

# Academic Integrity and Intellectual Autonomy

*David Horacek*

WHEN ACADEMICS bring up academic integrity, it is usually a prelude to telling our students that they are not allowed to cheat or plagiarize. Thanks to the realities of teaching, our own reflections about academic integrity tend to focus on the important practical work of deterring cheaters, as well as catching those who would not be deterred. In this chapter I want to investigate some rather more philosophical questions about academic integrity. What is it? What good is it? What makes its codes obligatory? My answers to these questions suggest that the most basic justification for academic integrity is one not usually discussed among educators, nor is it described to students. I argue that it is possible, and not unusual, for dishonest academic work to be produced without cheating, plagiarizing, or doing anything that universities forbid. This sort of dishonest work is wrong for the same reason that cheating is, insofar as both violate core principles of academic integrity. We educators should do our best to eliminate all failures of academic integrity in students, both the forbidden and the allowed, because both interfere with the development of a student's intellectual autonomy.

Every university publication on academic integrity that I have surveyed declares academic dishonesty to be forbidden. Here is one representative paragraph, which comes from a document published by Purdue University called "Academic Integrity: A Guide for Students":

Purdue prohibits "dishonesty in connection with any University activity. Cheating, plagiarism, or knowingly furnishing false information to the University are examples of dishonesty." [Part 5, Section III-B-2-a, *University Regulations*] Furthermore, the University Senate has stipulated

that “the commitment of acts of cheating, lying, and deceit in any of their diverse forms (such as the use of substitutes for taking examinations, the use of illegal cribs, plagiarism, and copying during examinations) is dishonest and must not be tolerated. Moreover, knowingly to aid and abet, directly or indirectly, other parties in committing dishonest acts is in itself dishonest” [University Senate Document 72-18, December 15, 1972]. (Akers, 2003)

Universities that provide more elaborate descriptions of academic integrity will often mention reasons to justify their administrative policies. For example, the academic integrity policy of Syracuse University argues that cheating “is unfair to other community members who do not cheat, because it devalues efforts to learn, to teach, and to conduct research” (Preamble).

Universities set out to accomplish two important tasks with their academic integrity policies: the first is to describe the nature and scope of academic integrity while (in some cases) giving reasons why it should be respected. The second is to state clearly what sorts of activities are forbidden. I believe these are two very different tasks, but because they are almost always done within the same document, policy authors tend to conflate them. Doing so leads to two conceptual mistakes: one of them, made in the Purdue document, is to correctly describe academic integrity as avoiding “dishonesty in connection with any University activity” but then say something false—namely, that all such dishonesty is forbidden. In fact, neither Purdue nor any other academic institution would forbid everything that falls under this broad category. Though it describes cheating, plagiarism, and furnishing false information merely as examples of dishonesty in academic work, these specific types of dishonesty are *de facto* the only ones that are banned.

The more common and conceptually more pernicious mistake is to begin with a detailed list of the academic activities that are banned (cheating, plagiarism, falsified data), and then go on to suggest that academic integrity is achieved if these specific perils are avoided.

To undo these tempting mistakes, I want to first investigate which activities a university ought to ban, and why. After this, I undertake a separate investigation of academic integrity. Bringing these results together will reveal a more complicated relationship than university policies would probably care to discuss. But my goal in this chapter is to improve our understanding, not our policies.

First, I consider the question of how university policies on academic integrity are justified. Insofar as these policies focus on where students ought not trespass, they may appear to be nothing more than institutional rules, sanctioned perhaps by long tradition. If understood as an institutional code of

conduct, the rules of academic integrity are conceptually easy to make sense of. Each student sorority, for example, also has its own code of conduct. In joining the sorority, the student acknowledges that she accepts this code. Perhaps joining the university involves a similar acknowledgment.

But clearly, the two cases are not analogous. The code of a sorority may, after all, include many *arbitrary* restrictions on behavior, such as prohibitions on certain outfits and foods. The requirements of academic integrity are, and are clearly meant to be understood as, non-arbitrary. Treating the codes as brute rules with punitive consequences may come close to how many undergraduates understand the matter, but for our purposes it is inadequate. At best, it explains why it is in the interest of students to follow the codes, but does not explain why these codes are right, and why they should be internalized and revered.

