



A room of our own? How integrity administrators inhabit and collaborate across third space

Greer Murphy

University of California, Santa Cruz, United States

Emily C. Perkins

Le Moyne College, United States

Abstract

Academic honesty and integrity (AH/AI) are claimed to be a fundamental set of values and practices that can facilitate students' success in higher education and that remains essential to the development of ethical citizenship after graduation. Despite broad rhetoric about integrity being critical to higher education's mission, not much is known about where this work resides within institutions or who, specifically, carries it out. Reporting on semi-structured interviews with 11 integrity administrators, our case study offers insight to the similarities between integrity and other third space labour, focusing on how administrators conceptualise and pursue collaboration—or not—as part of their roles. By describing the power imbalances and overall lack of organisational structure in which integrity administrators operate, as well as the absence of trust and credibility with which they contend, our study highlights lived experiences and working struggles of an under-recognised subset of third space laborers. It suggests that integrated practice and career longevity will remain impossible unless there are fundamental sea changes in institutional understanding, attention, and support.

Keywords: academic integrity; academic honesty; institutional ethnography; labour; third space; collaboration; agency; career trajectories.

Introduction

Yeah, but first and foremost, getting everyone to buy in (and) value integrity. That would be my blue sky... and that's hard (Morgan).

Academic honesty and integrity (AH/AI) stand as a cornerstone of countless college and university mission statements. These values underpin learning, institutional reputation, and the social worth of higher education. Despite the importance of integrity in mission statements, handbooks, and other institutional documents, mechanisms for upholding, reinforcing, and supporting academic integrity are ambiguous at best (Bertram Gallant, 2008). What counts as academic integrity work, where this labour gets housed, who carries it out, and what if any specific training or expertise they bring to the role (versus what can be learned 'on the job') tends to be less well-articulated, thereby making the work more difficult to define, understand, or support (Bertram Gallant, 2008).

As integrity scholar-practitioners ourselves, we affirm that academic integrity administrators are professionals who work in the third space (Babha, 1994; Whitchurch, 2013). Applied in a higher education context, third space describes a conceptual area that transcends traditional boundaries (Grant, 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022) since it relies on expertise commonly associated with a variety of roles and skill-sets—faculty (research and teaching), staff (program evaluation and assessment), and senior administrative leadership (personnel development) domains—without fitting neatly into any single one. Further, we believe that developing more in-depth, accurate knowledge of academic integrity labour—how academic integrity 'happens' and what resources are needed to authenticate learning and support pedagogies that enhance integrity in the classroom and out—is crucial to understanding and perhaps, one day, to challenging the culture and structure of the modern university.

Affording visibility and credibility to a professional class who are underestimated relative to the range of activities they perform and the scope of contributions they make is critical if we are to deliver on the promise of equity and integrity in higher education. Moving beyond the false dichotomy of education versus punishment and adopting a balanced approach to academic integrity can benefit teaching and learning for everyone (Bertram Gallant, 2017; Dawson, 2020). Having a centralised and well-resourced administrative infrastructure to

help inform students, support faculty and staff, and set the tone for integrity training across an institution is essential (Ellis and Murdoch, 2024). We recognise that instantiating the values of honesty, trust, respect, responsibility, and fairness (ICAI, 2021) in lasting, sustainable ways can be complex, costly, and daunting work. Nonetheless, we as third space integrity administrators—on behalf of ourselves, our colleagues, and most of all, our students—demand nothing less.

Context

I fear I might be giving you a really weird perspective, because a lot of it is about dysfunction and just sort of how these responsibilities get passed around (Isaac).

Integrity work, akin to offices such as honours colleges, advising offices, or tutoring centres (Stoller, 2021), operates in a liminal academic third space (Bhabha, 1994; 2004; Whitchurch, 2013). Research indicates a growing recognition of the 'rising aspirational and professional needs' of third space professionals (Sebalj, Holbrook and Bourke, 2012, p.468). However, these individuals are still often perceived as 'comparatively impotent or largely invisible' within the organisational frameworks they occupy (Gray, 2015, p.546). Our conversations with the administrators in this study consistently reveal barriers faced in navigating power dynamics within and across different organisational spheres.

