Academic Dishonesty in 2012

Susan Sportsman, PhD, RN, ANEF
Director, Academic Consulting Group

Nursing and health professions faculty express concern about the prevalence of academic dishonesty among their students and question the effect of this dishonesty on their ability to provide safe, quality care following graduation. The purpose of this white paper is to explore the reasons for this academic dishonesty, its impact upon students’ practice following graduation, and faculty strategies for encouraging students to act in an ethical and honest manner in class and clinical experience.

Academic Dishonesty: What is it?

Kolanko, Clark, et.al. (2006) defines academic dishonesty as “intentional participation in deceptive practices regarding one’s academic work or the work of others.” The most common types of academic dishonesty include cheating and plagiarism. McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino (2006) notes that cheating has become increasingly prevalent from elementary school through graduate school and suggests that 70-90% of students report cheating at least once.

There are numerous reasons for academic dishonesty. A primary factor is the “high stakes” nature of grades in nursing and health professions education. Without good grades, students are not able to graduate, take their licensing/certification examinations, and move into their professional roles. Those who have aspirations for additional education recognize that their GPA in professional studies will influence their ability to enroll in further education. Callahan (2004) theorizes there are four underlying reasons for academic dishonesty: 1) new pressures related to later success; 2) environmental temptations, such as heavy workloads; 3) bigger rewards for winning; and 4) “trickle down corruption.” He suggests that the moral imperative for students has changed from “don’t cheat” to “don’t get caught.”

Students report other factors that may influence academic dishonesty:

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<th>Factors Influencing Academic Dishonesty</th>
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<td>• Risk-taking behavior that counts on not getting caught or punished</td>
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<td>• Will to succeed at all costs</td>
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<td>• Lack of preparation or skills</td>
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<td>• Heavy course load</td>
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<td>• Failure of instructors to explain materials</td>
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<td>• Need to keep pace with those who cheat</td>
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<td>• Poor teachers</td>
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<td>• Teachers who seem to not care about the students’ performance</td>
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Revised from Danielson, et.al. (2006) and Kolanko, Clark, et.al. (2006)
Cheating

As previously noted, academic dishonesty by students most often includes cheating and plagiarism. Kolanko, Clark, et.al. (2006) also suggests that classroom cheating can be divided into three categories:

- Taking, giving, or receiving information from others (e.g., copying another student’s paper during a test)
- Using forbidden information (e.g., “Cheat sheets” or other written material)
- Circumventing the assessment process (e.g., “I can’t take the test because my grandmother died — again”)

Research on Cheating

Given the concern about cheating in the classroom, there have been a number of studies designed to assess the prevalence of cheating in various disciplines, including nursing and health professions. McCabe (1999) who has studied cheating in a variety of settings, found through a focus group approach, that high school students believe cheating is ubiquitous. Cheating doesn't weigh heavily on their conscience. They do not believe that they will be caught — or punished — and that they are not likely to “rat” on their classmates. These high school students also noted that their willingness to cheat is, in part, dependent on how much they respect their teachers. These behaviors seem to continue as students matriculate into college.

Cheating in post high school is not a behavior that has just appeared over the last several decades. In fact, Danielsen, et.al. (2006) suggests that there was significant cheating in the ancient Greek Olympics. Over the last 25 years, there have been a number of studies designed to describe the prevalence of cheating in education and relative criteria. In 1985 and 1987, Hilbert evaluated more than 210 senior nursing students to determine the percentage who engaged in academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty included copying several sentences from a reference without appropriate citations, collaborating on an assignment that was to be done on an individual basis, citing sources that were not used, asking about test questions from someone who has already taken the test, or

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<th>Types of Cheating</th>
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<td>• Looking at another’s paper</td>
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<td>• Buying papers and exams</td>
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<td>• Illegally accessing a professor’s office</td>
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<td>• Claiming the test/paper was turned in when it wasn’t</td>
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<td>• Studying a student’s test from previous years</td>
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<td>• Procuring a copy of the instructor’s text or test bank</td>
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<td>• Using cell phones, tablets, and other electronic equipment to find information or record test questions for others</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Writing notes on hat brims, skin, shoes, bottles, and other items</td>
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(Mishkin & Panettieri, 2009)
allowing someone to copy off their paper. The percentage of students reporting these behaviors ranged from 17% to 39%. Similarly, Brown (2002) completed a survey of 253 nursing students regarding cheating. Seventeen percent of the respondents indicated they had cheated and 75% reported that they had seen others cheat.

McCabe (2009) evaluated nursing students’ reports of cheating behavior and confirmed Hilberts’ (1985, 1987) findings. More than ⅛ of undergraduate nursing students and almost ⅛ of graduate nursing students reported engaging in one or more of the 16 behaviors identified. He also found that nursing faculty was more likely to be proactive in addressing the issues of cheating as compared to faculty in non-health care disciplines.

Cheating in Online Programs

Incidents of academic dishonesty, including cheating, can also occur in an online educational environment. Stephens, Young & Calabrese (2007) completed an online survey of 1,305 students in a wide range of disciplines from two universities to determine the extent of their cheating. Thirty-two percent denied cheating, 18.2% cheating only in conventional ways, such as copying from others in class or collaborating when individual work is required. A few students (4.2%) only cheated using digital means, such as not citing work copied from Internet sources. However, 42.6% of the respondents cheated both digitally and using conventional methods.

