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Whose Code of Conduct Matters Most? Examining the Link Between Academic Integrity and Student Development

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Abstract

Although most colleges strive to nurture a culture of integrity, incidents of dishonest behavior are on the rise. This article examines the role student development plays in students’ perceptions of academic dishonesty and in their willingness to adhere to a code of conduct that may be in sharp contrast to traditional integrity policies.

Convocation at the University of Dayton, a midsized private university in Ohio, is an inspiring, ritualized affair complete with speeches and faculty in full regalia. The event marks the beginning of a significant new phase in a young person’s life. Students are told they are beginning a journey that will last a lifetime, and they should embrace the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Like many schools, the ceremony concludes with a recitation and signing of the honor code, which does more than describe the university’s academic integrity policy. It symbolizes the learning community students are joining and the conviction that they will act with social responsibility. The honor code and other integrity policies represent a student’s gateway to the “community of trust” (Thornton & Jaeger, 2007, p. 15), which characterizes the university. Codes of conduct such as these are intended to be followed during students’ college years so that the notions of ethical behavior and civic responsibility will guide students’ values and choices in life after graduation. This article examines the rise of cheating and plagiarism on college campuses today, discusses the connections between student development theory and academic dishonesty, and concludes with what can be done in the classroom to nurture more effectively a campus climate of integrity.

The Incidence of Cheating Behavior

Although students typically begin their college journey confident in their pledge to uphold with integrity the honor of the academic community, does that sentiment last? According to studies on cheating in higher education, the pledge will be broken by many. Research over the last 20 years shows anywhere from 50% to 90% of students cheat (Baldasare & Washington White, 2012; Lester & Diekhoff, 2002; Lovett-Hooper, 2012).
In their 20-year study of student behavior and attitudes about academic dishonesty at a single university, which began in 1984, Vandehey, Diekhoff, and LaBeff (2007) found that by 1994, 61% of students admitted to cheating, and the behavior “had become so normative that it was no longer viewed by students as a deviant behavior that needed to be justified” (p. 468). Their study is notable because not only did it span 2 decades at the same state university, but also in the 2002–03 academic year, the school adopted a new honor code. Research the following year found that despite its existence, “awareness of the honor code [was] not associated with the decision whether or not to cheat” (Vandehey et al., 2007, p. 472). In addition, no significant difference was found between cheaters and noncheaters in the degree to which students felt the honor code influenced cheating.

Perhaps equally disturbing are connections between cheating in school and cheating after graduation. Research by Lovett-Hooper, Komarraju, Weston, and Dollinger (2007) at Southern Illinois University found that dishonest behavior in college was strongly correlated with dishonesty later in life. Of special concern is research that shows the frequency of dishonest behavior increases the longer students attend college (Baldasare & Washington White, 2012). What happens during those formative years after new student convocation to alter a student’s conviction to uphold codes of conduct, and why is dishonest behavior increasingly more acceptable the higher the year in college? Many have suggested the answer lies in the rise of cheating in politics and popular culture (Dionne, 1987; Erlanger, 2013; Karasz, 2012; Kulish, 2010; Lethem 2007; McKinley, 2011; Rieder, 2003; Sauer, 2011; Vega, 2011). Undoubtedly students see their idols, leaders, and other public figures cheating and getting away with it. They also see people becoming famous in social media and on television precisely because of dishonest behavior. Likewise, students see other students cheating and getting away with it, or having minimal consequences. Thus, although students may be aware of academic codes of conduct, in their personal lives, a very different code of conduct coexists in sharp contrast.

