This afternoon the MATH695 class gathered to hear perspectives on classroom cheating from seasoned professors and administrators. Moira Tarpy, a guest speaker from the office of judicial programs, explained the process by which her office evaluated each case of alleged academic dishonesty. Dr. Gulick related stories of cheating cases from earlier years, some successful and others disappointing. We also expected to hear Dr. Kueker explain how the department prepares its evidence before the hearing, but he did not make an appearance at today’s meeting.

The elapsed time from reporting academic dishonesty to obtaining a verdict (responsible or not) is about 40 days. According to Moira Tarpy, several cases from the summer session were still under investigation in her office, and few resources are free to handle new cases from this semester. Even so, we would be well-served by learning the trajectory of the judicial process.

First the suspicious work is examined by TAs, course chair/lecturer, and Dr. Kueker to see whether a strong case can be made. Annotations are sometimes made to help the staff in the office of judicial programs understand why the submitted mathematical work looks dishonest. Then all evidence is turned over to the office of judicial programs. The TAs’ and course chair’s contributions might end here, but they may attend the hearing if they choose, to ensure that the student representative (for the office of judicial programs) shares the evidence accurately.

The case might not even make it to hearing, if the accused student chooses to plead guilty and earn an XF grade for the course. If the student disputes the charge, then a hearing is held in front of his or her peers. The outcome of the hearing is usually no better than the outcome of a guilty plea, although in rare circumstances a verdict of not responsible is given. Sometimes a hearing can uncover a persistent pattern of cheating, which leads to a harsher penalty. Given the department’s track record for building strong cases, most students accused of academic dishonesty would be wise to plead guilty and forgo the lengthy judicial process.

Teaching assistants do not usually find the judicial process enjoyable either, so we have an incentive to prevent cheating before it happens, especially since turning a blind eye is never an option. We discussed several preventative
measures at today’s workshop. If we write our own exams, distributing different versions with slightly rearranged questions can easily identify students who blindly copy answers from their neighbors. Creating a special seating chart for an exam day would also prevent students from clustering around friends who are likely to share answers. Finally, attentive observation of the test-takers is always effective at discouraging cheating, especially if reminders are given at the hint of suspicious behaviour, e.g., “Remember, all work is supposed to be individual,” or “Calculators aren’t allowed on this exam.”