Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Terlip]

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Part of the journal section "Forum: Building a Culture of Academic Integrity"

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1. To begin, my area of study is organizational communication and I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in that area. I also have been teaching a course in Communication Ethics that is a Liberal Arts Core Capstone choice at the University of Northern Iowa. In all of the courses, significant discussions occur in relation to four areas: (a) the difference between effective and efficient communication and ethical communication, (b) what a person *should do* and what people often *actually do*, (c) how the situation affects the behavioral choices, and (d) *the* line that one crosses when unethical communication occurs (for example, when is a "white lie" unethical). In the latter instance discussions center around why and students most often focus on consequences, aspects of character, and their personal values which leads to lively discussion. In all the discussions I try to focus on both communication content and delivery by asking students to apply Tompkins's (2011) list of the five values of ethical communication: truth/truthfulness, justice, freedom, care and integrity.

2. As both a teacher and a citizen I am concerned with the rising levels of cheating and lapses in academic integrity. As a teacher I feel a responsibility to educate students about academic integrity and the related UNI policies. I also feel compelled to find ways to foster a classroom culture that does not accept or facilitate student behaviors that are not consistent with academic integrity. As a citizen I am concerned that students entering UNI most likely engaged in cheating as an elementary, middle and/or high school student. I also am concerned that the students we graduate do not contribute to the increase in employee dishonesty that has been documented. A number of researchers have connected cheating or academic dishonesty to dishonesty on the job and unethical behavior in organizations (See for example Martin, Rao & Sloan (2009) and Stone, Jahawar & Kisamar (2009)).

3. In my view it is our responsibility to create a culture at UNI that is built upon academic integrity. In 2007 Rettinger & Kramer concluded that "... being part of a culture in which many of one's peers cheat is associated with increased cheating . . .. Witnessing cheating increases the likelihood of cheating not only because it is more easily justified, but also because it gives students ideas (about how to cheat, for example), and that can lead to some increase in cheating behavior" (p. 310). A 2011 study examined the relationship between the reasons students gave for cheating and actual cheating levels (Miller, Shoptaugh & Woolridge). The authors found that: "[s]tudents who said they would not cheat because of punitive consequences were more

likely to report that they cheated in classes and took less responsibility for promoting academic integrity. Students whose reasons related to the value of learning, personal character, and/or it being simply not right reported less cheating and took more responsibility for academic integrity" (p. 169). This finding also reveals that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation occurs for students and that intrinsic motivation appears to be related to lower levels of cheating reported by students.

4. It seems that if we as instructors act to provide information about academic integrity, create class assignments that make cheating difficult, and enforce classroom and university policies about academic integrity then we will take a big step toward creating the type of culture we want at UNI. These suggestions, while easier to implement, all tap into extrinsic motivations of students. We also need to tap into and further reinforce students' character and values so that they begin to value learning and take on more responsibility in the learning process.

5. In 2001 M. Schwartz published a study in the *Journal of Business Ethics* which examined how corporate codes of ethics affected organizational members' behavior. The study also provided data that showed reasons why employees did or did not comply with the organizational codes of ethics. The rationalizations offered by employees in the study fell into eight categories: self-interest (greed, financial distress, avoiding harassment), dissatisfaction (with the job or the compensation, the environment (peer pressure, opportunity), company's interest, and ignorance (never knew, didn't perceive, or forgot).

6. At the 2015 Ethics in Higher Education conference held on the UNI campus I facilitated a student discussion of academic integrity. In this session, four student leaders (Parker Bennett, Lanie Crouse, Toril Einwalter and Samantha Johannsen) responded to video vignettes and answered questions about what they would do in the situation, what they thought the typical UNI student would do, and, most importantly what was the reason for a student's decision to act with integrity. The scenarios focused on observing a classmate cheating on an exam, self-plagiarism, and dealing with other students on group projects.

7. What is striking is that the reasons that emerged in the student panel were quite consistent with the list of corporate rationalizations. For example, ignorance was offered as a reason for self-plagiarism while the act of confronting or reporting a classmate cheating was discussed in relation to how grading was done and the instructor not providing close enough supervision. The other scenario on group work clearly hit home and the students provided a variety of reasons for not pulling one's weight in a group and/or confronting the person. These reasons included what kind of class it was (Liberal Arts Core versus major), impact on their grade, peer pressure not to confront others, the group's best interest, and the group members' level of satisfaction with the course.

8. Overall, the student discussion at the conference reinforced many of the themes that emerged from the speakers and sessions. Students indicated that UNI needs to do a better job of educating students about academic integrity and that UNI policies and instructors need to be clear about expectations and that faculty need to follow through if students break the rules. They also

clearly illustrated how a situation might impact on one's perception of cheating and/or one's reason to engage in unethical behavior. Finally, the role of peer pressure was underscored by the students. It is clear that expecting the students to police others is unrealistic at UNI today.

References

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