

The wider dimensions of academic integrity

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In this presentation I'd like to focus on the wider dimensions of academic integrity. To participate in this conversation, we need to turn a mirror on ourselves – as an academic community – and ask whether we're setting the right example for our students, and also whether our rhetoric of integrity is consistent with the reality of our academic world.

But first, let me suggest a few fundamental principles of integrity as they apply to higher education:

- A consistent emphasis on integrity strengthens not just individual character and resilience – it strengthens these traits within a community. Integrity is an ethos to be instilled within and across academia, among ourselves as well as our students. The most severe challenge to this ethos is not individual acts of cheating by students: It is instead the commodification of education and its confinement within a disposable world of ephemeral consumer goods. After all, if education is merely a disposable commodity, or simply a passport to practical skills and material abundance, why should academic integrity even matter?
- Integrity in education is not something to be enforced – it's something to be inculcated. It's not about following the rules so you won't be punished – it's about adopting a richer, more rewarding, way of life, with the reward being measured in strength of character, not in six-figure salaries. In short, we must persuade our students – and remind ourselves – that education is not merely instrumental but rather central to the formation of the self.
- Narrow visions of education as a practical set of tools to financial and material success are iniquitous to academic integrity. If we say to our students that a higher-paying job is their primary goal, and that education is simply an instrument or enabler for this goal, our students will undervalue their studies – seeing them simply as a series of hurdles to be jumped quickly and left behind as quickly.
- Education with integrity necessitates deeds that carry risks with them. Lapses in academic integrity are often derived from students seeking short cuts, such as cheating on a graded assignment, to avoid perceived risks, such as a failing grade. Here, we must help students to recognise that integrity is more rewarding precisely because it is more risky. Overcoming risks while avoiding temptation is precisely how strong character and a resilient personality are formed.

Two anecdotes from my life

When Teddi Fishman¹ invited me to speak to the CAI conference, she mentioned that we in education tend to see integrity in terms of preventing cheating, instead of focusing on whether the educational enterprise itself has integrity. She's absolutely right. For six years (1990-92; 1998-2002) I taught at the Air Force (AF) Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. I was a military instructor, taught to uphold the Air Force's three core values of 'Integrity first,' 'Service before self,' and 'Excellence in all we do.' In fact, these core values are now enshrined on the ramp that serves as the gateway to the terrazzo, or the cadet area. The ramp used to say 'Bring me men,' but now it reads 'Integrity, Service, Excellence.'

The AF Academy, and the AF itself, has enshrined 'integrity' as its primary core value. Yet this has not prevented two serious scandals: inappropriate influence exercised by evangelicals at the Academy², as well as the failure to address widespread sexual assault and harassment of female cadets³. Why did the AF Academy fail to act quickly to correct known problems that compromised its mission, especially when its core values placed integrity first?

I've thought a lot about this issue, and I think it boils down to a tendency *not* to put integrity first, or to mistake integrity for something else, something more selfish. Both these scandals were complicated, and I don't want to oversimplify. But I think those officers who were proselytising for evangelical Christianity thought it was their mission to do God's work, to spread the faith, to win converts to their particular brand of Christianity. Implicated in this proselytising were the Commandant of Cadets, the football coach, and many of the military chaplains assigned to the Academy. Their efforts, however, violated the Academy's mandate to remain officially neutral on issues regarding personal religious belief and practice.

Why did these high-ranking officials sacrifice the integrity of the Academy's mandate? Why did they act in a way that suggested intolerance of religious faiths other than evangelical Christianity? Obviously, when you believe you're literally on a mission from God, you're likely to lose a certain sense of perspective. You even lose track of what is consistent with your solemn oath of office: your oath as a military officer to uphold the United States (US) Constitution, which mandates the separation of private religious belief from state authority. Instead, you conflate your own personal set of religious beliefs with those of your country, and you can't see the conflict because you're blinded by your own self-congratulatory and righteous zeal.

In the case of the sexual assault scandal, I believe many officers in positions of authority at the AF Academy wanted to address this problem quietly, in-house, while others simply wanted to ignore or suppress it, even to a certain extent to blame the victims. This is a tendency that exists within all powerful institutions: a tendency to protect the *institution* first, its reputation, for example, instead of putting *integrity* first. As a Roman Catholic, I saw this happen in my own church: the tendency to suppress sexual abuses by the clergy, moving abusive priests from parish to parish and covering up their crimes, rather than addressing them openly and correcting them.

