# Promoting Student Academic Integrity:
# Our Responsibility

*by David K. Wilcox*

> "I remember seeing a student who was a leader of the football team and an organizer of student prayer events copying verses from a cheat sheet for his Bible memory quiz! I finally confronted him. That was hard."
> —Anonymous Christian school graduate

> "If the top 25 percent of the class is able to rash [rationalize] cheating, why should I condemn myself to worse grades than they get?"
> —Anonymous Christian school graduate

> "The pressure I received was from my eighth-grade classmates who knew I had done my math homework. They kept asking for my answers, and sometimes I gave in. Always being the 'righteous one' wasn't worth the loss of friends."
> —Anonymous Christian school graduate

> "Look, it's only homework, mindless homework."
> —Anonymous Christian school graduate

My youth pastor recently commented, "This is real; our good Christian kids are struggling with this all the time." Student academic integrity—it is not merely a public school issue; it's one of ours. If we were to list the causes of students' lack of integrity, the list would quickly include the sinful nature, the reality that many don't think that it is that "big of a deal," the rationalization that the ends justify the means, peer pressure from friends they want to please, and laziness. Might we teachers be a part of the cause?

The problem isn't going away. Donald L. McCabe of Rutgers University, founder and first president of the Council for Academic Integrity, discovered in a 2000–2001 study involving 4,500 students from 25 schools that "74 percent of the respondents admitted to one or more instances of serious test cheating and 72 percent admitted to serious cheating on written assignments. Over half of the students admitted they have engaged in some level of plagiarism on written assignments using the Internet" (CAI 2002–2003).

Apparently, we have divided the severity of cheating into different levels: soft cheating and hard cheating, or cheating that doesn't really matter and cheating that is over the line. A middle schooler won't call it situational ethics, but that is exactly what it is.

We have real work to do. Lawrence M. Hinman (2000) of the University of San Diego suggests that about 15 percent of students will never cheat, about 15 percent will almost

always try to cheat, and the remaining 70 percent are susceptible to the temptation to cheat, especially if they see that cheating is working for their peers. The easy availability of useful information that students can plagiarize and the anonymity with which they can appropriate it directly attack the fundamental virtues of honesty and responsibility.

The Scriptures abound with commandments, proverbs, and parables that clearly identify God's values in this regard. God is pure, holy, and intolerant of deceitfulness. He opposes Satan, the father of lies. He calls on us as His followers to walk in the truth, to keep our lips from deceitful speech. The Word of God has not changed, and neither have His admonitions for us to live in such a way that brings no dishonor to Him. What seems to have changed is our cultural norms and personal priorities, a change that makes obedience to God's unchanging values seem irrelevant.

Dr. Hinman's (2000) research on plagiarism suggests that we should consider three simultaneous approaches to the problem of a lack of academic integrity. These approaches lead to strategies, policies, and consequences. Hinman calls them the virtues approach, the prevention approach, and the policing approach. These three approaches correspond with three types of opportunities that allow us to intervene in students' decision-making process regarding cheating. At any given time and at all grade levels, we will have students responding in a variety of ways to the temptation to cheat. This fact requires us to implement a variety of strategies to respond to each student's behavior.

## The Virtues Approach

The virtues approach refers to implementing strategies to influence students before they develop the intention to cheat (Hinman 2000). It includes promoting a strong and prominently displayed honor code in the school, making academic integrity a frequently articulated value of the school, instituting programs like Character Counts, and making sure the Bible curriculum for each grade includes an emphasis on character, honesty, and integrity. This approach is relevant for all grades.

Non-Christian and Christian schools alike promote honor codes and programs such as Character Counts, but the distinctive in the Christian school is that we are free to teach the clear scriptural directives, which are a call to holiness, purity, and obedience in response to the matchless love of Jesus. Some charter schools emphasize character education, but only Christian schools can legally and freely articulate the real reasons to live rightly—that we are called to be responsive, reflective, spirit-filled disciples of the Lord Jesus, living to give honor and glory to Him in all areas of our lives, including our work.

## The Prevention Approach

The prevention approach attempts to thwart those who intend to cheat (Hinman 2000). It includes monitoring exams and assignments closely, demanding that students turn in copies of all sources with any report, requiring that students show their computations for math homework, using different test forms for alternate student rows and later classes, getting out from behind the desk during quizzes and tests, changing assignments each time the class is taught, requiring more demonstrations of student understanding during class time, and following the suggestions on such resources as the "Teacher's Checklist for ePlagiarism Prevention" (Liotta-Kolencik 2002).

If teachers are vigilant, they reduce the temptation to cheat because the chances of getting away with cheating are low. If the assignment really is busywork or there is evidence that the longest responses get the best grades, the temptation to cheat increases dramatically.

