

Reframing Academic Honesty

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Covered in ivy and bathed in afternoon sunshine, Pangloss State University is a perfect setting for students and faculty engaged in learning and the cultivation of talents, taste, and humankind's higher powers. Students come from all parts of the globe, eager to investigate topics in areas as diverse as chemical engineering and English literature. Professors look forward to classes with these students, and thus spend a great deal of time revising their pedagogies, developing lesson plans, and reading student papers. Administrators see only cheery students headed down the halls toward professors' offices for extended office hours. The department heads, dean, and president have few fires to put out or even knotty issues to negotiate, save the good-natured request of a faculty member needing another chair to accommodate the overflow of students attending her office hours, or the senior professor asking for funds to attend a workshop on transformational pedagogy during spring break.

Awake now, readers, from this dream, which in part you may have held when you first decided to embark upon your academic career. I know I envisioned something like this when I studied philosophy and religion at a liberal arts college. Listen to the perceptive and data-based reflections of Charles Howell on the learning landscapes of higher education today. In "The Moral and Organizational Implications of Cheating in College," Howell looks at all these players in today's higher education: students, professors, administrators, trustees, and the various publics who pay for state-supported institutions, as well as those of us who support or have supported private institutions of higher education. Like Howell, I am keenly interested in conceptual aspects of higher education, particularly its moral landscape. Also, like Howell, I am a department head. As I assess his excellent essay, I will point out major points that bear further scrutiny and reflection.

Howell's eyes and ears are wide open to the realities of today's higher education. He begins by stating, "Cheating by college students is endemic." Rather than croak a "get off my lawn" admonition to the "younger generation" about moral failings or hearken to a lustrous bygone era of rectitude, Howell notes that what constitutes cheating is up for discussion. There are different cultural and institutional norms that determine who is a cheater and what constitutes academic dishonesty. For instance, in some cultures, helping another on a paper or even a test is considered support, not dishonesty. Elaborate practices of sharing test answers by certain international students that aim to ensure high grades, even on proctored examinations, are likewise seen as cultural solidarity.¹

Howell points out that moral declamation about cheating does not go far toward helping us to understand the issue. The strength of his essay lies in its claim that there are two interdependent elements of academic dishonesty: though one of these elements is indeed moral, the other is organizational and structural. In other words,

Howell contends that the organization and structure of colleges provide a fertile ground in which cheating prospers. These structural and organizational elements must be examined and changed in order to eliminate what he calls the “moral hazards” of higher education for all the parties involved.

Howell clearly lays out the elements of structure and organization in higher education that are inimical to moral development. Students have the least power in this system. When presented with trivial busywork, or irrelevant or poorly designed assignments, they may feel that nothing is wrong with cheating to get a good grade. A student may reason, “If the professor can’t be bothered to give me an assignment that is worth my time, why should I bother to study for it, when a shortcut will do?” Howell asserts: “If students do not see that academic tasks are important or valid, moral arguments will not be persuasive.” So students are left in what Howell terms a “morally free zone” where learning is commodified and unprincipled.

Howell calls for a fresh analysis of this situation by using organizational science to lay bare what he calls an agency problem, namely, “a case in which interests of cooperating parties diverge and they do not all share the same information.” Howell thus brackets morality, for the time being, until we can see what is causing undesired processes and outcomes.

Howell does not make explicit much of what underlies student interests. Students cannot be assumed to just care about learning; they are naturally interested in other things, such as completing the course, finishing college on time, pleasing their parents, and becoming successful in the first steps of a career upon graduation.² Nor does Howell focus on extramural factors that contribute to the structure and organization of higher education, such as credentialist³ or consumerist trends within society that see education as product, not process.⁴

Howell sees that pedagogical practices of many professors, such as high-stakes information-recall tests and transmissionist pedagogies, allow students to take advantage of “information asymmetry” to gain a desired result. The professor is unaware of student cheating if he or she merely assigns a paper, and does not compare the prose on the paper handed in to the student’s own capabilities, or does not do a plagiarism check on the paper by pasting chunks of text into Google or using plagiarism-detection software such as Turnitin. Howell proposes that different, multistage pedagogies be adopted to allow instructors to see the development of a student’s intellect and understanding over time. Instructor feedback on the stages of an assignment, such as drafts of papers or steps in a group project, allow both parties to appreciate and understand the thinking that the instructor uses in curriculum development and the student uses in knowledge mastery.

Howell is correct to see that this kind of teaching is difficult to enact in today’s institutions of higher education. With the possible exception of a handful of small liberal arts colleges devoted to teaching, the vast majority of colleges and universities, especially large comprehensive and research-oriented universities, are eager to find ways to maximize outputs, such as student credit hours, per unit of instructional

cost. If larger classes can be taught by contingent faculty, so the thinking goes, then tenure-track faculty can focus on graduate education and funded research.

Howell counters the view that academic dishonesty is merely a supposed moral failing, a loss of moral fiber in society, or an outcome of credentialism, consumerism, or corporate higher education. He argues instead that the way in which institutions of higher education are structured and organized presents moral hazards for all participants, whether students, faculty, administrators, trustees, or outside citizens. Cheating and academic dishonesty are encouraged or at least given support, however tacitly, rather than being identified as dysfunctional behavior that should be remedied so that intellectual energies can be redirected. Improving the situation by introducing transformative and multistage pedagogies is a tough road to travel.

In my university, such changes in policy and procedure would be nearly impossible to enact. Widespread student learning, especially the kind that comes from the multistage pedagogies Howell discusses, is not a major performance outcome of my university in spite of official rhetoric and well-publicized celebrations of teaching. For every award or recognition of teaching, there is a larger emphasis upon seeking out and enacting models of efficient and cost-effective pedagogical delivery, such as online master's degrees and large introductory lecture classes aided by classroom response systems and bubble-sheet assessments. Intensive one-on-one apprenticeship learning is present in certain graduate programs, though not in most of the cash-cow non-thesis option master's programs at my university and elsewhere.

Ultimately, it is easier and cheaper to array the dean of students's office with staff, pamphlets, and websites devoted to academic honesty, and to deal with the students who get caught cheating and mete out punishment, than it is to understand and remedy structural causes for cheating and convince professors and teaching assistants to spend more of their time developing multistage assignments. We are not ready for academic honesty to be analyzed and treated as anything other than a moral problem, at least for now, and the structural and organizational issues that Howell raises in this fine essay will regrettably be granted little or no attention.

1. Heather K. Webb, "Academic Dishonesty and the International Student: Are International Students Different from Domestic Students?" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2006).

2. See Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), for a description of the multiple and competing interests and obligations of today's college student. Nathan, an anthropology professor who attended her own university as a full-time beginning student, saw firsthand why many students do not do required course assignments such as readings.

3. David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

4. Alex Molnar, *School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity* (New York: Routledge, 2005).