

The Corruption of Ethics in Higher Education

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Once the dean called me about a grade for the daughter of the rector. The rector was in the hospital. The dean said that he has suffered enough already and that I should not make him suffer any more, so I should give his daughter a good grade.

—Assistant Professor in Kazakhstan

Admissions were a way to make money. Big money.

—Administrator in Georgia

Universities are commonly thought to be a haven for young adults. No matter how unstable the polity or how dismal the prospects for the economy, education investments are treated as sacrosanct. Recently, however, it has been discovered that education systems can be as corrupt as other parts of government and the economy; and that values of fairness and impartiality, once thought to be universal characteristics of university systems, can be supplanted by the interests of specific individuals, families, ethnic groups, and institutions.

Such misconduct includes the abuse of authority for both personal and material gain. Higher education can be corrupt through: the illegal procurement of goods and services; cheating in the provision of its normal functions (admissions, grading, graduation, housing, and academic products); professional

misconduct (favoring of family members, sexual exploitation, bias in grading, research plagiarism, etc.); and cheating in the paying of taxes and the use of university property.

HOW COMMON IS IT?

In student surveys of Bulgaria, Moldova, and Serbia, between 35 and 45 percent believed that the official selection process could be by-passed. Approximately one in five admitted to having bribed a university official; in Moldova the figure was two in five. Within universities a wide variation exists in the propensity to bribe. Disciplines in highest demand—economics, finance, and law—have higher competition for entry, higher tuitions and fees, higher potential for earning, and hence higher stakes. These disciplines are more likely to be corrupt.

Education corruption is universal but the type differs from one region to another. In North America the problem appears to be student and faculty plagiarism and cheating on examinations. In addition, breaches in institutional ethics include the misconduct of research, ethical questions surrounding fundraising and sports, admissions and testing, academic governance, as well as classroom improprieties—showing up late for class, unfairly assessing homework assignments, and showing preference to specific genders, nationalities or opinions.

Outside the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), corruption is more frequent but occurs in different ways. In Vietnam, Cambodia, South Asia, eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, the main problem appears to be corruption for monetary gain—the propensity to seek bribes in exchange for higher grades, accreditation, and entrance to selective

programs of study. In sub-Saharan Africa, corruption includes frequent instances of professional misconduct and sexual exploitation in the classroom.

IS CORRUPTION CULTURAL?

Some people might argue that corruption and cheating is cultural and imbedded within the moral standards of the community. This situation might imply that students favor it and have no shame when participating. Generally, however, students express shame and remorse. In Croatia, 89 percent claimed that it was “wrong” to cheat on an examination, approximately the same portion as in the United States (90%). On the other hand, some reports suggest that American students who cheat also say they are satisfied with their personal ethics. This suggests that, in certain circumstance, cheating can become a behavioral norm, “disconnected” from personal ethics.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EFFECTS

Corruption may enhance efficiency when prices (tuition, fees, or wages) are distorted by regulations. Some university systems require that faculty salaries remain uniform across disciplines; hence, retaining talent may require unregulated payments. However, the net benefits of efficiency from corruption are less likely in universities because corruption affects other social goals for making the education investment. Because universities serve to model good behavior, allowing a university to become corrupt may be more costly than allowing corruption in the customs service or the police. Since one purpose of the university is to purposefully teach how to behave in the future, if the university is corrupt, one can expect future citizens to be corrupt as well.

Corruption has a negative effect on quality. The university becomes a high-priced, low-quality good if officials admit or give high grades to the less qualified. Instead of increasing internal competition, corruption limits it. Since honesty rests on the proof of a lack of violations, a university suspected of being corrupt reduces the power of its graduates in the labor market. With the private sector and particularly with companies that draw from international labor markets, the effect of having a reputation for corruption may be more serious than with local governments and state-owned enterprises.

Corruption negatively affects both private and social economic returns to investments in education. If students can purchase grades they have less incentive to learn. An employer does not know whether the student completed the degree on the basis of academic ability or because he or she bribed university officials. The signaling value of a university degree is reduced. Employers reduce risk by avoiding graduates from suspect institutions and by putting into place testing, internship, and other filtering mechanisms. Graduates need to accept significantly lower salaries until they can demonstrate their economic value through on-the-job experience. Graduates from universities suspected of corruption are not likely to be considered for technical and professional jobs. If they sort into government jobs where the potential for bribes is high (customs, police, etc.), the private income costs of corruption are reduced, but the social costs remain.

WHO CAN RESIST?

In circumstances where corruption is the norm, such an issue among faculty is not universal. Faculty “resisters” exist even in the most debilitating

environments—some directed by virtue of moral principle and others on the basis of pragmatic assessment. Regardless of the source, their strength leads to the judgment of a universal standard for the professoriate. This standard consists of the promise to treat all students with fairness and impartiality. It requires the selection of universalistic norms (of fairness to students and colleagues) over loyalty to family and friends. In this simple but meaningful way, certain faculty in some of the world's most isolated universities represent, in fact, “quiet heroes.” They stand up for their principles, without legal or administrative support, and not based on the possibility of professional recognition or financial reward; instead, they often stand up for fairness in defiance of senior administrators.

INGREDIENTS OF THE MORAL ACADEMY

In what ways must a university with international aspirations prove its adherence to universal principles? A university that reveals no public stance on the issue might be judged as having little interest in how the public perceives its integrity. A number of mechanisms exist to lessen the possibility of corruption and lower the perception that a university system could be corrupt. These include codes of conduct for faculty, administrators, and students; statements of honesty on public Web sites; university “courts” to hear cases of misconduct; and annual reports to the public on changes in the number and types of incidents on a year-by-year basis.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Many non-OECD countries are trying to participate in the Bologna process so as to make university degrees equivalent and facilitating transfer of course credits and credentials. It is hard to imagine why a country or a university in the European Union with a high reputation would allow its degrees to coincide with those of a university or a system of universities that face a perception of corruption. On the other hand, the European Quality Assurance Register or other mechanisms might include anticorruption evidence as criteria in the process of European accreditation; hence the process itself might be used as a means to clean up that problem from higher education systems.

Another implication concerns development assistance agencies that make investments in higher education. These agencies may have to rethink if their investments are made in systems with high levels of perceived corruption. However, an effective policy intervention must acquire information about the experience and cost of corruption. Regular surveys of students and faculty would be helpful. In fact, a survey of one university at two points in time demonstrated a decline in corruption. This suggests that when the potential of exposure and professional embarrassment becomes real, the propensity to engage in corruption declines.