Understanding the historical context of academic integrity sheds light on the emergence of intersecting domains within integrity labour. McCabe and Treviño's (1996) work underscores the longstanding presence of academic dishonesty in higher education, juxtaposed with its relatively more recent empirical exploration. Especially in the United States, academic integrity shares professional roots with student conduct and judicial affairs (Eerkes, 2010), tracing lineage to a century-old tradition of honour codes (Mackenzie, 1899; McCabe, Treviño and Butterfield, 2002; Pavela, 2022). Depending on the size, structure, and priorities of an institution, academic integrity work often gets done out of a hybrid unit (for example, combined with conduct, judicial affairs, or sometimes even academic advising) rather than organised into its own office. As a legacy of this quasi-judicial background, the text of some contemporary integrity policies still leans more towards punitive measures than educational approaches (Bretag et al., 2011; Miron et al.,

2021; Stoesz and Eaton, 2022). Though both fields are moving on (within academic integrity, for example, see Stephens and Bertram Gallant's (2023) work on 'after-education'), experience suggests that contemporary colleagues have trouble letting go of perceptions of integrity administrators as plagiarism police (Anson, 2008; Vaccino-Salvadore and Buck, 2021), out to punish students for punishment's sake.

Methodology

Led by epistemological conviction that meaning is socially constructed and situated, and that true understanding emerges most directly from the perspectives of people engaging in dialogue, we chose qualitative, institutional-ethnographic inquiry (Smith, 2005; LaFrance, 2019) as our preferred approach. Our IRB-approved study features open-ended conversation with participants, providing an insider view on integrity professionals' work environments and revealing inner institutional and social structures (Blommaert and Jie, 2010) that might otherwise remain hidden. In so doing, we seek to reveal what is often discredited or dismissed in popular discussions about academic integrity labour.

To recruit, we contacted a convenience sample of the International Center for Academic Integrity's (ICAI) Northeast and Southeast regional consortia. We emailed individuals active in these groups to explain the aims of our research and request their voluntary participation. After sending an overview of our work and conducting informal information meetings with any potential participant who requested one, we shared informed consent documentation with all participants. We reminded participants that potential risks for this study would be minimal, at or about the level of what might result from speaking with a professional acquaintance about opportunities, challenges, and benefits of their work as integrity administrators—if an excerpt of such a conversation were to be subsequently published. Participants were interviewed over Zoom and asked a series of questions related to their institution's integrity policy, their job description, and their views on what it is like to work as an integrity practitioners. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Participants were given the option to review and redact any part of their contribution(s) and edit any responses they did not wish to become part of the dataset. Participants were not offered any financial incentives and did not receive compensation for their contributions. For the case study reported here, we cover interviews of 11 participants from 11 institutions collected during Phase 2 of a

longer project. All integrity professionals were given or allowed to select pseudonyms in order to uphold confidentiality. In this study (see Table 1), participants represent institutions of various sizes and structures.

Table 1. Integrity administrators, institutional demographics, and reporting lines.

Integrity administrator*	Institutional demographics	Main area of responsibility (reporting line)	Role dedicated (50% or more) to integrity work?	Office named or dedicated to integrity work?
Isaac	Private, R1; Large (United States)	Assessment (Asst. Dean)	Yes	No
Tyler	Public, R1; Large (United States)	Student Services (Director)	No	No
Angela	Public, R1; Large (United States)	Undergrad. Studies (Vice Provost)	No	No
Frank	Public, R1; Large (United States)	Student Support & Accountability	No	No
Cody	Public, R2; Midsize (United States)	English Faculty & Writing Center	No	No
Daniel	Private; Small (United States)	History Faculty & Integrity Officer	Yes	No**

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Morgan	Public, R1; Large (United States)	Academic Affairs (Associate Provost)	Yes	No***
Ben	Private; Small (United States)	Academic Advising (Dean)	No	No
Paul	Private; Small (United States)	Business Faculty (Department Chair)	No	No
Sean	Public; Mid-size (Ireland)	Centre for Excellence in Teaching/Learning	Yes	No
Miles	Public; Large (Australia)	Complaints, Appeals, Misconduct	No	No

Notes. R1 = Doctoral degree-granting institution with very high research activity. In addition to noting overall size, U.S. institutions are labelled according to Carnegie classification (a designation not applied or directly available to universities outside of the U.S.): <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/classification-methodology/basic-classification/>.

