

## **The Academic Integrity Movement: Can Student Dishonesty Compare with Faculty and Administration Hypocrisy?**

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### **Student Vice and Self-Defense**

Student cheating and plagiarizing is treated as a high-crime by most faculty and administrators. Exercising them on the topic brings on apoplectic fits. We might stop to wonder why. With one billion of our six billion fellow humans apparently dying in pain of unnecessary deprivation at any moment, cheating on an exam seems a small thing. Living in a democratic government that pays mostly lip service to democracy should raise an unending howl from educators, given their enlightened values. But it barely brings out a strongly worded bumper sticker.

On the campus alone, date-rape far exceeds cheating as an ethical horror; it stands alone as a perennial capital crime. Then comes racism, homophobia, and sexism, perhaps, next reckless drug use (from cocaine to alcohol and tobacco), then suicide, serious theft and vandalism in the dorms, where some violence is reported. Academic dishonesty—student cheating and plagiarism—may come even farther down the college list of shame. So why is campus ethics--academic integrity—so defined by this issue?

A likely answer: Collegiate institutions are zealously devoted to the mission of education; academic dishonesty directly attacks, threatens and undermines that mission. It misrepresents the ill-gotten gains of theft as the accomplishments of meritorious learning. It lines the searching path toward truth with sleazy lies.

But the path toward truth is normally paved with critical thinking, including self-critical thinking. And the long-reputed harms charged against student cheating and plagiarism do not stand even casual scrutiny. Cheating need not decrease overall learning at college. Largely this is because learning and test-achievement do not correlate well; tests are not very good measures of the learning process. Thus to cheat on tests also is not clearly to cheat oneself as a learner. Only rarely does cheating undermine the trust required by teaching-learning relationships—a trust that, in most cases, was eroded long before by the authoritarian qualities of pre-college education. Such trust is required less for learning than for grading anyway, as government “intelligence agents,” and especially double-agents, have shown in spades.

Cheating is not especially unfair to other students, but for the questionably comparative grading curves that some faculty employ and the false correlations employers draw between grades and work capabilities. The “stealing others’ ideas” that occurs in plagiarizing typical classroom assignments visits no harms on their supposed victims who are usually long dead, with their descendents. Only a single professor or teaching assistant reads the course paper involved anyway, which is not made public. The argument that small-scale cheating in school leads to big-scale cheating in the corporation, the law firm, or in political office so appeals to reason. But since as early as the 1920s, empirical research simply has not supported this view of moral habits, vices, and character (Hartschorne and May, Kohlberg, Myers ).

What “cheating shows,” that must be opposed, is a student’s pride in “getting over” on professors and “the system,” even where both are seen as fair. This affection for injustice and casual disregard for honest dealings must be trained out of students along with the jaded immaturity involved. (But then, how widespread are these attitudes?) Accompanying

rationalizations must also be divided and conquered—rationalizations that mask to the cheater how pathetic and embarrassing it is to have to steal others' answers because one couldn't think up one's own. That's kindergarten. But childishness typically can not compete with real wrong, or routine injustice.

There are important situations where cheating or plagiarism is not only justified, but de facto obligatory. If I had to cite a single regret of my own student history, it would be failing to cheat when I was being victimized by unfair testing and grading, not to mention abusive teaching overall. (After decades as a professor I can now testify to how pervasively arbitrary and unstandardized grading is across different disciplines, instructors, and courses. Criticizing grading as "subjective" is against grading seem trivial.) In submitting to such unfair treatment years ago, I showed undue conventionalism and acquiescence in petty tyranny, both of which are toxic to ethical integrity. True, I often protested such unfair treatment, but this invariably worked to my detriment and that of my peers. (I ended up in the principal's office with my parents where even their defense of my point was to no avail.) Worse, my protest was viewed as courageous, as properly standing up for principle. The courage I really needed was that of dirtying one's hands a bit, adjusting my general principles to the specific context of unjust treatment. I needed the distinctive moral courage to besmirch my personal virtue in hopes of subverting injustice and its harms.

One comes to learn that those willing to sully their purity to fight wrongs show a level of moral commitment that rises well above nobility. After all, nobility normally requires conspiring, if not purposely, in the oppressive practices of others. In the present case, it means failing to expose poor teaching and its misrepresentation as students' failure to learn. Adult morality demands "principled" flexibility, not personal consistency masquerading as character. At the college level especially, ethics education can cleave toward the adult, though it presently does not, transcending childhood devices like codes of conduct, or "do-and-don't" rules.

