

When Will We Be Ready for Academic Integrity?

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Abstract: The academic dental community has been taken aback by recent events involving student cheating. Several of these events have served as the catalyst for a number of recent journal articles on the subject, providing an invaluable overview of the problems. There have also been several articles over the last few years that have considered student behavior and how institutions can address professionalism. Unfortunately, administrations can only do so much with their policies and curricula, which is why this article is directed toward the individuals that have the most influence on how policies are administered, curricula are implemented, and students are directed: that is, the faculty. This article discusses various ways faculty members can become more intimately involved in the development of professionalism at their institutions and encourages the creation of a four-year program that establishes a culture of professionalism.

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Recent events have served to focus, or perhaps refocus, professional schools on the issues surrounding academic integrity. The academic community has always been challenged with creating and upholding an atmosphere of academic integrity, and although the title of this article might lead one to believe that the authors think higher education is not doing anything to promote academic integrity, we do not. All centers of higher education express their values and expectations by stating that they want students to attain the highest academic achievement through individual hard work and personal integrity. But then there is the question of why there are continued reports of cheating at (what is perceived by many) alarming levels involving students from across the nation.¹⁻⁷ In a recent overview of the current status of professionalism in dental education,⁸⁻¹⁰ Masella, Botto, and Patthoff very effectively described the various components that affect our students' professional behavior as well as address the many ways dental institutions are attempting to address these issues. We agree with Masella's suggestion that multiple forms of professionalism should surround every aspect of the student's educational experiences from the ad-

ministration and faculty to professional experiences that are measured in each semester. Unfortunately, based on the apparent problem, it appears that many institutions are continuing to behave by doing the same things over and over and expecting different results (Ben Franklin's definition of insanity). However, rather than write one more article about how professional institutions need to change, this article is being written to challenge the faculty to become more involved.

The Magnitude of the Problem

A review of the literature indicates that there is no lack of reports demonstrating issues of cheating. Several studies have reported that 70 to 80 percent of students have admitted to some form of cheating in undergraduate schools.^{11,12} These reports typically go on to say that there is more cheating occurring on written assignments than during exams, which also suggests that students perceive a difference between the two types of assessment. Apparently students rationalize their behavior by thinking that cheating

on written assignments is not as unethical as cheating on exams. Multiple reasons have been given by the students for cheating; for example, cheating is necessary because academics are too competitive, everyone else is cheating, the faculty don't care, this class is boring, there's no real harm done, etc.¹¹

But in professional schools, is it not true that the average student is more mature and, therefore, has developed a higher moral value?¹³ Studies that have looked at graduate students or students in professional programs show that the prevalence of cheating may be less than in undergraduate programs (45 to 56 percent),¹⁴ but clearly still exists at levels that are unacceptable.^{12,15-17} With the explosion of technological devices such as cell phones, MP3 players, PalmPilots, etc., there has also been a concern that cheating is increasing. Although we were unable to find any data to support a correlation between cheating and technology, it seems logical that if one were inclined to cheat in the first place, whatever means available would be used. This seems to be validated by a recent presentation by L. Boudreaux (at an "Informational Technology Conference" held on the campus of Texas A&M University in February 2007) at which data collected from over 14,000 students on three different campuses over several years were presented. When describing the different ways that students have used to cheat, Boudreaux mentioned approximately thirty methods, of which roughly a third were technologically based. Although no data were shown to indicate which methods were used the most, the point is that students who feel they need to cheat have numerous alternatives at their disposal.

Students' approach to academic integrity is reflected in their peer group. Several studies have characterized different generational peer groups and their values.¹⁸ The more senior educators were initially challenged to adapt their teaching styles to the baby boomers (postwar generation born 1946 to 1960), whereas the faculty now are challenged to adapt their teaching styles to fit groups that for the most part have been referred to as either the Gen Xers (born 1965 to 1982) or the Millennials (born 1982 to 1991 and also referred to as Gen Y).¹⁶ The Gen Xers are beginning to give way to the Millennials in the professional schools, and this group is characterized by its members' respect for education and eagerness to learn. They are also characterized as trustworthy and intolerant of cheating,^{18,19} yet, at the same time, student cheating has been reported as increasing by McCabe and colleagues at the Center for Academic

Integrity,²⁰ revealing an ethically diverse set of students. What this implies is that, for these students, cheating is often viewed as situational (moral relativism), and, in many cases, students do not consider cheating to be a big deal.¹¹ However, if these students are challenged to consider academic integrity as a valued part of their education, we can appeal to their general respect for education and learning. We should also appeal to their common sense values in a way that embraces a diverse or open pluralism,²¹ so that we can help our students develop a healthy sense of professionalism.

Faculty Involvement

When new faculty are hired, they often have reservations regarding what is expected of them in the classroom and how to clearly state the institution's expectations of academic integrity. Faculty members all too often have the perception that, if they confront a student about cheating, their institution will not support them and their student evaluations will suffer. These issues are critical to faculty involvement. First, if their perceptions are real, it is highly unethical for an institution to not support their faculty following a properly documented infraction of academic integrity or professionalism. The hope is that this is a misperception by a few faculty; however, it is also suggested that if this is considered an issue, the faculty members should present their concerns to the administration through their local faculty governance body.

