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## Promoting Academic Integrity in Health Occupations Education

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Promoting Academic Integrity in  
Health Occupations Education

Steven B. Dowd<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: This article reviews the concept of academic integrity and its promotion by health occupations education faculty. Academic integrity is the use of a student's own work only; thus, an absence of any form of cheating or plagiarism is assumed. Since a lack of academic integrity can translate into later unethical behaviors by students in clinical settings, health occupations teachers have an obligation to promote academic integrity and prevent student cheating. In addition to reviewing concepts of academic integrity and plagiarism, this article provides specific recommendations for health occupations education programs.

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Preserving academic integrity has been a challenge since the beginning of formal education. Academic integrity is deceptively easy to define in terms of its essence--the absence of cheating--but difficult to define in terms of deeper issues. It has been noted, however, that this is a problem on the rise (Prescott, 1989). **Health** occupations programs are especially aware of the problem, as unethical classroom behaviors have been proven to correlate with unethical clinical behaviors (Sierles, Hendrick, & Circle, 1980; Hilbert, 1985).

Bradshaw and Lowenstein (1990) offer the following argument for the pursuit of academic honesty by faculty, despite the fact that it can be a complicated and disheartening task:

A high level of integrity is required for professional nursing practice, and the foundation for ethical behavior is established during the educational process. Although faculty facilitate learning, students must accept the primary responsibility for professional development. Students who are deliberately dishonest in their school work show a lack of integrity that will affect their nursing practice. Faculty who do not confront or follow through on academic dishonesty are not fulfilling the facilitative role. (p. 14)

#### Issues Surrounding Academic Integrity

In order to promote academic integrity, three questions must be answered on the issues surrounding the problem. First, how often and why do students cheat? Second, what are the environmental factors affecting cheating behavior? Third, how can we minimize cheating behavior while fostering integrity?

### How Often Does Cheating Occur?

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If cheating occurred only in isolation, it would not receive the attention it has from academics. In his research at a community college, Dowd (1992) found that 67% of faculty respondents to his survey had observed cases of cheating in the past year, with 19% indicating it had happened seven or more times in that year. Other researchers have had similar findings, with Jendrek (1989) reporting a 60% faculty observance of cheating in a midwestern public university, and Wright and Kelly (1974) reporting a 65% rate in a liberal arts college. Research data on faculty reporting student cheating to appropriate authorities were cited by Wright and Kelly (1974) as 15% of faculty, by Nuss (1989) as 39% of faculty, and by Dowd (1992) as 18% of faculty. Hardy (1982) argued that faculty were afraid of lawsuits and preferred to deal with students on a one-by-one basis or look the other way when cheating occurred. This latter action is obviously untenable in health occupations education. However, Raffetto (1985) found that if administration fails to back up faculty, faculty will rarely report cheating.

### Why Do Students Cheat?

Beyond the obvious desire to perform better, it is not clear why students cheat. Some identify that poor college policy allows students to cheat (Carmack, 1984). Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, and Clark (1986) report that it is immaturity, and Fass (1986) as well as Stem and Havlicek (1986) blame society. That is, public figures cheat, and often succeed. Davis (1993) states simply that cheating is performed to improve grades. He suggests that cheating will not be curtailed until students understand it deprives them of opportunities to test their own competency.

Shaughnessy (1988) noted that “empirical research and theorizing about cheating behaviors are scanty and inconclusive” (p. 2). Thus educators must pay attention to both those factors that can cause cheating in their own classrooms as well as the broader reasons for cheating. Students view cheating quite differently from faculty (Stem & Havlicek, 1986). Copying answers is obviously cheating, but what constitutes, for example, plagiarism? Can a student, for example, consult another student’s term paper for help?

### Environmental Factors in Cheating

Houston (1986) has amassed in a ten year period a substantial amount of data regarding the environmental attributes conducive to cheating, and has found that:

1. There is a positive correlation between cheating and the subject’s acquaintanceship with the person in the next seat.
2. There is a relationship between the use of multiple test forms and the reduction of cheating,
3. Subjects that feel they have poor study conditions are more likely to cheat.
4. Cheaters do not perform better on exams.
5. Cheating increases with an increased class size.

Instructors can use a variety of techniques to detect cheating. Frary (1993) noted the use of various statistical techniques to detect the copying of multiple-choice answers. He discusses a variety of reasons why instructors do not implement these techniques, time being the primary reason. Teachers, especially those in vocational areas such as health occupations, are typically very busy and do not feel they have the time to police students.

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Ferrell (Ferrell & Ferguson, 1993) developed a test **called** the Academic Misconduct Survey (AMS) that reveals students' propensity for various types of misconduct. They feel this form may be used to investigate incidents of academic misconduct in students who will be employed in fields, such as teaching, that **will** require high levels of competence and personal integrity. Although **Ferrell** and Ferguson tested graduate students, a **modified** version may prove useful in health occupations education.

