Annual Methodological Archive Research Review
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about
Volume 3, Issue 8 (2025)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189

http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

Caught Between Merit and Influence: University Leaders' Narratives of Handling Academic Dishonesty

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty remains a pervasive threat to higher education, undermining the credibility of assessment and eroding trust in meritocracy. While most research has focused on students' behaviors, relatively little is known about how university leaders adjudicate cases where clear evidence of misconduct collides with political, financial, or reputational pressures. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of senior academic leaders who confronted such dilemmas. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with vice-chancellors, deans, department heads, and examination controllers who had direct involvement in disciplinary decisions. Thematic narrative analysis revealed five interrelated themes: (1) *Merit Confronted by Influence*, where external actors intervened to protect students; (2) *Moral Distress and Risk Calculus*, as leaders balanced fairness against personal and institutional risks; (3) *System Gaps and Selective Enforcement*, where vague policies and pliable committees undermined consistency; (4) *Quiet Fixes and Negotiated Outcomes*, illustrating pragmatic compromises that preserved reputation at the expense of deterrence; and (5) *Identity Work in Leadership*, where leaders positioned themselves as guardians, mediators, or survivors to reconcile their choices. The findings extend ethical decision-making theory by demonstrating the intention–action gap under systemic constraint, and they contribute to institutional theory by showing how informal influence reshapes enforcement. Practically, the study highlights the need for clear sanction matrices, transparent appeal systems, and protection for leaders against external interference. By foregrounding leaders' narratives, the study underscores that academic integrity is not merely a student issue but a leadership challenge at the heart of higher education.

Keywords: Academic Dishonesty; Higher Education Leadership; Ethical Decision-

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Online ISSN 3007-3197
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Making; Institutional Theory; Narrative Inquiry; Academic Integrity

Introduction

Universities are widely regarded as spaces where merit, fairness, and intellectual honesty should guide both learning and governance. Yet, the challenge of academic dishonesty continues to threaten these ideals across higher education systems worldwide. Behaviors such as plagiarism, contract cheating, falsification of records, and exam malpractice not only compromise the credibility of assessment but also erode the public's trust in the very institutions responsible for producing knowledge. Scholars have long recognized that integrity is the foundation of higher education, but it is also one of its most fragile assets (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Bretag, 2016). While academic dishonesty is commonly studied from the perspective of students, why they cheat, how they rationalize misconduct, and what teaching practices influence their choices, far less attention has been given to the experiences of those responsible for adjudicating such cases. University leaders stand at the frontline of these dilemmas. They are expected to uphold the values of fairness and accountability, yet often face informal pressure from political actors, influential families, alumni, or donors who attempt to sway outcomes. These moments force leaders to navigate a delicate balance between meritocratic principles and external influence. Understanding how they experience and narrate these dilemmas is crucial, as their decisions not only resolve individual cases but also set institutional precedents for integrity (Aldhilan & Rafiq, 2025).

Academic Dishonesty as a Global Challenge

Academic dishonesty has become one of the most pressing challenges facing higher education worldwide. Broadly defined, it includes behaviors such as plagiarism, exam cheating, contract cheating, falsification of records, and unauthorized collaboration (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012). These practices not only undermine the credibility of assessment and the value of academic credentials but also corrode trust in universities as institutions that should embody fairness, merit, and knowledge creation (Bretag, 2016; Bertram Gallant, 2008). In an era where higher education plays a decisive role in social mobility, graduate employability, and national development, violations of academic integrity compromise both individual opportunities and broader societal progress (Macfarlane, Zhang, & Pun, 2014). While academic dishonesty is not new, its forms and intensity have evolved. The rise of digital technologies has multiplied

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http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

opportunities for plagiarism and cheating. "Contract cheating," where students outsource assignments to paid services, has expanded into a multimillion-dollar global industry (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016). More recently, the availability of generative artificial intelligence tools has introduced new challenges for distinguishing authentic student work from machine-generated text (Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway, 2023; Aldhilan et al., 2025). These developments raise the stakes for universities, demanding stronger integrity systems and more consistent enforcement.

Leadership as the Overlooked Dimension

The majority of academic integrity research has focused on students' behaviors, attitudes, and justifications for dishonesty (McCabe et al., 2001; Bretag et al., 2019). Studies have examined why students cheat, the role of peer norms, and how institutional culture shapes misconduct. Parallel streams have investigated teaching strategies and assessment designs that either deter or inadvertently encourage dishonesty (Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018). Far less attention has been paid to the leadership dimension of academic integrity. University leaders including vice-chancellors, deans, heads of departments, and examination controllers are the final arbiters in many misconduct cases. Their decisions determine whether sanctions are imposed, reduced, or ignored. Yet the lived experiences of these leaders remain underexplored. As Bertram Gallant and Drinan (2008) argue, integrity is not just a student issue but an organizational one: universities succeed or fail to uphold standards based on how leaders design systems, enforce rules, and model values. Importantly, leaders often operate at the intersection of meritocratic ideals and external influence. On the one hand, they are charged with upholding fairness and academic standards. On the other, they may face pressure from powerful stakeholders politicians, donors, influential families, or alumni to overlook or mitigate sanctions for favored students. In contexts where higher education is entangled with political and social patronage, these pressures can be both direct (a phone call from a minister) and indirect (expectations of reciprocity or fear of reputational damage).

Ethical Dilemmas in Practice

Research on ethical decision-making in organizations highlights the complex stages through which individuals recognize, judge, and act on moral issues. Rest's (1986) four-component model identifies moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention, and moral action as distinct steps, each vulnerable to breakdown. Jones's (1991) issue-contingent

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

model adds that the "moral intensity" of a situation its magnitude of consequences, proximity to the decision-maker, and likelihood of harm shapes how people respond. Treviño's (1986) interactionist model further stresses that organizational context, such as reward systems and role expectations, strongly conditions behavior. Applied to higher education, these frameworks suggest that even when leaders recognize misconduct and believe sanctions are justified, they may still fail to act if situational constraints are overwhelming. A dean who fears losing their position, damaging donor relationships, or provoking political retaliation may choose compromise over principle. Such decisions are not simply lapses in morality but reflections of the institutional environments in which leaders are embedded.

