



## Encouraging Academic Honesty: A Nursing Imperative

By: **Linda Johanson**

### Abstract

Academic dishonesty, whether intentional cheating or plagiarism, or unintentional sharing of work or confusion about referencing, is nothing new to the college environment but is especially disturbing within nursing. The integrity of the nursing profession may, in fact, be jeopardized as students with the habit of cheating graduate and enter the field. This article discusses how educators, students, university administration, and nurses in practice can discourage cheating and plagiarism and promote honesty.

“**H**ave you heard this? Peel the label off of your water bottle and glue a paper with class notes to the back of the label, then stick it back on your bottle. Bring the bottle to the test, and you not only have your notes to help you, but the water magnifies the words!”

This insight on how to successfully cheat during a test was offered by a student in my freshman seminar. Each new college freshman was assigned to a seminar group to discuss topics pertinent to academic success. This week's topic was academic dishonesty, and these students knew creative ways to cheat. One of the most original—a student who had drawn an elaborate “tattoo” on his arm comprising artful formulas relevant to algebraic problem-solving.

Although cheating is nothing new to the college environment, it is especially disturbing within nursing. Nursing requires practitioners to be prepared to deal with important ethical and moral issues. A culture of academic dishonesty does nothing to help prepare students for their intended professional role. The integrity of the nursing profession may, in fact, be jeopardized as students with the habit of cheating graduate and enter the field.

What is it that compels nursing students to be dishonest? What effects does this trend have on the profession? How can honest behavior be encouraged?

## ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Academic dishonesty has been broadly defined as “intentional participation in deceptive practices regarding one's academic work or the work of another” (Gaberson, 1997). This definition includes cheating

(unauthorized help with assignments or testing) and plagiarism (the presentation of work for credit that is not one's own), as well as falsification of information (i.e., quoting or using unexamined references). Although it is not a part of the formal definition, it is helpful to consider *unintentional* cheating and plagiarism as well. This includes students who participate in behaviors consistent with academic dishonesty but claim to be unaware they are doing something unacceptable.

It is difficult to assess precise prevalence because participants in studies examining academic dishonesty probably are reluctant to admit dishonest behaviors. However, academic dishonesty is commonplace in higher education. McCabe (2005) surveyed the incidence of cheating at 32 universities and found in undergraduates that 74% of business students and 68% in nonbusiness fields admitted to some form of cheating.

## HIGH-TECH CHEATING

There may be a correlation with the current abundance of technology and the incidence of student dishonesty. According to a recent survey of 1,222 undergraduate students in the United Kingdom, the Internet presented a conducive environment for academic dishonesty (Selwyn, 2008). The increased availability of Internet sites where term papers can be purchased (some free of charge) and a plethora of informational sites from which text can be “cut and pasted” into a paper makes the possibility to plagiarize easy for students. Some Internet sites offer advice to students concerning strategies for successful cheating. The following are examples of popular Web sites for cheating:

- **A-1 Term Papers:** Over 20,000 papers for purchase, priced individually.
- **ACI Writing Assistance Center:** Makes the claim that the providers of available documents for purchase have earned doctorates.

- **Cheater.com:** Users can search over 25,000 papers to purchase.
- **Free Essay Network:** No charge for essays and term papers.
- **The Evil House of Cheat:** Users join for a flat fee of \$69.95 every 6 months. Advice is offered for cheating on exams, and testimonials from students are posted.
- **The Paper Store:** Offers model term papers ostensibly intended for the student to use for assistance in producing their own work.

In addition to Internet resources, other high-technology devices make cheating easier for the savvy student. Cellular telephones with photo capability or tiny cameras concealed in buttonholes or wristwatches can be used to take a picture of an exam to print, e-mail, or post on the Web. Text messaging, handheld palm devices, MP3 players, or mini-recorders small enough to conceal yet sensitive enough to record whispering can all facilitate cheating. There are receiving units small enough to fit inside the ear canal that can be concealed by hair to receive transmitted test answers. None of these devices are cost prohibitive; all are available through legitimate vendors.

