



## Questions College Faculty Members Should Ask When Designing And Teaching Their Courses

by Gary Pavela

### What are the goals of this community?

Colleges don't have the same goals as businesses. The essential difference is that colleges put truth-seeking and character formation ahead of profit. Students won't grasp this point if they see themselves exclusively as isolated individuals pursuing marketable skills. The design and teaching of any college course should convey to students that they're part of a venerable institution --and a succession of generations--defined by certain core values, including honesty, intellectual curiosity, self-discipline, self-examination, cooperation, civility, and civic obligation. At a minimum, the idea of a college or university as a community of thinkers, scholars, and doers should be explored by dialogue with students at the beginning of the course. Key questions include:

1. what do you want to learn from this course?
2. should the course influence any of your beliefs, values, or habits?
3. should the course be taught differently than instruction offered by business, government, or a trade school?
4. what larger questions, challenges, or problems should this course help you address?
5. what does this course have to do with the goals or values of the college as a whole?

### What are my professional and ethical values? How will I communicate those values to students?

Students sometimes think discussions about ethics and academic integrity apply only to them. Many are unaware that most professors belong to disciplines that espouse strong ethical commitments. See, for example, the preamble to the "Code of Ethics for the National Society of Professional Engineers":

Engineering is an important and learned profession. As members of this profession, engineers are expected to exhibit the highest standards of honesty and integrity. Engineering has a direct and vital impact on the quality of life for all people. Accordingly, the services provided by engineers require honesty, impartiality, fairness, and equity, and must be dedicated to the protection of the public health, safety, and welfare. Engineers must perform under a standard of professional behavior that requires adherence to the highest principles of ethical conduct.

The full code is available at: <http://www.nspe.org/ethics/eh1-code.asp>.



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Likewise, in the humanities, consider the "Code of Ethics for Art Historians:"

Art historians must be competent researchers; they must also be fully aware of professional conduct and employ ethical practices. Scholarly integrity demands an awareness of personal and cultural bias and an openness to issues of difference as they may inflect methodology and analysis. Art historians are responsible for carefully documenting their findings and then making available to others their sources, evidence and data. They must guard against misrepresenting evidence and against the offense of plagiarism. They should fully acknowledge the receipt of financial support and institutional sponsorship, or privileged access to research material and/or original works of art, as well as crediting people in the field who give interviews and/or provide access to materials and works. It is equally important that assistance received from colleagues, students, and others be fully acknowledged.

*The full code is available at: <http://www.collegeart.org/guidelines/histethics.html>.*

A good way to remind students about the importance of academic integrity is to introduce them to ethical standards in the subject they're studying. Ask them to read and critique those standards-- and discuss whether any standards are necessary. Making such an effort suggests to students that honesty and integrity are core components of most careers or professions, not an obscure idiosyncrasy of academic life. Furthermore, students are often intensely interested in the values and beliefs of their teachers. By discussing the ethics of their disciplines or professions, college professors send the powerful subliminal message that ethical inquiry and commitment can be a source of personal fulfillment.

## **How shall I define my relationship with students?**

We'd like to suggest the controversial idea that the relationship between teacher and student be considered a form of friendship. Doing so requires an understanding of "friendship" as being something more than conviviality or flattery. Aristotle made an important distinction in this regard between "lower" and "higher" forms of friendship (e.g. friendship for pleasure and friendship to promote good thinking and good character). He wrote in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, (Ostwald translation) that:

[T]he friendship of good men is good, and it increases with (the frequency of) their meetings. Also, it seems, they become better as they are active together and correct one another: from the mold of the other each takes the imprints of the traits he likes, whence the saying: 'Noble things from noble people' (Ibid, p. 272).

A few professors may reject the idea that they are ever "corrected" by their students. Most experienced teachers, however, agree that good teaching entails mutuality: a sense that both teacher



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and students gain insight from each other, even if the teacher starts with a higher level of knowledge and experience.

