

Obstacles to academic integrity

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Abstract

Five obstacles to academic integrity are fear, double standards, personal connections, formal processes and corruptions of power. These are illustrated with personal examples. The five obstacles can be used as pointers to tactics to promote integrity.

Introduction

Most people subscribe to high principles, but living up to them is another matter. Practical realities mean continual compromises. Integrity is about aligning behaviour and principles. The challenge in maintaining integrity is to decide when to stand firm by principles and when to allow compromise or deviation – especially when principles clash. This is seldom easy.

Much comment about academic integrity seems to be targeted at students. For example, the Center for Academic Integrity (2007) at Clemson University states, “Academic Integrity is a fundamental value of teaching, learning, and scholarship. Yet, there is growing evidence that students cheat and plagiarize”. In the ‘Ten principles of academic integrity’ (McCabe & Pavela, 2007), the primary focus is on students, with statements such as “Students will generally reciprocate by respecting the best values of their teachers, including a commitment to academic integrity”. Fostering high standards among students is important, to be sure, but what about academic integrity for academics?

For several decades, I've been studying academic dissent, exploitation, plagiarism and fraud, all of which provide windows into the challenge of maintaining integrity. My main focus has been on problems among academics. From these experiences, I've extracted five obstacles to integrity: fear, double standards, personal connections, formal processes and corruptions of power. This list is far from definitive. I've mostly observed problems from the point of view of individual academics. Students and those in high administrative positions encounter different, though related, sets of obstacles.

Obstacle one: Fear

In May 1980, Dr Michael Spautz, a senior lecturer in the Commerce Department at the University of Newcastle, was dismissed from his tenured position. Earlier, Spautz had challenged the work of a professor in his department, Alan Williams, charging that Williams' PhD thesis was logically flawed and used references taken from unacknowledged secondary sources. Spautz's allegations were never seriously investigated. Instead, Spautz's behaviour in making these claims came under scrutiny, ultimately leading the Council to dismiss him (Martin, 1983).

I decided to investigate the issues and, in 1982, travelled to Newcastle where I met Spautz and several others involved with the case. My most lasting memory of that visit is the fear that seemed to pervade the campus regarding the Spautz case. The limited public comment about the case suggested that few academics were speaking out. Up close, the nervousness was palpable.

To be sure, this was a challenging issue to address. Spautz had become ever more flamboyant in his claims, engaging in a self-styled 'campaign for justice' in which he frequently circulated mimeographed newsletters across campus using forceful colloquial language to charge ever more individuals with conspiracy. Through his behaviour, Spautz undoubtedly alienated many potential supporters.

My assessment was that most academics did not want to be involved because they might be associated with Spautz and thereby discredited. They feared losing support from the senior executive, perhaps for tenure, promotion, staffing or departmental funding.

Consider another issue: allegations about 'soft marking', namely giving students higher marks than they deserve. Often these allegations are targeted at those teaching international full-fee paying students: failing too many of these students would discourage future enrolments and hence hurt the budget. University administrators have always been quick to deny that soft marking occurs.

Over the years I've talked to many academics concerned about soft marking, but few are willing to go public. On occasion, journalists contact me about it, saying they hear many accounts but have great difficulty finding anyone to comment on the record. There's a good reason for this: it's risky. I've talked to one academic who was dismissed and another who was denied tenure, each of whom had spoken out about soft marking. In addition, Associate Professor Ted Steele was dismissed from the University of Wollongong – where I work – for making public claims about soft marking. In my opinion, his claims did not stand up to scrutiny but it was wrong to dismiss him (Martin, 2002).

It is not my purpose to address the rights and wrongs of the Spautz case or claims about soft marking. Each of these cases is highly complex and not easily assessed. My point is that many academics seem to be afraid of taking a public stand on controversial issues.

Academics are among the most privileged of workers. They have a great deal of control over when and how they work, can choose a range of different research topics and have considerable protection against dismissal. Government and corporate employees, in contrast, are tightly constrained. Should they speak out critically about management or even just reveal what is happening in their organisation, their jobs are on the line. Most of them are fully aware of the dangers and keep quiet even when they know about corruption and bad practice.

