

The Question of Corruption in Academe

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Corruption in higher education is not a topic much discussed in academic circles. Academic institutions see themselves as somehow above the baser motivations and lower instincts of other elements of society. And society generally believes that universities are somehow special institutions imbued with the virtues of integrity. Yet, corruption in various manifestations is an element of higher education in many parts of the world. It is time to open a discussion of the meaning and scope of corruption since it seems to be an expanding phenomenon, especially in parts of the world facing severe economic hardships. Academic institutions in these countries come under extreme pressure to provide access and degrees to ensure success in difficult economic circumstances.

The dictionary definition of corruption will suffice well for academe—"impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle." It goes on to say—"inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means." Although there are global guides for societal transparency and democratic government, no one has developed a worldwide academic corruption index. Yet, we know from limited research and news reports that countries and some academic institutions are prone to corrupt practices of various kinds. Hardly any academic system is completely immune from at least some elements of corruption. Scandals in intercollegiate athletics, including such problems as admitting unqualified students who can play football and allowing cheating on exams to ensure athletes' eligibility to play, are common in the United States, and occasional lapses in academic honor codes have occurred. There have been cases of corporate interference with research projects or financial shenanigans by members of boards of trustees, senior administrators, or professors. Oral examination arrangements at some European universities have occasionally been unfairly manipulated. But when such malfeasance is detected, it is usually publicly exposed and the perpetrators disciplined. The academic system itself is not corrupt, and efforts are made to cleanse the institutions. The key point is that the traditional values of the university are honored and deviations from them are seen as aberrations and as unacceptable behavior.

This is in sharp contrast to academic systems that allow significant and persistent institutional as well as individual corruption at many levels and, more importantly, where academic norms of honesty and

meritocratic values are pushed to the side. The litany of problems is unfortunately long and disturbing. A few examples will suffice. Admission to universities is for sale in some parts of the world. Well-connected applicants or those who bribe or otherwise influence the academic authorities responsible for admissions, or those who can manipulate the admissions process gain entry regardless of their academic qualifications. In such situations, graduation is a virtual certainty, whether or not a student completes the required academic work. Admission is tantamount to graduation—and the process is sometimes smoothed by further bribery or influence peddling. Professors may offer "tutorial" sessions to applicants to the university or those already enrolled that often require considerable payments that serve as bribes for entry or success.

Professorial Corruption

Academic posts are often "sold" in the sense that those seeking appointments to lectureships or professorships must curry favor with selection committees through gifts or other emoluments. In some cases, academic posts are awarded on the basis of ethnic or religious backgrounds. Research and publications may be corrupted. Plagiarism in publications can be found in every academic system, but in some it is widespread and tacitly accepted—at least no one asks many questions, and the penalties for detection are few, if any. Research results or even entire research projects can be falsified. Corruption may also involve the promotion process. Candidates can bribe or otherwise sway promotion committees, or outside pressure may be brought to bear in the process. In universities with a rigid academic hierarchy, senior academics often promote their friends or perhaps colleagues without regard to the qualifications of the candidates.

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Examinations

The examination system, which is central to the meritocratic core of the university, is a common site for corruption. In India, for example, cheating is so well established in some parts of the country that when universities try to crack down, students protest and demand their traditional "right" to cheat. The litany of means used to cheat on examinations is long and, in a perverse way, an indication of the inventiveness of a corrupt system. Examination proctors (invigilators) are sometimes beaten or even killed by students for conscientiously

doing their jobs. In some places, professors or administrators collude with students by selling them examination papers in advance or by “fixing” the results. In others, students manage to steal examinations and sell them in advance to others. In the United States, Internet-based firms are now selling research papers to undergraduate students, who then sometimes submit the papers as their own. Recent American surveys indicate that a significant proportion of students admit to cheating on examinations from time to time. In countries where oral examinations are common, there are further possibilities for corruption.

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Causes and Effects

The many reasons behind academic corruption can be complicated. There is a clear correlation between economic factors and corruption. Where academic institutions are congenitally short of money and thus under great pressure to admit students, there is an increased likelihood for corruption. Faculty and administrators may be looking for ways to supplement woefully inadequate salaries in societies lacking other opportunities for employment. External pressures to admit and promote students are immense as well. While not all underfunded academic systems are corrupt—indeed most universities now face difficult financial circumstances—institutions that experience “permanent poverty” in societies that offer few options for the highly educated are more exposed to the lures of academic corruption. There are strong links, of course, between societal corruption and corruption in academe. Indeed, since universities in reality are not Ivory Towers, they are greatly affected by societal norms—and corruption is an element of social and economic life in many countries. Societies that do not have well-developed meritocratic norms are often prone to academic corruption—the idea that someone can be promoted or can receive an academic degree because he or she is from a particular group or has certain familial links is seen as acceptable.

The traditions of higher education also play a role. Universities everywhere have European roots and organizational patterns—they may not be well suited to some non-Western societies. This historical disjunction may make it easier for corruption to take hold. Further, in many developing countries, universities were part of a colonial system, and the values of subservience were

to some extent put into place by the colonial powers. Countries without deep academic traditions may also have looser ties to the traditional values of academe.

Academic systems that are politicized and in which nonacademic norms of many kinds impinge on universities may also be more prone to corruption. Political parties may be active on campus, seeking to dominate academic governance bodies and to put their followers into positions of influence. Students may be involved in activist movements that have little regard to the universities or the norms of academic life. Government or other external agencies may be working to shape academic decisions. Weak academic leadership may also be responsible for permitting corruption to entrench itself in the university. Sometimes, the organization of the university prevents strong leadership from emerging.

The effects of corruption on campus are extensive. Corruption destroys the very core of the university—the concept of meritocracy and the dominance of honest academic inquiry and excellence in teaching and research. The effects can be seen in things large and small. Corrupt admissions arrangements mean that the best students may not be admitted. Corrupt promotion policies mean that the best minds are not rewarded, and that many will not even wish to be part of the academic community. Funds are misused, and the result is that libraries and laboratories do not have the support they need.

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Conclusion

Universities require an effective civil society as much as nations do. The academic system needs basic financial support so that it is possible to provide effective teaching and engage in creative research. Universities need to be permitted the autonomy required to build and support academic culture and values. Perhaps most importantly, the academic community itself must understand that without integrity and meritocracy there can be no true university. The reality of corruption in higher education must be recognized as a central problem to be analyzed, understood, and rooted out. A first step is to recognize its nature and scope.