Enhancing Academic Integrity: Formulating Effective Honor Codes


Abstract: Academic integrity continues to be a source of public concern. Recently, two dental students were expelled and a third placed on probation for cheating at an eastern dental school. These students went on to sue the school for not following the due process rules stated in the student handbook, but were unsuccessful in their suit. Recent surveys indicate that cheating and other types of dishonest academic behavior on college and university campuses are increasing. Cheating is not unique to undergraduates, as surveys performed in professional programs involving dental, medical, medical residency, nursing, optometry, and pharmaceutical schools all recognized problems with cheating or other unethical conduct. The reasons for increased academic dishonesty can be related to many factors. Often discussed as causative factors are basic generational differences in values, the effect of electronic technologies on campus (such as hacking and digital term paper mills), and increased competition for grades and jobs. All of these factors can undermine a culture of academic integrity.

However, not all reports in the area of academic integrity on college campuses are negative. Recently, a survey performed by McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield found that cheating is less pervasive in institutions that have a viable honor code system in place. Thus, an honor code system appears to be one known and attainable mechanism for reducing academic dishonesty. This paper examines the importance of academic integrity in dental schools, discusses the application of honor systems to these environments, and provides guidelines for making such a code a viable part of a dental school’s institutional culture.

The Importance of Academic Integrity to the Educational Environment

True academic integrity means that there is honesty in all matters relating to endeavors of the academic environment. This multifaceted environment includes the teaching and learning of knowledge, skills, and values. The dental academic setting, as with other health care professional schools, the environment also includes rendering diagnosis and treatment and communicating with patients. Additionally, any service activity in the community made possible by the skills and qualifications of one employed or enrolled in a program of the academy is an extension of that academy. Thus, all of the traditional missions of the modern research university must be carried out with honesty and integrity.

The most commonly cited examples of breaches of academic integrity are students who cheat on examinations, plagiarize written assignments, collaborate with others when the professor has expressly forbidden that activity, or falsify institutional documents or applications to the institution. A whole new area of potential transgressions opens up when patient care is an element of the educational process.
ulty to obtain an advantage in specific clinical situations all become issues of academic integrity. Indeed any of the many aspects of patient care that would deviate from the accepted standard of care within the profession, either as defined in a state practice act or by the commonly accepted practices of the profession, are now academic violations. These can be termed unprofessional conduct, but they are still related to the basic reason that the student is enrolled in the specific academic program.

Academic integrity is a basic value of all educational programs, from the earliest preschool to the most advanced graduate or professional program. Simply put, all persons in the academy are expected to be honest. Honesty is deemed as ethical behavior. Ethical behavior supports the greatest good for the greatest number of people under the most common theory of ethics, the utilitarian theory.14

Breaches of academic integrity harm the dishonest individual, as he or she does not acquire the basic learning, skills, or knowledge. In turn, the public, which depends on the graduate to have this skill or knowledge, is harmed or at least deceived. The other students in the class are also harmed because their honest endeavors are reduced in comparison to one who competes with an unfair advantage.

Students are harmed by the dishonesty in another way. The innocent bystander who observes the act is put in the position of having to make a choice: tolerating an act of dishonesty, confronting the perpetrator, or reporting him or her to a faculty member or an honor council. If he or she does either of the later two, he or she is thus placed in the uncomfortable role of “snitch” by acting for the greater good of the entire system instead of that of the dishonest student or himself or herself.

The faculty is harmed by not knowing the true grasp of the content by the students and thus is unable to modify instruction if necessary. Lastly, the university’s reputation is harmed when the community perceives that it does not set and uphold high standards among its faculty and students. In essence, there are losers and no winners when academic dishonesty occurs.

Is Academic Dishonesty Inevitable?

