

# Encouraging Ethical Behavior of Students

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**T**RAINING DIETETICS STUDENTS and dietetics interns to manage ethical dilemmas successfully is a key component of their professional and personal development, especially considering that ethical behavior exhibited as a student may be related to conduct displayed later in the professional workplace setting.<sup>1,2</sup>

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy)/Commission on Dietetic Registration Code of Ethics (COE), which includes a preamble, 4 principles, and 32 standards, reflects the values and ethical principles guiding the nutrition and dietetics profession.<sup>3,4</sup> Along with the COE, students can turn to other resources to maintain academic integrity, including university student handbooks, campus and department bylaws and mission statements, and the course syllabus. Students should also understand the privacy policies outlined in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), as well as the privacy/confidentiality and codes of conduct policies developed by the organizations in which they are placed.<sup>5,6</sup>

Despite the proliferation and availability of resources to guide ethical student behavior, academic dishonesty continues to be an issue, particularly regarding online education. Nearly 60% of the 1,967 faculty members who participated in *Inside Higher Ed's* 2019 Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology believe academic fraud occurs more frequently online than in face-to-face courses, and 39% said they occur in both settings equally.<sup>7-9</sup> To address student ethical behavior in both online and in-person settings, enhanced instructor-to-student communication is essential.

“What we’ve learned, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the role that instructor presence plays in supporting ethical student behaviors,” said Nina L. Roofoe, PhD, RDN, LD, FAND, associate professor and chair, Department of Nutrition and Family Sciences, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, AR, member of the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics board (2020-2021), and current member of the Ethics committee. “You need to be highly engaged with your students. In addition to giving them a grade or feedback on an assignment, you need to overcommunicate in order to guide, discuss, and collaborate on their work to encourage academic integrity.” Roofoe also emphasized the role of student-to-student engagement in virtual courses via discussion boards, peer reviews, and blogs to create a sense of community that can enrich the student experience and preserve ethical behavior by reducing feelings of isolation and course-related stress.

## TYPES OF ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

Ethical conundrums faced by students typically center around the following topics: honesty/cheating, plagiarism, and privacy.<sup>5,10</sup>

### Honesty/Cheating

Examples of this behavior may be largely grouped under the term *contract cheating*, which refers to the “outsourcing of student work to third parties,” including custom writing services and test banks.<sup>11-13</sup> Other examples of academic dishonesty and cheating include using another student’s answers or referring to outside sources (eg, notes, books, and social media) to complete a test or examination and intentionally falsifying data in student research projects.

### Plagiarism

Using content and ideas generated by an outside source without appropriate citation is the core definition of plagiarism, which can include copying the exact wording of another source’s material, as well as summarizing that material without acknowledging the originating source.<sup>14</sup> “Students also need to be able to put material into their own words and they often don’t trust themselves to do that accurately,” added Roofoe. “I tell them, ‘You don’t have to be an eloquent writer, but you do have to be able to read and comprehend the material in order to put it in your own words.’”

Instructors have access to a variety of web-based plagiarism prevention tools, such as Turnitin and SafeAssign, which are integrated into many learning management systems and compare student-submitted content to material published on the internet and in online databases. Roofoe said she often releases the results of these tools so that they are accessible to the students, encouraging them to place flagged content into their own words before submitting the final paper.

### Privacy

Failure to comply with the COE, HIPAA, and other privacy-related guidelines, including revealing patient information or sharing images of patients and staff in the supervised practice environment, unless authorized to do so, via social media or other forms of digital communication are examples of privacy-related misconduct. In addition, students are expected to refrain from harassment or defamation of other students, preceptors, instructors, and patients on social media and during in-person exchanges. Ethical student conduct policies apply equally to behavior exhibited via digital platforms.

It is also important to note that a student who assists another peer in

committing an act of academic dishonesty is also exhibiting ethical misconduct. One study found that nearly 93% of undergraduate business students had witnessed another student engage in the act of cheating, but only 4.4% admitted that they had reported an incident of cheating.<sup>15,16</sup> The social ramifications of reporting a fellow student engaging in the act of cheating, combined with the misperception that it is not the student's responsibility to report this activity but actually the instructor's, are deterrents for actively calling out this behavior. Nevertheless, failure to report academic misconduct by another student is itself a breach of ethical behavior. Roofe stressed the importance of coaching students on how to determine what constitutes a credible incidence of misconduct, such as cheating, and how to properly report this activity with detailed and specific information.

