



Friendship, fidelity and academic integrity

by Gary Pavela

What follows is the revised text of a speech given by Gary Pavela on August 23, 2004 to the incoming class at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. The occasion was the inauguration of Trinity's new academic honor code--the result of a five year effort by students, administrators, and faculty members. The theme of the speech reflects the view that students (especially students in the millennial generation) are strongly peer oriented. They should be encouraged to see a commitment to academic integrity as a commitment to truth--and to understand that a commitment to truth is precisely the quality that allows true friendship to endure.

This is a beautiful auditorium, and I'm especially impressed with the ceiling. Please take a moment and look up at it. Consider the fact that many tons of steel and concrete are perched precariously above your head--probably put up there by the lowest bidder. My point is that all of us, at this precise moment, depend upon the honesty and integrity of the people who designed and built the building. Multiply this example by countless others and you'll understand the imperative of social trust. We're not talking about an obscure or unimportant topic.

One of the reasons why colleges and universities pay so much attention to academic integrity is the critical need for social trust. Trinity is one of the best small universities in the country. It's preparing you for positions of leadership in the larger society. So the academic integrity standards set by the University (and your fellow students on the new Honor Council) will be demanding.

Is 'business ethics' a contradiction in terms?

How many of you expect to work in business after you graduate? [about one-third of the audience raised their hand]. How many of you think the term "business ethics" is a contradiction in terms? [a scattering of hands were raised]. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan doesn't share that view. In a 1999 commencement speech at Harvard University he said that:

Beyond [a] personal sense of satisfaction, having a reputation for fair dealing is a profoundly practical virtue. We call it "good will" in business and add it to our balance sheets. Trust is at the root of any economic system based on mutually beneficial exchange. In virtually all transactions, we rely on the word of those with whom we do business. Were this not the case, exchange of goods and services could not take place on any reasonable scale. Our commercial codes and contract law presume that only a tiny fraction of contracts, at most, need be adjudicated. If a significant number of businesspeople violated the trust upon which our interactions are based, our court system and our economy would be swamped into immobility.

As social trust declines, information-based economies decline with it--and very quickly. Those of you who major in economics and study the collapse of Argentina's economy a few years ago will understand.



Building the structure of the self

But there's another reason why colleges and universities pay so much attention to academic integrity, beyond the practical imperative of preserving social trust. In addition to the physical structures around us, there's something else that requires integrity to build well: The structure of the self.

In one of my previous jobs, a long time ago, I read arguments and counter-arguments made in federal criminal white collar crime cases--appeals of felony convictions. It's striking how the personalities of the defendants in those cases converge with the personalities of students I've met who repeatedly engaged in academic dishonesty. They all seem to share three perspectives:

- "It's a dog-eat-dog world" (competitiveness and "gamesmanship" are everything).
- "I am (or will be) the top dog, since I'm smarter than everybody else."
- "Friends may be useful in helping me stay or become top dog, but they're otherwise dispensable. (Most cheaters know they're gaining an unfair advantage over other students, just like dishonest corporate executives know they're defrauding their colleagues and co-workers).

How are most white collar criminals convicted? The answer is that most convictions occur because "dispensable" friends of the defendant (who knew all along they were dispensable) enter into plea agreements and testify for the government. Read relevant news stories and see how often that happens.

It's depressing to see the result of these cases. The lives wasted. The human potential lost. But you can see something similar without going into a courtroom. It can be found in the bleakness and sense of emptiness associated with the exclusive view of life as a contest or game, where the goal is to be top dog--a winner above all else, before anyone else. A researcher named Michael Maccoby studied this way of looking at life and wrote about his findings in a book called *The Gamesman*. What happens to a "Gamesman" late in life? Maccoby wrote:

An old and tiring gamesman is a pathetic figure, especially after he has lost a few contests, and with them, his confidence. Once his youth, vigor, and even the thrill of winning are lost, he becomes depressed and goalless, questioning the purpose of his life. No longer energized by the . . . struggle and unable to dedicate himself to something he believes in beyond himself . . . he finds himself starkly alone. His attitude has kept him from deep friendship and intimacy. Nor has he sufficiently developed abilities that would strengthen the self, so that he might gain satisfaction from understanding (science) or creating (invention, art).

Think back for a moment to the betrayal of friendship (superficial, dispensable friendship) in the white collar crime cases. There are contrary examples. In wartime, for example, men and women have died for their friends willingly sacrificed their lives for their friends. In those instances, however, the friends did not see each other primarily in terms of personal ambition. They shared fidelity to each other on deeper grounds, as part of a



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community, a unit (a "band of brothers"), or a family.