**Developing Critical Thinkers and Self-Authors**

Student development theory can offer perspectives on student behavior and underscore the changes educators can make to help students develop a deeper sense of honesty and integrity. Baxter Magolda (2001) described student development as a journey toward self-authorship, “the capacity to internally define their [students’] own beliefs, identity, and relationships” (p. xvi). She noted that the typical first-year, late-adolescent student enters college focused on discovering and accepting what his or her professors believe as truth. During this time, students lack an “internal sense of self,” and as such, their “beliefs, identity, and relationships were defined by external others” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xix). Thus, when young students first enter college, they may initially view honor codes and academic integrity policies with unconditional, unquestionable acceptance. Similarly, Kegan (1994) argued that different orders of the mind, or organizing principles, impact how students make meaning as they develop. He noted that most early adolescents are in a third order of consciousness, focusing primarily on their relationships with others and with adopting their community’s views as their own. Students in the third order attempt to co-construct meaning with others and do not see themselves or their beliefs as outside of or apart from those of the group. Thus, young students beginning their first year of college may completely identify with and be tied to the beliefs of the academic community.
As students develop, they transition to more internally defined ways of knowing, questioning the beliefs they find, viewing knowledge as socially constructed, and ultimately coming to see knowledge as relative and contextual (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Kegan (1994) argued that the demands we place on students—those that put them “in over their heads”—require this level of consciousness, something he called a “hidden curriculum” that asks students to take control of their own learning and set their “own goals and standards” (Kegan, 1994, p. 303). Ironically, we demand this critical thinking—this level of questioning established beliefs and assumptions—at a time when we also ask students to adhere unquestionably to a code of conduct most of them have not been a part of co-creating. In other words, questioning a college’s academic code of conduct could be viewed as a natural, developmental period in a student’s life at a time in which challenging established, externally-generated values and beliefs is strongly encouraged.

Social Development and Peer Influence

Undoubtedly, students’ peers play an integral role in shaping how they think about the world (Palmer, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). In their social groups, students are exposed to new ideas and perspectives, creating dissonance (Taylor, 2008), a disruption in a student’s way of thinking that is required “for progression or forward movement to occur” (Taylor, 2008, p. 230). In more connected ways of knowing (Kegan, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), students look for opportunities from their social environments that welcome ideas that conflict with the norm. Consider the complications that can occur for students when they see others cheating and getting away with it, when they begin to analyze the low risk versus high rewards of dishonest behavior, and when they begin to consider context and relevance in their values and beliefs. Ignelzi (2000) argued, “When we are presented with information that doesn’t fit our meaning-making . . . we may discount or ignore it” (p. 6). As such, when students belong to a social community that minimizes or discounts an academic code of conduct, they may chose to ignore the code in favor of a “hidden” code of conduct that exists in their peer community, one that may be far more accessible and acceptable. Likewise, the “everybody’s doing it” attitude so prevalent on campuses today can be a powerful force shaping student behavior. When students are in the moral development stage Kohlberg calls the “Conventional Level” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), they act according to the expectations of their social order regardless of the consequences. Here, student behavior is not only based on conforming to group expectations, but also on “actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 55). Thus, if students believe the code of conduct for their peer group justifies cheating (or looking the other way when peers cheat), then this code of behavior may out-rank any academic integrity code.

McCabe and Trevino’s (1997) research on why students cheat found that “the most powerful influential factors were peer-related contextual factors” (p. 391). Dishonesty among students was higher when students thought their peers were cheating at higher levels. Similarly, Scanlon and Newman (2002) found that students consistently believed others were plagiarizing more than they were. In particular, 8% of students reported plagiarizing from the Internet often or very frequently, whereas just over 50% of students believed that their peers did (Scanlon & Newman, 2002). They concluded, “if students perceive that a majority of their peers are going online to plagiarize, they may be more apt to plagiarize themselves” (Scanlon & Newman, 2002, p. 383). These findings suggest that peers can significantly impact a student’s ethical choices and behavior.
Improving Students’ Understanding of Honesty

Getting a classroom of students to care about academic integrity is difficult when their lives are full of challenges and they are moving developmentally through phases, levels, and dimensions—each student at a different pace. Short of eliminating grades altogether, there are things that can be done to help curb the rise of cheating on college campuses. Fundamentally, however, educators should keep in mind that students are moving toward self-authorship during their college years, and students’ social group attitudes and behaviors can be far more important to them than academic policies. Thus, it is not enough to establish honor codes and policies and expect that all students will conform.

