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We Should Have High Standards for all Students, Not Just Those at Harvard

September 25, 2012

Note: While on sabbatical, Dr. Comstock is working as the Director of the Executive Leadership Group at the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C.

After nearly a decade as a chief academic officer, I got used to people asking me my opinion on higher education issues. But now that I am working at the American Council on Education, the questions are more far reaching. For example, recently, someone asked me what I thought should be done about the cheating scandal at Harvard.

Of course, I do not have insider information about the alleged cheating at Harvard. So I can't really address that issue directly.

But I remain troubled by the question.

The "what should we do about cheating at Harvard" question implies that we have higher expectations for academic integrity at our elite colleges and universities than we do for students at the nearly 4,000 other higher education institutions in our country. And that question also implies that we expect students at our elite colleges to come of age without making mistakes typically associated with that process. So the story is that in a Harvard Introduction to Congress class of 279 students, about half may have engaged in plagiarism and "inappropriate collaboration" on a take-home final exam.

The first thing I thought when reading about this issue in the [Washington Post](#) was that 279 is a really large class size. But that is an issue for a different blog post.

When asked about the issue, I said that traditional students at elite schools are, in many ways, not much different from traditional students at other schools. They are between the ages of 18-24.... they are coming of age.... they are testing their value structure.... learning who they are.... and shaping the kind of adult they will become. They will make mistakes and they should face the appropriate consequences. But it is not surprising that some of the most important lessons in their young lives will be learned the hard way. Such was the case with nearly everyone I know, myself included.

But still the probes went further: "Shouldn't we have a higher standard for students at Harvard?"

Absolutely not, I replied.

For if we hold Harvard students to a higher standard, then we are conversely holding all other students to a lower standard. And our students deserve more respect from us than that. And so do the families that raised them.

The hard-working, talented students across this country – whether they attend elite institutions, community colleges, small liberal arts schools, comprehensive universities, research universities, land grant institutions or non-traditional programs deserve to be held to high standards of performance and academic integrity.

This is a key element in the definition of quality education across all sectors of higher education.

Most faculty members quickly learn that, given the support they need, most students rise to the level of challenge and personal expectations we set for them. So since not all students can or should attend Harvard, I think it is best that we don't hold Harvard students to a higher standard. Rather, let's expect the best from all of our students.

Jayne Marie Comstock