

A student-centric approach to promote academic integrity

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Category: Non-refereed

This paper focuses on the role of students of Singapore Management University (SMU) in raising the awareness of academic integrity through active engagement between the University and representatives of the student community. A student organisation named the “Student Council of Discipline” (SCD) forms annually to collaborate with the University, via the University Council of Student Conduct (UCSC), to moderate student conduct matters. The foundation of the SCD lies upon the University’s core values, or CIRCLE Values (Commitment, Integrity, Responsibility, Collegiality, Leadership and Excellence), which is used to inoculate their peers with a higher moral awareness, especially in the area of academic integrity. This paper discusses the background of general student conduct management in SMU, the objective principles behind the existing approach towards academic integrity vis-à-vis student engagement and values education, various initiatives throughout the years, and the outcomes and challenges faced. Lastly, this paper outlines plans to further student engagement and explores possible future developments.

Keywords: Academic integrity, CIRCLE values, SMU, Singapore Management University, Student Council of Discipline

Introduction

The Singapore Management University (SMU) was incorporated in 2000 and modeled after the Wharton School of Business (University of Pennsylvania). The University pioneered an interactive approach towards student education and engagement in Singapore, with students shaping their own tertiary experience through self-driven participation in school policies, curriculum and student life activities. All members of SMU are guided by 6 ‘CIRCLE’ Values – Commitment, Integrity, Responsibility, Collegiality, Leadership and Excellence. These values represent SMU’s mission towards social conscientiousness and ethical success.

SMU embraces *participative democracy* and *student engagement*, which have been shown as powerful means of developing students as well rounded individuals (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007). Students in SMU are encouraged, and given many opportunities, to be self-driven and engaged. Class sizes are small, which allow students to fully express their individuality, while building closer relationships with their peers. Many major university events are organised and run by student committees.

This participative spirit also drives the moderation of discipline, in particular, academic integrity, in SMU. Whilst disciplinary matters are handled by the University administration through the SMU University Council of Student Conduct (UCSC) that is chaired by the Provost, the need to engage student participation led to the formation of, and partnership with, a student peer group. Known as the ‘Student Council of Discipline’ (SCD), the Council augments and reinforces the importance of ethical behavior and academic conduct amongst the student body. In addition to driving peer influence amongst the student body, the SCD also plays a weighted role in the University’s Disciplinary Procedure by sitting on the judiciary panel. In so doing, the importance of student morality is emphasised and adds leverage to peer educational efforts.

This paper will discuss the ideals and values behind student engagement to moderating academic integrity in the University environment, highlighting the initiatives undertaken by the SMU student peer group ‘Student Council of Discipline’ (SCD) over the years. The paper discusses also the challenges and future opportunities for this approach in creating a self-perpetuating ethical culture in the University.

SMU CIRCLE values

SMU believes that all students are in the process of positioning themselves in congruence to moral values, such as integrity and honesty (Kohlberg, 1984). The values outlined in the SMU 'CIRCLE' values serve as an inspiring benchmark to essential and crucial aspects of behavior and personal conduct. This 'CIRCLE' consists of:

Commitment:	To adhere to an agreement and see it through to completion
Integrity:	To uphold honesty and truthfulness in oneself, and to others.
Responsibility:	To take ownership and accountability for one's actions.
Collegiality:	To value people and build positive and lasting relationships.
Leadership:	To lead and motivate one's peers to achieve long-term goals.
Excellence:	To strive to exceed personal and external benchmarks

These shared value statements represent the University's mission to produce ethical, broad-based and creative leaders for the world. These values, and their importance to the student's personal development and success, are introduced to them during the University orientation camp, and emphasised during the term of their studies through positive association with real-world expectations (eg. employer seminars, briefings by successful alumni) and recognition awards (e.g. graduation awards for exemplary graduates who have embodied the values throughout their course).

The CIRCLE values represent an aspiring ideal for students. In reality, students do make mistakes, behave inappropriately and do harm to others or themselves. It is important to balance this need for discipline with the education and character modeling of these students, bearing in mind that the core objective of the University is to educate and nurture. Furthermore, studies have shown that disciplinary systems that are overly formalised and severe may have a negative effect on resultant student sentiment and behavior (Black, 2004; Cantor & Wright, 2001; Heal, 1978). Therefore, SMU aims to facilitate the student's personal and professional development based on the CIRCLE Values instead, further outlining their moral obligations, personal responsibilities and academic professionalism expected of a student in SMU.