### Means of Minimizing Cheating and Promoting Integrity

Warner (1971), in an article for **radiologic** technology educators, reported that the burden rests squarely on the instructor's shoulders. She believes that otherwise good people can act aberrantly under stress. The educational environment, especially in health occupations education, is often stressful. This stress is very new to many students, and they may act incorrectly when, under normal circumstances, they would have acted ethically. She firmly states that "if cheating is a function of the personality structure of the student and the school accepts such an individual, the school has an obligation to provide an environment which will maximize the student's maturation" (p. 131). Warner noted that educators often react emotional] y to student cheating. What is most dangerous, she notes, is the tendency to label the student, which can prove detrimental in the long-term student-teacher relationship.

In nursing education, Booth and Hoyer (1992) reported that the ethical principles of **deontology** (duty) should guide the instructor in making decisions about cheating. The four ethical principles of deontology include autonomy, beneficence, **nonmaleficence**, and justice. The following material from Table **I** of their article illustrates the ethical application of

autonomy to academic integrity, and would make an excellent resource in a course covering ethics.

Individual nurses need to function autonomously and to govern themselves using standards of practice as guidelines. It is unthinkable that any faculty would have to continually monitor or to be the watchdog of students in relation to professional behaviors. The individual student who has achieved a high level of moral development and embraced ethical principles will adopt the rules and regulations of an ethical institution. The student can then make those personal ethical principles operational within the organization. (p. 89)

Covering academic integrity in classroom discussions of ethics is probably the best long-term solution to cheating. Davis (1993) noted that only by developing in students an internalized code of ethics can cheating be effectively deterred. Booth and Hoyer (1992) also have developed a useful decision tree for faculty based on whether a complaint is minor, moderate, or severe, outlining possible actions.

#### Recommendations

Based on a review of the literature and personal research in dealing with academic integrity, the following recommendations are offered for health occupations programs:

1. Faculty must realize that they serve as role models. For example, such behavior as violation of copyright law may signal to **students** that they, **also**, have the right to cheat. An instructor who regularly photocopies materials from texts and magazines without securing permission is indicating to students that unethical behavior is acceptable. Students may not

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understand all the ins and outs of copyright law, but they know that copying consumable workbooks or multiple chapters from saleable texts is wrong.

2. Faculty must teach students how not and why not to cheat. Policies and standards should be part and parcel of the catalog and/or student handbook. Stem and **Havlicek** (1986) stated that faculty must confront misconduct as part of their role as educators, and demand honorable behavior on the part of students. This includes teaching **students** proper ethical behaviors (**Swazey, Louis, and Anderson, 1994**).

3. Policies must empower **both** students and faculty. Policy must be a collaborative effort of administration, faculty, and students. It is a mistake to develop a policy that appears to disempower faculty or students. **Bailey (1990)** noted that we must collaborate to “arrive at solutions which foster professional, academic, and ethical growth” (p. 35).

4. Policies must be clear. but also **freely** adaptable for the special needs of faculty and programs. **Prescott (1989)** stated that over-regulation “creates an environment stifling to scientific enterprise” (p. 287).

5. Once a policy is in place, administration must **support** faculty. Faculty should not be crippled by fear. **Prescott (1989)** noted that the lack of such commitment has rendered many institutions with long-established policies ineffective in policing dishonesty.

6. The environmental reasons for cheating must be minimized. **Fass (1986)** reported that “attention to faculty **practices** and to the classroom environment should be a part of every institution’s strategy for eliminating academic dishonesty” (p. 33).

7. Well-defined policies should curb our concern with lawsuits, which are a real fear, but are unlikely to occur due to the time and **effort** involved. **Zelenski (1988)** found that



well-defined integrity policies usually keep colleges out of court. Roberts (1986) found that in such cases, courts are generally deferential to the judgments of academicians. Mohn (1993) noted that the case Connellv. The University of Vermont and State Agricultural College established a basis for courts avoiding judicial interference **in** the educational process unless the decision “was motivated by arbitrariness, capriciousness, or bad faith” (p. 63).

8. The promotion of integrity should always come **first**. The program that polices without teaching **integrity** will have **only** superficial success in eliminating dishonesty.

An example is in order regarding the last item. Dowd (1992) reported in a case study the value of promoting integrity over policing cheating. He cited the following two actions as violations of academic integrity:

1. Intentional] y using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information or study aids in any academic exercise, including placement, proficiency, and CLEP tests.
2. Intentionally falsifying or inventing information or citations in an academic exercise.

(p. 14)

But rather than cite violations. a more positive approach is to cite examples of academic integrity:

1. On] y using authorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise, including placement, proficiency, and **CLEP** tests.
2. **Only** using true information and recognized citations in an academic exercise. (p.14)

#### The Special Problem of Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a special problem in teaching, primarily because it is sometimes poorly understood (or at least, ill-defined) by both students and faculty. Hawley (1984) noted that

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the primary problem from a student perspective is what appears to be deceit can instead be ignorance. There are also cultural differences in regard to plagiarism, which may complicate matters as American society becomes more multi-cultural. Three studies (Uhlig and Howes, 1967; Skom, 1986; Peterson, 1986) provide a good deal of evidence that students who plagiarize:

1. do not understand basic documentation;
2. have little or no understanding of scholarly referencing;
3. do not understand what constitutes ethical behavior in the academic setting; and
4. in general, do not have a sufficient grasp of appropriate behavior.