Describing its opposite as “academic dishonesty” suggests that academic integrity is obligatory because dishonesty is morally wrong. Syracuse University uses of the word “unfair” to describe cheating, suggesting a moral weight behind the university’s codes. While cheating is clearly dishonest, this by itself not does not justify a ban. For one thing, it is unclear whether all dishonesty is immoral. Certain falsehoods and omissions of truth often expedite sensitive collaborations and harm neither the liar nor the victim. This point is relevant here because students who are caught cheating often wonder what the big deal is about appropriate citations and independent work. Many assignments that we require of them seem to them like exercises and mere formalities, the very sort of territory where “white lies” rarely do harm. There is no university prohibition on bullshitting,<sup>1</sup> yet there is one on cheating. Both are obviously dishonest. Why is it not arbitrary that one sort of dishonesty is tolerated while the other is forbidden?

*There is no university prohibition on bullshitting, yet there is one on cheating. Both are obviously dishonest. Why is it not arbitrary that one sort of dishonesty is tolerated while the other is forbidden?*

Even if all dishonesty were immoral, why does the university mandate adherence to certain moral principles and not others? I claim the university does not have sufficient license to legislate any moral principles *simply because they are moral*. (If it did, *all* moral principles would require legislating.) Legislating the codes of academic integrity requires an independent rationale. In the extended argument below, I attempt to reconstruct this rationale, but also to call attention to aspects of academic integrity that are outside the scope of legislation. Once more is said about these unlegislated aspects of academic integrity, I will

examine its role in the education of students, concluding that it plays a privileged role in their intellectual maturation.

### **All Researchers Form a Community, One That Defines Itself Through Its Adherence to the Code of Academic Integrity**

Students of medicine, law, carpentry, and many other praxis-oriented fields understand themselves as initiates to a community of practitioners. College students typically do not. For many reasons, however, they should. They are initiates to the *community of researchers*.

Since communities of practitioners typically follow certain codes of conduct, a part of the initiation into any community will require the initiates to internalize its codes. Future doctors, for example, must not only understand the Hippocratic Oath, but also embrace it as the necessary principle that must bind their conduct as doctors. This traditional set of codes has much in common with the codes of academic integrity. Adherence to each is *required* within its respective discipline. Each is supported by moral considerations. Each is a code that defines an institution and a community. In each case, personal internalization of the codes of the community is necessary for membership.

Someone who is trained as a doctor but does not abide by the Hippocratic Oath is not acting as a doctor, because she does not share in the primary priorities of medicine. For example, she may decide that one of her patients is immoral and deserves to suffer, so she uses her knowledge to cause him suffering. We can invent situations in which this sort of behavior might be understandable or even justifiable, but what is clear is that even if she is acting justifiably, she is not acting as a doctor. There are excellent reasons for the community of doctors to abhor anything that tempts them to make exceptions to their Hippocratic Oath. I will not list these reasons here. I bring up the topic only for the sake of drawing an analogy: the codes of academic integrity are to the community of inquirers what the Hippocratic Oath is to the community of medical practitioners.

It would be strange to call the Hippocratic Oath a code of honor, as though it would distinguish the honorable doctors from the rest. The oath does not outline a standard of excellence or virtue; it only sets out the *barest minimum* of what is required of a doctor. Yet it has been suggested that the code of academic integrity should be understood as a code of honor. I think this is wrong. As in the case of medicine, the code of academic integrity doesn't distinguish the honorable researchers from the rest. For that matter, the code also doesn't distinguish the honorable students from the rest. The code of academic integrity defines the ground floor of what is acceptable, whereas acting by any code of *honor* would clearly require going above and beyond the barest minimum of

acceptability. Therefore, the code of academic integrity is not a code of honor for researchers and students, and it is misleading to describe it as such.

I noted earlier the impression left by many university policies that academic integrity is achieved merely by avoidance of certain banned activities like cheating. The same mistake in the medical analogy would be this: thinking that being true to the Hippocratic Oath requires simply the avoidance of malpractice. No one would realistically think this, because we understand that only a small subset of the responsibilities in the Hippocratic Oath are explicitly legislated as bans of the sort that would trigger malpractice charges. The same mistake is easier to make in the academic case, though it is no less a mistake. There is more to following a community-defining code than merely the avoidance of some forbidden activities.

