

Honor and Honesty in the Academy – A Wonderful Example

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Earlier this week, I received a surprising email and encountered an admirable instance of academic honesty. An author wrote to tell me that he wished to withdraw his manuscript from consideration in the journal of *Innovative Higher Education* because he had just learned that one part of his research had not been covered by the appropriate IRB approval, through an oversight in the submission process. He said that for “ethical reasons” he would need to withdraw the manuscript. He went on to apologize for using “your valuable time and resources.” He hopes to straighten the problem out soon.

In over a decade of serving as the editor of *Innovative Higher Education*, this is the first instance that I have encountered of this type of action after a manuscript has been accepted with “revise and resubmit.” Considering the pressure to publish, especially for those faculty members trying to progress through the ranks, the need to withdraw a manuscript would be especially disappointing, as even the most limited research studies require large investments of time and resources. What a wonderful role model of academic honor this faculty member must be to his students! He clearly, as is said in the vernacular, “walks the walk.”

In my recent role as Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, one of my duties was to hear student appeals on cases of academic dishonesty. The University of Georgia has a highly structured process to consider allegations of academic dishonesty involving students including facilitated discussions, continued discussions with an academic honesty panel, and a multiple violations review board (<http://ovpi.uga.edu/academic-honesty>). Faculty and students are recruited or volunteer to serve on panels to consider the cases with the options of dismissing the case or assigning appropriate sanctions. Only a limited number of cases reached the Office of the Provost; and my role was to review the entire file and listen to any recordings of formal proceedings either to dismiss, uphold, or modify the sanctions.

After reviewing the files, an unsettled feeling generally came over me. I wanted to understand clearly the facts and the reasoning that led to the outcome. As a mother (thankfully my sons have graduated from college) and as a faculty member, I wanted to understand all sides of the story. Of course, there is no way to identify a student who may be engaged in a pattern of dishonest behavior from the foolish student who took his or her first short-cut. Hopefully, the cases served as teachable moments for most of the transgressors. Perhaps being “caught” at the course level and experiencing the humiliation and associated punishment will prevent

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some from unethical and illegal activities in the future (think Bernie Madoff, the billionaire investment adviser whose Ponzi scheme landed him in federal prison). Surely none of the students I encountered are on that path! I could imagine the naiveté that some students brought into situations where mature decisions are required and the alternatives are undesirable (e.g., the term paper is not finished and a lowered grade is expected, or copying from the internet just this one time “won’t hurt anyone to get it in on time!”). The less than insightful student might not clearly understand the ethical dilemma and the potential outcomes of his deception.

How could a student get into such a mess? Did the student not have basic ethical upbringing? Does the student not understand that our social system is built on honesty, trustworthiness, and the requirement that others can have confidence in what is published or written or said? Developing ethical understanding is likely a journey. I was dismayed to learn how quickly and foolishly some students threw away their academic careers and good name to excel in a course by taking short-cuts, by engaging in plagiarism, receiving unauthorized assistance, or lying. When or if parents became aware of the cases, they were often incredulous and heart-broken. More than once, I felt sympathy for a distraught parent.

The University encourages all faculty members to promote integrity in the classroom and beyond by placing information about academic honesty on the syllabus, by discussing expectations for performance, and by monitoring behavior. The professor I referenced at the beginning of this editorial did more. He set an example. He stepped up and revealed the problem with his research. He could have just said he was withdrawing the manuscript from further consideration. I hope he will share his example with his students, with his colleagues. He should be proud of his action, although I am sure he must be frustrated.

Here’s to a more just, kind, and trustworthy academy!