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Academic Honesty and the "Millennials"

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By Timothy Quinnan, Ph.D.

Daniel, we?ll call him, sat on the other side of my
desk, a perplexed look furrowing his brow. He wondered why he had been
summoned to see me. After all, the only time students were officially
invited to meet with the dean of student affairs it meant they were in
trouble, or so he believed.

Daniel insisted he had done nothing wrong. So his
American History professor claimed he had plagiarized a paper on World
War II, but this was simply a big misunderstanding. Daniel had done his
own research on the Web, located the material he needed, and, well,
?downloaded it into a Word text file that would end up being his term
paper. Yet no credits to external sources appeared. I asserted that his
action constituted plagiarism.

?Plagiarism? What

exactly is that? No. ?I didn?t do anything wrong. I tried to explain to the professor that I did the research

on my own!?
His cheeks reddening in frustration, Daniel clearly could not make the
connection. I explained what the term meant, that sources must be cited
in the paper, and how his actions were considered a serious breach of
our academic code of conduct. Still not comprehending, he reaffirmed
his innocence. A long, arduous discussion followed which ended only
after Daniel grudgingly accepted responsibility for his malfeasance.
I?m not convinced he ever fully grasped my remonstrations or the
punishment imposed.

In the quiet of my office afterward, I thought about the
slow but steady rise in the number of academic misconduct cases
reaching me. I knew that Daniel was far from alone. There were others,
yet variety in these violations showed small range. Failing to cite
original authorship or source location, copying the homework of a
classmate with whom they?re working on a group project and claiming it
as their own, and even attempting to ?access? (never ?hack?) the secure
Blackboard files of faculty in order to get a preview of a study guide
for an upcoming exam, these predominated in the disciplinary issues my
position required me to address. A disturbing pattern was emerging.

This trend revealed a startling disregard for integrity in learning.

Academic honesty, a notion sacred to scholarship and drummed into my consciousness from my earliest schooldays, seemed an alien concept to college students today. At first, I thought it was a fresh tactic to avoid penalties. Surely, deep down, students knew better but vehemently pleaded ignorance as a ploy to soften the inevitable meting of discipline. Then came my epiphany. As more of these incidents occurred, disciplinary consultations with them changed my mind. Closely studying young face after face, intently listening to one explanation after another, it dawned on me that many of them entering college these days just didn?t get it. That the work he or she submitted to satisfy a course assignment must be the product of

personal inquiry, critical analysis, and literary composition did, in fact, escape them. Sadly, a distinction this fine didn?t quite translate into their realm of experience.

A colleague working in our library to whom I confided, admitted noticing it too. She commiserated with me in telling this anecdote: A student walked in and asked where she could find the latest material on global warming. The librarian escorted her to the area where the most recent magazines and monographs on environmental issues were shelved . Seeing the rows of publications, the student?s expression went blank. She thanked the librarian and turned to go. When the librarian asked why, the student said that she preferred the computer lab where she could extract this information directly from the Internet. Still shaking her head in amazement, the student?s parting comment to the staff member was, ?You didn?t expect me to read through all that stuff did you? It would take hours. I?ll just get it from the Web and turn it in.?

To be sure, it isn?t that students in college now display any less natural aptitude or ability. Intellectually, they hold their own against prior generations as evidenced by achievement scores on college admissions tests. Frankly, the problem is not native, but acquired. Today?s students merely reflect a lifetime of experiences in an alternate reality. These millenials– students entering the campus after 2000? came of age during a time of intense cultural change and uncertainty. Products of postmodern times, their values and views are skewed accordingly. The dilution and demise of academic absolutes, inconsistent standards and expectations from primary through high schooling, a society whose leaders often display a frightful lack of ethics, and ascending media/waning parental influences, such conditions contributed to their confusion.

