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## Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Helgevold]

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## **Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Helgevold]**

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

Abbylynn Helgevold “Building a Culture of Academic Integrity”

1. When I first started thinking about academic integrity my thoughts originally began with the classroom. I thought about the steps I take to promote integrity or, more specifically, limit cheating and academic dishonesty. Like many of my colleagues, I noticed that I too tended to focus less on punitive measures and more on positive steps to reinforce and support integrity. As many of the conference presenters indicated, these steps are recognized as strong pedagogical strategies in addition to being effective in curbing cheating behavior. When I reflect on these practices I realize that, for the most part, I consider these positive steps to be strongest when they are rooted in a commitment to building a classroom community, which can only flourish when there is trust. In other words, I see a connection between trusting, community, and the cultivation of integrity.

2. With regard to integrity and honesty, community is an essential piece of the puzzle since it is in community that these things can be nurtured and supported. In my view, the best communities are communities that build people up and that is what I, ideally and in my most lofty moments, wish to achieve. In the classroom I strive to establish a sense of community, I want my students to understand that this is something we are doing together. My hope is not only to provide some sense of ownership and internal motivation but is also to provide a foundation for building trust<sup>[1]</sup> in that community.

3. Initiating trusting relationships in the classroom requires some time to “buy in.” I typically begin all of my classes with a mutual expectations exercise in which we discuss what kinds of expectations it is reasonable to have of each other. This exercise provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their own goals for the course and their semester, and to voice their concerns and anxieties. They also get a chance to hear me give expression to and reflect on my own. We are then tasked with holding each other accountable. When I “buy in” I begin with some assumptions about my students. I assume that most of them have their hearts in the right place. I also assume that they want to succeed and do well. I actually think that their desire to do well and the accompanying fear of failure is often the cause of their “cheating” behaviors. I assume that there is a good degree of trustworthiness in my students.

4. In starting with these assumptions, my hope is that cheating behaviors and thought patterns can be analyzed and avoided. During moments where I know there is increased pressure to

breach integrity, say during a test in a crowded room, I bring that out in the open. I often begin exams with a discussion of why “cheating sucks” and “we” don’t do it, and I have them make a promise, they either sign a document or they look me squarely in the face as they say out loud “I will not cheat on this exam.” Or “I will not discuss the contents of this exam.”<sup>[2]</sup> Then I give them an affirmation of their trustworthiness by acknowledging that they may need to look away from the exam to think and I help them to identify neutral places in the room to focus on like the ceiling or the board. Essentially the message I aim to communicate is this: I do trust that you don’t want to be a cheater, and I also know that you are vulnerable to pressure, here are some steps we can take to keep ourselves in the right place. The first involves remembering that you don’t want to be a cheater and why, and the second involves thinking of the consequences of breaking this trust and compromising your own values. It is way better to tank an exam and then figure out what to do moving forward and think about why that happened than it is to compromise your own self-respect and the respect others have for you in your community.

5. My approach to this issue is shaped by my interest in building and sustaining relationships that strengthen community and in building trust in those communities. I see these things as very much interrelated. A community cannot function and flourish without trust and the best kind of trusting needs to be fostered in relationship and in community. All of this also is important for building integrity, which, as a character trait, also needs strong community support and frequent opportunities to be exercised and reflected upon in order to be developed and maintained. Furthermore, this kind of reflection and examination requires a trusting environment insofar as it often reveals some of our vulnerabilities; it exposes mistakes we have made or pressures we have faced. I believe we need to have the kind of environment in which we can engage in such reflection openly.

6. It isn’t necessarily clear that we all understand integrity to mean the same thing. If integrity means more than just being honest, which I think it does, becoming a person of integrity requires reflection on the kinds of things one values, an analysis of the reasons one has for valuing those things and then decisions to act on the basis of those values. Building and sustaining *a culture* of integrity requires building and sustaining the kind of community in which these discussions and this reflection can take place, where we reflect on the principles that guide us in the academy and consider how our choices and behaviors are informed by those principles and where we can discuss openly and head on, the pressures we face to violate those principles and the consequences that are tied to such violations.

7. Too often the tendency is to assume that integrity is simply something one has or doesn’t have. Sometimes I think the point that integrity is something to be cultivated and nurtured becomes buried or otherwise obscured. For students it is certainly the case that they are just now at the point where they are becoming aware of their values. They are discovering where these values came from, what they are, and who they are as persons in relation to these values. This is a process - a process in which we participate as their instructors and mentors and members of their community. I think it is also true for us in so far as making room for thinking through such matters serves to strengthen our ability to act with integrity and to be persons of integrity in our

own lives. All of this is essential if we are to be trusted members of the larger communities of which we are a part.

8. Developing strategies and assignments that minimize the likelihood of cheating are important but I wouldn't want to do that in lieu of providing opportunities to have real discussions about what integrity is, why it matters, and what trust is, and why it matters. I have found it valuable to reflect with students in my classroom about the consequences of a breakdown in trust. I have found that in the classroom, certain "strategies" or exercises are really helpful. In terms of thinking more broadly outside of the classroom, my experiences suggest to me that you don't need to wait until there is evidence of a blaring problem, or evidence of a lack of integrity to dedicate your time to supporting integrity. The hope is, of course, that we are trustworthy, that we are persons of integrity (professionally and academically) but we can move from hope to confidence by engaging in more frequent reflection and public discussion about these matters. What are the values of the academy? How do we uphold those values in our activities? What does it mean to commit oneself to those values with sincerity and act consistently in support of those values? The more occasions we have to engage in conversation and building each other up, the stronger our culture of integrity will become.

#### Notes

1. In their article "Creating Trust," Flores and Solomon suggest that it is best to think of trust as an activity rather than as an established condition. The benefit of this understanding of trust as *trusting* is that it becomes something that we can DO something about. We can think about how to build trust, and how to repair trusting relationships when trust has been broken and we can think more clearly about how to trust in a way that leaves us better able to handle the risks associated with trusting. See: Fernando Flores and Robert C. Solomon, "Creating Trust" *Business Ethics Quarterly* 8.2 (205-232).

2. These strategies are informed by work done by Dan Ariely who investigates varieties of irrational behavior in his book *Predictably Irrational*. Chapter 11 focuses on the causes of dishonesty. Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational* (New York: Harper) 2008.



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