

Ruth N. Henry

Where Is the Honor?

A student in a sophomore literature class bought a term paper through the internet. A senior turned in another student's lab report with his name on it. A freshman history student used text messages on her cell phone to get test answers from her friend across the room. Her classmate's answers were correct, because she had taken a picture of the study guide with her cell-phone camera before the test. An algebra student with a programmable calculator retrieved the equations he needed to work the problems on a test.

What do all of these students have in common? They are all cheating, although they are doing so in nontraditional ways. None of these five students has ever copied answers from another student's exam just by sneaking a glance across the aisle. In fact, some of these students do not consider themselves "cheaters" at all — so what are they thinking?

It is hard to say what they are thinking, but what is clear is that they are not thinking about integrity. Integrity has become an out-of-date virtue to many people in academics and in the business world. Students are simply doing what it takes to "make the grade" — often in response to pressure from parents, graduate school admission standards that they will face in the future, and scholarship requirements that they must meet each semester.

At the private, church-affiliated university where I teach, we worked with the Center for Academic Integrity to conduct a web-based survey of our faculty and students concerning cheating practices. While we found that our cheating rates were slightly below those of other schools across the country, we were not pleased with our findings. We found that, while very few students reported actually copying answers on a test, unauthorized collaboration on assignments, plagiarism, and other nontraditional forms of cheating were much more prevalent. According to Don McCabe, who developed the Academic Integrity survey, this is a nationwide trend.

In response to our findings, a committee of concerned faculty at our university took a full year to study our survey results, interview our students and faculty, and research academic-integrity policies at other universities. As a result of our efforts, we have found that college faculty can take several steps to maximize honesty on campus.

- Communicate! Talk to the students about integrity. Let them know that you expect their best effort. Define what your policies are for each assignment in each class. While collaboration is encouraged on some assignments, it is strictly forbidden in others. Communicate clearly to them what is acceptable.
- Make it easier for your students to do the right thing. Even if your school has an honor code that encourages teachers to leave the room during exams, do not do it! According to the students we surveyed, the teacher's absence increases the likelihood that they will be tempted to cheat. Also, teachers can give alternate forms of the same exam; with today's software programs, it is easy to scramble questions and make a different form for each row of students. Do not allow cell phones, hats with bills, or programmable calculators during exams.
- Try to develop a campus culture where cheating is unacceptable. This may involve an institutional-integrity policy, a clear statement of the institution's academic-integrity policies, or consistently enforced sanctions for integrity violations. Do not rely on your school's honor code to reduce dishonesty if it is based on students turning in their peers for cheating. Research has proved that, even if students do not approve of unethical behavior, they will not betray their classmates.
- Model personal integrity for your students. Be honest in your dealings with them and employ impartial, appropriate assessment techniques. If we as teachers misrepresent data on a research project, use unjust grading procedures, or fail to treat all students fairly and equally, what are we showing them about our own integrity?

We live in an imperfect world populated by people with human shortcomings, where pressures abound, business and political role models are corrupt, and good role models are rare. Although the academic environment is far from being a perfect world, the decision to be honest is still made individually by each student; we as faculty members can influence our students to take that decision seriously and to take pride in their own integrity.

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Philosophical Limits: A Question of Ethics*

Unfettered investigation is the realm of philosophy. Among the many goals of a college-level introduction to philosophy is to allow students to question even their most tightly held beliefs, to doubt what they had before considered indubitable. Over the semester of such an introductory philosophy course, professors hope their students glean an appreciation for and understanding of different positions, a respect for the force of reason, and a healthy skepticism. Success, for a philosophy professor, is a student who sees the world differently, who reasons more tightly, who reads and listens both more curiously and more questioningly.

But success does not always occur by the end of the undergraduate semester, and most philosophy professors realize that. Many students no doubt leave with more questions than they entered with — either they have come to doubt the too-easy answers that they had been given previously, or they have faced issues that they had never before considered. Either way, there is a good chance that students at the end of their semester-long philosophical experience will be more “mixed up” than when they started. Philosophy professors should not agonize over this, of course: students have plenty of time to make up their minds about the important life issues that philosophy raises. Even if students are confused now about their obligations to others, the existence of God, or what the Good Life is, they have years to decide on these important issues, and the chances are low that they will do serious harm to themselves or others while taking those years to reflect and live.

That approach is appropriate for professors at most institutions, I think, but for the past three years I have taught introductory philosophy, a course with a heavy emphasis on ethics, to sophomores at the United States Military Academy at West Point, a four-year institution the express aim of which is to graduate and commission officers into the U.S. Army. The aim of the Academy places its philosophy professors in a unique position: these cadets to whom I teach ethics may lead platoons in as little as a few years, and that fact will give pause to anyone familiar with the military. The men and women who graduate and lead platoons are some of the most powerful twenty-two and twenty-three-year-olds on the planet. They command units of about thirty soldiers, and most wield implements of destruction — rifles, tanks, and missiles. As we have seen throughout the twentieth century and most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq, they possess the potential for unimaginable evil, as well as good.

It is this consideration that draws me away from the position that I outlined earlier, the one that remains

satisfied with graduating those who are utterly confused about life’s big questions. The course I teach focuses on ethical issues, partly because ethics is the domain in which a lieutenant’s missteps are the most damaging — and deadly. We need only recall Lieutenant William Calley’s role in Vietnam’s My Lai Massacre to understand the dangers that a morally bereft platoon leader poses to noncombatants and his own soldiers. In teaching this course, I take on several mutually supporting obligations: to the nation, to the future officer, to his or her platoon, and to the people of other nations who might be helped or hurt by the officer’s decisions. Those obligations entail that I make a strenuous effort to turn my students away from ethical nihilism, for example, and that I make an unsubtle argument for the immunity of noncombatants. Such obligations also require that if cadets mention that they think that all people in a combat zone are equal, and therefore equally targetable, I try to persuade them that such is not the case. Naturally, this is only after I let their classmates persuade them, but the point is that I cannot in good conscience let such an ethical statement lie. To do so in the standard college classroom is merely to recognize the student’s continual search for moral understanding. To do so at a military academy is to invite atrocities such as those we have most recently witnessed at Abu Ghraib.

Deciding which few things are nonnegotiable in a philosophy class like this is a dicey task with potentially serious repercussions, and it is a topic worthy of serious debate. Certainly, military education should not impose religious beliefs, and my own thought is that it ought not advocate any certain ethical framework over another. The military profession has plenty of room for Kantians, utilitarians, and observers of the natural law. There are some ethical standards that must remain constant, however; the military is no place for one who disbelieves in the relevance of ethics, for example. And in the specific cases, officers not only should follow the rules that prohibit torturing and killing POWs and targeting noncombatants, but they also must to a great extent “buy into” those moral positions, as well. If they do not, they run the risk of leading themselves or their troops into atrocities. When I teach them philosophy, at least part of my aim, on behalf of the American people, is to prevent that.

* The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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