## OTHER FACTORS

Access to high-technology has made cheating more convenient, flexible, and efficient; however, it is not the only reason students engage in academic dishonesty. Another factor is that students don't always perceive cheating behaviors to be dishonest. Arhin (2009) concluded after surveying 44 senior baccalaureate nursing students that many behaviors associated with academic dishonesty occur because the students in “Generation Y” tend to normalize such behaviors. Students were presented with scenarios and asked to assess if they perceived the situations to involve cheating or not. Although students could correctly define academic dishonesty, they had difficulty categorizing specific behaviors as dishonest. For example, only 27.3% of students

characterized the handing down of coursework and lab reports for use by other students in lower classes as a dishonest behavior (p. 18). These are students who are not cheating intentionally. This category also might include students who are genuinely confused about the correct way to cite references for a term paper. They don't mean to plagiarize. They just don't recognize their behaviors as unacceptable.

## ACADEMIC PROCEDURES

Once an accusation of cheating is made, academic institutions may not have procedures in place that are supportive to faculty (Schneider, 1999). The university judicial process can be lengthy and labor-intensive, and the professor may be required to produce substantial evidence, testimony, and paperwork. There can be lawsuits as well as repercussions from students resulting in unfavorable course evaluations, which can affect promotion and tenure for the faculty member. All of these challenges may discourage professors from making a formal accusation when dishonesty is suspected. When students who are caught or suspected of academic dishonesty are not reported and punished, the culture becomes one of tolerance. In the absence of an incentive to discontinue unacceptable behaviors, students simply persist or accelerate.

Nurses continue to outrank all other professions in the public's perception of occupations with integrity. According to Gallup polls, 84% of respondents reported the impression that honesty and ethical standards of nurses are "very high" or "high" (Saad, 2006). So it would seem that individuals preparing for careers in nursing would be unlikely to be academically dishonest. However, the competitive environment and academic rigor associated with nursing education might tempt students to cheat to earn higher grades or academic honors, or simply to pass courses or survive. Larger class sizes associated with faculty shortages may make it more difficult for students to obtain individualized assistance from professors, compelling some to cheat to compensate.

Professors of nursing may be unintentionally somewhat to blame for academic dishonesty. Because nursing is known as a profession of integrity, faculty may not suspect student nurses would become involved in acts of dishonesty, and they may not be alert to this potential. It takes attentiveness and time to detect plagiarism. With nationwide shortages of nursing faculty and an intense and dynamic subject matter to teach that includes classroom teaching, clinical, research, service, and practice, there is little time to devote to tracking down and dealing with cheaters.

Christian educators are held to God's standards as well as empowered by the Holy Spirit. Scripture offers examples of confrontation that we can look to for insight and support: Moses confronted Pharaoh (Exodus 8—9), Samuel confronted the people after they insisted on having a king (1 Samuel 12), the priests of Israel confronted King Uzziah when he violated temple rituals (2 Chronicles 26), the prophets were told by God to confront the people for their detestable practices (i.e., Isaiah 30; Ezekiel 16), and there are more. Christians are called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and gently call each other to accountability for wrongdoing (Galatians 6:1-2).

## PARTICULARLY DISTRESSING

Students have used crib sheets, copied term papers, stolen exam material, copied from another's test, and engaged in other forms of dishonest behavior since the beginning of formalized schooling. In schools of nursing, however, dishonesty is particularly distressing. Academic dishonesty involves essentially both stealing and lying. For example, when work is presented as the student's own, but it has been copied or purchased, that is a lie. To copy work from another's paper or obtain exam material without permission is stealing. When students falsely claim they are sick to postpone taking an exam, it is deceit. This type of deceit and the

general lack of integrity associated with academic dishonesty are inconsistent character traits for practice according to an accepted code of professional nursing.

Students who have been consistently dishonest in nursing school may continue dishonest behavior once they enter the profession. Research has suggested a relationship between unethical behavior in the classroom and dishonesty in the workplace (Harper, 2006). Nurses who alter legal documents, steal opioids, cover up medication errors, knowingly extend scope of practice, and so on are engaging in dishonest behavior that impacts the safety of the patients they have committed to serve.