**Faculty** actually boast about their bad teaching behavior, and they are admired for it by their colleagues. They proudly depict themselves as "hard-nosed graders" who give "killer exams," which many fail and almost all do poorly on. This is a self-indicting outrage—an immoral *routine* in academe. A competent teacher, by contrast, makes course material sing and partners with students in skill development. If students do not do top-notch work, they are not functioning primarily as students in the course or the teaching approach taken needs radical change.

With a little thought and effort, most faculty can make it well-nigh impossible for students to cheat or plagiarize. One way is by not giving the same exams repeatedly. Another is by not using multiple-choice or other mechanical examination formats. A third is by asking students to do several drafts of a paper, illustrating the developing process of their work on each task, and integrating progressive drafts incrementally. (One searches the Web in vain for papers satisfying these requirements.) Add an oral, face-to-face component to the drafting process and the learning involved simply can't be faked or simulated.

Such "progressive" measures can take more faculty effort and time than do standard tests. But isn't that what "hard-headed teachers and graders" expect of their students? Why not of themselves also? Measurement batteries that get at the full variety of student learning and effort have long been available. Why then do faculty cling to the long outmoded and discredited in their course practices? (Unfortunately, this rhetorical question has an all-too pragmatic answer: college faculty must decrease teaching and grading time relative to research and grant-making activities. This response is ethically self-indicting as well—for faculty and administrators.)

Isn't such negligent or disingenuous teaching more ethically problematic than student cheating? Isn't it more the rule than the exception? What of its compounding with institutional evaluation criteria that rate faculty publications and grant dollars over teaching competence? Doesn't another whole set of more serious problems emanate from the professionalization and corporatization of academe? This, after all, pressures faculty into compliance with these evaluation measures. And how rates the timid and cowardly submission of faculty to these measures?

*College administration* routinely touts its faculty's dedication to personalized teaching, especially in official materials sent to applicants and their parents. Simultaneously, administrators push reward structures that punish such dedication. Official publications reinterpret the array of college assets and foci so that they appear to match student interests. The aim here is to meet admissions quotas, not to model truth in advertising. And advertising is the name of the game, after all; "information technology" is the ad slogan of the moment. How does orienting to the student pool as market shares, or enticing applicants through false advertising, size up as an academic integrity issue? Is there a single college ethics initiative that addresses it?

One looks in vain through college brochures or catalogues for even the slightest hint that most professors receive zero teaching instruction before going to the head of the classroom. Nor do most colleges train professors during their teaching careers. This news would surprise prospective students, I'd bet, not to mention their check-toting parents. But paradoxically, it might improve student course evaluations: "for someone who never took a course in teaching, the professor isn't that bad."

It has become a common practice for faculty to comb calls for grant proposals, see what topics granting agencies want researched, and then skew their research direction accordingly. Often, faculty do not take this direction because they believe it is worthwhile or because they feel qualified in the area. Rather, they do it to bring in the funding with overhead their administrative "overlords" demand. What level of fraudulence and deception does such collusion reach? Never have I heard faculty even hush their tones when discussing research "opportunities" of this sort, nor have I heard administrators caution against such chicanery.

### **The academic integrity movement**

I cite these examples in "honor" of the growing academic integrity movement, which somehow sees the ethical splinters in students' eyes without seeing the beam in its own. Consider this succinct summary of the movement's aims taken from one of its leading Web sites.

"Academic Integrity is a fundamental value of teaching, learning, and scholarship. Yet, there is growing evidence that students cheat and plagiarize. Assess your climate of learning. Evaluate current academic programs and policies by purchasing the Academic Integrity Assessment Guide." While "teaching, learning, and scholarship" are all mentioned, only the learning or student-cheating focus is followed up. No mention is made of cheating, plagiarizing, and other forms of academic dishonesty by faculty-scholars. And when "learning climate" is noted, nothing untoward about college administration or institutional structure is so much as hinted at.

It is puzzling that the faculty involved in the academic integrity movement equate dishonesty with lack of integrity, or pose dishonesty as the negative pole on a continuum with positive integrity. The former involves a trait or vice—dishonesty and principled inconsistency; the latter concerns overall character and life orientation.

Ethicists who are incensed by student cheating show no similar concern for the rampant disrespect shown students, nor for the extreme anxiety caused them when inflexible deadlines are

mandated for class assignments or when faculty assign exams and papers that are all due at the same time. A complete lack of coordination is clear here among faculty in different courses and departments, with a lack of concern even to try. Students suffer prolonged and painful loneliness at college, especially at first, and periods of isolating alienation from peers. They anguish alone with crises of identity and the loss of spiritual orientation, personal meaning, and self-worth. Conflicts with parents and the breakup of love relationships often rob them of interest and motivation, sapping the power to concentrate on studies. The real harm, the real suffering involved here often gets recorded as poor classroom achievement. Were institutions actually fostering the kind of community and the sense of belonging they advertise, along with the social skills mentioned in descriptions of campus “leadership” programs, these evils could be mitigated. Yet instead of addressing such institutional failing openly and responsibly, the blame is shifted to the emotional problems of particular students. And these problems are treated confidentially through individual counseling outside the curriculum.