Academics can come under attack, as evidenced by the David Peetz case. Peetz carried out research the findings of which clashed with Australian government claims (Marr, 2007, pp. 6-13). But Peetz, though fiercely criticised in Federal parliament, did not lose his job. Andrew Wilkie, who publicly challenged government claims justifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq, resigned, knowing his position as a government analyst would be untenable as soon as he spoke out (Wilkie, 2004). Academics, in comparison, can criticise the government or their own university administration and expect to keep their jobs. But few of them speak out. Fear is one factor in this. It is a huge constraint on integrity.

Obstacle two: Double standards

Within academia, plagiarism is treated as a mortal sin – at least when done by students. Occasionally academics are accused of plagiarism; sometimes these academics pay a heavy price, but on other occasions it is the accuser who suffers. In the recent case of Professor Kim Walker, Head of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, students have complained that her alleged plagiarism has been treated more leniently than that of students (Alexander, 2007).

There is also a much wider double standard: when a politician reads a speech written by a speechwriter, this is not called plagiarism, though it fits the standard definition. The same applies to university officials who put their names on official documents prepared by subordinates. Celebrities whose autobiographies are written by ghostwriters are guilty of plagiarism, but this is treated as standard practice. I term this "institutionalised plagiarism" (Martin, 1994): it represents a double standard so embedded in common practice as to be considered unremarkable.

Double standards are barriers to integrity, and they are most powerful when they are institutionalised. To question them is to be seen as troublesome. When I became president of Whistleblowers Australia in 1996, a prominent member sent me a letter addressed to a politician which he asked me to sign as president. I supported what was said in the letter and supported it coming from Whistleblowers Australia, but because of my studies of plagiarism I declined to sign the letter as if I had written it; instead, I offered to endorse the letter as written by the member. This caused some tension at the time, but in a small voluntary organisation I had enough influence to do it my way. But this would not be nearly so easy in a large organisation with a long tradition of attributing formal authorship to senior officials.

Pointing out double standards is important, but it is only one step. Changing entrenched double standards is a much bigger task.

Obstacle three: Personal connections

In 1991, I was a member of the Sexual Harassment Sub-committee at the University of Wollongong when we decided to raise the issue of sexual relationships between members of the university community (Colless, 1993). This was about consensual relationships, not harassment, but the connection is closer than usually realised (Bacchi, 1992). Our interest arose out of a prominent case in which a tutor had dated students; the tutor was later convicted of rape and went to prison.

We raised two main concerns: conflict of interest and abuse of trust. Conflict of interest arises, for example, when teachers mark the work of students with whom they have a close personal relationship. Even if they could be objective, other students would most likely believe that bias was involved. Regarding abuse of trust, students look to their teachers to guide and nurture them intellectually; to use that trust to gain a personal relationship may, in some cases, undermine a student's intellectual autonomy and self-confidence, especially when the relationship subsequently breaks up (Rutter, 1990). Similar considerations apply to sexual relations between staff, especially when one supervises another.

Our committee's initiative on this matter generated many heated objections, especially from male academics. About this time, the same issues were being raised at some other universities. There have been passionate arguments about the right of academics to enter into close relationships with whomever they like, but all sides to the debate seem to accept the point about conflict of interest, at least in relation to teaching: a teacher having a close relationship with a student – as parent, child, lover or some other capacity – shouldn't be marking or supervising their work.

One of the arguments raised in the heated debate about campus sex was that close professional relationships could lead to bias just as surely as close personal relationships. Researchers are usually very supportive of the work of their collaborators, regardless of their private interactions. Even without collaborating, common adherence to a research agenda or way of viewing the world can lead to strong bias. Yet this is seldom seen to constitute a conflict of interest.

As a result of the fierce reaction to our committee's proposals, we decided not to push for a formal university policy. The main benefit from our initiative was giving the issues a very high profile, which seems to have empowered female students on campus: there was a sudden decline in the number of informal reports of sexual harassment to university counsellors but an increase in the number of complaints taken to the Equal Opportunity Unit.

