



ACHIEVING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

How high school honor codes can boost student performance.

In today's highly competitive world, honor sometimes takes a back seat to "winning."

We saw this in the recent #OperationVarsityBlues college admissions scandal where affluent parents committed fraud to help their children gain admission to prestigious universities.

What leads students to compromise their integrity? According to a [2019 report from the National Academies Press](#), one reason is pressure to succeed. Students who attend high-achieving schools battle chronic stress and show elevated levels of depression, anxiety, rule-breaking and substance use. The NAP report noted that this group makes up 20% to 25% of the US population.

Is the pursuit of academic success creating a health hazard? How do we get students to embrace and practice academic integrity?

THE SCOPE OF THE CHEATING PROBLEM

Katie Wike, a senior instructional innovations specialist for [Turnitin](#), worked as an English-language arts teacher for eight years. In that time, she saw plenty of cheating — plagiarizing from the internet, copying from peers, lifting from homework done by older brothers and sisters, and even having parents do projects because the students were pinched for time. Now, contract cheating has become "more commonplace" in high school, she says, with students using PayPal, debit cards or gift cards to order papers from online essay mills.

Paige Singleton was a math teacher for 20 years in K-12 before becoming a certified change management consultant for Turnitin. She recalls a student coming to her and showing her

a website where students could access the test questions for the math textbook they were using in class and get all the answers; the student also demonstrated a mobile app that would allow users to take pictures of their math problems and have it generate a step-by-step solution for them that they could slap into their assignments with no more effort than copying the text.

The ease with which cheating can happen and the seemingly ubiquitous nature of it has pushed a lot of teachers to simply give up the battle, Singleton observes, “because they can’t convince other people to feel as strongly about it as they do and to do something about it.”

REVIVING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Lisa LaBrake, in her 29th year as an ELA and media teacher at [Sweet Home Senior High School](#) in New York, and a team of colleagues are concerned enough about academic dishonesty that they’ve started to develop an honor code at their high school. Without that in place, LaBrake points out, she’s unsure whether teachers should be willing to write recommendation letters for students, allow them to apply for the National Honor Society or let them be considered as scholar-athletes.

For Sweet Home, the work of creating a culture of academic integrity begins with a survey. LaBrake and her team want to understand how rampant cheating is and why certain students do it. She says she believes that information could be a real eye-opener in her district, which adheres to the expectation that everyone will graduate.

LaBrake’s belief is that the honor code conversations will take several directions.

First, she says she expects the school to introduce consistent teaching on “finding good sources, citing sources, giving credit, allowing opportunities for students to be original and to explain where they got some of their ideas from.”

Second, she says she wants the community as whole to put less emphasis on “the grade grab” and more effort into helping young people learn how to be “honest consumers and producers.”



5 STEPS TO CREATING AN EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC HONOR CODE

STEP #1: Go grassroots.

The first step in developing an effective high school honor code is to create “awareness of the issue,” says Paige Singleton, a certified change management practitioner for Turnitin. The goal is to build an understanding among the entire community — teachers and administrators, as well as students and parents, and even the business community — to convince people, “yes, this is a serious problem and the implications of the problem are that students aren’t learning.”

STEP #2: Lay the groundwork.

From there, Singleton suggests that community group learns how to introduce the change. She suggests working with the [International Center for Academic Integrity](#), which offers consulting and resources on what an honor code is and how it works in schools.

STEP #3. Bring in the honor council.

An honor code represents something more than a webpage with rules. Frequently, it involves the use of an “honor council” to do the hard work, Singleton says. Depending on the culture of the school and with mindfulness of applicable education privacy laws, that council might be made up of adults running the show or — Singleton’s preference — it could be student-led through drafting honor code policies and advocating to other students.

“Students tend to listen more to other students,” she explains. “There comes a certain point around grades seven or eight where students start to tune out adults. But they listen to their peers. If you get the students involved, it’s an opportunity to develop leadership in your student population and for the students to start encouraging each other to do the right thing and not engage in academic dishonesty.”

STEP #4. Step aside and let the council do its job.

When an instance of academic dishonesty takes place, it’s the purview of the honor council to investigate, which means “talking to that student, finding out what happened and seeing if they can come to some type of resolution.”

STEP #5. Raise awareness.

No, this doesn’t mean publicizing the details of honor code decisions. But it does mean making sure teachers talk about the honor code at strategic moments in the semester with students, that the honor council shows consistency in its response, and that the stakeholder group at the heart of the effort takes the pulse of the community to find out whether the actions have impact and signs of progress are blooming.

Third, she adds that she hopes her fellow teachers will consider the amount and type of work they give to students, to have those assignments “be meaningful, where it’s not just the students copying because it’s ‘busy work’ but so that the originality comes through.”

All of that, says LaBrake, is “very hard work and it takes a lot of planning and it takes a lot of teamwork to do that. But our district is all about that.”

The effective honor code calls for a “formative process,” Wike explains. “You can’t just address it one time at the beginning of the year when you’re talking about the student handbook, and then when a student cheats, you pull it back out and say, ‘Well, we talked about this. Why didn’t you know better?’ It needs to be something that is taught and revisited.”

While acknowledging that some students cheat “with ill intentions,” in her experience, “a lot of students don’t understand. They don’t know better. It’s a lack of skill. They don’t know how to cite appropriately or they don’t know how to manage their time.” And Wike suggests it provides fodder for valuable conversation. “OK, so let’s talk about: How can you do differently next time? How can I help you manage your time so that you’re not put in this position again and you can do your own work honorably with integrity?”



THE BENEFITS OF AN HONOR CODE

Done right, instilling an honor code into schools can make for better learning outcomes for students, Singleton says. A bright student may get by in classes by copying others' work in elementary or middle school, but by not doing their own work in those early days, their inattention to the basics can have ramifications later on.

"Parents would come to me and say, 'My child never had any trouble. Why are they having trouble this year in this class?' If we could get students to be honest about their history, then we could go back and find out that there was a lot of not doing their own work in the middle-school years, and it's translating to a lack of success in high school."

An honor code also adds an element of equity and fairness. When all students are on the same page when it comes to what is expected of them and there is institutional support and follow-through, it can break down barriers of perceived favoritism.

Eventually, students get to a point "where these behaviors are not going to work anymore," Singleton asserts, "and they're not going to be able to pass these classes because they haven't built the skills that they need in order to be successful."

And therein lies the case for the honor code: Building that awareness within the community of the full cost of cheating. This way, parents and students — not just the teachers and administrators — understand why the honor code is essential and can help the school put an effective one in place. ■

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