*All names reported in this table are pseudonyms.

**Cases managed through Provost's Office; Integrity Committee meets and determines responsibility in each case.

***Role serves a standing Faculty Senate committee that oversees and adjudicates cases.

Occupying the third space

We used third space (Bhabha, 1994) as a guiding conceptual lens, allowing us to challenge the idea of communities as stable entities with clear boundaries and pure cultures. Integrity administrators, like other third space experts, are in a constant state of flux, 'free to negotiate and translate their ... identities in a discontinuous, intertextual temporality of cultural difference' (Bhabha, 1994, p.55). We present findings from an ongoing ethnographic study featuring interviews with 11 integrity administrators. These findings came to light through traditional qualitative techniques (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007) where we developed codes from iterative readings of each interview and then discussed and revised these codes during researcher meetings. Our results highlight how third spaces can be challenging but also potentially productive for integrity administrators, a place to individually and collectively create transgressive and revolutionary meanings out of the work we do and the labour we provide (MacDonald, 2019). In all, we aim to draw implications for how critical reflection can provide greater visibility to third space experts in general and bolster the sustainability and longevity of academic integrity labour in particular.

To equal or even greater degrees than other third space colleagues, integrity administrators must rely on trust and credibility to do their work.

... you want buy-in, otherwise the process will not work. It's dead in the water. It's a non-starter. I really think that (Paul).

Literature shows how often third space professionals express concerns over credibility and positioning (for example, see Fraser and Ling, 2014). Within these liminal spaces credibility is dynamic and shifting, not static or dependent on structural hierarchy (Whitchurch, 2013). In this sort of space, authority must be continuously negotiated and renewed—and others' perspectives must be constantly managed—to maintain trust and influence (Whitchurch, 2013, p.94).

For integrity administrators, trustworthiness can be measured by the extent to which integrity work is not perceived as secondary to or 'less than' other institutional priorities. When performing labour that often goes unseen, this trust is especially fragile,

necessitating even more active efforts to cultivate and maintain it. Such effort is pivotal in facilitating collaboration across institutional boundaries, as strong relationships can mitigate power struggles and foster mutual support (Macfarlane, 2011; Whitchurch, 2015). By forging alliances with various campus partners—from faculty members, to student organisations, to other administrative units—integrity administrators can amplify their efforts to promote equitable policies and practices related to integrity.

However, this work is no easy feat, as integrity administrators encounter explicit resistance that impedes their success. Resistance stems in part from misunderstanding at the senior institutional leadership (Provost/President) level, highlighting the need for increased dialogue and transparency surrounding integrity labour on college campuses. Ben's observations regarding perceptions of integrity work underscore the importance of addressing mistrust early and often: 'I think that, ultimately all [faculty] would have respect for it ... I don't think any of them would blame us for any lack of trust in the process. I think they would blame it on policies and procedures ... which I think is an opportunity ultimately'. Daniel explains how faculty at his school have misconceived the overarching goal of integrity offices, fearing consequences and possible aftereffects of a traditionally punitive conduct model: 'Then you think, it's no wonder faculty are reluctant to report if they feel like, you know, Billy's dad is going to be accusing them of discrimination and threatening a lawsuit'.

Like Ben, though, Daniel seems ultimately hopeful: 'We just need to keep getting [our] message out there so faculty know they're not gonna destroy someone's life and [we] work with the student conduct guys and the learning center guys to make sure we're all on the same page with this stuff'. Historically low engagement with integrity reporting (McCabe, 1993) reflects a broader issue of mistrust that should be addressed. By working together to prioritise more accurate reporting in the name of communication and transparency, senior leaders and third space expert integrity professionals can establish the sort of culture Ben and Daniel describe, where all stakeholders recognise their collective responsibility to help uphold ethical standards. To the extent they do, a true campus community of integrity can thrive.