There's also a rich classical heritage behind the concept of friendship between teacher and student, harkening back to Socrates as the teacher of Plato, and Plato as the teacher of Aristotle. Certainly there were unequal relationships among them at different times, but the overriding goal of truth-seeking permitted (and likely encouraged) friendship and disagreement to co-exist. A beautiful expression of this reality can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, when Aristotle questioned Plato's theory of timeless forms or universals:

[P]erhaps we had better examine the universal good and face the problem of its meaning, although such an inquiry is repugnant, since those who have introduced the doctrine of Forms are dear to us. . . Both [friendship and truth] are dear to us, but it our sacred duty to honor truth more highly . . . (Ibid, p. 10).

An objection to the word "friendship" to encompass the teacher-student relationship is that an unequal power relationship exists, based in part on the awarding of grades. There's force in this argument, but it can be diminished by the aims and tone set by the teacher. Once students understand that the goal of the relationship is shared inquiry and expanded knowledge--and that mutual "correction" is invited-- genuine friendship can arise. This is far from abstract theory; it's an experience many teachers and students report on a daily basis, and helps explain bonds that often last for a lifetime. We saw an example of the phenomenon in the following end-of-year commentary by University of Virginia Cavalier Daily staff member (and graduating senior) Katie Dalton (May 17, 2002). Ms. Dalton wrote about her "best teacher," William Fishback:

My friendship with you has been the most rewarding relationship to come out of my academic experience. You know just how and when to push me out of procrastination, and you consistently offer support as a father would. More than anyone else, you embody the Jeffersonian ideal of a professor who instructs but also encourages his students, and who values friendships with his pupils as much as their final exams.

Imagine, for a moment, Ms. Dalton's likely reaction to the suggestion that she might consider cheating or plagiarizing in professor Fishback's class. We believe the idea would be repugnant to her because it would constitute a form of betrayal. There's strong support for this view, based on evidence that less academic dishonesty occurs in smaller classes, where teacher and student establish personal connection.

## **How can I promote a love of learning?**

Not every aspect of every subject can be made entertaining or "relevant." Students do, however, make a distinction between courses where they are challenged to think deeply and creatively, and



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classes that seem endlessly tedious and pointless. The temptation to engage in academic dishonesty seems much stronger in the latter.

It's hard to imagine any subject that can't shed some light on the structure of the world, or on human nature, aims, or ambitions. Asking students to think about possible connections between the subject and a broader meaning in life (including defining personal values and goals) can spark a level of interest that makes academic dishonesty manifestly self-defeating. This idea was explored in a September 9, 2003 New York Times "op-ed" article by University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson, ("How Teachers Can Stop Cheating"). Edmundson used the reported upsurge in Internet cheating to focus on how the style and substance of what's taught influences the willingness of students to engage in academic dishonesty:

In teaching only reading and the scholarly arts, humanities professors do just half of their jobs. It's not enough to ask for a careful description of erotic imagery in 'Romeo and Juliet . . .' We need to go further and ask if those works provide usable truths for ourselves and our students . . . Speaking of his exchange with his pupils, Socrates, the founder of humanistic education, once observed: 'What we're engaged in here isn't a chance conversation but a dialogue about the way we ought to live our lives.' The closer we professors come to following Socrates, the less cheating we're likely to see.

Professor Edmundson's suggestion shouldn't be limited to the humanities. The best researchers in any field seem to be captivated by a sense of fascination with their work. At a minimum, teachers can explore with students how and why such fascination arises. A good example can be seen in Simon Blackburn's review of Richard Dawkins' new book *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* in the December 1, 2003 New Republic. Blackburn, professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge, wrote that:

Dawkins unashamedly and gloriously delights in science. If anything is sacred to him, it is truth and the patient road to it. He loves the methods of science and its self-correcting nature. He loves the amazing world that it reveals---a world far more amazing than any that human beings could invent out of their own heads. A quotation that he provides from Douglas Adams fits him exactly: "I'd take the awe of understanding over the awe of ignorance any day." In the last essay in the book he expresses this love in a moving letter to his ten-year-old daughter, extolling science's reliance on observation, evidence, and the testing of hypotheses, and contrasting them with the ways by which falsehoods come to grip the human mind: by authority, and tradition, and the inner conviction called revelation.