Please keep the word fidelity in mind. It has two compatible meanings:

- Fidelity to a friend means being true to the friendship.
- And fidelity also means conformity to truth itself.

Let's explore this idea further.

The role of truth and friendship in forming a self

Please think of your best friend. What key words describe the qualities of your friend's character? Let's pause a moment. Let those words come to your mind.

- How many of you used the word "loyal," or something similar? [nearly everyone in the audience raised their hand].
- How many of you used the word "honest," or something similar? [nearly everyone in the audience raised their hand].
- How many used "crafty and deceitful," or something similar? [laughter, and one hand raised].

You see again the rich meaning of the word "fidelity." A friend is someone loyal to us, but also honest--loyal to truth.

Let me ask another question. How many of you have found yourself adopting the mannerism of a friend or family member? A certain expression? A way of laughing? [nearly everyone in the audience raised their hand]. What if our self--or a good part of it--is a blend of the key people in our lives? Maybe we know that's true, and seek and give friendship because doing so has something to do with creating a self. The implications are obvious: Choose your friends carefully. At the physical level, we are what we eat. At the spiritual level--the level of the higher self--we are who we love.

The "professional friend" exercise

Let's pursue this topic a bit further. Please pretend your parents decided you needed a "professional friend," so they paid someone (secretly) \$500 a month to be your "friend." You don't know about this, of course. The instructions your parents gave to your professional friend were to build your self-esteem. By that they mean:

- Always to flatter you
- Always to praise you.
- Never to criticize you;
- And never, ever, be a burden on you by asking you for help.

My hunch is that most of you would eventually find such a "friend" boring. What's missing? *Fidelity*. Your professional friend has no true loyalty, because the friendship is likely to end when the money stops. And there is no fidelity to truth, since the friendship is based on a deception. Maybe your self-esteem would go up for a time in such a phony friendship, but it would plummet fast if you found out it was a deception. Your self would



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not grow richer and deeper, and the self you might be incorporating would be the self of a flatterer and a charlatan.

Of course, your parents would never come up with such a dumb idea. They know the self you want to form is a self oriented toward truth, and fidelity to the truth. And, as you indicated by show of hands a few minutes ago, you want honest friends who will tell you the truth.

Teaching, friendship, and honor codes

Do you think you could have such a friendship (a friendship oriented toward truth) with your college teachers, at least some of them? [Most members of the audience raised their hand]. I'm glad your answer is yes, both for your benefit, and theirs.

The University of Virginia has a newspaper called the *Cavalier Daily*. Two years ago I read a letter to the editor by a graduating senior, Katie Dalton. She wrote about her best teacher, William Fishback:

My friendship with you has been the most rewarding relationship to come out of my academic experience. You know just how and when to push me out of procrastination, and you consistently offer support as a father would. More than anyone else, you embody the Jeffersonian ideal of a professor who instructs but also encourages his students, and who values friendships with his pupils as much as their final exams.

Virginia is an honor code school--one of the original honor code schools. I think honor codes foster friendships between students and teachers. In a moment I'll try to explain why.

First, I want to stress that not only can you be friends with your teachers, but forming genuine friendships with them (at least some of them) is something you should do, as an important part of your education. Seek them out. Show up at office hours and ask good questions. Tell them something about your self, including any of your doubts and fears about the academic world.

The idea that teachers and students can be friends in the pursuit of truth goes back to the time of Plato's academy. Socrates was the teacher of Plato and Plato was the teacher of Aristotle. Friendship was at the core of their relationships, even when Plato and Aristotle disagreed about philosophical issues. Between them was no conflict between fidelity to truth and fidelity to each other, because the mutual pursuit of truth was the core of the friendship.

What does all this have to do with your new honor code?

Properly designed and administered, an honor code reflects a partnership between faculty members and students. The partnership is explicitly designed to foster an orientation toward truth. In this sense it's a larger manifestation of the kind of friendship seen between UVA student Katie Dalton and her teacher, William Fishback.



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The immediate beneficiary of the faculty-student honor code partnership is the university itself. The student voice is heard in ways that might have been overlooked before. New ideas are generated, and new insights gained. A climate of trust and cooperation is more likely to evolve.

The larger society also benefits, because honor code schools seem particularly effective in emphasizing the importance of social trust. Remember the example of the ceiling above our heads.

But probably the biggest beneficiary of a faculty-student partnership in pursuit of truth (if you take your new honor code seriously) is *you*. You'll be building a self oriented toward truth. Doing so will enrich your lives in many ways. Perhaps the most important is that you will discover the highest kind of friendship--friendship grounded in fidelity, in the full sense of that word.