VIEWPOINT

Academic Dishonesty: Whose Fault is it Anyway?

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As health professionals, we must follow high ethical standards to ensure we “consider the welfare of humanity and relief of suffering.”¹ As researchers, we also adhere to high ethical standards to ensure the outcomes of our research hold up to the rigor of best practices and scrutiny of peer review. In pharmacy education, we expect nothing less from our students. We can all agree there is no room for cheating when it comes to providing high quality patient care, when the lack of knowledge or skill can result in a devastating event or even loss of life. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) evaluates efforts of colleges and schools of pharmacy to ensure academic integrity and professionalism of pharmacy students,² and most institutions have established a code of professional conduct and go to great lengths to maintain these expectations. Given the focus on personal and professional development in the 2016 ACPE Standards, addressing cheating early can help ensure ethical behavior in practice because academic dishonesty is associated with unethical business practices.^{3,4} Yet, as faculty members and administrators, we continue to deal with academic dishonesty among our students.

So, why do students continue to cheat, plagiarize, collaborate in an unauthorized manner, and facilitate the cheating of other students? We pride ourselves in the rigors of pharmacy education, but this rigor pressures students significantly, not unlike what medical and dental students experience.^{5,6} These pressures can be intensified by students’ families or peers. Often this pressure leads students to be highly grade-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented. Desire to get ahead is a commonly cited reason for cheating in studies of college students, including those who are studying medicine and pharmacy.^{6,7} Other reasons students cite include fear of failure, poor time management skills, and desire to assist a classmate.⁶ In some instances, particularly when submitting written work, students claim to not understand such academically dishonest behaviors as unauthorized collaboration and plagiarism.

Nationally, more than 98% of graduating pharmacy students agree or strongly agree that they are aware of

professional and academic conduct expectations. However, only 77% and 78% of students agree or strongly agree, respectively, that the school effectively manages academic and professional misconduct.⁸ Reasons students blame academic misconduct on faculty members is availability of old examinations and re-use of questions, not catching cheaters, and/or not punishing cheaters.

Indeed, faculty members whose focus lies in educating students, conducting research, and providing service contributions often complain about the extent of measures they must take to prevent dishonest behavior and cheating. Creating seating charts or different versions of examinations and enforcing testing policies that require students to leave their belongings in the front of the room are all proven strategies to discourage cheating. However, implementation of these measures consumes faculty time and energy. Technological advances may facilitate cheating and challenge faculty members to keep up with new and creative ways that students find to cheat.⁹ Furthermore, the process of prosecuting a student is challenging and time consuming, and often faculty members are unaware of the proper procedures and support resources available.

So what are possible solutions? Schools need to toe a hard line on all forms of cheating by strictly enforcing anti-cheating measures and punishing cheaters who are caught. They need to continue to educate students and faculty members about academic dishonesty and the consequences of cheating in academic and health-care settings, particularly with regard to patients. Schools also need to consider that different students engage in academic dishonesty for different reasons when developing codes of professional and academic conduct. While laws prohibit schools from making public specific information regarding individuals who cheat, transparency in statistics for cases reviewed and consequences applied can increase awareness among faculty members and students about how the school manages academic and professional misconduct and discourages dishonest behavior among other students. As faculty members, the burden is on our shoulders

to ensure our students will be ethical professionals. That starts by preventing cheating in all its forms.

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