Most dental and other health professions schools have developed policies and procedures as well as courses that address ethics and professionalism. Typically, students are introduced to these policies and take these courses at the beginning of their professional education. In addition, white coat ceremonies, signing of pledges, and similar activities are meant to signify these students’ entry into a culture of integrity and professionalism that will guide them throughout their careers.

Our attention to ethics in students’ professional education may also benefit from recent thinking on academic integrity in college. One scholar who challenges the widely accepted view that academic dishonesty on college campuses is on the rise is James M. Lang. In an interview about his 2013 book, Lang contends that, despite the many reported cases of cheating, current college graduates are no less honest than their predecessors and suggests we should instead focus on what the presence of cheating tells us. In his view, the fact that most students admit to cheating at least once during college points to a fundamental flaw in education: that many programs are “failing to help students really learn” and that “cheating is an inappropriate response to a learning environment that is not working for the student.”

While emphasizing that cheating is always unacceptable, Lang also points to the conflicts that we as educators create for our students. He asks, for example, if “there are specific features of a curriculum, or a course design, or an assessment structure that lend themselves to cheating” and notes that his own research indicates those features that induce cheating are the same as those that reduce learning. Lang distinguishes between “performance” learning (designed to do well on exams) and “mastery” learning (designed to master the subject) and points out that the former can steer students towards cheating. To address that problem, Lang challenges us as educators to be innovative in our course design and assessment practices, focusing less on “covering material” and more on building “our courses on problems, questions, and challenges” that promote mastery as well as performance.

Our thinking on the teaching of ethics and professionalism in dental education should also be stimulated by two articles in this month’s journal. The previous major study of academic affairs deans’ perceptions of academic integrity in U.S. dental schools was published in 2000. To update those findings, Graham et al. conducted a survey to determine the ways schools are discouraging student cheating and the incidence and types of academic dishonesty that are occurring. The data presented by Graham et al. provide an important context for this subject, and the policies and procedures they report and the others they recommend provide a network of strategies for administrators to consider in establishing environments of academic integrity at their schools. The types of assessments they describe may also promote the kind of mastery learning that Lang discusses.

The other article uses evidence from state dental board disciplinary actions to highlight the need for education about emotional intelligence in dental schools since “dentists treat people, not just teeth.” Munk’s study of reports from 21 state boards found that more than half of the infractions were related to emotional intelligence issues, rather than cognitive or technical matters. In particular, the competencies most frequently violated in this domain had to do with transparency, teamwork and collaboration, organizational awareness, and accurate self-assessment. These kinds of problems also support the need for greater attention to what Lang called mastery learning.

Although we may feel that our policies, procedures, and courses on ethics and professionalism are robust, these two articles show that as dental educators we have a lot to do in the design of our assessments (to test mastery rather than performance) and in the teaching of emotional intelligence skills.
Addressing these areas, along with greater attention to the American Dental Education Association (A DEA) Statement on Professionalism in Dental Education,4 will help our students to function at the highest levels of integrity and professionalism.

—Nadeem Y. Karimbux, DMD, MMSc

REFERENCES