When I arrived at the University of Wollongong in the mid 1980s, it was standard practice in my department for honours supervisors to prepare an examiner's report to be considered along with the reports of two other examiners. Usually the supervisor was a partisan on the student's behalf. This was an obvious source of bias, fostering an unhealthy patronage system in which prize students were groomed for success so long as they flattered their supervisors. Occasionally relations broke down and the supervisor played down the student's contribution when final marks were determined. I refused to participate in this practice, which fortunately was abandoned not long after. But it took another two decades and persistent efforts before the university adopted policies on honours that barred supervisors from being examiners.

The process took a long time because some academics were highly resistant to change. The new university policy was not the end of the story. A couple of departments then changed their honours regulations to get around the letter of the policy and continue allowing supervisors to be examiners for their own students.

Personal connections make it difficult to live according to the principle that people be treated fairly and equally for their contributions. This clash occurs when we are on a selection committee and a friend or close colleague applies for a job, when we assess a grant application by someone we like or dislike – or whose ideas we like or dislike – when we review books, and sometimes when we mark student work knowing the names of the students.

Strictly following principle might mean declining to sit on a selection committee when a friend is applying, but that could mean seriously hurting your friend's chances because other members of the committee have no

hesitation in favouring *their* friends. In such a situation, scrupulously trying to be fair may cause unfairness. The challenge is to promote practices that encourage everyone to behave in a principled way.

Obstacle four: Official channels

Whistleblowers are people who speak out in the public interest, for example, about corruption or hazards to the public. Often they suffer reprisals. Clyde Manwell was a Professor of Zoology at the University of Adelaide when in 1971 he and his wife Ann Baker wrote a letter to the [Adelaide Advertiser](#) about problems with spraying for fruit fly. The Senior Professor of Zoology complained to the Vice-Chancellor, leading to an attempt to dismiss Manwell. He retained his post, but the struggle lasted four years (Martin, Baker, Manwell, & Pugh, 1986, pp. 87-122).

Over the years I've spoken to hundreds of whistleblowers. Their experiences are remarkably similar. One of the striking features of their stories is that official channels hardly ever work. Official channels, otherwise known as formal procedures, include grievance procedures, ombudsmen, anti-discrimination boards and courts. I've spoken to many whistleblowers who've gone to one agency, obtained no help, gone to another and so on through many years and half a dozen agencies. My informal observation is backed up by research showing that whistleblowers report being helped by agencies in less than one out of ten approaches; in many instances they report being worse off (De Maria, 1999).

This striking finding goes against what most people think about official channels. Usually, when there's a problem, the immediate instinct is to set up a formal process to deal with it. Most Australian governments have passed whistleblower protection laws. Unfortunately they don't work: there has not been a single prosecution for reprisals against a whistleblower under any of the Australian laws. They give only an illusion of protection (Martin, 2003).

It's important to distinguish between types of problems. Perhaps photocopying costs have escalated or some cheques have disappeared, so processes are put in place to require passwords for photocopying and to replace cheques with direct deposits. There may be no danger in speaking out about these sorts of problems, and the formal processes to deal with them can be unproblematic. Where whistleblowing enters another realm is when it threatens the interests of powerful groups, most commonly management. This is when reprisals are likely and when official channels are likely to be a facade.

The normal idea is that official channels provide justice. If this is incorrect in certain types of cases, then promoting integrity may mean sidestepping or even challenging formal processes.

In one case, I advised a talented academic who had been denied tenure not to appeal but instead to prepare careful documentation about the case and be ready to publicly expose the bias involved. However, she rejected this advice, appealed, lost the appeal and was devastated by the official endorsement of the original decision.

In another case, I advised Dudley Pinnock, a [high-performing](#) academic at the University of Adelaide who was targeted for redundancy, that formal processes would probably fail. He decided, though, to follow union advice to appeal. After the appeal failed, he permitted me to post documents about his case on my website, leading to a defamation threat from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide – which is another story (Martin, 2000).

My intent is not to argue the rights and wrongs of these two cases, but to point out that when formal procedures do not provide a good prospect of justice, pursuing other roads may be the best option.

Incidentally, Pinnock argued that he was targeted for redundancy because he had objected to interference with his research by senior academics, in which case power – obstacle five – played a role. Pinnock believes that his colleagues did not raise objections to the attacks on his work and his position due to fear – obstacle one.