A last puzzler: at most universities, students are banished from their learning community for cheating and plagiarism. The unwitting ethical lesson taught here is that enlightened and reflective communities handle internal messes by sweeping them outside. They handle rule violations and significant faults in their members by changing the locks on the doors. If the student offense is small, expulsion is replaced by “hard labor,” usually in the form of assigned research on academic honesty. Here the ideals of inquiry are portrayed as a form of punishment, and student suspicions about the real nature of “school work” are affirmed.

Notwithstanding the above tally, some colleges and universities show that higher education can get serious about ethics education. All can do so, potentially, by putting their own houses in order as an example to their students. Coming full circle, we also must recognize that, in social context, even the worst ethical offenses just attributed to academe are small potatoes. Even the ethics codes aspired to in business and most other professions are themselves more ethically problematic than the misbehavior of faculty. Most college professors approach teaching as a mission, conscientiously dedicating their lives to the highest benefit of others’ children, with little external reward.

### **Beyond Academic Honesty: Toward Solutions**

Most university administrators acknowledge the need to engender social responsibility, at least among students. College mission statements feature this goal front and center. Whether or not dishonesty or irresponsibility is common on campus, students must develop their moral insight and reasoning skills simply to assume adult roles and the more complex responsibilities that go along with them. To its credit, higher education is trying to address this challenge through both ethics courses (theory) and service programs (practice). Still, the reductionist penchant in academe has led each program to focus on a narrow, pet area of the ethical network: character and virtue; ethical problem solving or reasoning; value awareness, self-responsibility, and discipline; ethical role-requirements within complex institutions; ethical codes of conduct; community service learning; ethical mentors, coaches, and role models; civic and citizenship education. And this has led to competition among (incomplete) camps.

A few programs offer more inclusive alternatives (see Colby et al. 2003), but they are not being adopted elsewhere due to the academic ethos of unique originality. Each school seems to feel it must reinvent the wheel. Looking at the various program foci as components of a more inclusive program, let us consider how some main themes can be enhanced.

### **Responsibility focus**

A great contribution to ethics is the feminist distinction between responsibility and response-ability. A standard responsibility is a felt requirement, a debt owed, usually a burdensome duty that restricts our individual(istic) freedom. It requires us to sacrifice self-interests for the interests of others, usually against the pull of our will. This not only makes ethics a hard sell motivationally, but it reflects the moralistic, child-like view of ethics as imposed taskmaster rather than as expressive tool. A non-standard sense of responsibility accords our role in relationships more due and allows us to see responsibility as the ability to respond to others—to respond well and self-gratifyingly. This transforms the restrictive drawbacks of responsible compliance into attractive opportunities to shine.

A “response-ability” viewpoint makes better sense of our responsibilities toward ourselves as well, including our growth or development and our personal integrity. The standard picture of self-responsibility, where we force ourselves to do things, cannot represent the self-discipline or self-determination involved as true freedom--except through sleight of hand abetted by self-delusion. And ethics must be free; it must organize voluntary cooperation, not cooperation-or-else. By contrast, self-response-ability focuses us on our own worth and the value of our talents or potentials. It enhances our self-appreciation and rests on our predictable response to what we really are and can become.

Compare this ethics of response and inspiration with “doing the right thing for its own sake.” The latter is often held up as the only proper moral motivation, or as morality’s noblest motivational ideal. But it’s an ideal that conflicts with human nature and the laws of psychology. Even when we can twist our nature somehow to generate such motives, they tend to bring out the worst in us—sheepishness, conformity, and masochism. They leave us defenseless in the face of raw power, aggressive competition, and everyday exploitation by the self-interested. Long experience with being taken advantage of reveals the futility of this orientation. It thus pushes us toward personal hypocrisy, toward the use of ethics as window dressing to hide pragmatism, and toward the relegation of ethics to the dustbin of idealism or utopian dreaming. In everyday life, these problems render our ethical behavior begrudging, not self-affirming or fulfilling. If these are the categories students will use to organize their ethics education, the task is futile and possibly counterproductive. Thus, moving to non-standard themes and approaches is a must.