*The code of academic integrity defines the ground floor of what is acceptable, whereas acting by any code of honor would clearly require going above and beyond the barest minimum of acceptability.*

#### **Why the Academy Needs the Code of Academic Integrity**

There is no alternative to academic integrity, no standard perhaps less honorable or chivalrous, that will allow the community of researchers to accomplish its goals. It is *required* for productive interactions among researchers. This indispensability is the extra-moral component needed to justify *legislating* aspects of this code.<sup>2</sup>

Young people may not immediately appreciate the indispensability of academic integrity to getting research done. Because it is sometimes introduced as an honor code, some may suspect that academic integrity is a quaint idealism. Others might find it noble in principle, but also suspect that, like the wigs of English barristers, strict codes of academic integrity are vestigial, ornamental, and potentially cumbersome. Might we not be better served by a bit of flexibility? The answer is no. Consider a society in which researchers feel no compulsion to abide by the codes of academic integrity. Imagine, for example, that various corporations each support a flock of academics whose job is to act in the interest of their employer. They release studies vindicating the superiority and safety of the products of their benefactors, while casting doubt on the products of their competitors. They extol the virtues of a certain ideology, while sweeping its shortcomings under the rug. They make up titles and invent citations, while

taking credit for the work of others. In general, they feel no compulsion to be sincere in their work.

One obvious cost of this arrangement is that we laypeople wouldn't have anyone to trust. How would we make informed decisions about what policies we should support, what products were safe, or what diets were effective, if every available source felt free to make things up? But the problem would be more serious than just a lack of information for laypeople: experts would be in exactly the same situation. This sort of an intellectual climate would require every individual researcher to personally confirm the conclusions of others, since their accuracy could not be assumed. The situation would quickly become unmanageable, and no such system could survive for long before groups of researchers decided to pool their resources so that each one would not individually have to duplicate every result. Pooling resources in this way would absolutely require that the cooperating scientists be sincere with one another. If they were to put their cooperation agreement into the form of a contract, it would not only pledge a "formal" honesty of correct attribution, absence of plagiarism, etc., but would also forbid the researchers from bullshitting one another. This cooperating group of researchers would increase its effectiveness the larger it grew and as it merged together with various other research groups. The logical limit of this merging would be a global group of researchers bound by a contract to be sincere with one another. I claim that this is exactly what we have, though the contract is not an explicit document because the researching community coalesced rather naturally and without overt ceremony. Explicit or not, the contract that binds researchers to one another is the same as the one that would bind even a small group of collaborating researchers. These, then, are the codes of academic integrity. No matter how perverted a research community may become, need would force groups of researchers to bind themselves by these codes.

The primary point is this: our codes of academic integrity are not some sort of nostalgic fantasy about a culture of honesty that managed to avoid extinction in the zoo of academia. In fact, they are absolutely necessary for getting difficult things done. Secondly, we see that these necessary codes would have to include not only formal restrictions like agreeing to avoid plagiarism, but also a general requirement of sincerity, of aiming at getting the research right. This aim precludes lying as well as bullshit, pandering, and other failures to aim for truth.

### **Students are Research Initiates Who Should Accept the Necessity and Rightness of Academic Integrity Codes**

Still, a student convinced that academic integrity is indispensable to research may wonder: "What does this have to do with me? Sure, if I ever become a

researcher, I will play by their rules, but tonight I'm only writing a term paper! Apart from making sure I cite my sources and compose my own sentences, the codes of researchers have no relevance to my situation, right?"

There is a rebuttal to this sort of understandable skepticism, and it has to do with the fact that, regardless of his eventual intentions, by virtue of conducting research even as "practice," the student is an initiate to the community that is structured by these codes. Unfortunately, this hypothetical student can easily fail to recognize his position with respect to the community, and perhaps also the role of academic integrity in structuring that community. Bringing students to these realizations is a goal very much worth aiming at. There is great intellectual value in internalizing the full codes of academic integrity, not merely their legislated subset.