A logical contributor to the rise in academic dishonesty noted in professional schools today is a change in values among the attendees. Studies document a significant increase over the past thirty years in materialism, manifest as a desire to become well off financially, among entering undergraduate students.15 Although this finding may be tempered over time and with professional training, such values are likely to also be present in students as they enter dental school.16

This single value difference may reflect a larger generational trend. Aschenbrener recommends the examination of social differences between the five currently living generations in America to understand the dental student of today.17 Those now in dental school are members of Generation X, commonly defined as being born between 1961 and 1981. The members of this generation are reputedly more technologically savvy, globally oriented, and culturally diverse than any of those before it. However, this generation has also purportedly been warned that they are the “only generation since the Civil War to be unlikely to match their parents’ economic fortunes.”18 This tends to make the generation as a whole rather nomadic. Money is very important, jobs are means to an end, and employees are interested in developing transferable skills, not loyalty to a particular institution. With such basic generational values, a lowered emphasis on personal integrity and a reduced trust of those in authority are not surprising.

Whatever the basis, the predicted effect of generational differences is supported by the current statistics on student cheating. In 1963, Bowers conducted a survey of college students and reported that 30 percent admitted to plagiarism, 26 percent to copying another student’s test or exam, and 11 percent to unauthorized collaboration.19 In 1993, Cole and McCabe repeated the survey and found that thirty years later the respective percentages of responders admitting to these same three behaviors were 26 percent, 52 percent, and 49 percent.20 Thus, in the intervening years, reported dishonest behaviors have not diminished. Further support for the existence of this problem includes a cover story in the November 1999 issue of US News and World Report that indicated 84 percent of college students believe they need to cheat to get ahead in today’s world.21

Academic dishonesty is a problem in dental schools as well. In 1998, Beemsterboer et al. conducted a survey of academic integrity in dental schools.22 Of the forty-six schools that responded, only four reported no investigations of academic dishonesty during the preceding two academic years. In the remaining forty-two schools, the number of
investigated cases ranged from one to eight. Eleven of the forty-two schools reported two investigations in the preceding two years. The most commonly alleged dishonest acts were cheating during an examination via use of illegal written material or copying from another student’s paper and forgery of a faculty signature to a patient record. So it is clear that academic integrity as a problem exists in dental schools nationwide.

The Role of Honor Codes in Reversing the Trend of Dishonesty

The past few decades have seen a rise in the use of ethical codes to set standards for a group of persons. According to DiMatteo and Wiesner, this may be a reaction to the belief that our society has been in an ethical free-fall. The perceived moral decay has been attributed to disintegration of the family unit, the decline of the Puritan work ethic, and the blind focus on the monetary bottom line in business. Moral decay is believed to be exhibited by the rise in crime, insider-trading scandals, and increase in civil litigation. Indeed, these trends may be related to the generational differences discussed above. The honor code in university environments is an attempt to counteract these general societal tendencies, encourage consistent ethical behavior, and instill a commitment to honesty and personal integrity.

Honor codes have replaced the old in loco parentis system of controlling students’ behaviors through disciplinary codes that were totally mandated, policed, and enforced by the administration and faculty. Under this doctrine, the college, acting in place of parents, had authority to direct student behavior and to punish students but also had responsibility to care for students. Additionally, colleges were permitted exemption from the strict adherence to the Fourth Amendment Constitutional right against search and seizure, and students’ expectation of privacy was less than it is today. Honor codes are one example of a move towards personal responsibility and self-accountability for students. In an honor system, which is the supporting mechanism for actualization of the honor code’s premises, students play a major role in establishing rules and procedures as well as in implementing policies and evaluating those alleged to have violated the code.

Put in simplest terms, an honor code is a statement of the values of the institution and the establishment of a level of expected behavior for all persons who function in the educational arena. Traditionally, honor codes have been developed to protect the academic integrity of the university, encourage ethical behavior, and foster a climate of fair competition. Honor codes reinforce expected faculty/student behavior by establishing a mechanism to emphasize the university’s position based on its articulated values. Codes also promote competency by ensuring that students who have done the necessary independent work have obtained the required body of knowledge and skills.

