Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity in the University

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It is 2 a.m., the night before your research paper is due, which will determine a major portion of your grade for the course. As you do your best to stay awake to finish the paper, you find that someone has posted an essay online on your exact topic. You think about how much time it would save to hand in this essay as your own, and you begin to weigh this option against the likelihood of getting caught. This type of scenario is just one of many possible ethical dilemmas that students today during the digital age might face (12).

What is academic integrity? Academic integrity involves "[u]nderstanding what it means to be honest in the particular culture of the academic world and being able to apply the scholarly conventions of acknowledgement," such as proper citation of sources (7). Research has shown that students today, while familiar with the term academic integrity, do not have as strong of a grasp as they should of all that this concept entails. One research study found that a significant amount of plagiarism occurs simply because students lack sufficient understanding of what constitutes plagiarism (3), such as how to cite sources.

In a more extreme form, academic dishonesty in its broadest definition includes "any form of fraud in an academic setting" (5). Instances include plagiarism, cheating on tests, deception, fabrication, exchanging work with other students or purchasing work; the latter has its own term: contract cheating, which refers to paying contractors to write the work (10; 1). Additionally, a 2015 research study showed that an estimated 17% of U.S. college students misuse ADHD drugs to enhance studying (11).

Academic dishonesty has many negative consequences, such as cost to the individual's learning, "misaligned instruction" and "unfair grade distribution" for others in the classroom (10). Several students interviewed on this topic felt that cheating lessens the value of the cheater's college degree (12). In the case of study drugs, students even could face risks to their health.

Why might someone commit academic fraud? Researchers have tried to pinpoint the factors that might account for academic dishonesty. At the forefront is lack of a culture of academic integrity. A study of health profession students found that cheating "is more likely to occur

when students view it as a social norm ('everybody does it')" (9). Of particular concern, some research has suggested that those who cheat have a higher likelihood of unethical professional practice as well (6; 14).

Research has shown that cheating has been on the rise from the 1940s to this decade (5). The advent of the digital age, while mostly positive, in some ways offers more opportunity to violate academic integrity. In part, "[r]eadily available technology may contribute to the problem because student behaviors have included cutting and pasting internet information, sharing online quizzes and texting confidential information to classmates" (8). Regarding plagiarism, the practice "is becoming more evident as technology enables easy access to online resources" (13). Even more so, "[w]ith technology-assisted academic dishonesty, control of student behavior can become extremely difficult and taxing on educators" (8). As technology continues to progress, universities will need to set more measures in place to combat technology-assisted cheating.

What else might motivate a student to commit academic fraud? In the aforementioned analysis of health profession students, "[p]eer pressure, competition for high grades, heavy course demands, time management constraints, [and] dissatisfaction with faculty instruction" factored into academic dishonesty (9). Furthermore, perseverance, academic aptitude, self-discipline, life events and balancing school with other commitments also emerged from another study as reasons that students might outsource their work (1). Other reasons shown from various studies included "pressure to maintain grades, emphasis of grade over comprehension…larger classroom settings, reduced fear of getting caught, poorer self-control and higher self-oriented thoughts, small consequences attached to getting caught… and overall actions and attitudes of faculty regarding cheating" (6). Again, in the digital age, "advances in electronic technology, which make it easier to cheat" played a role (9). These considerations, exacerbated by a culture of academic dishonesty, contribute to academic fraud.

What types of interventions might resolve this issue? Keener (6), who surveyed student and faculty perceptions of academic integrity, suggests that "[e]vidence supports initiatives aimed at involving students in developing academic honesty policies." Bealle (2), a library professor who created classroom materials on the topic, has found that many advantages arise from incorporating academic integrity lessons into the classroom itself. Similarly, Smedley (13), a researcher in the field, studied an educational intervention for undergraduate nursing students in a private college in Sydney, Australia, and found that promoting awareness helped more in reducing plagiarism than did relying solely on plagiarism detection software. Regarding technology-driven cheating, banning cell phones, tablets and so on might serve as one effective strategy to combat this type of cheating (6).

According to Mabins (8), "increased awareness, standardized faculty mentoring and training, and a student involved process" all together collectively contribute to a culture of academic integrity. The university can contribute to the culture of success by serving as a model of

ethical decision-making and by effectively communicating academic integrity information (4). Given that "[c]hanging the culture and overall environment is found to curb cheating" (6), students and faculty alike can take measures to create a culture of academic integrity, particularly in the digital age when new technology offers more opportunity for academic dishonesty.

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