

TIME FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TO MAKE ETHICS THE TOP PRIORITY

** by Peter A. Keller

The meltdown of our financial system was preceded by a more significant collapse of confidence in the ability of American institutions to act with integrity.

From banking and manufacturing to energy and even the quality of the foods we consume, Americans have lost confidence in the institutions that sustain their lives. When we look to political leaders for reassurance we find conflicts of interest that contribute to an inability to coalesce around plans that will get us back on track. We are left with a deep sense of anxiety if not downright panic about our capacity to build a future based on the integrity of critical relationships.

Our ethical crisis is arguably larger than our financial crisis. Honesty and integrity should be the bedrock of the interpersonal relationships that support how our institutions function.

In the end no one benefits from the loss of confidence in government, business and educational institutions. We have now become acutely aware that a culture without integrity cannot survive. We stand at that brink of a frightening moral abyss.

As Colleen Vojak of the University of Illinois has pointed out, we live in a culture that confuses economic wealth and materialism with virtue. As a consequence, students easily lose sight of personal responsibility for truth-telling, the integrity of their personal relationships, and the maintenance of trustworthy communities.

The impact of our ethical confusion on everything from child-rearing to cheating on academic assignments and dishonesty in business transactions is nearly incalculable. It is surely greater than the monies that our government is allocating to restore confidence and function in our economic sector.

If we can't even establish academic integrity in our schools, colleges, and universities, how can we expect business and governmental practices in which we can have confidence? We can't.

That is why we must fix our educational systems before we can expect integrity in other institutions. Unfortunately most recent initiatives to improve learning in colleges and universities have largely neglected ethics and academic integrity.

As a result of research by Donald L. McCabe of Rutgers University Business School and others, we have known for decades that the majority of students cheat at one time or another. Most never get caught. Many justify their actions as a necessary step toward survival in the academy or a preferred career. Others argue that the culture in which our high school and college students exist is often at odds with stated expectations for academic integrity.

Should we expect virtuous leaders to emerge magically from educational cultures that have not found sound ways to address cultural conflicts and reliably promote integrity?

While some might suggest that we simply need to crack down on cheating more aggressively, I argue that we live in a world where we will never be able to control fully student or faculty violations of academic integrity. Moreover, ethical behavior is not something easily accounted for on an audited balance sheet. It must be based on how we learn to think about what is right, accept responsibility, and promote honesty – even when no one in authority is watching.

Derek Bok had it right two decades ago when as president of Harvard he observed the failure of modern universities to come to grips with the moral aspects of education.

It seems even clearer now that we should move ethics instruction and character development to the front burner. Schools, colleges, and universities must identify ethics as a top priority.

The success of such a movement will come not from codification and regulation of behavior in the academy. It will come from a well-planned cultural transformation; one that promotes ethical behavior based on a shared understanding that it is necessary to restore confidence in each other, our communities, and the fundamental institutions of our society.

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