Overall, the purposes of an honor code can be reduced to two general categories: educational and regulatory. The educational purposes help the student learn ethical behavior and internalize the content of the code. The idea of general good citizenship as a student, and as a general member of society, is enhanced. The underlying premise is that moral development continues throughout our lives. Directed instruction in the area of ethics, with its surrounding supportive mores and expectations, will positively influence the student. This view is supported by ethicists and counters the more fatalistic stance that students come to professional school morally complete.

Conversely, the regulatory aspect of an honor code keeps the playing field level for all competitors and makes it clear what is punishable. The code therefore must be uniformly practiced and enforced. A code that is not enforced will be ineffective, since students will quickly perceive the obvious disconnect between what is posted and what is practiced. Recent research has supported the importance of both educational and regulatory roles of honor codes, suggesting that an honor code works because it alters the basic academic environment of the institution to include an expectation of academic integrity.

Problems with academic dishonesty do exist, but the use of an honor code may be an effective tool in curbing academic dishonesty and enhancing an ethical environment, especially important in a health profession school. Honor codes need to be carefully constructed and the process adhered to, thus avoiding legal ramifications if challenged in court. In order to be workable and support an environment of academic integrity, the code must have a solid legal foundation.
Elements of an Effective and Constitutionally Valid Honor Code

As honor codes can be effective means of reducing academic dishonesty, it is important that an institution carefully formulate the code it adopts. Briefly enumerated, the minimum elements of an ideal honor code include:

1. a statement of values endorsed and upheld by the code, generally honesty and integrity in all academic endeavors;
2. a list of enumerated violations, usually with a disclaimer that the behaviors fit into a general class and that not every potential violation is enumerated;
3. a list of sanctions for violation of a code premise;
4. a description of the governing judiciary group charged with overseeing any proceedings for violators including its selection process and qualifications;
5. a description of the process to be followed should a report of a violation be made to the governing group;
6. a statement of confidentiality of the process and outcomes;
7. a provision for recording proceedings;
8. a provision for a written decision within a specified period; and
9. a provision for appeal to an additional body if the outcome is adverse to the accused.

These elements are the ideal for a soundly constructed honor code that would be functional and advance the ethical environment. Currently, schools of dentistry have a variety of honor codes with varying levels of effectiveness and no one universally superior example.

The primary concerns in formulating an honor code are the legal rights of the accused and the source and extent of these rights. To provide for the adherence to these rights, honor codes should describe the underlying values supported by the code and spell out the expected behavior established by it. Secondly, codes should contain a disciplinary portion that makes clear the prescribed sanctions. These sanctions should vary in degree in proportion to the severity of the violation.

Additionally, the procedure section should clearly lay out what steps are to be followed by each player in the event that a person is suspected of violation of any tenet of the code. The procedure section in state-affiliated universities should be guided in large part by the safeguards of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. These passages state in pertinent part that “no person shall be . . . deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of the law.”

Students in a state-affiliated university are deemed to have a property interest in their education once they are admitted into a course of study. Should the university determine that the student has violated any of its rules, it may impose sanctions up to and including permanent expulsion so long as the student is given due process in the taking of this action.

So what are the elements of due process that are important to honor codes? These are generally summed up by saying the accused is to be given notice and an opportunity to be heard. What seems relatively simple on the surface is actually much more complicated to implement due to years of litigation surrounding the meaning of these terms. A brief discussion of these elements is important for the construction of a functional and legally sound honor code.

The first element, adequate notice, permits time between the accused’s learning of the charge against him or her and the hearing that allows him or her to respond to the charges and to present any evidence on his or her behalf. Courts differ as to what is adequate notice, but the generally recommended time is between five and ten days after the receipt of the notice. It is important that the school verify actual receipt of the notice either by presenting it personally or mailing it via certified mail with a return receipt requested. The intent of adequate notice is that the student has time to properly prepare to respond to the allegation and gather evidence in his or her favor. The content of the notice is also important since there is some case law to support the requirement that the notice should detail the reasons for the hearing that may result in the student’s loss of a significant interest. Some schools provide complete disclosure of all evidence to be used against the accused as maintained in an evidence or fact book. Others simply refer to the specific infraction supported by the school’s honor code and policy documents. The specific behavior that constitutes a violation of the referenced provision is then enumerated.