Institutional Pressures and Informal Influence

Institutional theory provides a lens for understanding these environments. Scott (2014) conceptualizes institutions as resting on three pillars: regulative (rules and sanctions), normative (values and roles), and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs). Formal academic integrity policies belong to the regulative pillar, but their enforcement is filtered through the other two. In many developing or politically fragile contexts, informal norms and patronage networks exert as much force as written policies (Hallak & Poisson, 2007; Heyneman, 2004). DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) notion of isomorphism suggests that organizations may adopt formal rules symbolically while daily practices remain driven by informal expectations. This disjuncture produces fertile ground for ethical dilemmas. A vice-chancellor may have a clear code of conduct on paper but find it impossible to apply uniformly when confronted with students backed by influential networks. Inconsistent enforcement, in turn, undermines trust in the integrity system, signaling to students and faculty that rules are flexible when power is involved. Over time, such practices normalize selective integrity, deepening the very problem universities seek to combat.

Narratives as a Window into Ethical Struggles

To capture these dynamics, narrative inquiry offers a powerful methodological approach. Narratives are not mere reports of events; they are acts of meaning-making where storytellers construct identities, assign responsibility, and justify choices (Riessman, 2008). In telling stories of academic dishonesty cases, leaders position themselves as guardians of standards, mediators of competing interests, or survivors constrained by larger forces. These narratives reveal not only what leaders did but how they rationalize and reconcile

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
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their decisions. Narrative analysis thus enables a deeper understanding of ethical dilemmas as lived experiences rather than abstract principles. By examining leaders' stories, researchers can uncover how values, institutional pressures, and personal risks intersect in real-world decision-making. As Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) argue, educational leadership must be understood as an "ethic of the profession," where choices are rarely simple and often involve balancing competing goods.

Contextual Urgency

The need to study leadership narratives is especially acute in contexts where political interference in higher education is well-documented. Research has shown that corruption, favoritism, and clientelism can distort educational outcomes in many regions (Hallak & Poisson, 2007; Heyneman, 2004). Universities are often caught between global expectations of meritocratic standards and local realities of patronage. Leaders' decisions about academic dishonesty thus become litmus tests of institutional integrity. At the same time, globalization and digitalization have heightened scrutiny. International rankings, student mobility, and accreditation frameworks place universities under pressure to demonstrate integrity. A single scandal involving plagiarism or exam manipulation can damage reputation beyond national borders. Leaders are therefore under unprecedented strain to balance competing obligations protecting institutional legitimacy, satisfying stakeholders, and ensuring justice for students.

Research Problem and Objectives

Despite the importance of leadership in upholding integrity, empirical research on how university leaders handle academic dishonesty remains limited. There is little insight into:

1. How leaders narrate their experiences when merit conflicts with influence.
2. What ethical dilemmas and identity struggles do these narratives reveal?
3. How institutional arrangements enable or constrain leaders' decisions.

This study addresses these gaps by collecting and analyzing narratives of university leaders who have handled cases of academic dishonesty under conditions of external pressure.

Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do university leaders describe their experiences of handling academic dishonesty cases?

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2. What ethical dilemmas emerge when merit clashes with informal influence?
3. How do leaders justify, reconcile, or repair their choices in these dilemmas?

Contribution of the Study

This research contributes in three ways:

- **Empirical Contribution**: It shifts the focus from student misconduct to leadership dilemmas, providing rare qualitative evidence of how decisions are made under pressure.
- **Theoretical Contribution**: It integrates ethical decision-making models with institutional theory, showing how moral stages are shaped by structural and cultural constraints, and uses narrative analysis to highlight identity work.
- **Practical Contribution**: It offers insights for designing integrity systems that are realistic for leaders to implement, including protections against undue influence, clearer sanction matrices, and support for transparent decision-making.

Literature Review

The literature on academic dishonesty and integrity in higher education is vast yet uneven. Most work has focused on student motivations and faculty responses, while relatively little has examined the leadership dilemmas at the institutional level. To situate this study, the review is organized into four strands: (1) research on academic dishonesty and institutional responses, (2) ethical decision-making in organizations, (3) institutional theory and the role of informal influence, and (4) narrative ethics and leadership identity. Together, these strands provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing how university leaders navigate cases where merit clashes with external pressure.

Academic Dishonesty and Institutional Responses

Scope of the Problem

Academic dishonesty has been documented across diverse higher education systems, with surveys suggesting that between 40% and 70% of students admit to some form of misconduct during their studies (McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001; McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012). Misconduct encompasses a spectrum of behaviors: plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsification of data, contract cheating, impersonation in examinations, and most recently, the misuse of generative artificial intelligence (Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway, 2023). These behaviors are not trivial. They

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erode institutional credibility, distort meritocracy, and undermine graduates' employability (Macfarlane, Zhang, & Pun, 2014).

Changing Forms of Misconduct

Technology has transformed the landscape of cheating. The proliferation of "essay mills" and online contract cheating services has created a commercialized market for academic dishonesty (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018). Surveys show that students increasingly view such outsourcing as a service rather than a violation, blurring moral boundaries (Bretag et al., 2019). More recently, AI tools such as ChatGPT have raised new concerns about originality, authorship, and detection (Cotton et al., 2023; Rafiq et al., 2024).

Institutional Responses

Historically, universities have relied on reactive enforcement faculty detection and punishment. However, research shows that inconsistent enforcement fosters cynicism and weakens deterrence (Bertram Gallant, 2008). Institutions that invest in system-wide integrity cultures, with clear policies, dedicated offices, training for staff, and transparent sanctions, achieve more effective outcomes (Bretag, 2016). Bretag and colleagues (2019), in a large multi-university study, found that transparent communication of policies and consistent assessment design are the strongest predictors of reduced misconduct. Despite these advances, leadership perspectives remain underexplored. Decisions about whether to apply, bend, or ignore policies often rest with university leaders. Their accounts are rarely studied, even though they shape the lived culture of integrity on campus.