These are, of course, serious lapses in personal as well as institutional integrity. Yet because they were systemic and rationalised as defensive, even 'necessary,' they compromised the integrity of these institutions far more than individual breaches of integrity, such as cheating or plagiarism.

Integrity is, after all, not just a matter of appropriate responses to situations – it must be the underpinning to the entire process. Let me give you another, almost trivial, example that illustrates this. When I was at the Academy, I had cadets tell me about a football player who had three DUIs (driving under the influence of alcohol) before he

was finally kicked out. These cadets were incensed because the SOP (standard operating procedure) back then was to kick out cadets with a DUI after the first infraction, and most certainly after the second.

The cadets believed this was a clear double-standard – that normal rules didn't apply to this football player because he was a gifted athlete who had the full support of the football coach, who carried the unofficial rank of 'general' because of his powerful influence on campus.

Some of you might know of cases like this on your own campuses. Whether the cadets were right or wrong about the facts in this case almost doesn't matter, for a clear double-standard did exist for some members of the football team, and the football coach was indeed very powerful, and was also one of the prime movers behind inappropriate Christian evangelism at the Academy. Supporters of this coach and his team, I think, saw no conflict between 'integrity first' and overt favoritism toward the team. What mattered most to them was a berth in a national bowl, or at least a winning season, and somehow this 'success' would justify previous compromises in integrity.

In this case, many cadets clearly saw the double-standard and became openly cynical, questioning the soundness of their education, their institution, as well as their future profession as AF officers.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not here to bash the AF Academy. My point is rather that even at an institution like the Academy, where integrity is accorded first place and a student Honour Code is enshrined, there are damaging lapses in integrity that corrode the true mission of education, which I see as instilling strong moral character, the discernment and strength 'to do the right thing,' as the film director Spike Lee might say.

A second anecdote

I promised you two anecdotes. The second concerns the institution at which I currently teach, which is pervaded by business-speak and the bottom line. Given the recession and budget cuts we're all experiencing, I doubt this will come as a surprise to most of you. But what message does it send when we tell the faculty that one of their main missions is to help parents and students 'capitalise' on their 'investment' in college? When we tell students that their college experience will enhance their 'advancement potential'? When we speak of the need for improved marketing and 'branding' of our institution so that we can better sell ourselves to students? What does it suggest when a newly heightened emphasis on student satisfaction and retention is tied directly to concerns about our college budget, which relies heavily on student tuition to pay the bills?

Such business-speak is hardly unique to my institution. As Tracey Bretag noted during this conference, in Australia it's becoming increasingly common to see education marketed as a 'product,' and to see student recruitment statistics being touted as a measure of 'market share.'

Is this simply good business sense by administrators, who have to deal with the 'real world' far more than those of us in our non-real world classrooms and lofty ivory towers?

I believe this emphasis on education as providing credentials to heighten one's 'advancement potential' erodes the true mission of higher learning. After all, is higher

learning simply about earning higher pay? Isn't there a purpose higher than a hefty bank account or material success?

These are concerns that I first articulated in an article I wrote on education for TomDispatch.com⁴, which generated a remarkable number of revealing responses from students, parents, and faculty that touch on the larger issue of academic integrity. To cite just three examples: One student wrote to me that, "Growing up, I always dreamed that college would be a time to expand my horizons, my intellect and most of all strengthen my character. I found that very hard to do with people whose only interest was getting the highest paying job with the least amount of effort." A concerned mother wrote to me from Eden Prairie, Minnesota that, "I have a son graduating from a large suburban high school this year. It is with profound disappointment that I observe him and his classmates to be adrift, without a moral and ethical compass to navigate this rapidly changing and increasingly unsustainable world, and to contribute vital ideas toward solving our looming challenges." And a faculty member from the University of Miami wrote that, "Students should be challenged intellectually [but] they focus only on issues related to future employment and earnings. They feel everything must be relevant to their vocational futures. This is problematic in and of itself, but in addition to this, their scope [for] what they deem as relevant is extremely limited. And worst of all, we, the [faculty] who are supposed to know better, encourage and promote this."