The next element of due process for consideration in the construction of an honor code is the right of the accused to face those who present evidence
against him or her and to cross-examine him or her in a hearing. While this is not constitutionally mandated, most honor codes provide for this element of due process. In contrast, almost no honor code gives the accused the right to be represented by an attorney, especially one who is serving in the classical role of a legal representative. The rationale for excluding attorneys is to maintain a nonadversarial environment during the proceedings. If an attorney does not represent the school, there will be unequal footing at the hearing if the accused has an attorney. The exception to this would be the case where the school does have an attorney in attendance, in which case the accused must be allowed to be similarly represented.

All of these rights and actions taken to preserve them in the procedures preceding and including the hearing are aspects of procedural due process. There is another type of due process, called substantive due process, which is a court-made notion resulting from U.S. Supreme Court decisions that introduced the concept. The concept implies that the rule itself must be fair and reasonable. Substantive due process gives rise to two further considerations. The first is that the law, or in this case the code, itself must be clearly enough written that it isn’t vague or uncertain. Second, in the process of academic dismissal of a student, the institution must not be arbitrary or capricious. Arbitrariness can be demonstrated by sanctions that are patently unreasonable or disproportionate to the offense. Alternatively, a school that has ignored its own procedural due process requirements would be guilty of arbitrariness.

The Problem of Legal Challenges

A significant concern for university faculty and administrators is the propensity of a student to legally challenge the results of an honor code conviction. Such civil litigations are understandable, given the high stakes involved for the student and his or her future career. After careful drafting of the honor code, steps can be taken during the process to help solidify the school’s legal position.

Positioning the Code: Everyone Must Be Involved

An effective honor code should be monitored as nonintrusively as possible. Some intrusion is acceptable because professional students will have voluntarily entered the instructional program and they either expressly signed a statement agreeing to abide by the honor code or implicitly did so by accepting admission to the school. The question then becomes who should police the policy—students, faculty, or administration? The answer is all of these persons must be involved if the code is to serve its purpose and be effective.

Administrators, and even university trustees, set the overall tone for the expectations of campus activity. The trustees should receive annual reports of the activities of honor councils or courts. An annual report functions to put the entire university com-
community on notice that the trustees are interested in and pay attention to this type of activities. Additionally, analysis of the frequency and type of violations investigated allows the trustees to act as a type of quality assurance body. Trustees are in the position to be able to take necessary corrective action through changes in systems or policies.

Administrators can reinforce the importance of the code by distributing copies of it annually to all students and allocating time at orientation to discuss the code’s purpose, content, and procedures. Asking students to participate in roleplay exercises presenting hypothetical ethical conflicts and violations, in which they have to decide how to respond, will help increase students’ comfort level. Two gray areas that should be addressed with students are understanding what are acceptable behaviors under the code and defining constructive ways to approach a classmate that a student believes has engaged in some form of academic dishonesty.

Faculty responsibilities include discussing the code briefly during the first session of each course to reinforce its importance and their own support of it, a common practice in undergraduate settings. Faculty act as role models for ethical behavior and instruct in ethics in the proper courses. Faculty may also need time for discussion of the code periodically at faculty meetings, where roleplay activities of their own could be valuable.

Faculty must also serve as enforcers. If faculty members deal with individual incidences of cheating as internal matters by lowering the involved student’s grade, doing so undermines the desired continual demonstration that there is a set system for handling such matters. Even though confidentiality is followed, the student body often is aware of a process being applied within an institution. This may reduce the negative incentive for dishonesty through the public application of the honor code.

In the survey by Beemsterboer et al., a disappointing finding was the report that faculty often do not disclose infractions because they don’t want to invest the time or face the discomfort of confrontation.22 Further reasons given included the perception that nothing would be done to correct the situation if they do get involved, so why should they be the “bad guy”? Additionally, some faculty feared negative evaluations by students at course evaluation time if they are perceived as “hard-nosed” with regard to cheating by students. This last premise has in fact been refuted in research regarding student perceptions of fairness. If the faculty member is demanding but fair in treating all students the same in similar circumstances, students are very accepting.39 Handling the matter sensitively but swiftly and surely is a faculty responsibility.