Even seemingly less egregious dishonest behaviors among professional nursing staff can negatively impact the workplace, causing tensions and hurt feelings. Malloch (2001) has written about the pervasiveness of "white lies" among nurse leaders. Because of discomfort with conflict and lack of development of truth-telling abilities, nurse leaders often coat the truth when confronted with difficult situations, such as giving a negative performance review (Malloch, 2001, p. 62). This is dishonest behavior, although the motive might emanate from intent to be compassionate rather than malicious. Do educators do this?

Of particular concern regarding the impact of academic dishonesty in the profession is that the student who consistently cheats while in school may emerge from the program lacking the knowledge to engage in safe and competent practice. Patients in acute care settings have higher acuties as compared to even a decade ago. The proliferation of drugs and complexities of medication regimens present a cognitive challenge for nurses, as does the advancement of technologies in the healthcare environment. Nurses must have mastery over concepts of leadership, research, community health, management, and psychiatric principles just to mention a few expected competencies. Students who cheat to pass the courses in which these principles are taught may miss out on the integration of valuable knowledge necessary for safe practice.

## PROMOTING HONESTY

To preserve the integrity of the profession it becomes the responsibility of many to promote honesty. This includes the development and maintenance of a climate that supports honesty and the discouragement of behaviors associated with academic dishonesty. Students, faculty, university administration, and nurses alike can participate in the campaign.

Not all students are dishonest. Many appropriately utilize resources available on the Internet and would not consider cheating. These students can participate in upholding honesty by refusing to share their work with students who attempt to cheat. They should use caution when testing to shield their answer sheet and always follow exam security policies strictly. They can serve as examples for students who tend to be tempted to cheat or those who normalize dishonest behaviors. Students who observe or have awareness of others who are cheating should be encouraged to report such behavior to the professor with the assurance that their identity will be protected.

All universities should have clear policies in place regarding test security and exam protocol, and a fair judicial system to report and punish academic dishonesty. Nursing faculty should volunteer to serve on committees that conduct judicial review so that policies are clarified. These policies and the consequences for infractions should be clearly described in the catalog or student handbook and posted on the university Web site. Although it is ultimately the responsibility of students to be aware of academic policies, it is helpful to reinforce policies regularly. Each course syllabus should point the student to the original source for these documents, and at the onset of academic courses, policies should be verbally reinforced by the professor. An honesty statement can be placed on all exams and a signed honor code initiated. It is essential that all faculty members remain firm and consistent in the administration of protocols.

Nursing faculty should be aware that academic dishonesty is prevalent on college campuses, and that nursing programs are not immune. Professors should be vigilant for incidences of academic dishonesty and make it a priority to curtail dishonest behavior. Tests should be kept in secure locations where potential for theft is minimized. Exam protocols should be instituted that require the removal of electronic equipment such as cell phones, palm devices, ipods, and others from the desk space during the test. We require these items be turned off, placed in backpacks, and left in the front of the classroom. We do allow calculators, but check to ensure the memories have been cleared before students begin testing. Scratch paper should be supplied by the instructor and collected with the test. Students can be seated randomly, leaving a chair space between each if physically possible. Other suggestions for curtailing cheating on exams include the use of proctors who circulate in the classroom and accompany students who leave the test to use the restroom, scrambling test questions, and using different versions of the same test (Arhin, 2009, p. 20).

## DISCOURAGING PLAGIARISM

It is equally important that students be made aware of exactly what constitutes plagiarism. At our university we have created a short online program that is mandatory for certain courses in the College of Health Sciences. The information can be integrated into core courses that are sequenced early in the curriculum. In addition, our university has a writing center staffed with assistants who work individually with students who submit drafts of written work. This type of program promotes honesty by informing students of proper ways to cite papers and clarifying the distinction between paraphrasing and plagiarism.