However, the university recognises that such ideals do not occur in a disciplinary vacuum. Disciplinary cases, including academic violations, are routinely reported to, and investigated by the UCSC. As part of the disciplinary process, students who commit academic violations are interviewed by UCSC to evaluate the nature of the misconduct. According to Lindsay (2008), an 'instrumental', or calculative, attitude towards education is a major cause of academic misconduct among students. To address this, the respondent would be invited to examine the coursework or situation in question, guided by advice on what professional academic standards are. The aim is for the respondent to realise for themselves that poor academic conduct is neither justifiable, acceptable nor to be taken as a calculable risk, if they expect to grow intellectually. This method also seeks to address the 'backyard blitz syndrome' identified by Langridge (2003) as "a concentrated effort for a limited time span [to] see the task achieved – no matter how well or how badly... cobbled together, it is done". Over the years, UCSC has shared the results of these interviews, after editing for anonymity, with the SCD. This has added more realism and practicality in their conception of educative initiatives.

Student engagement: Student Council of Discipline

The use of peer engagement for the purpose of education has its roots in antiquity. According to Wagner (1982), it was first documented and utilised by Aristotle. While it is not a novel concept, the main factor of success remains unchanged - the sharing of useful or valuable information among individuals who belong to a similar culture, cohort or environment (Carnegie, 1998). Turner & Shepherd (1999) further cited widely recognised justifications and

benefits for the use of peer engagement. These include cost-effectiveness compared to other comparable approaches; the tendency for students to trust their peers, and therein their educational messages, more than authority figures; the empowerment and socio-psychological development of students involved with peer engagement; the ability to emplace positive role models within the educational culture and the reinforcement of learning through continuous social contact with a wider, and sometimes inaccessible, population. These factors and wide evidence suggesting success in areas such as drug prevention, alcoholism, smoking, weight control and HIV prevention (Ward et al, 1997), indicate that peer engagement is likely to contribute greatly to the moderation of student conduct.

In furtherance to this approach, SMU has appointed a group of students as the Student Council of Discipline (SCD), since 2003. The Council, appointed by the SMU Provost, was envisioned as a student group working closely with fellow students in an effort to promote good personal moral values and ethical behaviour. They also act as student representatives on the SMU Disciplinary Panel and as student advisors to the University administration where conduct and ethical issues are concerned.

The SCD consists of 10-12 students from each Faculty in SMU. Each Council serves a 2-year term and is responsible for selecting their successive council from the student population. These selected candidates are also assessed by the Provost before they are appointed. Although the Council is funded by the University, they are encouraged to operate autonomously with guidance and support from University administration.

During the period of induction, new members of SCD undergo a basic leadership course, under the stewardship of UCSC. The course aims to equip them with basic interpersonal and leadership skills, which include motivational techniques, positive communication, servant leadership and basic counseling methods. In addition, they are instructed on the details and nuances of the University's Disciplinary Procedures and their responsibilities on the Disciplinary Panel. Throughout the term of their membership, the UCSC continues to provide guidance and mentorship where required, while ensuring that the operations of the SCD remains fully autonomous.

The Council employs a flat hierarchy where each member contributes equally to leadership and strategic direction. The Council's main role during each school term is to continually brainstorm on ways to educate the general school population on their rights, responsibilities, moral and academic obligations vis-à-vis the CIRCLE values. The Council meets regularly with the University administration for guidance meetings, and to share their findings on any issue that may require attention.

One of the most important roles of the Council above all, is to act as a bridge between the University and the students. Being students themselves, they would be in a good position to understand student life and be empathetic to its associated difficulties. The University works very closely with the SCD in a mutual relationship, guiding them on ethical issues and conduct matters, as well as given administrative support in the running of the Council. In turn, the University Administration, gains many valuable insights from hearing student perspectives.

While the Council has an active role in the Disciplinary Panel when disciplinary cases are adjudicated, they do not maintain an enforcement presence on campus. Hence, being seen as a moral and educative advisor on matters of conduct and ethics is a deliberate attempt to moderate their image towards the student community. To this end, they also serve as recourse for students to submit their queries on academic integrity or general conduct. This channel of communication has proven successful in gaining the students' trust.

As part of the peer education process, the SCD has made exhaustive use of many static and social media over the years. The Council has used email messages, posters, decals, gift items,

contests, surveys and seminars, to capture the attention and thoughts of their fellow students. In order to reach ever greater numbers of the student population, the Council has had to move progressively by tapping on the latest technological and media trends without sacrificing the crux of their ethical message. As a peer educator, each member has the responsibility to embody the CIRCLE values they propagate during their daily contact with their friends and university mates. Furthermore, they are required to discern the mood of the campus and detect any emerging trend or issue which may need addressing.

The educational campaigns organised by the SCD are mainly focused on promoting CIRCLE values and raising awareness on academic integrity. Some examples would include the positioning of large wall-sized posters near the University cafeteria, where it would be viewed by all students. The Council has also created 2 'anti-mascots', the 'Cheatman' and 'Plagman', who embody the unpleasant nature and consequences of cheating or plagiarising. The Council also conducts seminars to freshmen on the CIRCLE values and its relevance to one's life and character, as well as academic integrity workshops. They have distributed material regarding plagiarism and promotion of responsible behavior, including a quarterly email magazine called *SCD Times* featuring real-life stories on CIRCLE values and academic issues, providing learning points and food for thought for the student reader.

