Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures: Where Are We in Addressing Academic Dishonesty?

Much has been written about the prevalence of academic dishonesty in the past two decades. Despite the dialogue, incidents have not only increased in number, but also in complexity as students discover even more creative and technologically savvy ways to circumvent the system. Gone are the days of simple plagiarism, glancing at another’s paper during an examination, or using cheat sheets. Violations have evolved from “low-tech” to “high-tech” infractions, with the expectation of more to come. Most faculty can personally attest to this grim reality and the ongoing challenges they face in either identifying or preventing these incidents. What is equally disheartening is that many faculty have had the unpleasant experience of addressing a cheating incident only to realize that students often show little or no remorse for such actions, and that there are likely countless other violations that go undetected.

At a recent nursing educators conference, faculty shared various examples of cheating driven by desperation, opportunism, and, in some cases, a blatant disregard for what is right. Highly questionable acts have gone beyond the classroom, such as upper level students overenrolling in classes and later selling their seats to a sought-after class to underclassmen for profit. Nothing seems off limits. Recent headlines about the Columbia University student who openly plagiarized a valedictory speech, stealing his remarks directly from a comedy routine, serves to further underscore the fact that academic dishonesty has reached epidemic proportions (ABC News, 2010). Although this trend is unsettling in the larger academic community, it is even more disturbing when it involves students in nursing and related health fields, who are supposed to be guided by standards of professional practice and ethics, and who are preparing for entry into an environment where dishonest behaviors can have potentially dire consequences.

There are several theories among academics as to why such breaches have increased so dramatically of late. A complex interplay of factors has been identified, ranging from the strongly held belief that there has been a deterioration in moral values of the current generation (Tanner, 2004), to a persistent attitude among students whereby “doing the right thing” has been replaced by “doing what it takes.” Some blame the current generation of “helicopter” parents (who have morphed to “stealth bomber” levels under extreme circumstances) and their offspring who believe that everyone deserves a trophy (and gets an “A” grade) regardless of the quality of the work submitted. Combine this with a lack of personal role models, popular media (including competitive reality shows) that glamorize such behaviors as a reasonable means of getting ahead, and a more accepting attitude on the part of faculty that “cheating happens.” These social changes, along with the pervasive use of the Internet, an explosion in the proliferation of various technological devices (from smartphones to iPads), and an increase in distance education all provide a multiplicity of opportunities to cheat.

Dishonest actions have almost become the norm, rather than the exception, as they represent the necessary price to pay for survival in a high stakes environment where progression through a program, enhancing one’s resume for graduate school or honor society induction, and maintaining grades for scholarships and loans have taken precedence over behaving with integrity. Both parental and self-imposed pressure to be successful may also play a role as students resort to any means by which to achieve their lifelong dream of becoming nurses and to secure a career that can weather harsher economic times. Many students who may not have previously crossed the line now feel pressure to do so and, at the same time, find it easier to cross a line that seems to have become significantly blurred.

The unprecedented levels and complexity of cheating have left many faculty dispirited and comparatively powerless to stay one step ahead of the combination of warp-speed technology and lack of ethical centeredness of students. As the definition of actions that are now considered “dishonest” broadens, so must the strategies to address them. Traditional approaches of monitoring and taking punitive action against the student involved, while sending a message to others that such behaviors will not be tolerated, are only part of the answer. Preventive strategies must also be implemented. These include the careful proctoring of examinations, the use of antiplagiarism software, currency regarding technological advances in cheating (see Faucher & Caves, 2009, for a comprehensive and eye-opening list), and continued vigilance regarding the various methods to curtail opportunities for academic dishonesty.
Faculty must also create a culture that supports the core values of trust and integrity (Tanner, 2004) rather than a culture of punishment and blame (Tippitt et al., 2009). Efforts to teach the importance of personal and professional integrity must extend beyond a mere mention in the syllabus. Addressing the issue in orientation programs with ongoing reinforcement of integrity issues throughout the curriculum is key (Tippitt et al., 2009). In addition, faculty must be strong role models themselves and maintain an atmosphere of civility and appropriate student-faculty boundaries. The adoption of honor codes or signed contracts are other strategies suggested in the literature (Tippitt et al., 2009) to shift accountability to the student. It is essential that any code or contract require that students not only abide by the rules themselves, but promptly report others in violation.

Another recurring topic that invites serious consideration is the reevaluation of assignments (Faucher & Caves, 2009) that place undue time demands on students and may force even the brightest and most organized among them to consider illicit collaboration or individual acts of cheating. Changing the way we do business in both the depth and breadth of assignments, as well as how we assess performance, may be in order. It is also incumbent on faculty to orient and continue to mentor new faculty with regard to these important issues. Faculty should initiate empirical research to gauge the effectiveness of preventive strategies so that standards of student behavior and nursing practice are not further compromised. The time is now, as these current students are not only our future caregivers, but the next generation of faculty members.

**References**


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The authors have no financial or proprietary interest in the materials presented herein.

doi:10.3928/01484834-20100921-01