Obstacle five: Power

Teachers have a great deal of power over students, most obviously through giving marks. In the classroom, a teacher's passing comment, glance or tone of voice can signal approval or disapproval. Many students are reluctant to speak in class for fear of appearing foolish in front of peers; the teacher's attitude makes a big difference.

There's research confirming the maxim that power tends to corrupt (Kipnis, 1981). Having power often brings about a subtle transformation of the powerholder, subtle at least for the powerholder, who sees the world in a different way but doesn't realise the reason. Having power over others leads to the belief that the others are less worthy and hence can be exploited more than equals.

For teachers, one of the consequences of power can be blaming students for their inadequacies. If students plagiarise, it must mean they are cheats or at best ignorant. (An alternative perspective is that assignments are badly designed and that proper acknowledgement practice is not adequately taught.)

Referees for journals exercise power over the fate of submissions. Under the cloak of anonymity, a damning report can be written, demoralising the author. Grant assessors have similar power. Editors and grant committees have even more power. In the circumstances, authors and applicants behave just like students: they conform and play it safe, fearing the consequences of unorthodoxy, not to mention the risks of openly challenging authority. Just as few students confront their teachers over shortcomings, preferring to complain privately to fellow students, so few academics speak publicly about their rejections from journals committees or the shortcomings of grant systems. The result is that teachers and grant bodies receive misleading feedback, namely excessive flattery and insufficient critical advice. This changes their self-concept and helps them to justify their power.

Within universities, the same dynamics operate. Senior university officials have considerable power over faculties, deans and heads of units have power over academics, and a hierarchy operates among non-academic staff. For academics, the local hierarchy is moderated by a parallel power system, peers in one's field in other parts of the country and world, but disciplinary fields have their own power systems. Each of these systems is subject to the corruptions of power.

Power only *tends* to corrupt, and not all powerholders succumb. However, rather than relying on personal willpower to maintain integrity, the long-term solution is to change systems so individuals are less exposed to the hazards of power.

Conclusion

There are many obstacles to living up to one's principles. I've described five common obstacles for academics: fear, double standards, personal connections, official channels and power. These are difficult to challenge because they are built into academic lives and often completely unnoticed. Blatant problems are easier to confront than familiar ways of thinking and behaving.

These five obstacles can be placed in a wider picture of strategy for integrity. Strategy can be conceptualised as a systematic plan to move from a present reality to a desired future, taking into account resources and obstacles. Critical analysis is the usual tool used to understand present reality. Understanding goals is a challenge of a different order: compared to the massive amount of analysis carried out by researchers, not much effort is devoted to articulating and understanding goals. Resources include money, skills, allies, networks and anything else that can be deployed to pursue goals. Obstacles encompass a similar range of entities, including opponents and patterns of thought and behaviour such as I've described here.

Strategies can be formulated and carried out by large organisations, small groups and individuals. Developing strategies to promote integrity, in education and elsewhere, is undoubtedly important but a larger enterprise than I can address here. What I'll do instead is to turn the obstacles on their head to arrive at some guidelines for action, in the context of strategy.

1. Be courageous.
Resist abuses. Speak out. But do this only after carefully examining options and likely consequences. The aim is to be principled and effective.
2. Set an example.
Behave in a way that highlights congruence between principles and behaviour. For example, try to be generous in crediting co-authors, but resist being exploited.
3. Act independently and openly.
This helps to avoid or neutralise conflicts of interest. For example, when your own interests are involved, ask someone else, who is genuinely independent, to stand in your place or to assess the situation. Be as open as possible about your own conflicts of interest.

4. Do it yourself.
Don't rely on official channels. Instead, document the issues, seek advice, build support and work with allies. Develop a plan.
5. Seek honest feedback.
Be alert to the corruptions of power. Try to make it safe for others to comment freely and to act independently.

How do these guidelines relate to strategy? They can best be understood as being part of the resources used in moving towards goals. Part of understanding obstacles is learning how to overcome or circumvent them. This should be considered part of a never-ending process, because principles are not static. As we move towards our goals and achieve a higher level of integrity, we can envision new standards, and sometimes there are new obstacles too. That's why strategy is important: a key part of educational integrity is the quest itself.

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