One of my teaching strategies revolves around exposing the "insane conspiracy" of high school writing teachers and telling students that I expect them to write like real researchers, that is, in the first person. In high school, students are often encouraged to avoid using the first person in their writing, presumably because it undermines the tone of "objectivity" that they are told to aim for. This is quite strange, because almost all research articles in every field (including all in my field) are written in the first person. Since the students are stating their own conclusions, I require expressions like "I think" when they write about what they think. Students often wonder why we instructors care about their opinions. In one instance, a student expressed her surprise this way: "Why do you make me write about what I think? I mean, I guess I have some opinions, but I'm not really gonna figure this out. I'm just a sophomore and philosophy isn't even my major!" This was not an attempt to dodge responsibility but a genuine question raised by a talented student who felt intimidated by my request for sincere analysis. She was comfortable with exposition, but hesitant to express her own conclusion regarding a difficult topic (whether there is a solution to Hume's problem of induction) and defend it with her best reasons. Students who feel this way must be reassured that even if they have a hard time picturing it at the moment, they will eventually have something important to say about something—and assuming that mantle in speech and writing, even in "practice" scenarios, is a way of making sure that, when that time comes, they'll know how to say it. There is a danger in this strategy, in that it may encourage bullshit: students shouldn't come away with the impression that we just want them to *act as though* they have an opinion. We should want sincerity—not pretense—and must communicate this. For this, students must be able to get A's for "I don't know" papers, in which they defend why they think there is no adequately supported conclusion regarding a certain matter.

The point is that students should eventually awaken to the realization that in their research papers, they are speaking as themselves. They should be aiming

at developing and defending their views, not merely telling instructors what they want to hear. I picture this as a sort of intellectual adulthood, the stage at which the initiate inquires not only about the work of others, but also about what she thinks of that work. In doing this, she recognizes herself as a member of an inquiring community, not a mere consumer of its labors. Helping a student through this transition is perhaps the most important thing we do as educators. Once students see their writing as something said with their own voices, they realize their responsibility to say something they truly stand behind. Of course, a serious confrontation with one's own ideas and the reasons behind them is not easy. It takes courage as well as labor. The most banal way to resist this confrontation is for students literally to allow someone else's ideas to pose as their own. This is what the codes of academic integrity explicitly forbid, and such deception clearly does hinder intellectual progress.

Bullshitting, pandering, and other permitted strategies are copouts to the same extent. Successful students often rely on these strategies, and can get far without ever pausing to examine "their take" on a subject. When an instructor like me implores them to express their own views in their work, they take this as an instruction to write several paragraphs with sentences that contain the expression "I think that" while making references to the assigned texts. These sentences may be pure bullshit in Harry Frankfurt's (2005) sense—that is, statements asserted with a complete disregard for the truth (in this case, the truth of what the student really thinks about the subject, which may remain to them an unexamined matter). Nonetheless, well-written bullshit can compose a formally acceptable paper for a university course. Some such papers even earn A's, if students do a good enough job at faking genuine analysis and giving their instructor what he or she wanted to read. I am not suggesting we punish good bullshitters and panderers with bad grades. But because we care about their intellectual development, we should do our best to encourage them to reflect genuinely—to approach their subject like researchers.

### **Intellectual Autonomy Requires the Free Acceptance of Academic Integrity**

Even though no prohibitions are violated, bullshitting and pandering (and other similar approaches) are not consistent with the full codes of academic integrity. I think this is an important point: there is more to the content of academic integrity than the rules that are listed in the university guidebooks.

Earlier, I considered a test of whether a doctor is acting as a doctor—that is, according to the foundational norms of the medical community. I distinguished between acting understandably and acting as a doctor, noting that a medical professional may do the former without doing the latter. There is a parallel for researchers: if a researcher bullshits his way through a research article, or merely

mirrors the perceived prejudices of a journal's editors, he is not acting as a researcher. There is space in the research community for devil's advocates, which shows that researchers may sometimes defend conclusions they personally do not believe. However, bullshitting and (mere) pandering are clearly out of bounds. Thus, the normative bounds that constrain the activities of researchers go beyond avoiding the prohibitions against incorrect attribution, falsified data, and so forth, since bullshitting and pandering don't violate any of these explicit prohibitions. When considering the contract that would bind a small group of collaborating researchers, it is clear that bullshitting and pandering would be proscribed. Since research in general should be viewed as a global, cooperative undertaking, the same implicit contract applies.

