

Academic Integrity: A Letter to My Students ¹

Here at the beginning of the semester I want to say something to you about academic integrity.

I'm deeply convinced that integrity is an essential part of any true educational experience, integrity on my part as a faculty member and integrity on your part as a student.

To take an easy example, would you want to be operated on by a doctor who cheated his way through medical school? Or would you feel comfortable on a bridge designed by an engineer who cheated her way through engineering school? Would you trust your tax return to an accountant who copied his exam answers from his neighbor?

Those are easy examples, but what difference does it make if you as a student or I as a faculty member violate the principles of academic integrity in a psychology course, especially if it's not in our major?

For me, the answer is that integrity is important in this course precisely because integrity is important in all areas of life. If we don't have integrity in the small things, if we find it possible to justify plagiarism or cheating or shoddy work in things that don't seem important, how will we resist doing the same in areas that really do matter, in areas where money might be at stake, or the possibility of advancement, or our esteem in the eyes of others?

Personal integrity is not a quality we're born to naturally. It's a quality of character we need to nurture, and this requires practice in both meanings of that word (as in practice the piano and practice a profession). We can only be a person of integrity if we practice it every day.

What does that involve for each of us in this course? Let's find out by going through each stage in the course. As you'll see, academic integrity basically requires the same things of you as a student as it requires of me as a teacher.

I. Preparation for Class

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to coming prepared for class, the principles of academic integrity require that I come having done the things necessary to make the class a worthwhile educational experience for you. This requires that I:

- Read the text,
- Clarify information I might not be clear about,
- Prepare the class with an eye toward what is current today (that is, not simply rely on past notes), and
- Plan the session so that it will make it worth your while to be there.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to coming prepared for class, the principles of academic integrity suggest that you have a responsibility to yourself, to me, and to the other students to do the things necessary to put yourself in a position to make fruitful contributions to class discussion. This will require you to:

- read the text before coming to class,
- clarify anything you're unsure of (including looking up words you don't understand),
- formulate questions you might have so you can ask them in class, and
- think about the issues raised in the class discussion or class materials.

II. In Class

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to class sessions, the principles of academic integrity require that I take you seriously and treat you with respect. This requires that I:

- show up for all class sessions, unless I'm simply unable to do so,
- come to class on time, and not leave early,
- not waste class time, but use it well to fulfill the objectives of the course
- do my best to answer your questions,
- honestly acknowledge when I don't have an answer or don't know something, and then go out and get an answer by the next class,
- both encourage you, and give you an equal opportunity, to participate in class discussions,
- contain you if your enthusiasm for participating in the discussions makes it difficult for others to participate,
- assume that you are prepared for class and that I won't embarrass you if I call on you, even if your hand isn't up,
- respect the views you express and not make fun of you or of them,
- not allow others to ridicule you or your ideas, or you to do the same to them, and
- make clear when I am expressing an opinion, and not impose on you my views on controversial issues.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to class sessions, the principles of academic integrity require you to take both your fellow students and me seriously and to treat us with respect. This requires that you:

- show up for all class sessions, unless you are truly unable to do so,
- come to class on time and not leave early,
- make good use of class time by being engaged in what's going on,
- ask questions about anything you don't understand, and not just for your own sake but because other students might not realize that they also don't understand ,

- participate in the class discussions so as to contribute your thinking to the shared effort to develop understanding and insight (remember that even something that's clearly wrong can contribute to the discussion by stimulating an idea in another student that she/he might not otherwise have had),
- monitor your own participation so as to allow for and encourage the participation of others,
- respect the other students by not making fun of them or their ideas, and by not holding side-conversations that distract them (and me) from the class discussion.

III. With Regard to Exams

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to exams, the principles of academic integrity require that I:

- do my best during class time to prepare you for the exams,
- be available during office hours or at arranged time to work with you individually to help you get ready for the exams,
- develop exam questions that will be a meaningful test not only of the course content, but also of your ability to express and defend intelligent judgments about the content,
- carefully monitor the exam so that honest students will not be disadvantaged by other students who might choose to cheat if given the opportunity, and
- give due and careful consideration to your answers when evaluating them and assigning a grade.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to exams, the principles of academic integrity require you to:

- come to class having done your best to prepare for the exam, including seeking my help if you need it,
- make full use of the time available to write the best answers you can,
- accept your limitations and not trying to get around them by using cheat sheets, copying, or seeking help from another student,
- not giving help to other students, or making it easy for them to copy off of you.