Faculty members have another significant responsibility with regard to the regulatory purpose of honor codes, and that is the role of prevention. By continually instilling the spirit of the code and removal of temptation, they can greatly reduce the likelihood of occurrences of cheating. Some guidelines for faculty that can help include prohibitions against giving the same examination in successive semesters or years; security of examinations and answer keys before and after administration; proctoring of the examination by the course director or other participating professor; use of essay or short answer exam format whenever possible; use of multiple forms of the same multiple choice exams by means of computerized randomization of question sequence; and the use of student seating charts.

Responsibility does not end with the faculty. Students have distinct functions in honor code enforcement, including input roles during its formulation. Student leaders can also be invaluable in building support for a newly formulated honor code. Finally, students should play a very active role in the actual resolution of contested cases.12 Recent research has shown that student judicial systems that focus on institutional citizenship can act as powerful community-building forces.40

One controversial role for students is the one of a “snitch.” It is true that students are often in the best position to know who is involved in academic dishonesty and how it has occurred. They are also the ones most harmed by the unfair advantage that a peer gains through cheating. With a nontoleration element of a traditional honor code, students agree to report any academic dishonesty they witness and can suffer similar punishments as those of the cheating student by not reporting when they know cheating has occurred. The United States Military Academy at West Point is perhaps best known for its nontoleration principle in its very brief and clear honor code: “A cadet will not lie, cheat or steal nor tolerate those who do.” This code is an example of a structurally simple code with a troublesome clause from a student perspective, as evidenced by several high-profile academic cheating scandals and other ethical breaches, including sexual abuse/harassment, in the past. Nontoleration is the essence of self-po-
licensing. It is a form of autonomy and certainly moves an individual towards self-governance in harmony with society’s common allowance for professionals to regulate themselves. The problem with clauses like this lies in two competing societal values. The premise pits the loyalty of friendship and the basic human need to belong to a group in direct competition with the greater good of maintaining the institution’s academic integrity. The fundamental problem is that the larger picture may seem somehow more remote when a buddy is sitting beside a student begging, either verbally or with his eyes, that he or she not be exposed for this transgression. Add the negative societal factor of being a “snitch” and it is easy to see that students have a very difficult choice to make with the nontolerating clause in an honor code.

If there is a nontolerating element in an institution’s code, students should be counseled in decision-making process to report another student. Helping students and faculty alike perform positive interventions with suspected or observed violators is an important step, especially if the intervention will prevent the behavior or stop it before the extent is so serious as to justify significant sanctions.

**Conclusion**

Academic integrity is an issue that impacts every aspect of an educational institution and all persons associated with it, both past and present. Honor codes have been shown, through their positive effect on institutional culture, to reduce instances of academic dishonesty. This has occurred in the face of reports of ever-increasing dishonesty and apparently different generational goals and values. Properly drafted and administered honor codes can guide students down an ethical path and enhance positive peer pressure against dishonest behavior. Because of their responsibility to the public who are their present and future patients, this issue is particularly important for health care professional students such as those in dental schools. However, honor codes cannot work without the support and input from all persons within a school, including the trustees, administration, faculty, and students. With the entire institutional community behind an honor code, the chances for developing and maintaining a culture of academic integrity are greatly increased.

**REFERENCES**

31. U.S. Constitution, Fifth Amendment.
32. See Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education, 294 F. 2d 150 (5th Cir. 1961) as classic case on procedural due process.
34. See Bleicker v. Board of Trustees of Ohio State, 485 F. Supp. 1381 (S.D. Ohio 1980) for time periods of reasonable notice and inadequacy of procedural safeguards resulting lack of substantive due process.
37. See United States v. Miami University 294F.3d797 (6th Cir.2001).