That said, the challenge of building trust and credibility from a third space integrity role is formidable. Concerted effort to foster understanding and transparency can pave the way

for a more robust, effective approach to promoting academic integrity. And after all, as Tyler articulates, the goal remains the same: 'convince everybody that we're all in this together and it's not something that you shove off on someone else, because we're all contributing to it'.

As third space inhabitants, integrity administrators navigate power imbalance and tensions within and across organisational roles.

There's been no institutional message out loud that's been, you know, integrated into something everyone would know and see in terms of, this is what we stand for (Cody).

In higher education institutions, the evolution of new policies and education initiatives often results in shifting responsibilities and the emergence of new roles, either integrated with existing positions or established as stand-alone offices. Whitchurch (2008) observes the fluidity of professional roles in higher education, which diverge from traditional organisational charts and job descriptions. This fluidity has the potential to afford flexibility to those who do this work. It can also constrain effectiveness by making it more difficult to develop credibility and time-in-role needed to overcome the many power imbalances third space integrity administrators inevitably face. Administrators in our study lamented how often their duties got passed around or subtly tucked into existing roles, making the sheer quantity of what they were assigned to do almost impossible. For instance, Ben describes how his integrity duties had grown out of work from multiple departments, leaving him overwhelmed and understaffed: 'I have to do all the tutoring for campus, all the [supplemental instruction], and all the accessibility accommodations ... that's not going to work'.

With respect to quantity of work and the resulting impact on ability to focus, Frank's claim that a standing team of people working on academic integrity would benefit not just him but students and other members of the institution, rings true: 'I feel limited, not only because of the many responsibilities [but because] there's not someone that's just [doing integrity work]'. Listening to third space voices makes apparent how often senior leadership remains unaware of the invisible labour that happens there. As Cody puts it, '... we say it's

central; we say it's vital; we say it's fundamental. But it's an afterthought tacked onto other people's jobs'. Integrity labour is treated as ancillary or secondary, not worthy of dedicated attention. Academic integrity is often 'put together with something else' (Tyler), one more unpleasant task those who avoid the work are glad not to deal with. One of the integrity administrators in our study went as far as to label the way duties can 'get passed around' as 'dysfunctional' (Isaac).

Within this ambiguity and potential for overwhelming workload also comes opportunity for agency. Agency and decision-making discretion are both essential in cultivating a strong professional identity (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2010; Whitchurch, 2015). Results from our study suggest that third space integrity administrators can leverage flexibility to build relationships with colleagues across campus. Limiting the scope of work and influencing institutional practice to resource integrity with the support it deserves, though, proves trickier. Expressed in Frank's desire for more frequent interaction with campus partners, leadership at the top can facilitate or inhibit collaboration throughout an institution: 'I would love more work with the residence halls. ... Athletics would be another one that [we don't] work closely with. I mean, I've had to but I'm not sure we collaborate, if that makes sense. I wish our leadership was more engaged. I wish they were more in tune with academic integrity, and we're not necessarily there yet'.

In response to these institutional gaps, integrity administrators are left to seek community and support from external organisations to establish working relationships, cultivate partnerships, and strengthen (or form) professional identity. Such administrators find solace and belonging in the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), which for most we interviewed serves as their only means of targeted professional development. For example, Daniel lauds the benefits of ICAI's regional consortia meetings, including how 'resourceful' and 'generous with time' their organisers—volunteers, all—can be. These ersatz professional communities serve as safe haven for administrators to openly discuss challenges, offer solidarity and support, and engage in reflective dialogue. In discussing his involvement with ICAI, Isaac highlights the catharsis of venting over shared frustrations: 'I've really enjoyed what I've learned from people, and even just bitching about things that are mutually irritating ... you know, that's very helpful'. Such interactions not only generate new ideas and ways of tackling problems, they reassure third space professionals like the integrity administrators in our study that they are not alone.