At the elementary level, we sometimes seem to give implied permission to copy from encyclopedias when our students prepare country reports or biographies. Students can therefore get the unintended message that copying is acceptable. Instead, we must use our class time to explain how to convert facts collected from a source in the library into a written report or other presentation that students develop by themselves. Preparing a worksheet for students to use to write the required facts and then having them close the books and write in class is one such instructive/preventive strategy. Some teachers are reducing the amount of work expected of students outside class, except reading or collecting information, so that teachers can be sure that what is produced is truly from the students. Any assessment strategies that verify in school the students' learning can help prevent cheating.

We can identify many strategies under the prevention approach. It allows us to be proactive by teaching, mentoring, clarifying, reducing the pressure to cheat, and structuring learning activities such that cheating has little chance to succeed.

# Student Academic Integrity: A Case Study for Your Staff on "Sharing"

**In the following example, identify what the contributing factors to the problem are, how the teacher might have reduced the likelihood of the problem's occurrence, and what might be appropriate teacher responses to the situation.**

The problem happened when it became clear that the math homework answers of several close friends were consistently the same. Forty percent of the grade in Miss Johnson's eighth-grade pre-algebra class is based on homework. Three days a week homework is graded. Sometimes there are 25 problems required, and sometimes more. The good thing from the viewpoint of students is that they have to show their work on only half the problems.

This Friday, students faced the challenge of having work to do for three other classes. The students had a history chapter test, some grammar work, and something in science. Several girls counted on Heather to do the work this time on both the show-your-work math problems and the ones that require only the answers. True to form, when the girls had a chance to meet before school, they all copied the answers from Heather, thanking her for coming through again. Heather valued their friendship. As an "A student," she thought that being able to show she cared in what was really a harmless way helped keep her from being classified as a selfish nerd.

This time, however, they were spotted, but not by a teacher—it was another student. The student wrote an anonymous note to Miss Johnson, telling her what Heather, Madison, Jennifer, and Amy were doing to complete their math homework. Now Miss Johnson had several conflicting questions: "Do I ignore a note because it is anonymous? Do I try to become a detective and trap these students in the act? Does it matter, really, since students' competence will eventually become evident on chapter tests?"

- **Discuss this scenario with other faculty.**

- **What principles of student discipline apply in this case?**

- **What could the teacher have done to reduce the chances that this type of cheating would occur?**

- **Individually, identify what punishment/mercy/restitution you would apply in this case. Then compare your response with those of several other teachers. Are the responses consistent? Should they be?**

## The Policing Approach

The policing approach refers to the need to be vigilant and committed to catching and punishing those who have already cheated (Hinman 2000). An increasing number of Christian schools now contract with services such as www.TurnItIn.com, which identify copied sections of documents. Hinman's term *policing* does not sit well with most of us, but the administering of consequences is crucial. Sadly, students often first encounter firmness in consequences at school. If we administer consequences in love, we can help prevent students from far greater shame and serious consequences as they get older. Parent and student handbooks with signed statements of understanding and support of the school's rules is a crucial component of this process.

Academic integrity is one of the goals of our schools. It may not always be explicitly stated as such, but it is central to our desired student outcomes. We cannot ignore the reality that we must be vigilant at every grade level. We cannot blame parents or society for the aura of permissiveness that even goes as far as to find humor in creative dishonesty. We can make a difference by modeling academic integrity in our own work, by demonstrating a love for discovering truth and for the individual student's pursuit of truth with integrity, by structuring our courses in such a way that the opportunities for cheating are minimized, by encouraging work habits that are Christ honoring such as giving credit to the insights of others through proper citation, and by emphasizing the need for reflection, discernment, and analysis within a Christian worldview. "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity" (1 Chronicles 29:17, NIV).

References
CAI. *See* Center for Academic Integrity.
Center for Academic Integrity. 2002–2003. CAI Research. http://www.academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp.
Hinman, Lawrence M. 2000. Academic integrity and the World Wide Web. PowerPoint presentation presented at the 10th Annual Meeting of the Center for Academic Integrity, November 2, Colorado Springs, CO. http://ethics.acusd.edu/presentations/cai2000/index_files/frame.htm.
Liotta-Kolencik. 2002. *But I changed the words …: Educating the cut and paste generation.* Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office of Commonwealth Libraries. http://www.statelibrary.state.pa.us/libraries/lib/libraries/ePlagiarism_Brochure.pdf.

Resource
*Plagiarism: It's a crime.* 2004. Huntsville, TX: Educational Video Network. VHS/DVD.

David K. Wilcox, PhD, is the ACSI director of international school services for Latin America and Asia. Before he joined ACSI in 1995, he and his family served in Malaysia and Ecuador for a total of 13 years.