

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 11
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Building a Culture of Academic Integrity & Forum Theme 2: Constitution Day 2015: The Voting Rights Act of 1965*

Article 2

3-2016

Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Gordon, Anita M. (2016) "Introduction," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol11/iss1/2>

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Building a Culture of Academic Integrity

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

Anita M. Gordon “Building a Culture of Academic Integrity”

1. In a review of the top surveys on cheating in college by Donald McCabe and others from the last several decades, James Lang (2013) noted overall incidence rates in the range of 65% to 82%. Keeping in mind that these are based on self-report data, which rely on student honesty in the reporting, accurate memories, and a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating, these results suggest that academic integrity continues to be a challenging and yet critical issue for higher education. After graduation, research shows that there is a high correlation (66% for undergraduates, 61% for graduate students) between cheating in college and dishonest actions in the workplace (Nonis & Swift, 2001). Yet 40% of faculty in a multi-institutional study reported that they ignored student cheating on one or more occasions (Coren, 2011). Of the 83% of respondents in Coren’s study who did talk with a student they believed to be cheating, those who had a prior “bad” experience were more likely to ignore cheating in the future, less likely to believe the administration would back faculty who confront cheating, and more likely to feel that it was one of the most negative aspects of their job, compared to those who reported “good” experiences. Beyond student integrity, a meta-analysis of the studies investigating the prevalence of research misconduct among faculty found that between .3% and 4.9% of researchers admitted to having falsified or fabricated their data. A much higher percentage, 33.7%, have reportedly engaged in one or more of a wide range of Questionable Research Practices (Fanelli, 2009).

2. Thus, tempting as it is to believe that most people are good and good people don’t cheat, the facts show that many people do, at all levels, and it must follow that not all of them are bad people. This speaks to the fact that human behavior is complex, and people have a lot of reasons for why they do things, both good and bad. This means that we really need to understand what those reasons are so that we can reduce the likelihood of misbehavior in its many forms. One excellent review of the literature on this question (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) outlines the causes of unethical behavior as individual factors (e.g., personality, character development, affect, cognition) interacting with environmental factors (e.g., situational contingencies, social & organizational contexts, laws and codes, prevention & enforcement mechanisms). Addressing cheating in academic scholarship should thus focus on identifying those factors that we can have an impact on (since we certainly do not have control over them all) so we can work to address them as much as possible.

3. The recent 2015 Ethics in Higher Education conference at UNI was held in order to provide a venue for educating and strategizing with one another on these issues. In the keynote presentation, Dr. James Lang, Ph.D., author of *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* (2013), discussed his ideas on how to prevent cheating in the classroom, as grounded in the literature on cognitive science

and effective pedagogy. Replacing high stakes limited testing opportunities with incremental and varied demonstrations of learning, for example, will, according to Dr. Lang, not only reduce the opportunities for cheating but also enhance student learning. A plenary panel of college and university faculty followed up on the keynote by discussing the ways in which they have attempted and/or hope to implement some of Dr. Lang's strategies in their own classrooms. Two other similar panels, comprised of faculty from UNI and other colleges in Iowa, shared their ideas, desires, and struggles in addressing student integrity as well. A luncheon panel of students offered their impressions of academic integrity and cheating, and reacted to video vignettes on those topics. And in other sessions throughout the day, faculty and students shared their ideas on how to prevent and address cheating in the classroom, on building an ethical campus culture, communicating science with integrity, conducting research with vulnerable children, teaching international students, writing with integrity, and the results of research on factors contributing to faculty research misconduct.

4. This forum is intended to spark a wider discussion on these issues among UNI faculty, administrators, staff, and students. Authors from the different plenary panels of the day were invited to discuss the ideas they presented at the conference as a way of encouraging others to join in the conversation and facilitate conversations of their own across campus. These conversations, we hope, will also lead to a careful examination of our current culture at UNI and how it promotes or impedes integrity, and to extensive strategizing and implementation of new ideas for encouraging integrity at all levels.

5. This effort reflects the overall purpose and mission of the UNI Center for Academic Ethics (CAE), a leading sponsor and organizer of the recent conference. Although the conference tended to focus primarily on ways to reduce student cheating, the CAE's goals are actually much broader as well as more proactive and affirmative. Our mission is to advance ethics across the academy, which means working in an interdisciplinary manner to promote integrity and ethical decision-making by everyone affiliated with the university. For students, we are not only interested in reducing cheating in the classroom, but also in helping them develop a habit of honesty that they will continue into the future as citizens and professionals. In addition to reflecting on how and why we cheat, we are even more interested in encouraging every individual on campus to ask themselves the following questions: What is integrity? What does it mean for me, in my life and work? How and why do I choose to practice integrity in my daily life and workplace activities? And how can I help others to advance their best selves as well?

6. Ayl, Gino, Barkan, & Ariely (2015) recently offered a framework for viewing and promoting integrity, comprised of three basic principles: 1) *reminding* people of moral codes through subtle cues in the environment; 2) making both good and bad behavior *visible*, to encourage peer monitoring and positive norms; and 3) helping people to practice *self-engagement* so that they connect their desires to be honest with their actual behavior, in order to help them resist temptations to misbehave. I believe this framework represents one approach to building a culture of integrity that emphasizes the kind of positive, affirming, and proactive strategies that the Center hopes to facilitate.

7. When my children were teenagers, I remember encouraging them to practice integrity as a way to build their own character and become someone that they could admire. Although their responses at the time tended to be along the lines of "whatever," I still believe that we should all strive for integrity not

only to make the world a better place but also to simply like ourselves at the end of the day. And I believe that we have an obligation to address this with each other and our students as an issue which is just as important as teaching them to communicate, think critically, and solve problems.

8. In addition to reading and reflecting on the following essays, I encourage you to visit the Center's website at www.uni.edu/ethics and/or to get in touch with me or another member of the Leadership Team to talk about how you can become engaged on this issue, access resources, or simply participate in the conversations that we're having. Together, we can foster an environment that reflects and affirms our values, including the highest standards of integrity in scholarship.

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