

THOUGHTS ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

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A central principle of Earlham College is that we treat one another as adults and as equals. We don't play games with one another. In particular, we don't assume students are going to cheat unless we take elaborate precautions to catch them. You are free moral agents, responsible to yourselves, and not to me, for your actions. It is hugely important to me that we continue to function in this manner.

Let me, however, encourage you to walk with integrity by stressing the importance and the seriousness of the responsibility I lay upon you to do your own work. All through your schooling, teachers have been telling you that in cheating, you cheat yourself. I hate to repeat this cliché, but it is worth noting that it is truer here than ever before. This course is costing you as much money as you could earn in 6 weeks at \$10/hour. Don't elect to spend that kind of cash and not to learn anything.

There are deeper reasons for acting with integrity, though. The scholarly community, whose members have nothing to sell except ideas, depends for its existence on honest attribution of insights to their authors. Imagine a world in which this honesty had died, in which new ideas could not be published, in which discoveries had to be hidden in secrecy for fear of theft, in which openness and community no longer existed. To cheat in a class is to cast a vote or this sort of society.

The Earlham community, also, benefits profoundly from the trust we are able to place in one another. Imagine what this course would be like if we had to have in-class exams with a professor patrolling the aisles hoping to nab miscreants. We would not be able to evaluate people's mathematical skills under normal conditions, and we would lose the precious ability to function as friends on the same side of the learning experience. To cheat in a class is to cast a vote for this sort of College.

The network of trust that makes possible the existence of scholarship, and of the College, gives us great strength, but it is a delicate organism which grows from a myriad of individual acts of trustworthiness by all of us at every time and in every place. No one manages to act with perfect integrity in every situation. Many of us, myself included, struggle daily with temptations of many sorts. I must tell you from my own experience and from that of those around me, though, how easily small deceptions lead to patterns of deceit and separation, poisoning communities, and relationships, and souls. As a friend and a fellow human being, I say to you, be careful how you walk.

As a possible aid in reflection, let me tell you two stories from the Earlham community.

The first is from early in my time at Earlham. Two students, one of whom was in one of my classes, came to my office, looking unhappy and wanting to discuss a problem of academic integrity. I had just given a take-home test, in which students were told not to

consult others. The student in my class, while taking this test, found there was a word whose meaning she didn't know on the exam. It was late, so rather than consult me, she went to the other student, not explaining the situation, and asked for a definition. Had she come to me with the same question, I would probably have given her an answer. The second student defined the term, then said, "Let me give you an example," and proceeded by chance to do exactly the problem I had posed on the exam. Now the first student found herself really in an unhappy position. She had started out to cut a corner in a small way, and had found herself suddenly handed a quarter of the points on the test in a manner that was clearly unacceptable. In keeping with the principles of integrity outlined in the Academic Code, both students came to me with the issue. So now I had two students in my office, near tears, and a complicated dilemma to resolve.

I tell this story for two reasons. The students coming to me with this confession are a splendid example of integrity I wish I was sure I could emulate myself. But the story is also a cautionary tale of how easily taking shortcuts can spin out into something with much larger consequences. Do take care.

My second story is one told by a colleague, who in college cheated in some manner on a paper in a class. Later, this colleague ended up working professionally in the same field as the professor in this class, maintaining for 20 years a professional and personal connection to this professor. My colleague spoke eloquently and movingly of how difficult this situation was—to be for 20 years a friend and admired former student of someone, and to know that the initial grounding of that relationship rested on fraud. What began as the act of a moment therefore became an issue that stood between two people for decades, subtly poisoning and crippling a friendship. Do take care.

Please do not think that I write this little essay out of the expectation that people will cheat if I don't lay down the law. On the contrary, I write it because at Earlham, I can assume the opposite. I write to celebrate life in a community in which I can assume that each of us, acting under the dictates of conscience, will seek and find the strength to live with integrity. We should all feel good about the decisions we have made to live with principle, and we should all help those who struggle with the temptations that afflict us all.

Should you find these arguments unpersuasive, let me out of fairness offer a last observation. I believe profoundly in allowing people to grow by acting as moral free agents. This does not, however, mean that I will fail to defend the values of the academic community if I detect that they have been violated. In one recent year, for instance, I sadly identified 8 students who had cheated on assignments in my classes. All these students failed the assignments in question and were reported to the Dean; 6 of them failed the class as well; 1 was nearly suspended; another was suspended and nearly expelled. Should you be contemplating cheating in this class, do read the Student Handbook about procedures and penalties resulting from lack of respect for our community. Notice, also, that the recommended penalties are described there as minimum penalties, and be advised that I will treat them as such.

To all of you, I offer my apologies for feeling a need to speak so bluntly. Do, please, believe that my forthrightness grows not from suspicion but from my commitment to maintaining Earlham as a community in which I can joyously regard you all as above suspicion.