Ethical Decision-Making in Organizations

Core Models

The ethics literature offers frameworks for understanding how individuals confront dilemmas. Rest's (1986) four-component model emphasizes moral awareness, judgment, intention, and action. A breakdown at any stage can result in unethical outcomes. Jones (1991) extends this with the issue-contingent model, highlighting "moral intensity" as a determinant of ethical choice. Treviño's (1986) interactionist model blends personal factors (values, locus of control) with situational influences (role expectations, reward systems).

Application to Higher Education

Applied to academic dishonesty, these models suggest that leaders may recognize

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

wrongdoing and even judge it as sanctionable but still fail to act decisively. The barriers lie in the intention–action gap: fear of retaliation, reputational damage, or career consequences. Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006) argue that organizational climates strongly influence whether ethical awareness translates into behavior. For university leaders, the "climate" includes governance arrangements, political interference, and cultural expectations.

Relevance for this study

By drawing on these models, this study investigates not only *what leaders decide* but also *why certain decisions are abandoned, delayed, or compromised.* It illuminates the processes through which ethical intentions are reshaped by institutional realities.

Institutional Theory and Informal Influence

Institutions as Constraints

Scott (2014) conceptualizes institutions as resting on three pillars: regulative (rules and sanctions), normative (values and obligations), and cultural-cognitive (taken-for-granted beliefs). Academic integrity policies are part of the regulative pillar, but their enforcement is mediated by cultural and normative expectations.

Informal Networks and Corruption

In many developing or transitional contexts, education systems are affected by clientelism, nepotism, and corruption (Hallak & Poisson, 2007). Heyneman (2004) argues that corruption in education can be more damaging than in other sectors because it distorts future opportunities and erodes trust in meritocratic pathways. Studies of higher education governance note that leaders often face patronage networks that undermine formal procedures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Altbach, 2005).

Implications for Academic Dishonesty

In practice, this means that a misconduct case is rarely judged on evidence alone. Leaders may face direct interventions (phone calls from politicians, requests from donors) or indirect expectations (protecting institutional reputation, maintaining social relationships). Policies thus become symbolic, applied to ordinary students but negotiable for the well-connected. The result is what Hallak and Poisson (2007) call a "hidden curriculum of corruption," where students learn that influence trumps merit.

This study applies institutional theory to explore how these informal constraints reshape

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
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leaders' decision spaces, highlighting the tension between official rules and unofficial expectations.

Narrative Ethics and Leadership Identity

Narratives as Moral Reasoning

Narratives are more than recollections; they are vehicles of moral reasoning. Riessman (2008) argues that stories structure events into plots, assign roles of hero or villain, and justify outcomes. Leaders telling stories about misconduct are not just describing events they are explaining and legitimating their choices.

Leadership and Identity Work

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that narrative inquiry captures the interplay of personal and professional identities. Educational leaders often frame themselves as guardians of standards, mediators of interests, or survivors of constraint, depending on how they wish to be seen (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). This identity work is crucial: it shows how leaders reconcile moral compromise with their sense of professional ethics.

Relevance for this Study

By analyzing leaders' narratives, this study uncovers how identity and ethics intertwine. Leaders may justify bending rules as necessary pragmatism or portray resistance as courageous defiance. These stories shed light on the values that survive, the compromises that are rationalized, and the self-images that leaders protect.

Synthesis

The reviewed literature points to several gaps. Although student misconduct has been widely studied, the voices of leaders are underrepresented. Ethical decision-making models explain individual reasoning but rarely account for the institutional pressures unique to higher education leadership. Institutional theory highlights these pressures but does not capture the personal identity work through which leaders make sense of compromise. Narrative inquiry bridges these gaps, allowing us to study leaders' experiences as both ethical struggles and identity projects.

This synthesis provides the conceptual braid for the present research:

1. Ethical decision-making models explain the stages of leaders' reasoning.
2. Institutional theory explains the constraints that reshape those stages.
3. Narrative analysis reveals how leaders justify and position themselves within these constraints.

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Print ISSN 3007-3189

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Together, these strands frame the research questions and guide the interpretation of leaders' narratives about academic dishonesty.

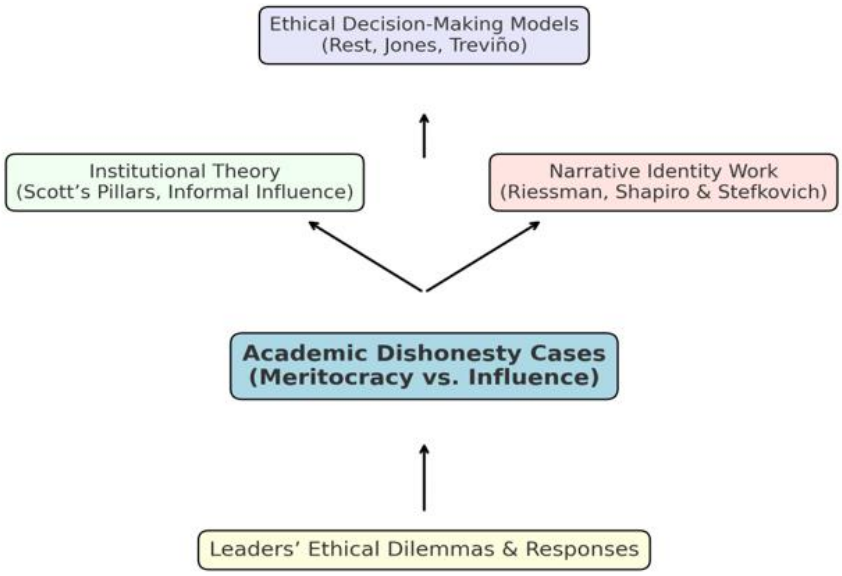


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design. Narrative inquiry was appropriate for exploring ethical dilemmas because it emphasizes lived experience and the ways individuals construct meaning through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Academic dishonesty cases are rarely neutral; they involve contested values, reputational stakes, and identity negotiations. Narratives enabled leaders to present not only what happened but also *how* and *why* they acted, revealing the interpretive frames that guided their decisions. By focusing on leaders' narratives, the study went beyond policy texts and institutional reports. It uncovered the ways leaders reconciled formal expectations with informal pressures and how they positioned themselves in morally complex contexts.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in higher education institutions that handled large numbers of students and operated under significant political, financial, and reputational pressures. These included both public universities, which often faced government oversight and political interference, and private universities, where donor and alumni influence was

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

more prominent. Including diverse institutions allowed for variation in leadership experiences while maintaining comparability in the phenomenon of interest navigating cases of academic dishonesty.