*Students should be encouraged to internalize the codes of academic integrity; these codes include all the norms that govern research, not merely the explicit prohibitions that are the focus of most discussions on academic integrity.*

When I say that students should be encouraged to internalize the codes of academic integrity, I understand these codes to include all the norms that govern research, not merely the explicit prohibitions that are the focus of most discussions on academic integrity. The common thread that binds the codes into a unit is that they are the minimal norms which define the community of researchers, and thereby also their initiates, which is how I think we should see our students. This might be reason enough to encourage students, the research initiates, to adopt the codes. However, I think there is also a different and more powerful reason for this conclusion.

This reason has to do with intellectual autonomy, which requires the full codes of intellectual integrity to be internalized. Internalizing them coincides with the shift of self-perception that I described as the onset of intellectual adulthood. It is to approach the task of saying something with the same sense of responsibility that a researcher feels.

Of course, the bare request to "feel the same sense of responsibility as a researcher would" is not something that a student can simply follow. This is not to say that asking does no good, but it does need to be supplemented with reasons why he or she should feel that sense of responsibility. Those reasons, however, are familiar: they are the same reasons that require the community of researchers to abide by its own codes. The difficult thing for a student is often the realization that these same reasons *apply to her!*

Asking students to write in the first person is one aspect of my strategy to encourage this realization. Introducing the notion of peer review is another. An effective way to do this is to teach a workshop on effective peer-reviewing and then expect students to apply what they learn to improving the drafts of their peers. Students who are taught how to point out shortcomings in the work of others, especially when they know that their own work will be subjected to similar scrutiny, tend to grasp more vividly their own intellectual responsibilities. I tell them that it is their responsibility as reviewers to point out to the author that a certain point is unclear, or inadequately supported, or seems uncertain because of an unexamined objection. My students know that if they allow the mistakes of their peers to slip by them, they are failing in their task as reviewers, and this failure will be reflected in their grades. (I read, comment on, and grade all of their reviews.) This has several positive effects: one is that this activity casts students in the role of apprentice researchers, making vivid to them in a participatory way the communal aspects of research. The second positive effect is that their papers tend to be written more carefully and reflectively when they know that peers will be combing over them. A further benefit is that in following my instructions for research review, students often refine their ideas of what is and isn't adequate research.

Creative instructors can come up with many other activities in which students are treated as apprentice researchers, highlighting the continuity between them and "real" researchers. The goal is ultimately to awaken a realization that the full codes of academic integrity are necessary for research to be possible, and that every serious research endeavor presupposes the good faith and sincerity of each participant. Ironically, published policies on academic integrity may hinder the appreciation of this point, since they present integrity too narrowly. Policies tell students not to cheat, plagiarize, or falsify data. What students need to know is that we expect them to aim far higher: their aim should be to get it right. Students reach intellectual adulthood when they feel a personal obligation to get it right in their work—and when the importance of getting it right contributes to the motivation for their effort. If we contrast these motivations with those of students who aim merely at abiding by the rules and getting good grades, the difference between them is this: the former have internalized the codes of academic integrity. They grasp that these are the very glue that binds an inquiring community, and they are thinking of themselves as members of that community. They have passed the transition point at which they realize that they are responsible—and should be held responsible—for the ideas they present as their own. If this is our aim, as I think it should be, we have not adequately addressed the issue of academic integrity when we have merely explained "the rules" and found strategies to enforce them vigilantly.

### Notes

1. I use this term in Harry Frankfurt's sense, in order to describe a "lack of connection to a concern for truth" and statements expressed with an "indifference to how things really are" (Frankfurt, 2005, 3-4).

2. If this argument is right, it would also justify legislating a ban on bullshit in academic work. However, I am aware of no university that forbids bullshitting, nor would I advocate such a ban. I suspect that a ban on bullshit would indeed be morally justified, though impossible to enforce without unacceptable invasions of privacy. Another possibility, however, is that a higher principle is involved: bullshitting is a "thought crime" (while deliberate falsification is something more). If institutions have no right to legislate against mere thought crimes, we have a different reason for treating these two failures of honesty so differently.

### Works Cited

- Akers, S. (2003). Academic integrity: A guide for students. Purdue University Office of the Dean. Available at <http://www.purdue.edu/ODOS/osrr/integrity.htm>
- Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Syracuse University. (2006, July 1). Academic integrity policy. Available at [http://supolicies.syr.edu/ethics/acad\\_integrity.htm](http://supolicies.syr.edu/ethics/acad_integrity.htm)