Academic Dishonesty (AD) or Violations of Class Policy (CP)?

Many of our best instructors have developed class policies and practices that reduce the chance students will act in academically dishonest ways. This is admirable. Examples of this sort of practice include banning the use of cell phones during exams, limiting certain calculator use, asking for notes and books to be “put away” during exams, directing where exam files can (and cannot) be saved, reminding students not to talk during exams, etc. All of these practices seem sensible since each could be the first step in academic dishonesty.

Although the link between each of these behaviors and academic dishonesty seems obvious, each of these behaviors IN THEMSELVES are not proof of cheating. Phones can be used to share exam answers, but they are also used by many students as timepieces. Carelessly stowed books and notes can be used to unfair advantage, but they can also be simply carelessly stowed, without any use or advantage gained. Each of the examples given could indicate cheating, but each could have a more innocent explanation.

Each year a stream of students visit the Ombudsperson to admit they violated class policy or practice, but deny (usually vehemently) that they cheated or did anything dishonest. They claim they made a careless mistake, acted stupidly or naively, or offer some other very plausible explanation as a defense against the accusation of academic dishonesty. Although they may certainly be lying to avoid the consequences of their actions, in many cases the student’s account is accurate and the instructor’s accusation of AD is really a statement that class policy has been violated.

There is an important distinction between academic dishonesty and violations of class policy. Cheating is most often a deliberate act to gain some unfair advantage. We must be vigilant to detect cheating and firm in our response to this behavior. Academic dishonesty strikes at the very core of the educational enterprise, undermining all that we do. On the other hand, violations of class policy may warrant a penalty, but they don’t warrant filing an Academic Dishonesty Report (ADR). As a faculty member, you have the responsibility to make and defend your determination that a student’s behavior is either cheating or a violation of class policy. This judgement should be made on the basis of evidence that academic dishonesty has been committed. A simple statement that a violation of class policy has occurred WITH NO ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE to support the claim of academic dishonesty is rarely enough to prevail in a hearing, should the student contest your allegation. Given the consequences to the student of an academic dishonesty finding, it is important to differentiate between a violation of class policy and an instance of academic dishonesty.