Participants and Sampling

The unit of analysis was senior university leaders who had direct responsibility for, or substantial involvement in, cases of academic dishonesty. Participants included:

1. Vice-Chancellors/Rectors
2. Pro-Vice-Chancellors or Academic Deans
3. Heads of Departments
4. Examination Controllers
5. Chairs or members of Academic Integrity or Disciplinary Committees

A purposive maximum variation sampling strategy was used to capture diversity in institutional type (public/private), leadership role (executive/academic), and governance model (centralized/decentralized). Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment, as initial participants recommended colleagues with relevant experiences (Patton, 2015).

This sample size was consistent with narrative inquiry, which emphasizes depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Inclusion Criteria were:

- Direct involvement in adjudicating at least one case of academic dishonesty in the past 3–5 years.
- Willingness to narrate experiences with assurance of confidentiality.

Recruitment and Access

Potential participants were contacted through formal email invitations that explained the purpose, scope, and ethical safeguards of the study. Each participant received an informed consent form outlining:

- The voluntary nature of participation.
- The right to withdraw at any time without consequence.
- Measures taken to protect anonymity (pseudonyms, generalizing institutional details).
- Plans for data storage and dissemination.

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Data Collection

Narrative Interviews

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured narrative interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Each interview began with a broad narrative prompt such as:

- *"Tell me about a case of academic dishonesty you were involved in that you found particularly difficult to resolve."*

Follow-up prompts probed decision points, pressures faced, policies referenced, and outcomes. Questions remained open-ended to encourage detailed storytelling (Riessman, 2008). Interviews were conducted face-to-face where possible or via secure video conferencing, and audio-recorded with permission.

Artifacts

Where feasible and ethically appropriate, participants provided supporting documents such as anonymized policy guidelines, committee decisions, or sanction matrices. These served as contextual supplements rather than primary data.

Field Notes

The researcher maintained reflective notes during and after interviews to capture impressions, non-verbal cues, and reflexive observations.

Data Analysis

The study used a **thematic narrative analysis** approach (Riessman, 2008), combining case-level narrative reconstruction with cross-case thematic synthesis.

1. **Case Construction:** Transcripts were developed into narrative case summaries capturing the sequence of events, actors involved, turning points, and outcomes.
2. **Initial Coding:** Using NVivo software, transcripts were coded for elements such as awareness triggers, forms of influence, decision points, policy references, emotional responses, and identity claims.
3. **Narrative Patterns:** Attention was given to how leaders structured their stories (plots, conflicts, resolutions) and positioned themselves relative to others (victim, mediator, guardian, survivor).
4. **Cross-Case Themes:** Codes were clustered into broader themes reflecting recurring dilemmas and strategies. These themes were mapped against the conceptual framework (ethical decision-making stages, institutional constraints,

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
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identity positioning).

5. **Interpretive Layer:** The findings were interpreted in light of existing theories, showing how leaders' narratives extended or challenged prevailing models of ethical decision-making.

This dual focus on *content* (what happened) and *form* (how it was narrated) allowed for both analytic rigor and interpretive depth.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, several strategies were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010):

- **Credibility:** Member reflections were sought by sharing synthesized themes with a subset of participants for resonance. Triangulation was achieved by incorporating artifacts and field notes.
- **Transferability:** Thick description of institutional contexts enabled readers to assess applicability to other settings.
- **Dependability:** An audit trail of coding decisions, analytic memos, and methodological reflections was maintained.
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling documented the researcher's assumptions, positionality, and decision-making throughout.
- **Ethical Reflexivity:** Special care was taken to avoid exposing institutions or individuals to reputational harm.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of academic dishonesty, strict ethical safeguards were followed. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institutional review board. Pseudonyms were used for participants, and institutions were generalized (e.g., "a large public university" rather than naming it). Data were stored securely with encrypted files and restricted access. Direct quotations were carefully reviewed to ensure they could not be traced back to identifiable cases. Researcher positionality was also acknowledged. As someone embedded in the higher education field, the researcher had insider knowledge but remained vigilant about bias. Reflexive practices helped ensure that interpretations were guided by participants' meanings rather than preconceived assumptions.

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Print ISSN 3007-3189

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Findings

The analysis generated five overarching themes reflecting the complex ethical dilemmas faced by university leaders when handling cases of academic dishonesty:

1. **Merit Confronted by Influence**
2. **Moral Distress and Risk Calculus**
3. **System Gaps and Selective Enforcement**
4. **Quiet Fixes and Negotiated Outcomes**
5. **Identity Work in Leadership**

Thematic Analysis Table

Codes (in-vivo & analytic)	Sub-Themes	Themes
"Phone call from minister," "pressure from donors," "student is connected"	Sources of external influence (political, financial, familial)	**Merit Confronted by Influence**
"Couldn't sleep at night," "it would ruin my career," "felt helpless"	Emotional strain, fairness vs. harm avoidance	**Moral Distress and Risk Calculus**
"Policy is vague," "committee overturned it," "two rules for two groups"	Policy ambiguities, selective enforcement, inconsistent appeals	**System Gaps and Selective Enforcement**
"We gave a warning quietly," "adjusted the grade," "kept it out of the media"	Informal settlements, soft sanctions, reputation management	**Quiet Fixes and Negotiated Outcomes**
"I had to protect the institution," "saw myself as a mediator," "survival strategy"	Identity narratives: guardian, mediator, survivor	**Identity Work in Leadership**

Theme 1: Merit Confronted by Influence

Across almost all narratives, leaders described how clear cases of academic dishonesty became ethically complex once external influence intruded into the decision-making process. Plagiarism detection software, exam invigilation reports, or eyewitness testimonies often left little doubt that misconduct had occurred. Yet, what should have been a straightforward application of university policy was transformed into a dilemma

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Print ISSN 3007-3189
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when calls, requests, or subtle pressures arrived from political figures, wealthy donors, or prominent alumni.

