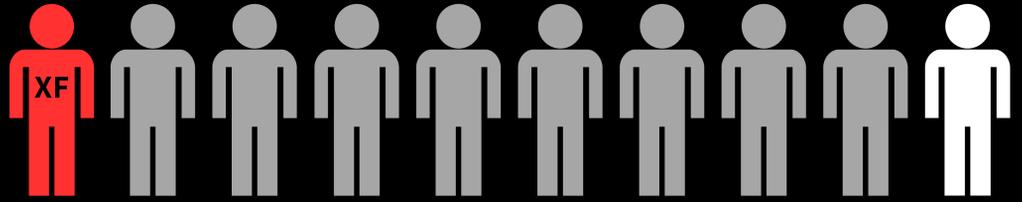


# DECIPHERING THE FACTORS:

# FACULTY DISCRETION

# IN ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT REFERRALS.

Existing literature on academic misconduct suggests that 80-95% of students engage in academic misconduct (e.g., cheating on exams, inappropriate collaboration on assignments, plagiarism, etc.). Yet, anywhere from 3-9% of these cases are ever actually reported and/or formally sanctioned (Cochran 2017; Hard, Conway, Moran 2006; McCabe 2005).



This leads to the differential treatment of students engaging in the same behaviors; the <10% of students whose cases are ever reported can experience sanctions as high as suspension and expulsion for engaging in the same misconduct as their peers. At UMD, the most common sanction imposed is a 12 month XF - failure of a course due to academic dishonesty, with an X distinction on the student's transcript for 12 months.

This research seeks to address what effect this discrepancy has on academic institutions, and attempt to understand why this inconsistency exists.

Kara Groisser, Bachelor of Arts, 2024

Thesis Directed by Associate Professor Bianca Bersani (CCJS)

Special thanks to Casey Kindall (CCJS) and James Bond (OSC)



## Research Questions

1. Do faculty at the University of Maryland **consistently formally refer** students to the Office of Student Conduct for suspected academic misconduct?
2. Can a **descriptive profile** be made of the faculty members that are most and/or least likely to formally refer a student?
3. What **factors**, if any, **influence a faculty member's decision** to formally refer a student to the Office of Student Conduct for suspected academic misconduct?

## Data and Methods

- In January 2024, a survey was sent to 1,473 unique faculty email addresses via Qualtrics.
- After cleaning the data. 221 responses were deemed complete and usable for analysis.
- Results were analyzed using SPSS.
  - Univariate analyses examined the frequency of the core variables of interest.
  - Bivariate, Chi-Square tests and Mann-Whitney U Tests were used to examine whether there is a significant association between variables.

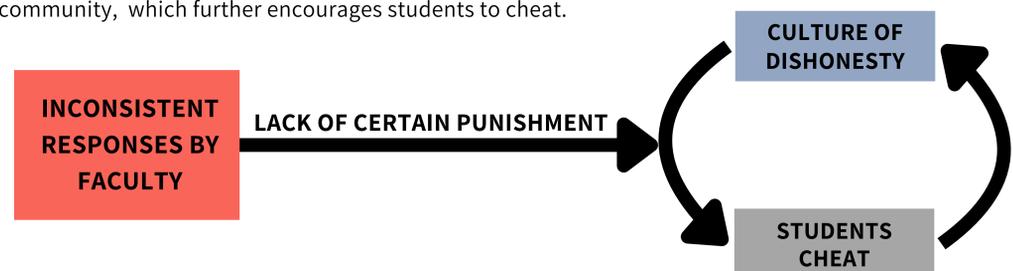
## Literature Review

The University of Maryland's Code of Academic Integrity requires that faculty report all suspicions of misconduct to the Office of Student Conduct (OSC), and students are threatened with sanctions as high as suspension or expulsion. Despite these policies, students are still cheating.