As a result, somewhere during almost two decades of formal education, a crucial lesson in academic integrity was neither fully taught nor adequately absorbed by the millenials. How this happened might mystify us older Americans, but it?s abundantly clear in the attitudes and behaviors of millenials that the educational system let them down. Articles occasionally appear in the national press about educators providing students exam answers to boost district performance scores, while other honorable pedagogues are taken to task, even fired, by school boards for failing students who admitted to cheating. In a climate where ethics are porous and wisdom relative, it?s doubtful too much time was devoted to archaic notions of academic honesty.

Omnipresent technology further complicated the student?s search for truth. After eighteen or more years of computers-in-every-classroom learning, required ?research? visits to countless Web sites passing off data-on-the-quick as real science, and teachers sending mixed or vague messages about how to acquire and present knowledge, it?s little wonder that traditional, modernist ideas of intellectual sincerity lost currency. Topping things off, cyberspace, a favorite haunt of the millenials, exists as a domain widely free of moral entanglements. Few rules govern access to information or how to use it. No Internet site containing college-level information that I?ve ever visited has a warning against academic misrepresentation posted on it. Instead, user discretion is relied upon.

Perhaps what Daniel did is only demonstrate the hip new form scholarship has taken in postmodern times among a generation instilled with MTV morality. Some parents and school officials obviously believe so. For those of us dedicated to the ideals of the university, thinking of this kind would be fatal. To do so would relieve both us and those we seek to educate of our respective obligations within the learning community we share.

Whether a void of conscience created by technology, lack of training in basic scholarship during the K-12 years, or a host of contradictory social messages are to blame, the issue of academic dishonesty now facing higher education is of immense importance. Though reports are inconclusive, common sense hints that abuses are fairly widespread and growing. If so, what I and other deans have been seeing may be only the advance guard of a broader student invasion. Will we be prepared to deal with them in a firm manner, with sanctions that include teaching students proper academic conduct as well as responsibility for adopting it? More than ever, it?s up to us to orient students to the expectations of universities regarding acceptable behaviors. Still, can colleges hope to remediate such glaring

deficiencies at so late stage in the educational process?

The only possible answer is yes, on obvious educational and moral grounds. If nothing else, colleges and universities must remain true to the core values that inspire and sustain them. The search for knowledge has to be principled and truthful. Unless we suddenly reject our commitment to the intellectual, personal, and, dare I say it, ethical development of each student, we must work harder to stem the swelling tide of academic dishonesty.

To ensure we succeed, here are four places each university should examine for a rigorous articulation of expectations for student integrity.

Address academic honesty with students early in their academic careers

New student orientation is a logical starting point to cover college expectations for honesty in learning and scholarship. Devote a significant component of your Orientation agenda to this topic by having faculty or professional staff meet with students in small groups to discuss the code of conduct. Colleges providing the First Year Experience should incorporate similar subject matter into the curriculum. .

Disseminate your academic honesty policy as widely as possible

Employ both print and electronic media to get the message out. Whether through the student handbook, college catalog, even course syllabi, and especially at your university?s Web page, make sure that all students are exposed to a variety of sources where the institution?s position on academic integrity is articulated and consequences for misconduct addressed.

Expand your College?s ?appropriate use of technology policy? to include research done on the Internet

Virtually every university developed a policy governing the appropriate use of technology for faculty, staff and students. If yours doesn?t, create one. If you already have this policy, expand it to include a statement to students warning against plagiarism from electronic sources and how the same principles of academic honesty apply to data collected from the Internet.

Establish an institutional norm for academic integrity

Avoid arbitrary and individualized attempts at resolving misconduct cases. Apart from potential legal liability, piecemeal handling of such violations and/or imposition of sanctions will lead to problems. Adhere to a university-wide procedure for investigating and

adjudicating known violations. The message of zero tolerance needs to be consistent, strong, and issued from a campus office charged with authority to carry out these actions.

In the end, all members of the university community will
be better served by taking a proactive approach. Education rests on holistic human development. Helping students grow into enlightened and principled persons must be a mission we work collaboratively to attain.

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