One vice-chancellor reflected:

"The case was straightforward plagiarism detected by Turnitin, confirmed by the committee. But then a call came from a minister's office saying the student was 'family.' Suddenly, the issue was no longer academic but political." (VC-03)

This quote illustrates the shift from academic to political framing. The leader had full confidence in the evidence and the procedural path forward, but the external intervention reframed the case as a political transaction. The moral awareness (Rest, 1986) was never in doubt misconduct was recognized but the scope of decision-making changed once influence entered the equation.

A dean shared a similar narrative:

"Our biggest donor insisted that his nephew should not be punished. He hinted that funding for the new lab might be reconsidered if the case went forward. That changed the dynamics entirely." (Dean-07)

Here, the dilemma was not only about the student but also about institutional survival. The dean weighed fairness against the potential loss of vital resources. The quote reveals how influence operated indirectly through economic leverage rather than explicit political interference. Such examples highlight how institutional priorities (maintaining donor relations, securing facilities) often clashed with leaders' ethical commitments.

Several leaders described strategies to buffer themselves from direct responsibility. A head of department explained:

"I insisted that the disciplinary committee take the final decision. It was a way to spread responsibility so the pressure wasn't directed solely at me." (HoD-05)

This quote shows how leaders used procedural mechanisms committees, documentation, and layers of bureaucracy to dilute individual accountability. While this strategy created protection for the leader, it also shifted the burden onto collective bodies, raising questions about whether committees acted independently or were themselves vulnerable to influence.

Taken together, these narratives underscore the fragility of meritocracy when influence

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intrudes. Leaders recognized the wrongdoing, but the locus of decision-making moved beyond policy. For some, pressure was political; for others, financial or reputational. Across cases, merit remained clear but its enforcement was contingent on power relations.

Theme 2: Moral Distress and Risk Calculus

A recurring pattern in leaders' accounts was the experience of moral distress the discomfort of knowing the right course of action but being unable to carry it out due to external constraints (Jameton, 1984). Leaders recognized academic dishonesty and felt committed to sanctioning it, but personal, institutional, and political risks altered the decisions they ultimately made. This theme captures the emotional burden of ethical leadership, showing how fairness was often weighed against survival.

One pro-vice chancellor described the internal conflict vividly:

"It was clear the student had cheated, but if I pushed the sanction, I risked losing my position. I stayed awake many nights debating what to do. In the end, I compromised because protecting the university and my career seemed necessary." (ProVC-04)

This narrative illustrates the risk calculus leaders engaged in. The misconduct was undeniable, but the leader perceived that strict enforcement could trigger political backlash severe enough to jeopardize both institutional stability and personal employment. The decision, therefore, was reframed from a matter of academic justice to a matter of damage control.

Another dean recounted the emotional toll of compromise:

"I felt I betrayed my values. As an academic, I should protect merit, but as a leader, I had to survive. The guilt stayed with me for months." (Dean-02)

This reflection underscores the identity conflict at the heart of moral distress. The dean recognized the ethical responsibility to uphold merit but framed the ultimate choice as a betrayal, leaving lingering guilt. The dissonance between professional ideals and organizational realities weighed heavily, pointing to the psychological costs of compromised leadership.

Leaders also emphasized the impossibility of finding a solution that satisfied all stakeholders. A head of department described this as a "no-win" scenario:

"If I punished him harshly, it could become a scandal in the newspapers. If I let him go, faculty would lose faith in me. It felt like a no-win situation." (HoD-01)

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This account demonstrates how leaders perceived themselves as trapped between public reputational risk and internal credibility. Any decision carried costs: enforcement risked scandal, while leniency risked faculty trust. The leader's narrative reflects the moral intensity of the situation (Jones, 1991), where consequences were high and unavoidable.

Several participants framed their decisions as reluctant compromises. One dean explained:

"I imposed a smaller penalty just to show something had been done. It was not what I believed in, but it reduced the pressure on me. I still regret that choice." (Dean-08)

This example shows how leaders negotiated a middle path that allowed them to act without fully enacting justice. Such decisions reveal the gap between moral intention and moral action (Rest, 1986). Leaders intended to uphold fairness but acted in ways shaped by fear, pressure, and pragmatism.

In sum, Theme 2 highlights how ethical dilemmas generated profound moral distress, forcing leaders to balance ideals against risks. Their stories show the heavy emotional labor of decision-making under constraint: leaders wrestled with guilt, helplessness, and regret, even when their compromises were framed as necessary for institutional survival. This theme adds nuance to understandings of leadership ethics by showing that decisions are not merely rational calculations but also deeply affective and identity-laden experiences.

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Volume 3, Issue 8 (2025)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189

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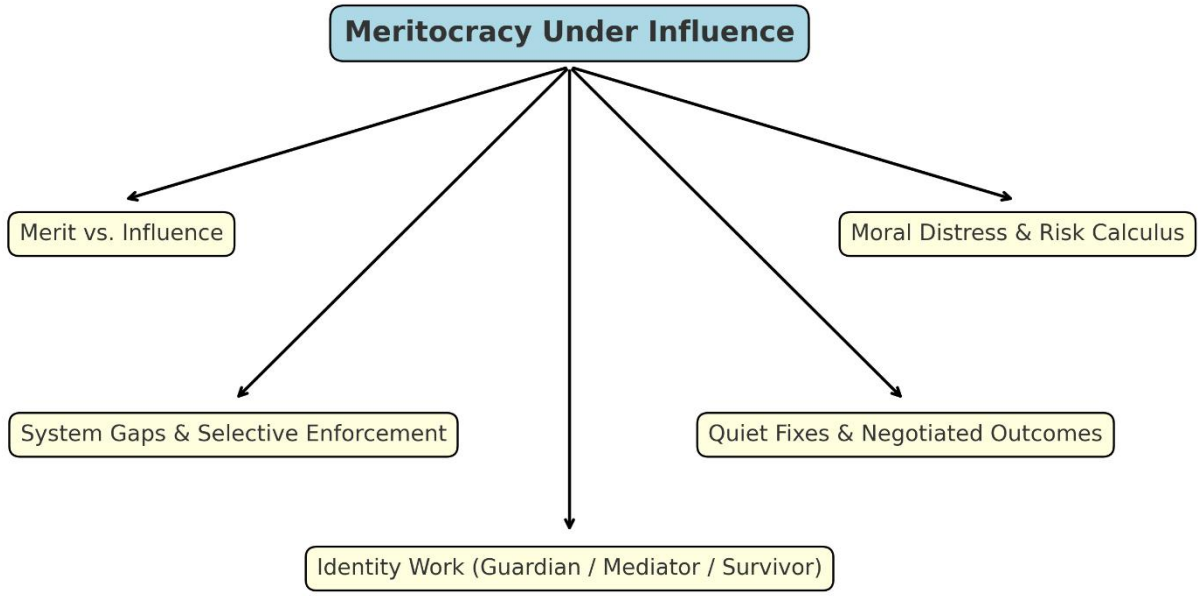


