

Test Transcript – Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity in the Classroom

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I'm Buie Seawell. I teach Business Ethics and Legal Studies at the Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver.

I think all of us here are deeply concerned about the integrity of our programs, about problems with cheating, about problems with plagiarism at our university. Here's what seems to happen. A survey will be done, an article will be published, the focus will be on 50% of all students admit cheating, undergraduate.

We had a survey done last year that showed that of all the graduate programs in the United States, business students, more than any other -- law, medicine or engineering or whatever -- violated honor codes and rules of integrity. And the response to those kinds of shocking realities seem to always, at least the first response to these things, we've got to crack down, we've got to do something to enforce our Honor Code, we have to punish, without exception, people who violate the Code.

There's nothing exactly wrong with that response, except it fails to see the problem is not simply the student's problem. It is a problem of the culture of an institution. It is a problem that is as much faculty as it is student, as much staff as it is faculty and students. We are all in this community, in the same boat.

As a faculty member, the first thing to do in response to a concern about cheating in the classroom is not to play the old game of "Ain't it awful" – "Ain't it awful those students are doing that?"

No, the first response is, "What can I, as a faculty member, do to set a tone of integrity for this course?" We live in a very competitive culture. Students in this culture want to make good grades. And they sometimes will do whatever it takes to achieve them. A faculty member can change that. By taking out the syllabus on the first day as I do, and going through each of the assessment components of that syllabus. And saying, here is how I am going to do everything I can do to guarantee that this is a safe and fair, and an environment of integrity for you to do this course in. And put the students and yourself into the same perspective that it is your task together to assure that the learning in the course is as important as the grading in the course. And that the grading and evaluation in the course will be that which is done in an environment of fairness. In a safe environment, in an environment where no one has to feel that someone else is gaming the system to their disadvantage. Faculty can make such an environment.

More than that, there are cultural problems beyond the roles of the university and the classroom. And those have to do with the variety of cultures that our students come from. An example, we have many international students in the Daniels College. Many of those students are from Asian cultures. In those cultures, cooperation is valued, often more than the integrity and competition components of learning. And that cooperation is seen that is something good. The students also are at a linguistic disadvantage. They are here and they make communities of helpfulness and support among themselves. The alien components of a Western culture where everything is about individual success and competitive advantage is not something that they are comfortable with. Stressing that directly with the students, making it clear that things that they see as helpfulness might be seen as cheating is a first task of a professor in the classroom and provides a learning experience for all the students.

The thing that I care a lot about, I think it's very important that at our university has a University Honor Code and that the system is enforcing and adjudicating that code. But integrity does not come from the top down. It is important to have close environments at the college and department and classroom level where we talk about the importance of not having cheating and not having plagiarism within our system. And that it is something that we take ownership of.

One of the most successful undergraduate honor code programs in this country is in Washington and Lee University. And why is it so successful? It's because it is student-owned and student-administered. It is because it is something the students themselves equate with their learning.

Another very successful program is Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Here there is no testing whatsoever. All evaluation is personal between the student and the faculty. There are no grades. It is all about learning. It is nothing about competing for grades. And guess what? There is no problem with academic integrity.

We need to look at our culture and as faculty; we need to look at the peculiar and important role that we play in achieving a culture of integrity.