

# Why More Colleges Are Turning a Blind Eye to Cheating

Imagine that you're the president of a community college. To justify your institution's existence and your enviable salary, you must convince the board of trustees that the institution is meeting—possibly even exceeding—certain productivity benchmarks: for instance, a threshold number of new enrolments, solid graduation rates and satisfactory retention of students from year to year.

The ethical dilemma you face is whether to maintain academic integrity standards in order to make a principled stand against student cheating or relax those standards in order to artificially inflate key productivity figures—for instance, graduation and retention rates. Which would you choose?

Ever since higher education leaders and executive administrators [adopted the business model](#), the scenario I've described is no longer so outlandish. In fact, it's playing out at [Harrisburg Area Community College](#) (HACC), a community college system in Central Pennsylvania serving over 70,000 students at five campuses and in its online program, led by President John Sygielski.

HACC is no stranger to mismanagement and corruption. Poor administrative oversight has [led its accreditor to twice issue warnings](#) and temporarily suspend the community college's accreditation. Almost a year ago [HACC's Vice President Nancy Rockey embezzled over \\$200k in school funds](#). She is now serving a federal prison sentence.

I inquired about the truth of rumors that HACC regularly conducts fake or rigged investigations into alleged violations of its academic integrity policy. I published the [results of my inquiry in an article on the site Truth-out.org](#) In

addition, I made an open records request under [Pennsylvania's Right to Know law](#), asking HACC to disclose the details of one specific investigation to which I was privy. Unsurprisingly, HACC chose to claim an exemption so that it could hide the truth. I appealed the decision to the [PA Office of Open Records](#).

While the [appeal was eventually defeated](#), it revealed that HACC's ersatz investigation of alleged student cheating involved merely examining the student's transcripts, not vetting their academic work. How could this constitute a good faith investigation?

Presently, HACC's accreditor, [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#) (MSCHE), is investigating the matter. The accreditor seeks to know, one, whether the institution failed to enforce its own academic integrity policy and, two, whether it afforded adequate safeguards to prevent student ghosting (someone other than the student taking exams and tests in the student's place, a common practice for cheating in online courses). President John Sygielski has been sent a series of questions by MSCHE that he must answer pursuant to a possible third warning and suspension of HACC's accreditation.

According to [PennLive reporter Jan Murphy](#), Sygielski or "Ski" (as he likes to be called) has faced "no shortage of adversity" during his tenure as HACC's president. Close adherence to the business model has led HACC to wade into morally murky waters. He and other college leaders should be challenged to answer a single question: Does their drive to increase productivity justify lowering academic integrity standards?

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[Image Credit: [Deviant Art](#)]