Figure 2: Thematic Map of Findings

Theme 3: System Gaps and Selective Enforcement

Leaders repeatedly emphasized that **institutional weaknesses** in policy and enforcement created fertile ground for ethical dilemmas. Even when leaders wished to uphold merit, vague policies, inconsistent committee procedures, and opaque appeals processes left space for influence and selective application of rules. Many participants suggested that ambiguity in regulations was not accidental but an embedded feature of the system that enabled discretion and, at times, manipulation.

An examination controller explained how policy vagueness complicated enforcement:

"The policy just says 'serious action will be taken' but doesn't define what that action is. That ambiguity leaves space for manipulation. People interpret it according to their interests." (ExamCtrl-03)

This quote highlights how a lack of specificity in sanction guidelines undermined consistency. Rather than acting as deterrents, vague policies gave room for **subjective interpretation** that often benefitted powerful students. The regulative pillar of institutions (Scott, 2014) was formally present but practically weak.

A dean expressed frustration at how disciplinary committees meant to serve as safeguards

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sometimes functioned as mechanisms for interference:

"The disciplinary committee was supposed to protect fairness, but when influential families intervened, the committee quietly reversed decisions. It made us look powerless." (Dean-06)

This narrative shows how collective decision-making bodies could become conduits for informal power rather than shields. The dean's sense of powerlessness demonstrates how leaders felt stripped of authority when committees yielded to pressure, weakening both policy enforcement and their personal credibility.

Some leaders described this as resulting in a "two-tiered system" of justice. A head of department observed:

"I tell my faculty we have one law, but in reality, we have two one for the powerful and one for everyone else." (HoD-07)

This candid admission illustrates how selective enforcement was normalized. Ordinary students were punished, while those with connections were often spared. The quote reflects not just frustration but resignation to a system where meritocracy was systematically undermined.

Others described the appeals process as another site of selective enforcement. One pro-VC explained:

"We recommended expulsion, but the appeal board reduced it to a warning. They never gave reasons. Everyone knew it was because the student's father was influential." (ProVC-02)

Here, the appeal system became a formal pathway for reversing sanctions without transparency, further deepening cynicism among faculty and staff.

Taken together, these accounts reveal how system gaps and selective enforcement compounded the ethical burden on leaders. Even when they tried to enforce fairness, weak policy language, pliable committees, and politicized appeals undercut their decisions. The narratives illustrate the interplay between Scott's (2014) regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars: the rules existed, but enforcement was subordinated to cultural norms of influence. Leaders' stories demonstrate how institutional fragility amplifies moral dilemmas by denying them the structural support to act consistently.

Theme 4: Quiet Fixes and Negotiated Outcomes

Faced with influence and systemic weaknesses, many leaders admitted adopting quiet fixes or negotiated compromises to resolve academic dishonesty cases. These strategies

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were described as pragmatic choices to reduce conflict, protect institutional reputation, or shield themselves from political retaliation. While leaders acknowledged that such outcomes diluted fairness, they framed them as necessary trade-offs in environments where formal sanctions were difficult to enforce.

A vice-chancellor described one such compromise:

"We decided to pass the student but with a note in the file. It was a compromise merit was not upheld fully, but at least there was some accountability. The record was there if the behavior repeated." (VC-01)

This account illustrates a hidden sanction, one that avoided confrontation while retaining a paper trail. The leader justified this as a middle path, maintaining some accountability without triggering external backlash. Such decisions reveal the practical adjustments leaders made between ethical ideals and organizational realities.

Reputation management also played a central role. A dean openly admitted:

"I handled it discreetly. No public announcement, no record in the press. The priority was to protect the university's image. Sometimes justice has to be silent if the institution is to survive." (Dean-03)

This quote highlights how institutional image often outweighed transparency. Leaders felt that a scandal could damage credibility more than lenient handling of dishonesty. In this sense, the institutional survival logic sometimes superseded meritocratic justice. The dean's phrase "justice has to be silent" epitomizes the trade-off between accountability and reputation.

In several cases, negotiated settlements involved direct discussions with parents, alumni, or intermediaries. A head of department recounted:

"We agreed the student would repeat the course rather than face expulsion. Both sides felt they had won something the family avoided embarrassment, and the faculty saw some form of penalty." (HoD-02)

Here, compromise was framed as a win–win arrangement, even though it represented a retreat from formal sanctions. The leader portrayed the outcome as balancing fairness with diplomacy. This demonstrates how leaders employed negotiation as a survival skill, emphasizing relational management over strict enforcement.

Another examination controller reflected on the cumulative impact of such compromises:

"Over time, these quiet deals create a culture where students believe rules are flexible. They think

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connections matter more than merit. That is the dangerous legacy of compromise." (ExamCtrl-02)

Unlike other leaders, this participant voiced concern about the long-term erosion of trust. By acknowledging the "legacy of compromise," the narrative recognizes that quiet fixes may preserve short-term peace but undermine the long-term credibility of the institution.

Overall, this theme shows how leaders exercised agency under constraint. They were not passive victims of influence but active negotiators of outcomes, crafting solutions that allowed institutions to function with minimal disruption. Yet, these quiet fixes also normalized a culture where dishonesty could be bargained away, highlighting the tension between pragmatism and principle in academic leadership.