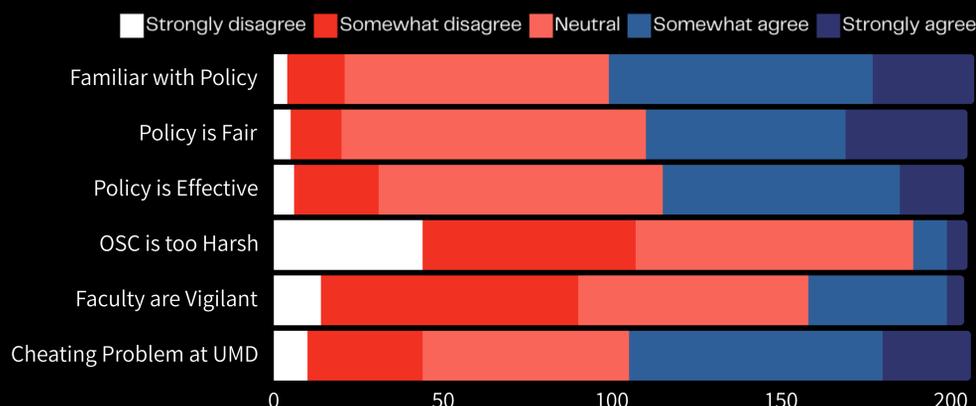
Research suggests that the **threat of formal sanctions is ultimately effective** in reducing the likelihood of misconduct, but this threat can only be effective if **students have a degree of certainty** that they will be caught at all.

Further literature finds that **faculty are inconsistent in their responses** to academic misconduct: 98% of faculty in one survey said they would take action when faced with cheating, but in the same study, only 53% said they would follow University policy in their response. 46% of faculty in this survey reported ignoring an act of misconduct altogether (Christensen and McCabe 2006).

**Students are aware of the inconsistent responses:** one study found that 90% of college students believe that cheaters are either never caught or not appropriately disciplined (Scanlan 2006). Students learn which faculty are harsh and which are lenient, and they begin to develop a lack of certainty that they will be punished and/or caught at all, fostering a culture of dishonesty among the university community, which further encourages students to cheat.



## Results



## Discussion

The results of this study confirmed what existing literature suggests; faculty are inconsistent in their responses to academic misconduct, and the factors that motivate faculty to formally refer a student for academic misconduct are difficult to discern. It was not possible to create a descriptive profile for faculty that are more or less likely to refer based on the results of the survey. This suggests that any efforts to improve consistency in response to academic misconduct can not and must not be directed toward any one particular group. Instead, a holistic approach is necessary, as the use of personal discretion in decisions by faculty is prevalent across departments, age, and years of experience.

It would be realistic to assume that faculty who have been in an instructional role for longer would have more opportunity to formally refer and thus have a higher likelihood to have referred before, but this was not the case. Neither less nor more experienced faculty are more inclined to formally refer students for academic misconduct. There could very well be issues in both the training/understanding of University policy, as well as an existence of issues that faculty might have with the policy itself.



Overall, if faculty who believe that the student disciplinary process is fair and effective are more likely to utilize it, then discovering what it is they believe makes the process fair and effective would be a place for future exploration. Collecting these opinions would help inform recommendations to changes in policy that might encourage more faculty to utilize the formal process, thereby decreasing the likelihood of differential treatment. In turn, consistency in use of the formal process by faculty will breed more trust within the University, ultimately providing for a culture of honesty and collaboration that promotes integrity across the board.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney Test

Past referral		
Variable	Value	Sig.
Harshness	2631.5	<.001*
Vigilance	3609	0.041*
Problem	3271.5	0.002*
Fairness	3389.5	0.007*
Effectiveness	3434	0.016*
Familiarity	3296	<.001*
Future referral intention		
Variable	Value	Sig.
Harshness	2502	<.001*
Fairness	2563	<.001*
Effectiveness	2647.5	0.001*
Familiarity	3091	0.003*

