

# Your Turn

by Steve Jones

## First, Do Not Cheat

**A profoundly disturbing finding emerged** from a recent survey of graduate business students: Over half admitted to cheating during the course of their programs. That statistic about academic dishonesty was published last year by Donald L. McCabe, Kenneth D. Butterfield, and Linda Klebe Treviño, and it compounds the damage inflicted by the spate of corporate scandals over the past decade. No wonder the general public wonders if cheating in business is the exception or the norm, or if anyone in business is a person of integrity.

As a former CEO who is now a business school dean and company director, I ask a crucial question. If business schools do not take the lead on teaching integrity, who will?

Many argue that it is unreasonable to expect business schools to teach integrity, given that typical MBA students come to us as fully formed adults in their mid-to-late 20s, and most already have had an average of five years' work experience. But businesspeople know through their experiences, and academics through their research, that integrity is the essential foundation of a successful career. If we are not doing our best to instill it and nurture it, then we are not serving our students or the community. If business schools want to be at the forefront of keeping business ethical, we have to take action ourselves. Here are some suggestions:

**Don't admit cheaters.** A critical finding of the academic dishonesty study is that observed peer behavior is the single most important factor in explaining why MBAs cheat.

Because this means that one student who violates the rules can influence many others, we need to keep bad eggs out. Virtually all business schools require students to reveal past criminal convictions, and most also require them to disclose prior disciplinary sanctions. The critical question is what schools do with this information.

I don't advocate that schools automatically reject anyone with a questionable past, but I do urge schools to scrutinize such applicants with much more rigor. In particular, administrators should require such students to provide a detailed account of any transgressions, with appropriate documentation. They should also make sure students undergo extensive interviews with the admissions office to demonstrate their commitment to honor. Any doubts pertaining to applicants should be resolved before admission.

**Encourage faculty to play a greater role in promoting integrity.** Faculty carry at least two important responsibilities. First, they must clearly establish that they will not allow cheating in their classrooms, and they must follow their words with action whenever they detect improper behavior. We can't control what students do after they graduate, but we can leave no doubt that we will take disciplinary

action, when necessary, before they leave school.

Second, faculty should routinely expose students to the idea that there is more to business than maximizing shareholder wealth. I don't mean that professors should espouse a particular corporate philosophy.

I do suggest that, as part of a proper business education, faculty should present students with a variety of theories about what constitutes good corporate behavior, including careful attention to customers, employees, and communities. If faculty do this job well, they will assist students in carrying honor from the classroom to the boardroom.

**Make ethics courses mandatory.** For almost 30 years, my school has required all MBA students to take a business

ethics course. We understand that simply preaching about corporate social responsibility to 27- to 30-year-old graduate students isn't enough to produce highly ethical business people. Instead, we must expose students to real-life examples of complex corporate dilemmas, including many where there is no "right" answer, to help them identify the ethical challenges they will face in corporate life. The key is to arm them with the skills to identify critical ethical issues and to use a thoughtful, fair approach to resolve



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**WE SHOULD TEACH OUR STUDENTS *PRIMA HONESTAS*, OR "FIRST, ACT WITH INTEGRITY."**

them. This method will give students useful tools while reinforcing the vital point that doing the right thing matters.


**Involve students in the process.** Another critical finding in the study is that honor codes help build and reinforce honesty among students. I serve as dean at a university that I also attended as an undergraduate, and it has had a student-run honor court for more than 100 years. Although I can't cite statistics to demonstrate that this has substantially reduced instances of impropriety, I have no doubt that it has. When students are heavily involved in developing and enforcing rules against cheating, they take ownership of the process and show even less tolerance for bad behavior than the faculty or administration. I believe that this emphasis on integrity carries over into later life as well.

**Help corporations avoid hiring cheaters.** Having spent 30 years in the business world, and half of that time outside the U.S., I do not believe any business in the world wants to hire MBAs who bend the rules or engage in sleazy practices. Business schools that educate students in ethical approaches and attitudes will gain a competitive edge in placing their graduates.

I urge business schools to take a specific approach when dealing with corporate recruiters and partners. Ask them to require all applicants to disclose any honor court convictions or sanctions meted out to them during their MBA studies. Federal privacy laws bar schools from sharing this information with recruiters, but nothing prevents prospective employers from requiring students to allow their school to release it as a condition to

interviewing or hiring. Although transgressions should be assessed on an individual basis, if I were a corporate recruiter, I would adopt a virtually no-exclusions presumption that I would not hire students who cheated in graduate school. Few steps would do more to reinforce the importance of integrity among our students than for corporations to join business schools as partners in this initiative.

**Don't accept contributions from corporate cheaters.** If business schools are to serve as role models for students about to enter the corporate world, we must avoid hypocrisy. One way to do this is to refuse tainted money, especially from any company or any person who has been disgraced in the public eye and who might be attempting to buy respectability through large donations. Of course, this is an easier policy to propose in the abstract than to practice in a concrete fashion. For example, companies in the middle of a heated labor dispute might be somewhat controversial, but I would not consider them as disgraced as companies discredited by a true scandal. Nonetheless, in a realm where symbolic steps can play an important role in affecting perceptions, business schools ought to be in the forefront of taking a principled stand.

As business schools, we can adapt the famous principle attributed to Hippocrates and taught to doctors. *Primum non nocere* is translated as "First, do no harm." We should teach our students a slightly different version: *Prima honestas*, or "First, act with integrity." 

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