The Council also works closely with other student groups, such as the SMU Student Association (SMUSA) and various sports groups. In the former case, the promotion of CIRCLE Values is a common cause and the partnership has served both groups well in terms of meeting their organisation objectives. The pooling of resources and ideas has resulted in larger scale effects and influence than if the initiative had been undertaken alone. In the latter case, it is one example of partnerships with regards to related activities, in this case – sportsmanship. SCD highlighted the value of ethics in sports, together with the message that such values engendered in sports should also endure in other areas of life.

Current challenges and ideas for the future

Since their inception, the Council has faced and mitigated numerous challenges and issues. Internally, the Council constantly faces a difficulty in finding suitably qualified candidates during their selection process. On one hand, membership on the Council requires individuals with exemplary character, commitment, intelligence and excellent people skills. On the other hand, this is compounded by the fact that many of these suitable students would have competing commitments in school or other clubs, hence reducing the pool of available applicants. Furthermore, a gradual reduction in the number of applicants has been observed over the years, a possible indication that students may be engaging less with the University. This finding is also echoed in a study by McInnis (2001) where students were found to have gradually disengaged from University life and regard tertiary study as a solitary activity. In a bid to engage more applicants, the Council has focused its recruitment efforts on freshmen and sophomores as these students are at the early stage of their journey in the university and have more time to develop their potentials. In light of possible reduced engagement by SMU students, the role of SCD in student relations becomes even more vital.

According to Colvin (2007), one of the main challenges faced by students involved in peer engagement is the over allocation of time spent on image management within their group and that of the general student population. Frequent misunderstandings and power struggles are also common occurrences within any peer group. In this case, it is observed that the Council does expend a fair amount of effort in an attempt to portray a professional image. This would not be considered a wasteful endeavour as a professional image, coupled with true competence, is necessary as part of the effort to gain trust from their fellow students. The challenge faced by the Council was to understand and be aware of the delineation between professionalism and empty marketing. The maintenance of a flat organisational hierarchy by the Council since its

early years has enabled all the members, regardless of their appointed roles, to contribute with an equal voice to all executive decision with minimal internal strife and power struggles.

One of the key challenges that remain to be addressed by the Council is in measuring their manifest effectiveness in influencing their peers' behaviour and mindset to embrace good values. The members of SCD often find it difficult to objectively assess the benefits of any particular initiative, especially those that are smaller in scale. This makes it difficult to decide if the initiative should be continued, improved or abandoned so effort could be directed elsewhere. To date, small steps have been taken to conduct comparative attitude surveys of a small proportion of students and initial results have been positive. However, much wider and deeper surveys of a larger student population have to be conducted before conclusive results can be reported.

Going forward, the Council will seek to focus more effort in addressing fundamental issues – such as guiding students to understand values as being intrinsic qualities and to create greater discussion on the CIRCLE values. The Council will also work closely with the Student Association and other student groups to address the serious problem of disengagement and to highlight the fact that University life is about personal growth and not just a means to attaining academic qualification. This could be achieved through the use of open forums with students or seminars and symposiums on CIRCLE values.

The Council shall also be looking to expanding its partnership boundaries by engaging potential employers to endorse and promote the importance of CIRCLE values and ethics in the real world. According to Sims (1993), academic dishonesty is often a precursor to future workplace dishonesty. Employers desire honest employees with the highest integrity. By engaging these employers, the SCD hopes to enhance the importance of the CIRCLE values amongst the student community and also highlighting to employers the commitment of the University to producing graduates with a sense of ethics.

Conclusion

It is a poor assumption that University rules and regulations alone can engender an ethical and value-oriented environment for students. Ultimately, students themselves must come to understand and believe in ethics and values as important facets of their character. By communicating to their peers in their own language and with an identifiable perspective, the SCD is able to create this environment and help their peers understand that the quality of success can only be attained by a character of integrity.

To this end, it has been said that Universities do not exist solely to teach or profess facts, but to change lives (Sinaiko, 1998). The moderation of values, at this critical point of students' development, cannot be conceived as a system, but as a paradigm. The discussion and discourse of morality and ethics cannot be viewed as objectives to be met, but as values to live by. Within the framework of greater involvement and peer-engagement, students can be guided to think deeply about moral and societal values, formulating an understanding of themselves that would be coherent, relevant and conducive to personal and greater good.

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Please cite as: Singh, R. (2011). A student-centric approach to promote academic integrity. In *Educational integrity: Culture and values. Proceedings 5th Asia Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity*. The University of Western Australia, 26-28 September. (pp. 121-126)
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