Theme 5: Identity Work in Leadership

Beyond describing decisions and pressures, leaders' narratives revealed how they constructed their professional identities when recounting cases of academic dishonesty. Stories were not neutral reports; they were identity performances, where leaders positioned themselves as guardians of merit, pragmatic mediators, or survivors constrained by systemic forces. These self-presentations allowed them to reconcile compromises and preserve legitimacy in contexts that often undermined their authority.

Several leaders framed themselves as guardians of standards, portraying resistance as an ethical duty. One vice-chancellor reflected:

"I knew I might lose my job, but I refused to compromise. For me, protecting standards is non-negotiable. If I don't defend merit, then who will?" (VC-04)

This narrative highlights the ethic of conviction (Weber, 1946/1994), where the leader valued principle over consequence. By framing their stance as courageous resistance, such leaders reinforced an identity as moral exemplars, even when resistance carried risks.

Other leaders narrated themselves as mediators of competing interests, emphasizing pragmatism over confrontation. A dean explained:

"I see myself as a bridge between ideals and realities. Sometimes a compromise is the only way to protect the institution as a whole. My role is to find a balance, even if it is imperfect." (Dean-05)

Here, the leader justified compromise as institutional stewardship. The self-image is less about purity of principle and more about balancing competing goods protecting institutional reputation, managing external stakeholders, and preserving faculty morale. The narrative reflects an ethic of responsibility (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016), where

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decisions are justified by their consequences rather than their conformity to rules.

A third identity was that of the survivor under constraint. Leaders in this category emphasized the overwhelming power of systemic forces and portrayed themselves as doing the best they could in impossible circumstances. A head of department confessed:

"I don't think anyone in my position could have acted differently. The system is stronger than individuals. I learned to survive rather than fight battles I couldn't win." (HoD-06)

This positioning reflects resignation rather than resistance. By emphasizing the strength of "the system," leaders framed themselves as caught in webs of influence beyond personal control. Such identity work allowed them to deflect responsibility for compromises, presenting survival as an achievement in itself.

Finally, some leaders combined these identities fluidly, shifting between guardian, mediator, and survivor depending on the case. An examination controller captured this ambivalence:

"In one case, I stood firm and refused to bend. In another, I allowed a compromise to protect the university's image. I don't see it as hypocrisy it is adaptation. Leadership is living in the grey zone." (ExamCtrl-04)

This account underscores the contextual fluidity of leadership identities. Leaders moved between roles, not out of inconsistency but as a strategy for navigating shifting demands. Narrative inquiry shows how this flexibility is part of the moral labor of leadership sustaining legitimacy while moving between principle, pragmatism, and survival.

Taken together, these identity narratives reveal that leaders' accounts were not only about what happened but also about who they wanted to be seen as in retelling those events. By presenting themselves as guardians, mediators, or survivors, leaders preserved their moral legitimacy even when outcomes were compromised. This demonstrates how narrative identity work functions as a coping mechanism, enabling leaders to reconcile the gap between their professional values and institutional realities.

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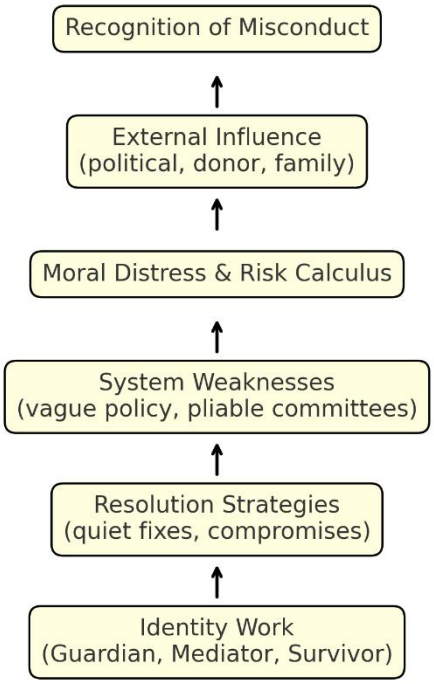


Figure 3: Process Model of Leadership Response to Academic Dishonesty

Discussion

The narratives of university leaders reveal that the challenge of upholding academic integrity is not a matter of detecting dishonesty but of navigating complex environments where merit collides with influence. Although participants consistently recognized misconduct, the decisions they described were shaped by political, financial, and reputational pressures, as well as by institutional weaknesses and their own identity negotiations. The findings extend current understandings of academic dishonesty by moving the focus from students' behaviors to the ethical struggles of leaders, showing how integrity is both an individual commitment and a systemic vulnerability.

Ethical Decision-Making under Constraint

The findings strongly resonate with models of ethical decision-making. Rest's (1986) four-component framework moral awareness, judgment, intention, and action was evident in nearly every narrative. Leaders easily achieved moral awareness: plagiarism, exam cheating, or impersonation was recognized as dishonest without ambiguity. Yet, the

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breakdown occurred between intention and action, where situational pressures constrained ethical choices. For instance, leaders reported weighing risks to their careers, institutional funding, or political stability before deciding whether to enforce sanctions. This gap illustrates how external contingencies disrupt what should be a straightforward path from judgment to action.

Jones's (1991) concept of moral intensity helps explain why leaders perceived these cases as uniquely stressful. The consequences were not limited to the dishonest student but extended to the institution's reputation, faculty trust, and leaders' own professional security. Situations with high proximity such as when the student was a donor's relative were judged to be particularly intense. Similarly, Treviño's (1986) interactionist model emphasizes how organizational climates shape ethical behavior. Leaders' narratives show that climates characterized by political interference or weak governance diluted the likelihood that moral judgments translated into moral actions.

By foregrounding leaders' moral distress, the study confirms earlier research that ethical reasoning is not purely cognitive but also affective and identity-laden (Craft, 2013; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Leaders did not only debate policies; they described guilt, regret, and helplessness emotions that highlight the personal toll of decision-making under constraint.

Institutional Weaknesses and Informal Influence

The findings also advance institutional theory. Scott's (2014) three pillars regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive offer a framework for understanding how integrity policies falter. The regulative pillar was visible in codes of conduct and disciplinary committees. Yet these structures often proved ineffective because they were mediated by normative expectations (e.g., loyalty to donors, deference to political elites) and cultural beliefs (e.g., rules are flexible for the powerful).

