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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: A LETTER TO MY STUDENTS

For the past few years, I have been giving my students a letter on the subject of academic integrity. At its heart is the idea that the principles of academic integrity apply as much to me as teacher as they do to them as students.

I have incorporated a discussion of the letter into my American government class by linking it to the issue of integrity in public life. At the end of the discussion, I ask the students to give me anonymous feedback on the discussion. Almost to a person, they feel the topic was well worth investing class time.

Integrity: Academic and Political

Here at the beginning of the semester I want to say something to you about academic integrity.

I'm deeply convinced that integrity is an essential part of any true educational experience—integrity on my part as a faculty member and integrity on your part as a student.

To take an easy example, would you want to be operated on by a doctor who cheated his way through medical school? Or would you feel comfortable on a bridge designed by an engineer who cheated her way through engineering school? Would you trust your tax return to an accountant who copied his exam answers from his neighbor?

Those are easy examples, but what difference does it make if you as a student or I as a faculty member violate the principles of academic integrity in a political science course, especially if it's not in your major?

For me, the answer is that integrity is important in this course precisely because integrity is important in all areas of life. If we don't have integrity in the small things, if we find it possible to justify plagiarism or cheating or shoddy work in things that don't seem important, how will we resist doing the same in areas that really do matter, in areas where money might be at stake, or the possibility of advancement, or our esteem in the eyes of others?

Personal integrity is not a quality we're born to naturally. It's a quality of character we need to nurture, and this requires practice in both meanings of that word (as in practice

the piano and practice a profession). We can only be persons of integrity if we practice it daily.

What does that involve for each of us in this course? Let's find out by going through each stage in the course. As you'll see, academic integrity basically requires the same things of you as a student as it requires of me as a teacher

1. Preparation for Class

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to coming prepared for class, the principles of academic integrity require that I come having done the things necessary to make the class a worthwhile educational experience for you. This requires that I:

- reread the text (even when I've written it myself),
- clarify information I might not be clear about,
- prepare the class with an eye toward what is current today (that is, not simply rely on past notes), and
- plan the session so that it will make it worth your while to be there.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to coming prepared for class, the principles of academic integrity suggest that you have a responsibility to yourself, to me, and to the other students to do the things necessary to put yourself in a position to make fruitful contributions to class discussion. This will require you to:

- read the text before coming to class,
- clarify anything you're unsure of (including looking up words you don't understand),
- formulate questions you might have so you can ask them in class, and
- think about the issues raised in the directed reading guide.

II. In Class

What Academic Integrity Requires of Me in This Area

With regard to class sessions, the principles of academic integrity require that I take you seriously and treat you with respect. This requires that I:

- show up for all class sessions, unless I'm simply unable to do so,
- come to class on time, and not leave early,
- not waste class time, but use it well to fulfill the objectives of the course
- do my best to answer your questions,
- honestly acknowledge when I don't have an answer or don't know something, and then go out and get an answer by the next class,
- both encourage you, and give you an equal opportunity to participate in class discussions,
- contain you if your enthusiasm for participating in the discussions makes it difficult for others to participate,
- assume that you are prepared for class and that I won't embarrass you if I call on you, even if your hand isn't up,
- respect the views you express and not make fun of you or of them,

- not allow others to ridicule you or your ideas, or you to do the same to them, and
- make clear when I am expressing an opinion and not impose on you my views on controversial issues.

What Academic Integrity Requires of You in This Area

With regard to class sessions, the principles of academic integrity require you to take both me and your fellow students seriously and to treat us with respect.

This requires that you:

- show up for all class sessions, unless you are simply unable to do so,
- come to class on time and not leave early,
- make good use of class time by being engaged in what's going on,
- ask questions about anything you don't understand, and not just for your own sake but because other students might not realize that they also don't understand,
- participate in the class discussions so as to contribute your thinking to the shared effort to develop understanding and insight (remember that even something that's clearly wrong can contribute to the discussion by stimulating an idea in another student that s/he might not otherwise have had),
- monitor your own participation so as to allow for and encourage the participation of others,
- respect the other students by not making fun of them

At this point, the letter goes on to talk about integrity as it relates to exams, written assignments, and the final grade. A discussion of the consequences if one of us fails to live up to the principles of academic integrity is included, as well.

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