code. Encountering these assessment questions without knowledge that they would appear on an exam/quiz has been determined to be a violation.

Student Understanding of Academic Misconduct

Although I cannot speak as to how each individual student who could be facing an academic misconduct violation specifically used Chegg throughout this course, I can speak as to what is currently a common understanding concerning what constitutes academic misconduct. This common understanding is derived from what the professor specified upfront, as well as their communicated observations with the students throughout the course. The only specific instructions concerning academic integrity given to students included the fact that quizzes/exams were open note, that calculators were allowed; and that collaboration with anyone on each assessment was prohibited. I believe it is accurate to say that most students in FINC 409 this fall understood that collaborating with anyone meant taking the assessment with others or discussing the assessment with someone who had already taken it. There appears to be a gray area in the definition of “open note.”

In other classes, many students have been encouraged to summarize their notes for a given assessment’s material, and the aid of the internet is authorized, given the time limit and uniqueness of those assessments. In the case of FINC 409, it seems that in many cases the internet may not have been just used to help a student figure out how to solve a problem, but inadvertently it ended up giving student’s answers to specific questions that appeared within

their assessment. It is a very gray area, especially considering the virtual/asynchronous nature of this course, as there was not a set time for each student to take an assessment. The gray area that many students, including myself, were not aware of was the fact that using an unauthorized source as study material to prepare for quizzes/exams could end up being considered academic misconduct. As previously mentioned, it was clearly stated by a member of the Aggie Honor Council that if a student accidentally viewed quiz/exam questions while preparing for that assessment through Chegg that it will be considered academic misconduct by those overseeing the process.

It is imperative to recall that the material accessed by the majority of the students could be easily obtained unknowingly. As stated by the professors of the course, most of the quiz/exam questions used this semester were new material created by them. After looking into this from a student's view, it appears that at least a few exam questions were reused from previous sources. Unfortunately, Chegg does not provide time stamps on each question posted. However, they do provide time stamps on each comment made on an answer, providing insight into the time of their publication. Three exam questions from Exams One and Two contain comments dated back to before the release of the respective exams they were on. Considering the fact that the professors for this course stated they used mostly new material for quizzes/exams, and without any further way for a student to analyze this, it is likely that a student took the exam immediately following its opening, and entered all of the questions into Chegg.

Factors Enabling Uncertainty

When you look it up on the internet, the Chegg response time for one question is up to two hours. During our course, we took eight question quizzes that ended in thirty minutes and sixteen question exams that ended in one hour. They would not have been guaranteed a response for even one question within the allotted assessment time. It is important to note that posting quiz/exam material on a resource such as Chegg is commonly understood to be engaging in academic misconduct. The quizzes in question for many students were available to be taken for four days and the exams in question were available for one full day. From my time here at Texas A&M, this appears to be a pretty common feature of a course delivered asynchronously so I am not choosing to critique those in charge for organizing this course in such a manner. However, it did play into the overall issue. What did not play into the students' favor is that there was not a

common time in which everyone would be taking the exam. This resulted in some students taking the exam before others.

With such an open time range for each assessment, this would very easily include times in which other students have already previously taken that assessment and the students responsible for inputting assessment questions into Chegg would have already done so. Further, if you ended up using Chegg to see a variety of similar problems during this time, you are almost undoubtedly going to come across quiz/exam questions unknowingly. When you look up specific problems, Chegg provides you with the following features: “Similar Questions,” “Up next for you in insert class” and, “Questions viewed by other students.” Many students often use these features to find more practice problems to increase their readiness for a quiz/exam. However, in doing so, one could very easily come across questions that would appear on their quiz/exam.

The Importance of Proactive Communication

As previously stated, I can see how this is not fair to all students and could be classified as academic misconduct, but without any heads up from a professor regarding this situation, a student would not know they are engaging in academic misconduct. It is important to note that going forward, students who find themselves in this situation should communicate this to their professor immediately in a sign of good faith so measures can immediately be taken to prevent this from continuing on. Unfortunately, I did not think about this as I underwent these specific circumstances throughout the course. This aspect was pointed out to me as I was receiving counsel regarding my allegation and it was also pointed out that while I was not technically inclined to do so, a lack of me doing so makes me appear guilty. I realize the logic in this and this is partly the reason why I chose to cut my losses where I am at. As previously stated, if situations that result in academic misconduct were not specifically discussed by a professor, students rely on their individual general understanding of what is allowed.