The shift from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) offers many opportunities to address academic dishonesty inside the classroom. For example, rather than only dictating policy regarding ethical academic behavior, an instructor can put the decisions about what constitutes cheating in students’ hands by encouraging them to create their own course cheating policy and to define (and enforce) the consequences of violations. Helping steward students toward a self-authored understanding of ethical behavior and responsibility might, for example, utilize Baxter Magolda’s (2004) learning partnerships model, by emphasizing three distinct practices: validating what students already know, situating what students learn in their own experiences, and acknowledging that students co-construct knowledge. For example, to help students in my writing courses better understand authorship and intellectual property, we discuss the many issues involved in plagiarism. I begin by having students briefly write and then share their understanding of this topic. They typically talk about what their high school teachers taught them about plagiarism, and some share stories of students who have been caught copying and pasting from the Internet. Others mention how difficult it can be to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing and the different messages they have gotten from teachers about what is or is not “acceptable copying.” Some talk about copying as it relates to the music industry, noting how artists frequently sample each other. As they share their experiences, I listen uncritically, that is, trying as best I can to set aside my own perspectives on plagiarism as a writing teacher, and acknowledge their ideas. Invariably, students find they share similar experiences and points of view. Having a class discussion situates their knowledge of the topic, and hearing their peers’ views helps validate their understanding.

Next, rather than lecture on the complex issues involved, students work in teams of three or four to research plagiarism. To begin, each team selects a role to play, which provides a perspective for their investigation. Roles include musicians, visual artists, journalists, high school students, students from China, and college teachers. Their task is to explore the notion of plagiarism from that group’s perspective (e.g., What attitudes and beliefs do people in your group have toward plagiarism and why?). Each team prepares a written report that describes their group’s point-of-view, and teams present their findings to the class.

This project encourages students to consider a perspective beyond their own, and the team presentations help us all better understand the many different perspectives on plagiarism. To complete this project, students write a reflection in which they consider how they think about this issue in light of what they have learned. While this project may not give students a complete understanding of plagiarism, it helps them examine attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about it in new ways. They also begin to form their own understanding of plagiarism in light of other perspectives, an act that nudges them toward self-authorship. This kind of activity allows the classroom to serve as a holding environment where students co-construct meaning with their teammates as they explore a personal understanding of a difficult, complex issue.
Further Recommendations

McCabe’s research has shown that honor codes can be effective at reducing cheating, particularly if they are modified honor codes, which promote a shared campus culture of academic integrity by, for example, involving students in policy decisions and strategy (McCabe & Pavela, 2000). Regardless of what type of codes or policies are in place, educators should ensure that they are not reduced to rituals that are simply recited, signed, and forgotten or merely used as symbolic boilerplate language on syllabi.

Considering student development theory, the following are ways to nurture more actively a culture of honesty and integrity:

1. Honor and integrity should become part of a college’s culture and, therefore, be repeatedly discussed and reinforced throughout a student’s years in school.

2. Academic honesty policies should be worded in plain English and enforced consistently throughout the university.

3. Faculty should feel incentivized to enforce academic integrity policies and not fear retaliation from students (or administration) for investigating and reporting incidents. (Student evaluation procedures may need to be reconsidered in light of this.)

4. Academic honesty should be discussed across the curriculum and be discipline-specific. For example, business students can discuss issues related to business ethics; those in medical fields can be exposed to the complicated ethical issues related to healthcare decision making.

5. Faculty should model academic integrity in their own grant writing and research, and should share these efforts with their students.

In addition, the rise of cheating on college campuses signals the important place the liberal arts (and particularly the humanities) hold for shaping students who are ethically sound, morally engaged citizens. Courses in philosophy, history, and English can play a leading role in developing critical thinking skills, deeper reasoning abilities, and rhetorical strategies that enable students to analyze and interpret ideas as well as discover their own self-authored beliefs.

As the price of higher education rises and debates continue about the costs versus benefits of a degree, we need to emphasize to a far greater extent the less tangible benefits of an education—the value-added aspects of learning what it means to be ethical and responsible—and the social returns of that investment to our community and democracy. In the years to come, cheating behavior in politics, social media, and popular culture is unlikely to decline. Students will continue to question authority, challenge assumptions and beliefs, and form strong social groups. Although development such as this is a work in progress, educators can take a leading role in helping young students navigate the complex developmental journey to become adults who respect and embrace honor and integrity.
References