Key words in that paragraph include gloriously, delights, sacred, loves, and amazing, all associated with the sense of "flow" that occurs when a creative and disciplined mind pursues a greater truth. Students need to know that those feelings can give meaning to a career-- and have the collateral benefit of making fraud and dishonesty inherently repugnant.



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## **What else can I say that might help students understand the importance of Academic Integrity?**

Students need to know that complex societies depend on high levels of trust. One simple exercise is to invite students to glance at the classroom ceiling. They might then be reminded that thousands of pounds of steel and concrete are balanced directly above their heads. Everyone in the classroom--at the precise moment of the conversation--is dependent on the integrity of the people who designed and built the building. (Note: This suggestion is drawn from a University of Maryland advisory letter to faculty members, also distributed online to faculty members at Stanford University. See:

<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/faculty/materials.commitment.htm>

## **How can I help students avoid the temptation to cheat or plagiarize?**

In the broadest sense, college professors need to be catalysts for change of an educational system that seems to stress relentless competition-- either as an end in itself, or for credentialing in the larger society. At the same time, professors can't ignore simple, practical steps they can take to reduce the temptation students face to engage in academic dishonesty. Every teacher needs to be attentive to developing new or revised examination questions (rather than repeating old ones year after year); providing adequate security for examinations before they're administered; giving clear instructions about taking examinations or writing papers (especially about possible collaboration, or the use of electronic devices like calculators or cell-phones); properly identifying test-takers in large classes; providing adequate proctoring; arranging random seating; alternating test questions when students are sitting next to each other in crowded conditions; and taking precautions against fraudulent requests for regrading.

Here are three additional ideas worth emphasizing (most borrowed from other teachers):

1. To reduce the temptation to engage in plagiarism, design the course so that students are asked to "present" major papers in class, responding to questions from the teacher and other students. Given the growth in class website and e-mail technologies, completed papers can be distributed to the class for advance reading. When students know they have to explain and respond to multiple questions about their work they're less inclined to download a purchased paper the night before.
2. Students might be allowed to bring and use a handwritten note card on certain kinds of examinations. Many faculty members have found that allowing students to use such authorized "crib sheets" enhances advance preparation and outlining, encourages thinking rather than memorization, and significantly reduces cheating.
3. Especially with the advent of new teaching technologies, various forms of competency based learning can be utilized, including allowing students to revise and resubmit graded papers for additional credit, or to retake graded examinations and obtain at least partial credit for



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demonstrating how they learned from past errors. These approaches reduce the sense of panic students feel when the work of an entire semester seems to depend on one or two major exercises.

## **How can I protect students who don't engage in academic dishonesty?**

As long as teachers use competitive grading systems they must insure the competition is fair. That means, in part, that students who engage in intentional acts of deception (like cheating and plagiarism) need to be referred for appropriate disciplinary action, in accordance with institutional policies. Incidents involving simple academic negligence might be handled informally, with a reduction in grade. Deliberate deception, however, may be associated with the habit of academic dishonesty in multiple classes. Students who engage in such repetitive wrongdoing are unlikely to be detected if teachers seek to punish academic dishonesty on their own.

Finally, one of the best ways to protect honest students is to help them win a role in promoting academic integrity campus wide (e.g., on honor committees and in the development of institutional initiatives like honor pledges). Students who assume such responsibilities are often wonderful resources for classroom presentations on the importance of academic integrity-- not just to the faculty, but to the student body as a whole.