### **Integrity focus**

A second valuable distinction in ethics comes from moral exemplar literature (see Oliner and Oliner 1988; Colby and Damon 1992; Puka 1993). Gandhi distinguished sharply between honesty and integrity, as did Aristotle in his *Ethics*. For Gandhi, integrity meant living one’s life as an open book. It meant conducting a long series of experiments in better living that others could analyze, learn from, and criticize. To our limited moral imaginations, this lifestyle seems difficult. So we brand it “ideal,” and “beyond the call of duty”--the stuff of super-human effort and humanity. We need not feel expected, therefore, to give it a whirl. But such integrity is not a difficult pursuit: our character isn’t at stake if we fail, nor the prospect of coming up short on responsibility. The ethical pressure is off. All we can expect of ourselves here is to try, and try something new, not exert ourselves overly on tasks we already dread. Experiments often fail and are expected to do so. Thus success is not demanded, as it is by standard ethical obligation. When we fail, we cannot really be blamed. After all, we are dedicating our whole lives to our betterment in dealing with others. What more can be expected of us? Failure is automatically followed by trying again, and trying better by design and routine. Where someone is hurt in the process, I simply try to compensate. I apologize, but have little to apologize for since my

experiments show unusual care to avoid such consequences. The next attempt routinely takes greater precautions. Acquiring greater virtues--becoming someone better--is the continual aim and likely consequence here, not preserving my ego or its precious moral character. Contrast this ongoing routine of full-life integrity with mere honesty—with the struggle of not telling lies or with being a “man of my word.”

### **Character focus**

In distinguishing honesty, ethical consistency, and integrity, Aristotle saw the last as character itself. Character is the full integration of our admirable traits and abilities into an admirably functioning virtue system. It includes the habituation of these abilities, their motivational supports, and their expression. It includes the good judgment that must retool the manner of their expression in unusual or especially difficult social contexts, and it includes the developing artfulness of social interaction. Aristotle’s two essays on ethics, which have defined the term itself in western culture, pose integrity as the spring of excellence in living. They put the art in living, in relating to others, and in being an exemplary type of person. The more we adopt Aristotle’s encompassing definition of ethics as living well and flourishing, the more and better ethics integrates with our daily lives.

To be ethical is to be practical also, not to be ethical versus pragmatic. It is to work well at one’s job and pursue a diligent career. It is to balance work artfully with family, exemplary parenting, and community involvement. In the liberal arts college especially, students are urged to nurture excellence in a major concentration of study and to nurture some lesser competence in a minor area. The rest is relegated to “literacy”—be it math literacy or literature--the ability to understand from outside what’s going on in some area and to converse with those focusing on it. For Aristotle, ethics is “majoring” in one’s life as a whole, not just one’s studies or career. It is majoring in oneself and one’s relationships to make them artful, to make them the best they can be. Ethics is making one’s contribution to society and to humanity.

Students are already convinced of the need for competence in their education and for excellence in developing the skills that will help them land a good job. They also understand that there’s a good deal more than this to successful living, which also involves doing something that is meaningful, finding love and belonging. Students understand that, even outside what society normally would term ethics. They know that some values are superficial and fleeting, while others are deep and lasting. Thus, Aristotelian ethics does not have to come out of left field and make the case for not doing what we wish to do or what works. Education itself is ethics, and so too are social life, home life, and citizenship. Scientific research is ethics, as is writing. The key is to achieve balance and proportion. This shows integrity. This *is* integrity.

From this vantage point, calling for special courses or programs in collegiate ethics seems odd. So do attempts to integrate ethics across the curriculum. It’s already there. It must merely be found, highlighted, and developed further. Ethics is know-how developed in pursuits that are worth doing. It is know-how in distinguishing better and worse values or goals, especially through practice and experience, reflection and discussion with others. (This is why know-how in lying, manipulating, thieving, and the like are not ethical; they are inferior uses of great skills, employed for inferior ends.)

Ethics is personal entrepreneurship and interpersonal management at their excellent extremes. It is good business in the business of life. By contrast, look at what currently passes for management in business and even in some business courses. Arbitrary authority hierarchies

dominate, dispensing child-like incentives to employees—from intimidation and threats to perquisites and bonuses. Burgeoning adults are reduced to children here.

The same can be said for standard parenting. We expect even our youngest children to negotiate their interactions reasonably and their conflicts fairly, not by threatening or hitting each other, but by “using their words” and “playing nice.” Yet parents wouldn’t dream of holding themselves to such standards even when dealing with their outmatched toddlers. Well prior to so-called spanking (assault and battery), parents resort to every small-minded form of deception, manipulation, intimidation, and authoritarianism in the book: “because it’s time to go”; “because you have to;” “I’ll count to ten, and then you’ll be sorry”; “because I’m the mommy, that’s why.” In an Aristotelian ethics curriculum, parent training would be prominent, along with childhood training (especially toward aging parents). So too would the arts of loving relationship generally. After all, what is more important or valuable?

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