

BILL PUKA

Student Cheating

FEATURED TOPIC

IN SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE, the ethical problems of college life are small. One billion of our six billion fellow humans are apparently ill or dying in pain of unnecessary deprivation at this moment. We live with a democratic government that pays mostly lip service to democracy. College students cause smaller problems. Typically, they do not form violent street gangs or crime syndicates that threaten the life, health, or safety of others; they rarely engage in wholesale fraud or embezzlement.

Date rape is likely the most serious campus ethics problem; it stands alone as a perennial capital crime. But, fortunately, there is little left to debate here ethically—date rape is rape, and rape is horribly wrong for readily statable reasons. Colleges are “on the case” here, focusing now on the attitude change needed to prevent the offense, with effective programs for undermining its mindset. After date rape, perhaps, come racism, homophobia, and sexism on the campus list of shame. Next comes reckless drug use (from cocaine to alcohol and tobacco), then suicide and serious theft and vandalism in the dorms, where some violence also is reported. Academic dishonesty—student cheating and plagiarism—may come even farther down the list, though some would order matters differently.

Most faculty and administrators, however, rate academic dishonesty a high crime, fatal to education. Obviously cheating is wrong: an affront to learning and self-integrity. But even where cheating is widespread, seeming to threaten the educational mission of a university, its touted harms do not stand 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

automatically 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 long eroded 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 in courses. The “stealing others’ ideas” that occurs in plagiarizing typical classroom assignments visits no harms on their supposed victims, who, along with their descendants, are usually long dead. Only a single professor or teaching assistant reads the course paper involved anyway, which is not made public.

What cheating shows that merits strong opposition is a student’s pride in deceptively “getting over” on professors and “the system,” even where both are recognized as fair. This affection for injustice and casual disregard for honest dealings must be trained out of students along with the jaded immaturity involved. Accompanying rationalizations must also be confronted—rationalizations that mask to the cheater how pathetic, embarrassing, childish, sleazy, and incompetent it is to steal others’ answers because one couldn’t even think up one’s own. That’s kindergarten.

By contrast, 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. In submitting to this treatment, 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. (No de facto,

Ethicists who are incensed by student cheating show no similar concern for the rampant disrespect shown students

BILL PUKA is professor of philosophy and psychology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

As Serious an Academic Integrity Problem as Faculty-Administration Business as Usual?



due-process option is available for winning such protests.) Worse, my protest was viewed as courageous, as properly standing up for principle. The courage I really needed to learn 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 ethics

Some 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. A competent teacher makes course material sing and partners with students in skill development. If students do not do top-notch work, then

**Rensselaer
Polytechnic
Institute**

either 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? 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?

Administrator ethics

College administrators routinely tout their faculty's dedication to personalized teaching, especially in official materials sent to applicants and their parents. Simultaneously, they 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 catalogs 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 the following 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 here, only the learning or student-cheating focus is followed up. No mention is

**Rensselaer
Polytechnic
Institute**

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 failings 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. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.