The above findings raise the question of whether students participating in online classes are more likely to cheat than other students. There seems to be little evidence to suggest that cheating in online courses is greater than in traditional classes. However, there is some evidence indicating that as students assume their professional roles, they are less likely to cheat. For example, Hart & Morgan (2010) found that self-reports of cheating in an online RN-to-BSN course were lower than that of pre-licensure students in traditional courses. McCabe’s research (2009) demonstrated a similar finding. McCabe suggests that RN-to-BSN students with several years of experience may be thoroughly socialized regarding integrity in practice.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism, using others’ work without proper citations, is also not new. McKerral, President of the Society of Professional Journalists, said in 2004 that “only the methods of stealing are new: plagiarism and fabricating isn’t a new phenomena, but technology makes them easy to commit and to catch” (Kiehl, 2006). There are numerous mechanisms that faculty and students can use to evaluate the originality of the work. More importantly, faculty should provide students with specific instructions regarding the definition of plagiarism and strategies to avoid inadvertent plagiarism. They should also reinforce proper documentation and citations in written work and the difference between collaborative learning and plagiarism. Frequent discussions with students about the school’s Academic Integrity Policy can also be helpful to reinforce appropriate behavior.
Once plagiarism has occurred, faculty must evaluate the circumstances surrounding the situation. In some cases, students may be unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or their limited composition skills may result in plagiarism within an assignment. In other cases, the plagiarism may be more willful or extensive. Kiehl (2006) suggests the ethical decision making model below to help faculty determine the most appropriate response to the student’s action.

**Ethical Decision Making Model by Kiehl (2006)**

A — Assessment of all factors in the situation  
B — Benefits. Determining the benefits of possible actions for student, teacher-student relationship, and other stakeholder  
C — Consequences and consultation  
D — Duty of all participants as determined by relevant Code of Ethics.

**Strategies to Encourage Academic Integrity**

There are a variety of strategies to discourage cheating and encourage an environment where academic honesty is valued. Given that in-class testing is a prominent component of nursing and health professions education, in the short term, strategies to proctor these tests can establish a testing environment that makes cheating difficult.

**Strategies for Proctoring Tests**

- Use more than one proctor to move around the room during testing  
- Do not use non-faculty staff, such as clerical staff  
- Request that students place personal items (books, bottled water, backpacks, purses, phones, etc.) in the front of the room  
- Do not permit food or drink of any type because students can write information on coffee cups, water bottles, gum, or candy wrappers  
- Ask students who have family concerns (sick children, etc.) to leave phones at a location close to the instructor  
- Do not allow students to leave a room during testing, except in an emergency and only when accompanied by a proctor  
- Before beginning the test, remind students of the consequences of cheating  
- If a faculty suspects a student of looking at another student’s paper, stand close to the student for the rest of the testing period  
- Use several formats of the same exam  
- Assign seating; separate friends

Revised from Mishkin & Panettieri (2009) and Kolanko, Clark, et.al. (2006).

More importantly, developing an environment that encourages academic integrity will pay important dividends. First of all, faculty must demonstrate academic integrity in all their work, for example, using proper citations for work shared with students. Adopting honor codes and integrating their use into the teaching-learning process is also important. McCabe and colleagues (1993, 1999, 2002) found that cheating is lower in universities that have honor codes than those that don’t, suggesting that having
an honor code enhances the climate of academic integrity. However, it is not sufficient to simply hang the honor code on the classroom wall or place it in the course syllabus. Faculty and students must discuss its implications in relation to the program, as well as throughout the curriculum in class, laboratory, and clinical experiences.

Student assignments must be meaningful to the students’ learning, and the instructions for completing the assignment and the evaluation criteria must be clear to the student. Deadlines for assignments should be reasonable and coordinated with assignments in other courses. Moreover, the emphasis on formative evaluation, rather than summative evaluation, is important in reducing student anxiety and promoting learning (Tippet, et.al. 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, faculty should implement appropriate proctoring and monitoring activities to reduce temptation for students to cheat or plagiarize. Since students report they are more likely to cheat if they believe that they will not be caught or punished, faculty must also be willing to address cheating and plagiarism or reports of such behaviors. However, these strategies have the potential to put faculty and students in adversarial positions.

Tanner (2004) suggests several ways in which faculty can support such a culture. For example, faculty should create learning experiences that are interesting, meaningful, and relevant to the students’ professional development. They should also create fair learning assessments that provide feedback to help students improve their academic and clinical performance. Making an effort to give students feedback that avoids comparisons to other students reduces the emphasis on competition and academic achievement rather than learning. Finally, Tanner (2004) suggests that faculty should evaluate the program rules about which students frequently complain, or even break. For example, in what circumstances is it harmful for students to work collaboratively on assignments and when is such collaboration a reflection of what students will see in an actual practical environment?

Academic integrity can be fostered in professional schools. Developing a culture where learning is more important than academic achievement can have a significant long-term positive effect on academic integrity in a program.
References

Brown, D.L. (2002) Spotlight on...Cheating must be ok – everyone does it! Nursing Education. 27(1). 6-8.


Bibliography for Academic Integrity