As for the second issue, concerning the students, faculty from various institutions around the country have expressed that students appreciate those faculty who create a safe and secure testing environment. To emphasize this point, we recently took part in an informal discussion in which students expressed their appreciation for faculty who upheld a standard of honesty and integrity and disdain for those faculty who did not. The students further stated that they felt that not creating such an atmosphere of academic integrity served to dilute their hard work and personal accomplishments.

What Can Be Done?

It has been suggested that the approach to this problem should be addressed at several different levels. The first part of the issue can be addressed through

structured formal courses that guide and develop our students along the path to professionalism.^{22,23} This, in fact, is how many schools have addressed some of these issues through their ethics courses. The second approach is that the faculty need to establish an environment that upholds the institution's policies. Most professional schools already have several policies in place, but ultimately it is up to the faculty to clearly state expectations and uphold and model these policies to develop a healthy sense of professionalism in our students. One way this can be accomplished, for example, is by making professionalism a part of students' grade during their clinical training. It should be obvious how important professionalism is when it concerns patients and their care. This is not a new idea and has already been adopted by several dental schools. Having a system in which part of the students' grade is based on their professional behavior clearly communicates the expectations and rewards of professional behavior. This type of system has the added benefit of helping shape the students' approach to comprehensive patient care. However, there is no reason not to make professionalism part of the students' grades throughout their four years of training, so that expectations are continuously stated and supported and professionalism is rewarded. This could be introduced during the first day of class or during a separate orientation venue in which the expectation of academic integrity is outlined. This introduction has to be followed by the faculty reminding students in each class of the school's expectations, including within all laboratory settings. A professionalism form could be developed and used throughout all clinical and laboratory settings, whether we are referring to third- or fourth-year patient clinics, preclinical laboratories, or even the first-year gross anatomy laboratory. Respect for patients, faculty, and student colleagues can be assessed, and when problems arise, they can be noted for individual guidance.

This brings up the pressures placed on students by dental school curricula. These pressures are felt during every aspect of dental education, from the heavily laden basic sciences, integration of the basic and clinical sciences, and preclinical laboratory followed by the introduction to patients in the clinic, to providing the necessary clinical experiences to ultimately earn the dental degree.²⁴ Along with these pressures and in view of recent events,¹⁻⁷ it would seem possible that some of our more technologically savvy students might take advantage of any opportunities that became available. These events have made

it abundantly clear that faculty need to be attentive to the clinical pressures posed by our curricula and continually vigilant as we move toward digitally based records that include both student procedures and patient records.

It should also be incumbent on course directors to make sure that all of their faculty get in the habit of reminding students about the school's expectations before every exam and that academic integrity is a shared student/faculty responsibility. One easy way to do this would be to state the school's honor code or policy on a cover sheet for every exam; also, the place where the student typically puts his or her name could easily be changed to a signature (or electronic signature for institutions using digital exams) agreeing to the policy. This practice would support data that indicate students are more likely to abide by an honor code when reminded before an exam.^{25,26}

Another suggestion would be for the faculty to participate in the creation of a uniform school policy concerning plagiarism, test policies, and clinical procedures. For example, faculty could create an environment that does not promote cheating by allowing students to bring only a pencil to their exams or nothing for those exams being given in a computer testing facility. Tests should be proctored by more than one faculty member, along with the creation of multiple exam forms given to students sitting in randomly assigned seats. The advent of electronic testing should dictate the inclusion of resident software that locks down the computer so that students can not exit the exam until they are finished. The institution's policies and procedures could be visited annually to calibrate faculty by either an academic dean or faculty designate, thereby creating and maintaining an institutional culture of academic integrity. As one example of this, the University of Illinois at Chicago dental school has taken an additional step toward empowering the faculty and creating an institutional culture by recently instituting a faculty code of ethics to add to its student ethics code.²⁷

Developing methods that consistently support the institution's academic integrity policies should be considered wherever possible. However, the idea of creating an institutional culture of integrity is not new. A system-wide approach to formalizing different ethics courses and modeling ethical behavior has been suggested.²⁸ An institutional assessment has been proposed as a means to begin a comprehensive look at where a school's strengths are and where additional support needs to be considered.²⁹ With these

general guidelines, faculty should be developing different professionalism tools throughout the curriculum to let our students see that professionalism goes beyond just the care of patients, but should be acknowledged throughout the student's entire dental school tenure. If this were done by every institution in the academic community, it would, in essence, formalize academic expectations nationally. This is why we suggest that the faculty need to take charge of their school's process at every level, from curricular changes to classroom policies. This idea demands leadership by faculty to help shape their students' approach to the profession and help maintain the honor of the profession.

Conclusion

Although reports of cheating are nothing new to academics, the continued reports of student cheating in our academic institutions (as high as 70 percent in some reports) demonstrate a clear need to develop a strong culture of professionalism and academic integrity. Since the faculty are a major part of the solution, we believe it is incumbent on the faculty to uphold their institutions' integrity and the professional field they represent. By clearly communicating the faculty's expectations through the establishment of policies and rewards during students' dental school tenure, faculty members can provide the means to guide our students in developing a sound awareness of their relationship to their patients, their colleagues, and themselves.

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