



Academic Integrity E-Update

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*Ethics in action
creates
character*

Semester End Tips:

- 1. Clearly define rationalizations*
- 2. Identify core ethical values*
- 3. Reflect on the ethical person we want to become*

Exposing Rationalizations

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We've all used them. Statements that help to ease our conscience about what we just did. We know it was wrong, but want to assure ourselves it wasn't all that bad. "I should have cited a personal leave day rather than sick day, but everyone does it." "I know I really didn't make that contribution, but I need the extra deduction on my taxes to help pay for my son's college expenses." In big or small situations, what we commonly call rationalizations seek to provide a moral cover for our questionable choices. Some psychologists label these statements as 'moral neutralizers' and recognize they are frequently employed by adults and students, and when easily cited, they are correlated to higher levels of cheating [1,2]. As the first semester wraps up, teachers can help students expose the use of rationalizations and encourage students to aspire to a higher standard of ethical behavior during semester exams, the completion of their projects and in the new year.

There are a variety of classifications for rationalizations. One approach adapted from Murdock & Stephens [3] is to consider three categories, which include (1) externalizing blame, (2) minimizing harm, and (3) creating alternative moral justifications. Someone who seeks to externalize the blame for their own cheating might say things like, "I didn't have enough time," "the teacher didn't teach well" or "my parents are pressuring me to earn top grades." Rationalizations that minimize harm can include, "hey, no one got hurt," "this paper was only busy work" and "I don't think this is cheating." Alternative moral justifications have frequently noted, "I did this to help a friend," "the assignment wasn't fair" and "cheating is acceptable if it helps me get into college."

As educators committed to academic integrity, our work to expose these rationalizations should challenge our students to recognize a higher ethical standard. An ethical standard can be defined by core values identified by the International Center for Academic Integrity -- honesty, trust, respect, fairness, responsibility and ethical courage to act on these values.

Thus, if students are tempted to blame a lack of time as a rationalization to plagiarize content for a paper, our pre-emptive process to teach them about rationalizations, and the alternative to practice the core values of responsibility (to plan out the assignment) and honesty (to cite properly) can help students aspire to a better ethical choice.

Resolutions in the new calendar year should still be relevant in mid-January. What about a resolution to become a more ethical student and overcome challenges with integrity? Ultimately we can help students reflect on who they want to be and point them to the social and personal value of seeking to live life ethically. Understanding and exposing rationalizations provides our students one more tool to help them act on an ethical choice.

1. Bandura, A. (1990) Selective activation and disengagement of moral control. Journal of Social Issues, 46(1), 27-46.
2. Brown, R.P., Tamborski, M., Wang, X., Barnes, C.D., Mumford, M.D., Connelly, S., & Devenport, L.D. (2011). Moral credentialing and the rationalization of misconduct. Ethics & Behavior, 21(1),1-12.

Do you have data to guide your understanding of students' current opinions and observations about academic integrity? Click here to learn about our [AMIS student survey](#).

Would you like to complete a professional development workshop focused on developing student ethical functioning? Click here to find [contact information](#) for SEE and ask about our PD offerings.

Active links here lead to SEE's website.



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3. Murdock, T.B., & Stephens, J.M. (2007). *Is cheating wrong? Students' reasoning about academic dishonesty. [The Psychology of Academic Cheating](#)*. Boston: Elsevier Academic Press.

Strategies to Encourage Commitment to Ethical Behavior

Most of our work to encourage academic integrity requires the commitment of our colleagues and students to turn good intentions into ethical action. Many of us (students included) can recognize ethical dilemmas and what an ethical person would do in that situation, but then we can be challenged to make our own personal ethical commitment to act on an ethical choice. With students in particular, there is a tremendous demand placed on them to honor loyalty to friends and classmates no matter what other ethical value is compromised. What strategies can we use to help students develop their own commitment to ethical behavior?

Our first suggestion is to be clear with definitions and the aspirational goals that are provided in core ethical values. Core values as outlined in the preceding essay can become a compelling life goal if valued by a respected teacher and used to define socially valuable behaviors as demonstrated in analysis of characters in history, literature or current events. An example of a clarifying discussion was observed recently in a high school class where a student labored to argue how cheating (in light of past injustice) was actually supporting the core value of fairness. Regardless of his passion to persuade, his own classmates resisted this distorted definition of fairness and helped clarify that fairness is better defined by equal opportunity for success by all with appropriate accommodations for those with special needs.

Another application of core values is to have students contribute to class rules and norms in a democratic process to achieve a learning environment that supports respect, fairness, caring and responsibility. Student ownership of these values and their guidance of class policies, rules and consequences provides a living example of the worth of core values at school. Clear definitions of core values and their demonstration in life go hand-in-hand with helping students analyze ethical dilemmas, with one goal to result in action choices that would be supported by core values.

These suggestions are all designed with the purpose to build commitment to ethical behavior in support of the flourishing of students and their school. The start of a new year and semester gives us a fresh opportunity to encourage ethics in action for the authentic success of our school community.

About SEE

The School for Ethical Education is a not-for-profit teaching agency in Milford, CT with the mission to advance strategies to put ethics in action to create character. As a non-sectarian 501(C)3 organization, SEE is partly supported by fees for service, grants and donations. For more information, visit our website at www.ethicsed.org

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