Participants' descriptions of vague policies and selective enforcement confirm prior critiques that many universities adopt integrity frameworks symbolically rather than substantively (Hallak & Poisson, 2007; Heyneman, 2004). Appeals processes in particular emerged as sites where formal rules were overridden by informal influence. The notion of a "two-tiered system" one for ordinary students and another for the influential illustrates what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as decoupling, where organizations maintain symbolic conformity to integrity norms while daily practices diverge.

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These findings extend research on corruption in education by showing how academic dishonesty cases become arenas for patronage politics. Instead of being neutral academic judgments, they are reframed as negotiations of institutional resources, reputations, and political relationships. In doing so, the study highlights how systemic weaknesses amplify leaders' vulnerability, leaving them to rely on compromise strategies such as quiet fixes and negotiated settlements.

Quiet Fixes as Pragmatic Survival

One of the most striking findings is the prevalence of quiet fixes sanctions applied discreetly, negotiations with families, or hidden notes in files. These strategies reveal leaders' agency in constrained contexts: they were not passive victims but active negotiators who sought to maintain institutional stability. Yet such compromises raise difficult questions. While they protected leaders and sometimes the university's short-term reputation, they also normalized a culture of negotiable integrity.

This echoes Bretag's (2016) argument that integrity requires consistent enforcement; otherwise, students learn that rules are malleable. Leaders' reflections that "students believe connections matter more than merit" show how compromises risk embedding a hidden curriculum of inequality (Hallak & Poisson, 2007). Pragmatism, while understandable, thus carries long-term consequences for academic culture.

Identity Work and Leadership Ethics

Narrative analysis reveals that leaders engaged in identity work to reconcile the tension between ideals and compromises. By positioning themselves as guardians, mediators, or survivors, leaders justified actions that might otherwise appear inconsistent. Riessman (2008) reminds us that stories are not transparent reflections of events but tools for self-presentation. Leaders' narratives, therefore, functioned as moral performances, defending their legitimacy in the face of ethical ambiguity.

The guardian identity reflects an ethic of conviction (Weber, 1946/1994), emphasizing principle over consequence. The mediator identity illustrates an ethic of responsibility (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016), balancing fairness with institutional survival. The survivor identity highlights structural determinism, portraying leaders as constrained actors who nonetheless sustained their professional roles. Together, these identities illustrate how ethical leadership is both principled and adaptive, shaped by the tension between individual values and systemic constraints.

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By documenting this identity work, the study extends prior research on leadership ethics in education (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). It shows that leaders are not only decision-makers but also narrative actors, using stories to preserve coherence between their professional identities and the compromised realities of institutional life.

Contributions to the Literature

This study contributes to three areas of scholarship.

1. Academic integrity research: By centering on leaders rather than students, it addresses a critical gap. While prior research has examined faculty detection strategies (Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018; Bretag et al., 2019), little has been known about the dilemmas leaders face when integrity collides with influence.
2. Ethical decision-making theory: The findings highlight the intention–action gap in Rest's model, showing how external influence interrupts the transition from judgment to enforcement. They also demonstrate the salience of Jones's (1991) moral intensity construct in higher education contexts.
3. Institutional theory and narrative ethics: By linking Scott's (2014) institutional pillars with leaders' identity narratives, the study reveals how systemic weaknesses and cultural norms interact with personal identity work. Leaders' stories show that integrity is both a structural issue and a personal moral performance.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest several implications for policy and practice. First, universities must strengthen the regulative pillar of integrity by adopting clear sanction matrices, transparent appeal procedures, and independent integrity offices insulated from political interference. Second, training for leaders should include scripts for refusing improper requests and strategies for managing external influence. Third, institutions must recognize the emotional labor of ethical leadership, providing peer support and safe spaces for reflection. Finally, public communication of integrity cases, handled sensitively, may help counter the perception that rules are selectively enforced.

Conclusion

This study explored the ethical dilemmas faced by university leaders in handling cases of academic dishonesty, focusing on how they narrated experiences where merit clashed with influence. By adopting a narrative inquiry approach, the research illuminated not only what leaders did but also how they explained, justified, and reconciled their decisions. The

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findings demonstrate that academic integrity is rarely a question of recognizing misconduct leaders uniformly identified dishonesty but rather of how, and to what extent, misconduct is sanctioned within environments saturated with political, financial, and cultural pressures.

Five themes emerged from the analysis. Leaders described merit confronted by influence, where evidence of dishonesty collided with interventions from politicians, donors, or powerful families. They spoke of moral distress and risk calculus, balancing fairness against risks to careers, institutional reputation, and survival. The findings also highlighted system gaps and selective enforcement, showing how vague policies and pliable committees enabled inconsistent outcomes. In response, leaders resorted to quiet fixes and negotiated outcomes, crafting pragmatic but compromised solutions. Finally, leaders engaged in identity work, framing themselves as guardians of standards, mediators of competing interests, or survivors constrained by systemic forces. Taken together, these findings extend the literature in three ways. First, they shift the lens of academic integrity from student behavior the dominant focus of prior research to the ethical struggles of leaders, who act at the intersection of personal values and institutional constraints. Second, they highlight the intention–action gap in ethical decision-making models (Rest, 1986), showing how moral judgments are reshaped by situational pressures. Third, they integrate institutional theory and narrative ethics, revealing how systemic weaknesses interact with leaders' identity work to produce compromises that are rationalized as either necessary or inevitable. The study also carries important practical implications. For universities to uphold integrity credibly, they must strengthen their structural safeguards: clearer sanction matrices, transparent appeal processes, and integrity offices insulated from external interference. Leaders require training not only in policy but also in managing influence and reputational risks. Institutions must also acknowledge the emotional labor of ethical leadership, offering spaces for reflection and peer support. Without such reforms, academic dishonesty will continue to be adjudicated through negotiations of power rather than principles of fairness. Future research should build on these findings in several directions. Comparative studies across national systems would help identify how different governance models shape leaders' dilemmas. Longitudinal research could examine whether repeated compromises alter leaders' ethical reasoning or institutional cultures over time. Finally, incorporating the perspectives of

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Print ISSN 3007-3189
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students, faculty, and policymakers could provide a fuller picture of how academic dishonesty is understood, contested, and managed within complex educational ecosystems.

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