Recently, Bradshaw and Lowenstein (1990) stated that faculty appear to believe students enter programs with certain background knowledge. They often assume that this includes knowledge of documentation and referencing. This, however, is rarely the case, with knowledge levels varying from student to student. However, they also found that plagiarism in an absolute sense is a form of lying, because the student turns in work that is taken from others and is presented as the student's own. The following list describes behaviors that can lead to a suspicion of plagiarism:

1. The topic prepared by the student is loosely related to course work or assignment. Also, the work submitted may not correspond to the instructor's guidelines. In this case, the paper may be a resubmitted original or a version from another course. This can be, given the above circumstances, a grey area in academic dishonesty.
2. The writing style is not representative of the student's usual capabilities. In such a case, the student may have secured editorial help.

3. The references used by the student are unusual or hard to verify. A trick some students practice is using three or four references, but plagiarizing heavily from an uncited text.

4. The student cannot discuss the submitted work sensibly or fully. One way to combat plagiarism on assigned papers is to have students present a brief oral overview of the paper to the class, complete with a question/answer period.

5. The topic chosen or references used are not current. This often indicates that the student has secured a term paper from another source.

6. Most importantly, remember that any one incident, unless flagrant, is usually only enough to provide a suspicion of plagiarism.

Thus interfaculty communication is imperative. In sequential or team-taught courses, such as those often found in health occupations education, faculty must communicate with each other about suspicions of plagiarism. This not only alerts other faculty, it can also help faculty come to a consensus on what constitutes plagiarism.

According to Skom (1986), faculty who avoid confronting students about plagiarism may promote poor student judgement. Baumeister and Scher (1988) also stated that poor judgement will lead students to plagiarize. This poor judgement consists of taking risks that can lead to short-term benefits (passing the class assignment) while ignoring long-term risks. For health occupations students, the primary long-term risk is not knowing the correct course of action in a patient care situation. Confrontation will send a clear message that faculty are serious about ethical behaviors and will initiate the appropriate discipline.

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The appropriate discipline may be more **difficult** to determine in plagiarism since it constitutes a range of behaviors from apparent ignorance to outright cheating. In some cases, the student may be given a lesser penalty, such as **the** opportunity to redo the work; in some cases, they may simply receive points deducted from the assignment; in others, they may fail the work or the course. Too wide a range of penalties means that actions may be viewed as arbitrary; administration must insure that penalties **are** uniform and that students receive their rights of due process.

Faculty and **administrators** often have fears of student lawsuits. This is understandable due to the time, expense, and antagonism of lawsuits, but as mentioned earlier, academic institutions tend to fare well in lawsuits. In fact, Mawdsley (1985) found that few plagiarism cases ever reach the courts. He lists the following key components to adhere to legal requirements in a plagiarism case:

1. The student must be notified as to the charge of plagiarism and the source of the plagiarized material.
2. The student should be allowed to appear before the person making the charge or a hearing panel.
3. The student should be allowed to confront or cross-examine witnesses.
4. The hearing must be impartial.
5. A decision reached can **only** be based on the evidence presented.
6. Institutional policy will dictate whether an attorney or advisor may be present.

(j). 36)

Although the definition for plagiarism seems straight forward, its practice varies among disciplines. *Canuteson* (1983) has illustrated the ambiguity in the **theft** of ideas. In philosophy, it is acceptable to appropriate anecdotes and other information in a manner that would be considered plagiarism in medical sciences. A defense of Dr. Martin Luther King, who was accused of plagiarizing passages from **Tillich** in his doctoral dissertation, indicates that this was not a case of plagiarism but an acceptable **borrowing** that would have been obvious to his readers. On the other extreme, **Griffin** (1991) recommended that even short quotations from an author's own previously published work should be set off in quotation marks, referenced back to the original article, and extensive borrowing done only with permission of the publisher and proper citation.

It is obvious that buying a term paper is plagiarism. But what if the student in the earlier example had merely used the **first** paper as a reference? Some faculty **would** consider that an unacceptable **borrowing**. The best defense against plagiarism is **defining** the concept to students as definitively as possible.

#### Conclusion

Problems of plagiarism and other deficits in academic integrity are not likely to disappear in the near future. Health occupations teachers have a special responsibility in combatting cheating and fostering ethical behaviors in their students. Patients under the care of an unethical practitioner will be the final, tragic losers in cases of failure to promote academic integrity. In ethics, a well known concept is the slippery slope--when one act leads to another at an **accelerating** rate, until one is **sliding** out of **control** (**Towsley &**

Cunningham, 1994). This article presents some means to help faculty help their students avoid the slippery slope of academic dishonesty, and focus instead on academic integrity.

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