

EARLHAM

Office of the President

September 3, 2007

Dear Friends:

When we announced “Academic Integrity” as the focus of this August’s faculty retreat, I am sure the topic filled many with apprehension. Do we really have a problem with this at Earlham today? Will we just have a grumpy conversation about recent incidents of plagiarism or cheating on tests? Or can we find our way to a deeper, more searching conversation that renews our purposes? In the end, I think all of us were enriched by the two days of discussion and felt more prepared for the year to come.

Is academic honesty a problem at Earlham? Relative to most other colleges and universities, not really. Relative to our own aspirations, we have to say yes.

Most colleges and universities approach their students with the expectation that cheating and plagiarism will be rampant unless they are steadily vigilant. Hence, examinations are proctored and papers, scrutinized for evidence of plagiarism. There are now a number of Web-based services that allow teachers to check whether a student’s paper has been copied from another source. And yet cheating remains commonplace. A Lexis-Nexis news search on the term “college cheating” yields a quick 1,000 hits with titles like “Cheaters’ Open Season Begins as Colleges Prepare for Finals Week,” “[University Name] President Disputes Allegations He Plagiarized Dissertation,” “Survey: Half of [University Name] Students Admit to Academic Cheating Last Fall,” and “Schools Urged to Block Mobile Phone Exam Cheats” (students increasingly are using the text messaging capabilities of cell phones to cheat on examinations).

We take a different approach at Earlham: we start by trusting our students. The relationship of trust between students and faculty is a cornerstone of an Earlham education. Most examinations are not proctored, and students are dismayed on the few occasions when a professor remains in the room. Virtually no member of the faculty actively searches for plagiarized papers. But every year we have some worrying incidents. Because we trust our students, those incidents are very painful; we experience them as a betrayal of trust. And it had been a long time since the faculty as a whole discussed the matter. Most members of the faculty were not even at Earlham when we last approved the College’s policy on academic integrity. (You can read the policy at www.earlham.edu/curriculumguide/academics/integrity.html.)

The faculty retreat discussion showed us broadly comfortable with our current policy, both how we state our expectations and how we address incidents of dishonesty that come to our attention. The focus of the discussion about academic integrity quickly turned to how we usher students into understanding what we expect and why. We need to remember that most of our students — even though they have chosen Earlham — will come to us deeply saturated with cultural messages quite different from Earlham’s values. They have heard the world telling them that getting the proper credentials is the important thing (it’s appearances that matter), and many have come from high schools where cheating is very common. As they enter Earlham, they cross a threshold. We immediately want them to think differently. What do we want them to learn?

We reminded ourselves that the world of intellect has its own sophisticated, often tacit rules. These need to be learned, often by modeling how we do things. Faculty need to show students how to do a laboratory experiment and how to write up the results. If you repeat an experiment a few times and one of the results looks odd in relation to the others, should you include that in your report? Why does that make sense? Faculty need to demonstrate how to critique the argument of a book in a paper written for a course. How and when should you make specific reference to passages in the book? When should you quote a passage? Why do citations used in psychology look different from citations used in English? Does that matter?

Another essential lesson concerns the importance and limits of cooperation. We value cooperation: we are a learning community where we expect to learn from one another. Students work together on their homework, and we encourage that. But we also want them to learn that the work they submit has to be their own unless the professor has explicitly said that what they submit is expected to be a group project.

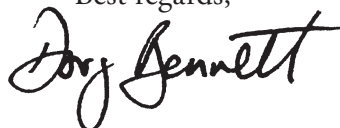
At bottom, we are trying to help students develop their own voices. We want students to cultivate the capability and the courage to think things through for themselves. When they learn that lesson — truly learn it — they will understand that cheating on a paper or exam is, most importantly, cheating oneself. Cheating may disadvantage other students; it may disappoint a teacher. But these are relatively minor in comparison with the harm done to oneself. Those who cheat undermine their ability to trust themselves, and in turn have a diminished ability to trust others. Cheating is a failure to draw out of oneself all the rich possibilities that are there to be realized. (It is not appearances that matter most.) Finding one's own best voice is a central goal of an education in the liberal arts and sciences.

Other essential goals are learning to respect and to share responsibility with one another. So what does academic integrity expect of us — both faculty and students — when we see someone else cheating? Do we have responsibilities only to ourselves to act with integrity? Or do we have responsibilities to others, or to the wider community in which we find ourselves? Earlham's policy on academic integrity says, "Those who believe they have witnessed violations of academic integrity should feel the obligation to speak about this to the suspected offender. The witness also should feel obligated to report the suspected offender to the instructor if the person fails to offer a satisfactory explanation and refuses to report him or herself."

It asks a great deal of a young person, or of anyone for that matter, to lovingly, but firmly, confront a fellow student one barely knows about a lapse of integrity. It can be all the harder if the other student is a friend. Nevertheless, this, too, we ask everyone to learn.

And now students have arrived to join the conversation about integrity. Classes have begun and our sports teams have played their first contests. At the opening Convocation, just-retired PAGES Professor Caroline Higgins invited us to think about the life and work of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. We are again engaged in the fulfilling work of learning who we can become. The Fall Semester is off to a very good start.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "D".

Doug Bennett