Again, if education is only about acquiring marketable skills so that one can get a high-paying job, it's very easy to lose sight of the ethical and moral dimensions of education, including the vital importance of inculcating a resilient ethos of integrity.

Meanwhile, as American colleges and universities boast of their ability to boost the marketable skills and thus the paychecks of their graduates, they are at the same time relying more and more on adjuncts and teaching assistants, some of whom barely squeak by on the money they make teaching multiple courses, often at three or four different institutions, whether locally or online.

In other words, as American colleges and universities claim to promote integrity, while at the same time boasting of the utility of a college education in monetary terms to students, many are also cutting the number of full-time faculty positions that come with decent benefits and adequate pay.

In doing so, have we not created a dynamic that fundamentally lacks integrity? Why do we boast of boosting the 'advancement potential' of our students while acting to limit the 'advancement potential' of part-time and adjunct faculty?

Academic integrity: Some further thoughts

I have a Christmas ornament that says, 'To teach is to touch the future.' A poetic sentiment, and it's true. But in 'touching' the future in our classes, we also shape the present. And by seeking to instill a culture of integrity, what we do matters now and in the future.

Integrity is the harder road – the tougher road. But it's worth taking precisely because it's harder. Maintaining one's integrity in the face of temptation is a form of loyalty: of staying true to one's better self.

How do we convince our students of the truth of this? Partly, I think, by reminding them that you can't be loyal to others if you routinely betray yourself. We also need to be blunt with our students, and to use language that resonates within their culture. For me, being a person of integrity is the sign of a 'winner'; to lack integrity, to be a

cheat, is the sign of a 'loser.' And no young American student wants to be labelled as a loser by his or her peers.

Using the language of winning and losing – a language that pervades American culture – will serve to encourage students to place a higher value on their personal integrity. Indeed, they should take ownership of it, and guard it as they would their reputation for all things that they affirm as 'winning' or life-enriching.

And when integrity comes into apparent conflict with other esteemed values such as loyalty, as in cases where an individual is pressured to compromise his or her integrity out of loyalty to the group, a person of integrity will recognise that those who would pressure you to violate your own better self out of loyalty are not deserving of that loyalty to begin with.

Academia is the real world precisely because we foster integrity

An expression I wish we could all banish is 'the real world,' in the sense of education not being the real world. How many times have you heard, "Once you graduate and get out into the real world," as if the world of work is somehow more real or more true than the world of study, of thinking, of reflection?

If education is not the real world, why should integrity even matter in our pseudo-world? As we seek to promote integrity, shouldn't we remind our students that education is indeed a real world, every bit as vital and true as the world of work?

Of course, cheating on a History exam may not be as life-changing as cutting corners while building jet engines for passenger aircraft. But integrity is a habit as well as a value, and one who cheats and prospers in the so-called non-real world of academia is probably more likely to cheat on an aircraft assembly line.

So my closing remark is this: Education is very much the real world precisely because our mission is deeper and more vital than providing advancement potential. Rather, we are, or should be, about creating and sustaining an environment in which personal integrity grows and blossoms, or, to mix metaphors, where integrity gains intensity and shines forth like a beacon on a lighthouse, helping us all to avoid wrecking ourselves on the shoals of our own collective shallowness.

About the author

William Astore currently teaches history at the Pennsylvania College of Technology. A retired lieutenant colonel (USAF), he served as the Associate Provost/Dean of Students at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA (2002-05) and before this as the deputy of international history at the USAF Academy. His D.Phil. is in Modern History from the University of Oxford (1996).

Endnotes

¹Dr Theresa Fishman, Director of the Center for Academic Integrity, Clemson University.

²See, for example, "Air Force Academy Leader Admits Religious Intolerance at School," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2005, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/04/national/04airforce.html>; and "Intolerance Found at Air Force Academy," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2005, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/22/AR2005062200598.html>.

³See, for example, "Survey: 20 Percent of Female Cadets Victims of Sexual Assault," CNN.com, August 29, 2003, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/08/29/academy.assaults/>; and "Air Force Academy Shows Improvement," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2005, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/22/AR2005122201801.html>.

⁴W. J. Astore, "Selling Education, Manufacturing Technocrats, Torturing Souls: The Tyranny of Being Practical." Posted on TomDispatch, Nation Institute, May 28, 2009. Available at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175076>.