

Why Academic Integrity Matters

“You must be the change you want to see in the world.” - Mahatma Gandhi

We live in a culture where "the bottom-line" tends to receive undue emphasis, often to the exclusion of other values. People want to know how their company will profit, or "what's in it for them," and generally think in material terms -- such as money and power -- when using this approach. Although there *are* practical "material" reasons why it's important for students to be honest in their academic endeavors (see below), they turn out to be of less significance.

The most important reason that each of us should strive to be a person of integrity is that all human relationships, and therefore the very fabric of society, is based on our ability to trust one another -- and this, in turn, is based on **honesty**. Think about it: whether in personal relationships, or at work, how much do (or can) we trust people who aren't honest with us? And how much of a relationship can we have with someone we don't trust? It all boils down to honesty. It is therefore no coincidence that the words "honor" and "honesty" share the same root, nor that cultures throughout history and world-wide have prized honor so highly.

Another important value that operates independently of the "bottom line" is **fairness**. When students cheat, they gain a short-term advantage over other students, and that's not fair. It's not fair to have a cheat-sheet when others are relying on memory; it's not fair to submit the writing of a published author when other students are submitting their own writing; and it's not fair to collaborate with someone else on a homework assignment when other students are following the teacher's instructions and working on their own.

Let's also be clear about our mission here at Northwestern High School, which is -- first and foremost -- education. Dishonest academic conduct undermines the learning process in multiple ways: it stunts the development of important skills such as reading, writing, research, analysis, synthesis, and comprehension; it hinders students in recognizing where their strengths and weaknesses in these areas lie; it prevents students from developing the self-confidence that comes from successfully completing a challenging assignment on one's own; it thwarts the development of creativity and critical thinking; and, lastly, it provides incorrect information to instructors in that critical feedback loop between students and their teachers. For all of these reasons it is clear that dishonest academic behavior defeats the educational goals of the school and, thus, diminishes the value of a student's education.

Remember, too, that the credibility of your diploma will be based on the reputation of Northwestern High School, which derives from the quality and integrity of our education. When you complete your work honestly, you can take pride in the fact that you are playing an important part in upholding the reputation that Northwestern currently enjoys as a world-class high school.

Of course there are times when you might get a better grade if you cheated on an exam or plagiarized in a paper, so it might seem to be in your best self-interest to do so. In fact, the reason people respect individuals with integrity so much is that everyone knows that it's *not* always easy to do the honest or fair thing; and that sometimes doing the right thing conflicts with what appears to be in our best interest.

So why *should* you be honest and fair when you know that not everyone is? Beyond the inherent "goodness" of honesty and fairness, what *are* the "material" pay-offs? As mentioned above, the esteem of others, self-confidence, better skills and a more accurate sense of where your strengths and deficiencies lie - as well as a diploma that has value in the marketplace - these are all tangible benefits that come from doing your work honestly.

But what is most important is the self-respect that comes from knowing that you're doing your part to create the kind of world that you want to live in: a world where people are honest and the playing field is fair. A society that is based on the premise, "May the best person win," rather than "May the most devious cheater win." After all, who would you want to be your surgeon, your structural engineer, your son or daughter's teacher: the person who was best for the job, or the one who cheated their way through school and is only faking competence?