Anti-plagiarism Web sites exist, and nursing faculty who require written papers can utilize such resources. Examples include <http://www.plagiarism-detector.com> and <http://turnitin.com>. Undergraduate nursing students typically are not required to write as many formal papers as

compared to students in other majors such as English and Psychology. Therefore, writing may be less familiar, and a short lecture on how to write a paper might be in order. When I teach Nursing Research, I post a prototypical paper by a student from a previous class for students to review so they understand the expectations with the assignment. It also is helpful for students to be allowed to submit first drafts with feedback.

Another way faculty can discourage plagiarism is by using creativity with the design of written assignments. For example, students can be required to analyze concepts and offer opinions with rationale, rather than a simple restatement of facts (Davis, 1993). By changing an assignment from semester to semester it will be more difficult to copy work from previous students. Professors should assess the work required in their courses for level of difficulty, and make sure assignments and volume of work match the credit hours for the course and objectives. Students should be challenged, but if the work is perceived as being too difficult for a majority of the class, it may be more tempting for them to cheat to pass.

Educators also must live a life above reproach, setting positive examples for students. Documenting sources in lecture notes and presentations shows scholarship, gives proper credit, and demonstrates academic honesty and integrity. Sharing when ideas or inspiration come from colleagues, even though a concept is not officially documented or published, is another form of honesty. When a paper is published by a faculty member, sharing the article with students can be a way of role modeling professionalism, writing, appropriate documentation, and positive role modeling.

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Nurses in practice also can contribute to teaching acceptable ethical behavior. In the clinical area nurses are role models for students. When students observe nurses who breach confidentiality or chart medications as administered before they are actually given, or steal supplies for personal use, they may view such behaviors as acceptable. Nurses need to be vigilant to conduct themselves with integrity, but especially aware when student nurses are present. Explaining nursing actions in complex situations to observing students may be required to help students understand the rationale behind appropriate behaviors versus acting less than honestly. For example, nursing judgment or patient situation may suggest a scheduled medication be given outside the allotted scheduling window or withheld. Explaining the rationale behind nursing actions can avoid students misunderstanding and wrongly thinking the nurse acted dishonestly.

## SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

In God's Word, he commands Christ followers to conduct ourselves with honesty. Colossians 3:9 connects lying with evil, "Do not lie to one another since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (NASB). Exodus 20:15 states clearly—and simply—one of the Ten Commandments, "Do not steal" (NASB). Deceit is ultimately coupled with negative outcomes.

Academic dishonesty in nursing programs lays a foundation for dishonesty in the nursing profession. This can have negative consequences ranging from a climate of hypocrisy to lawsuits and safety risks for patients. We can help prepare student nurses to practice according to accepted professional codes by encouraging honesty. This is a challenge, but an important and shared responsibility for nurses both professionally and spiritually. If an environment of honesty is encouraged and fostered in the academic realm, there are likely to be positive results. Honestly!

- 
- Arhin, A. (2009). A pilot study of nursing student's perceptions of academic dishonesty: A generation Y perspective. *The Association of Black Nursing Faculty Journal*, 19, 17-21.
- Davis, B. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gaberson, K. B. (1997). Academic dishonesty among nursing students. *Nursing Forum*, 32(3), 14-20.
- Harper, M. (2006). High tech cheating. *Nurse Education Today*, 26(8), 672-679.
- Malloch, K. (Spring, 2001). The white lies of leadership: Caring dishonesty? *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 25(3), 61-68.
- McCabe, D. L. (2005). Cheating among college and university students: A North American perspective. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 1(1). Retrieved July 1, 2009, from <http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/IJEI/index>
- Saad, L. (2006). Nurses top list of most honest and ethical professions. *Gallup Website*. Retrieved March 11, 2010, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/25888/Nurses-Top-List-Most-Honest-Ethical-Professions.aspx>
- Schneider, A. (1999). Why professors don't do more to stop students who cheat. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 45(20), 3-10.
- Selwyn, N. (November 1, 2008). A safe haven for misbehaving?: An investigation of online misbehavior among university students. *Social Science Computer Review*, 26(4), 446-465.