Integrity administrators occupy a unique position in academia, serving as vital mediators for faculty, student, administrator, and external stakeholder concerns. Situated in liminal 'third space', they confront intricate power dynamics in institutions shaped by hierarchy, disciplinary tradition, and ever more scarce resources. Hiring individuals into third space roles without taking steps to address or acknowledge underlying power dynamics is not sufficient; from the literature, as well as from our participants' practical experience, we know that clear delineation of authority and expertise can facilitate understanding and support effective functioning (Kallenberg, 2016). To empower third space roles, colleges and universities must reframe traditional power structures (Whitchurch, 2009) and foster better communication between third space staff and senior administrative leadership. Daniel expresses the impact this lack of connection can have: 'There's been this kind of compartmentalising parts of [integrity work] that nobody wants to do ... it's no wonder that's not working'. He elaborates: 'we should all be doing this work ... not in terms of writing policies, but we all work with students. That's what a college is supposed to do'. With integrity administrators, as with other third space experts, we see too much compartmentalisation being counterproductive; although it takes more work and time, engaging in student support together remains essential to fulfilling the mission of higher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

It's ... make it someone's job—that paper that [scholar] and someone else wrote. I apologise, I forget their names. But, like, you have to make it someone's job. Otherwise, [integrity becomes] this annoying thing at the side of someone's desk (Miles).

The role of integrity administrators, like that of other third space professionals, is consistently undervalued and overlooked (Whitchurch, 2015; Smith et al., 2021; Ahuna, Frankovitch and Murphy, 2023). Despite their vital role in upholding academic integrity, these administrators struggle with a lack of visibility, trust and credibility, which in turn leads to uncertainty about their career trajectories. Lack of recognition also undermines the collective effort to communicate the importance of academic integrity as a core value, which heightens suspicion and contradicts the guiding principles of integrity work.

As evidenced in the literature and in our study, third space professionals' authority often derives more from the knowledge and relationships they cultivate than from any formal institutional position or title. Perhaps as a result, career trajectories in the 'third space' of academic integrity administration are frequently convoluted and non-linear, lacking clear progress benchmarks (Whitchurch, 2009). Administrators in our study expressed frustration with the absence of clearly defined promotional criteria and lack of structured advancement in the field. In Sean's exasperated words, 'there is no senior position to me in academic integrity, if you know what I mean. There is no role to go up to. It would [only] be promotion within the existing role'. Isaac echoes these concerns, reflecting on how dysfunction in the allocation of duties further contributes to an already precarious career progression: 'My impression is, [academic integrity] is against the bottom line ... maybe this is too heavy, but I don't know necessarily about a long-term future for myself, professionally, in academic integrity. I value it very deeply, and I assume that most professionals in the space value it very deeply. But it's very hard to do [because], you know, space for those values isn't consistently shared'.

Within academic integrity administration, ambiguity surrounding career progression is exacerbated by how responsibilities are typically allocated. It is not necessarily practical to assume one person could manage all associated duties, especially when tacked onto other existing positions with their own substantial obligations (McKenzie, 2024). At the same time, having a prominent, titled, and easily identifiable integrity leader on campus can prove crucial to garnering recognition and support. But that same recognition could also become a double-edged sword: consolidating such significant responsibilities into one single position risks creating a vacuum—of person-power and credibility—should that person ever leave their position (Ahuna, Frankovitch and Murphy 2023).

In light of the challenges articulated by administrators in this study, it is imperative for institutions to recognise and more strongly value the expertise of third space professionals who work in academic integrity. Career advancement, professional development, and more structured institutional support are all essential to foster a thriving community of integrity administrators. By investing in the growth and professional well-being of third space occupants, institutions can better uphold fundamental principles of integrity and fulfil our promise to society of certifying graduates' learning and qualifications, along the way

cultivating a sustainable culture of trust, transparency, and accountability within and across the academic community.

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Author details

Greer Murphy directs the Academic Integrity Office at the University of California, Santa Cruz and serves on the Board of Directors for the International Center for Academic Integrity. As an applied linguist with degrees in Political Science and Education, Murphy's research interests include academic integrity and faculty development; multilingual writers

and writing program administration; and policy process to support institutional development and change.

Emily C. Perkins co-directs the Writing Center at Le Moyne College and is an active member of the International Center for Academic Integrity's Research Committee. Holding degrees in Philosophy, Education, and Trauma-informed Practice, she is dedicated to being a valuable resource and advocate for students as they navigate through their college experience. Her research interests include academic integrity and the plagiarism paradigm, generative AI and composition studies, and writing center theory and pedagogy.

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