IV. With Regard to Written Assignments

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to written assignments, the principles of academic integrity require that I:

- devise meaningful assignments that grow out of and further the work done in the classroom,
- provide you with a clear description of that assignment so that you know what is expected of you and what I'll be looking for when I grade it,
- give due and careful consideration to your paper when evaluating it and assigning a grade, and

- confront you if I suspect that you have plagiarized or in other ways not handed in work that is entirely your own.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to written assignments, the principles of academic integrity require you to:

- start your research and writing early enough to ensure that you have the time you need to do your best work,
- hand in a paper which you yourself have done specifically for this course and not borrowed from someone else or recycled from an earlier course,
- not be satisfied with a paper that is less than your best work,
- seek only appropriate help from others (such as proof-reading, or discussing your ideas with someone else to gain clarity in your thinking), and
- give full and proper credit to your sources.

Let me expand on this last point, since it applies to both you and me.

By its very nature, education and the accumulation of knowledge is a shared enterprise. None of us has the time, let alone the background knowledge required, to learn everything on our own. Virtually everything we know has come to us because someone else has taken the time to think about something, research it, and then share what she/he's learned with us in a class lecture or, more likely, in an article or book. This is every bit as true for me as a teacher as it is for you as students. I'd have very little to teach if all I could talk about is what I've learned solely on my own.

In a class lecture it would be too disruptive if I stopped to cite all of my sources, but I know, and you need to know, that I am sharing with you the things I've learned from hundreds of different authors. What I contribute is the way I bring their ideas together into a coherent whole so that it makes sense to you.

If this is true for me, how much more so for you. I have many more years of education and reading behind me than you do. I don't expect you to do original research. Instead, I expect you to read about the research of others, and to bring together their ideas in such a way that makes sense to you and will make sense to me. Therefore, it's essential for you to cite your sources in any research paper you write. The academic reasons for doing so are to give credit to those who have done the original research and written the article or book, and to allow me to look at them if I needed to find out if you have properly understood what the author was trying to say.

But at a practical level, citing your sources is a way to show that you've done the assignment. If your paper contains no citations, the implication is that you have done a piece of original research, but that wasn't the assignment. Citations (along with the bibliography) show that you have consulted a variety of resources as the assignment required. They're also an acknowledgement of your indebtedness to those authors.

So don't feel you need to hide the fact that you're drawing from one of your sources. That's what it's all about.

V. With Regard to Your Final Grade

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to your final grade, the principles of academic integrity require that I carefully weigh all of your grades during the course, as well as the other factors that affect the final grade as spelled out in the syllabus, before assigning a final grade.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to your final grade, the principles of academic integrity require that, if you feel I've made a mistake in computing that grade, you have a responsibility to come to me as soon as possible prepared to show why you think I've made a mistake.

VI. Failures to Live up to Our Responsibilities

In all of the areas listed above, I will do my best to live up to my responsibilities. If you feel I've failed to do so, you have every right to call me on it. If you do, I have a responsibility to give you respectful consideration. If you feel that I do not do these things, you have the right (and I would say the responsibility) to bring this to the attention of my supervisor.

At the same time, I have a right to expect that you will live up to your responsibilities. If I get a sense that you're not doing so, I consider it a matter of my academic integrity that I call you on it.

Indeed, in certain circumstances (such as cheating or plagiarism) I may be required to charge you with a violation of the College's Code of Academic Integrity. For the College is every bit as committed to academic integrity as I am.

You should familiarize yourself with that Code. You can find it in the student handbook; it's also summarized on page 51 in the College Catalog. Be sure to notice that there's a procedure that's designed to protect your rights. But that procedure might also result in one or another sanction being imposed on you if you're found guilty of violating the Code of Academic Integrity.

Which brings me to the most difficult question with regard to academic integrity; what if you become aware of a fellow classmate who is not living up to the principles of academic integrity, but you sense that I'm not aware of it? What should you do? I'll give you the answer, but I'll acknowledge up front that it's a hard one. Nevertheless, I would hope that you would at least grapple with it if you are ever confronted with the situation. The answer is that you should say something to that student, and if worse comes to worse, you should tell me. But why?

Academic integrity, as with so much in life, involves a system of interconnected rights and responsibilities that reflect our mutual dependence upon one another. The success of our individual efforts in this course, as with so much in life, depends on all of us conscientiously exercising our rights and living up to our responsibilities. And the failure of any of us—even just one of us—to do what is required will diminish, however slightly, the opportunity for the rest to achieve their goals. That is why it's essential for all of us in this class to practice academic integrity, in both senses of the word practice. For practice today will lay a solid foundation for practice tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, so that through daily practice integrity will come to be woven throughout the fabric of our lives, and thus through at least a part of the fabric of society.

1. Note: The above "A Letter to My Students" was written entirely by William M. Taylor of Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, IL 60016, and shared with members of the LLCC faculty. Permission was granted by Mr. Taylor to use any or all of the material in this letter in any way that is consistent with its purpose of promoting academic integrity.