

UNR, UNLV differ on punishment for cheaters

By Sally Ho, AP

Leaders at the two major universities in Nevada don't seem to agree on how to dish out punishment equally and consistently among cheating students.

Patricia Ellison, a biochemistry professor at UNR who is chair of the Faculty Senate's academic standards committee, said the school lacks consistency in handling cases with such gray areas.

Ellison is among the elected leaders representing the UNR faculty who have now proposed a plan to create a "sliding scale" of consequences that would be in line with the severity of the offense. She said there also needs to be a uniform reporting process and the Reno professors are urging for an online system to make it easier to report cases.

Not all professors report possible cheats because the current letter-writing system can be cumbersome, Ellison said. Sanctions within the classroom – ranging from a do-over on an assignment to failing the entire course – are typically determined by the individual instructors without full guidance to ensure the punishment is even-handed and evenly applied.

"What we really want is consistent penalties," Ellison said. "We can't possibly catch every case. We catch as many as we can and should be consistent with what we do about it."

UNR, which has 21,000 students and 5,200 faculty staff members, said it had 122 confirmed cases of academic misconduct out of the 135 reports filed in the 2014-2015 school year.

In the same time frame, UNLV, which has 28,600 students and about 950 instructors, had 287 cases of confirmed academic misconduct among the over 300 cases reported. UNLV already has an online reporting process.

Officials said plagiarism is a common mistake students can make. They may simply lack the skills to properly cite a source of information. They may also misunderstand the parameters of an assignment and error by working in groups with classmates.

And when it comes to the most severe cases of cheating involving not just mistakes but intentional dishonesty, both UNR and UNLV say it's extremely rare that a student cheats repeatedly or egregiously. Beyond the classroom, the universities can also impose disciplinary action as severe as suspension or expulsion, though UNR said it's never expelled anyone over academic misconduct.

Phil Burns, director of the office of student conduct at the Southern Nevada school, said UNLV has had to expel students but it's uncommon, with fewer than 10 cases in recent memory.

UNLV also doesn't have full guidelines dictating how a student should be sanctioned within the classroom for each particular offense. Burns said he doesn't believe in a "cookie-cutter" approach because each student and set of circumstances should be weighed individually.

"We're all human. We all make mistakes," Burns said. "If this job was about punishment, I wouldn't do it."