Other situations in which a student may be assisting a peer in committing academic misconduct are, perhaps, less clearly defined. Acts of cheating are typically easy to determine, but what about situations in which a student is seemingly helping another student? Perhaps a student offers his or her notes to someone who did not attend class? (If this happens regularly with the same student, it is indeed an issue.) Or what about a group participation project with a peer-evaluation component, where one student fails to communicate properly with the other group members, has last-minute conflicts, and fails to complete their part of the project due to a sick child? Students must understand the fine line between helping and enabling others' behavior, noted Roofe, and failure to indicate this behavior on the peer evaluation is a breach of academic integrity. Enablers of unethical student behavior should be held accountable for their role in these situations.

## COE

The Academy and its credentialing agency, the Commission on Dietetic Registration, suggest that it is "in the best interest of the profession and the public it services to have a Code of Ethics in place that provides guidance to nutrition and dietetics practitioners in their professional practice and conduct."<sup>17</sup>

The COE's principles—principle 1: competence and professional development in practice (Non-Maleficence); principle 2: integrity in personal and organizational behaviors and practices (Autonomy); principle 3: professionalism (Beneficence); and principle 4: social responsibility for local, regional, national, global nutrition, and well-being (Justice)—and their accompanying standards provide guidance for ethical dilemmas typically faced by students. Specifically, the COE suggests nutrition and dietetics practitioners "respect intellectual property rights, including citation and recognition of the ideas and works of others regardless of the medium (e.g., written, oral, electronic)" (2d); "provide accurate and truthful information in all communications" (2e); and "respect patient/client's autonomy [and] safeguard patient/client confidentiality . . ." (2h). The COE also recommends "demonstrate[ing] respect, constructive dialogue, civility, and professionalism in all communications, including social media" (3c), and to "provide objective evaluations of performance for employees, coworkers, and students and candidates for employment . . ." (3g).<sup>4,17</sup> The COE is an integral part of training and professional development for all dietetics students and dietetics interns.

## Deterring Academic Misconduct

Key drivers for unethical behavior in academia often involve the pressures students face in creating quality work while managing outside factors, ranging from caring for a family to the anxiety sometimes associated with the virtual education models so prevalent during the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic.<sup>18</sup> The pandemic will eventually subside, but lapses in academic integrity will not, unfortunately. A productive approach for fostering ethical behavior in students in both online and in-person settings includes engaged and consistent mentoring of dietetics students and dietetics interns. "The mentoring relationships that dietetics students and interns develop with their faculty, preceptors, and directors can, and should, serve to guide their understanding of the COE and their ability to apply these professional behaviors to

the situations they encounter," said Roofe.

Other strategies for developing ethical student behavior include an expanded focus on the fundamentals of citation and data analysis best practices for academic work, and clear parameters on what constitutes individual vs group work.

The University of California Berkeley's Center for Teaching and Learning underscores the importance of course design in promoting academic integrity, with an emphasis on learning for mastery of content over performance, building student self-efficacy by communicating to students what is required to successfully complete a course, and preparing students for managing potential ethical considerations by presenting case studies from academia and from the field itself.<sup>19</sup> "A well-designed course supports authentic learning with course-level learning objectives that align with a variety of assessment types including face to face exams, papers and projects, and group work," added Roofe. "Starting the semester with low-stakes quizzes or assignments builds confidence while learning key concepts that students build on throughout the semester. Having points in the gradebook and confidence about the content before a high-stakes exam can decrease the temptation to cheat."

## CONCLUSIONS

The Academy/Commission on Dietetic Registration COE applies to all member categories, including student members. The guidance provided by the COE, along with enhanced, focused instruction of students on authorship best practices, are key to promoting academic integrity, as are strong mentorship and modeling by instructors to underscore the importance of professional and honest behavior, both for students and their peers. Fostering a teaching environment that supports ethics training benefits the entire nutrition and dietetics profession, as well as the patients and clients these future professionals will serve.

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## STATEMENT OF POTENTIAL OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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