This general understanding is subject to change over a full semester, especially considering rules that students are not completely sure about. Many students observe the proactivity of measures in question by the professor throughout the semester. For example, the professor may choose to proctor assignments, or specifically prohibit the usage of online resources to study. Both of which were never done throughout this course. Using the internet in attempt to help a student figure out how to solve certain problems, not specifically to give them the answer, was a gray

area throughout the course. When the professor did not ever talk about this gray area and did not monitor the suspicious activity from the beginning, this shaped the general understanding that students held as the course progressed. Actively monitoring suspicious activity throughout the entirety of the course, and clearly stating what would be deemed academic misconduct from that start would have absolutely prevented this large fiasco from occurring.

Upholding Student Rights

Stated in the Academic Integrity Statement and Policy section of the FINC 409 syllabus, “Texas A&M University students are responsible for authenticating all work submitted to an instructor. If asked, students must be able to produce proof that the item submitted is indeed the work of that student. Students must keep appropriate records at all times. The inability to authenticate one’s work, should the instructor request it, may be sufficient grounds to initiate an academic misconduct case.” This information can also be found within the Aggie Honor System rulebook (Section 20.1.2.3, Student Rule 20). Further, as found under the Autonomously Handled Allegations section of the Student Resources tab for the Aggie Honor Council website, important information can be found. There it states, “If a faculty member chooses to handle a case autonomously, they shall make an effort to allow the students an opportunity to respond to the allegations. The allegations may be communicated in person or through email. Following either the attempt to make contact or receiving a response from the student, and after a report is filed with the Aggie Honor System Office by the faculty member, an Aggie Honor System Office staff member will contact the student to discuss appeal options. It is very important to note that I was never given either of these opportunities. Although I cannot say for certain, given the fact that the professors did not discover the suspicious activity until after the course was completed, and the quantity of allegations, it can reasonably be concluded that not many, if any, students were provided with these opportunities.

With all of this said, it is vital to recognize the utmost importance of effective communication. In the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students find themselves in limbo between in-person and virtual classes. The transition between these two methods of education can be quite stressful and complicated—dictated by a great deal of uncertainty surrounding new expectations. During a time in which the majority of classes are now completed remotely, it is imperative that specific boundaries and requirements are set by respective professors so that their

students will know how to successfully complete their course. The professor of a course has an immense influence in maintaining the reputation of our university by monitoring and upholding academic integrity. By holding such a large role, I believe it to be quite important for professors to engage in proactive measures to ensure that their students are well aware of what they consider to be academic misconduct. With a rapidly transitioning society in the realm of technology, there will always be the need for proactive communication.

Impaired Opportunity

The utilization of mass email by the university's honor council has led many students to feel deindividualized, as they were not given the time or opportunity to prove their knowledge and integrity prior to accusation. The first email, which was sent to only some students believed to be engaged in academic misconduct, specifically detailed the assignments which were seen to be completed at an abnormally rapid rate. However, the second email—which was released to every student within the course—did no such thing. Students received this email with no prior awareness—a difficult occurrence considering the students were given the choice to either self-report their actions, or in some cases, face the possibility of expulsion from the university. But how would these students, specifically those who studied Chegg prior to their exams unknowingly, know that they actually engaged in misconduct? This mass email served the purpose of backing many students into a very stressful and vague corner. Further, the students which received the first email, those who had been already accused, held quite the advantage concerning knowledge of their actions.

One of the last points to be addressed is the fact that all misconduct allegations were made at the very end of the course. No student was notified of potential risk until their final grades were being assessed. Students within the FINC 409 course are currently facing extremely difficult repercussions from their university in the middle of taking their final exams. If they do not self-report, they face expulsion or suspension. If they do self-report, they face consequences including: the imposition of zeroes on past assignments, the drop in letter grade within the course, the acquisition of an F in the course, and the placement of academic suspension. So, what should these students do? Many believe that studying Chegg prior to their exam times without knowing that certain material would be on the exam is not cheating. These students may be inclined to remain stationary with their actions. However, these same students may also then face

expulsion from their dream university. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the majority of these students will self-report, subjecting themselves to consequences they never would have deemed imaginable from the beginning of this course. These consequences also jeopardize their permanent academic records, strips them of the ability to graduate with honors, and potentially excludes them from admission into post-graduate programs.

A Higher Code of Ethics

As stated before, there are two parties involved in the application of academic integrity. One of which is the party responsible for overseeing the course. The responsibility of ensuring justice relies largely upon this party. Holding the fate of many students within their hands, they need to be held responsible as well to promote reasonable measures aimed at upholding academic integrity. This fiasco, one which has the potential to severely hinder the professional success of many young minds, could have been prevented from the very start. If sanctions are applied to these students, then those responsible for academic integrity within their courses should also face sanctions for their lack of responsibility. There has to be a better way to allow students to prove their knowledge without crucifying their academic integrity based on negligence by the professors. This is not just a case of a few dozen students. This is potentially a case of a few hundred.

Sincerely,

Your fellow Aggie