

# Does Academic Integrity

## Matter in 2023? ]

The headlines are shocking. Rampant cheating on college campuses. Discouraged faculty at a loss for how to turn the tide. Students angered by classmates cutting corners to “earn” a degree so they can reap rewards in the next season of their lives.

For educators, this reality is demoralizing. For parents, it is frightening. For Christians, it is heartbreaking. When the world places a premium on accomplishment and edging out the competition, choosing honesty can feel like a path to mediocrity. In the age of papers authored by artificial intelligence, one can be left to ask, “What does academic integrity look like in 2023?”

We live in a time when the world is sending two very clear and dangerous messages. First, culture is teaching that honesty is optional and solely dependent on your circumstances. Second, we see example after example of people desperately trying to live compartmentalized lives. Being one person publicly and a different person privately seems to be a norm. When this is the cultural narrative, a clear message is sent that integrity in all areas of life and across all areas of life is not important or even possible.

Parenting and leading students to choose lives of integrity is a challenge, but the Bible calls us to be “in but not of” this world, and at Wesleyan School, this distinction is a key piece of our mission.

*“Wesleyan’s mission is to be a Christian school...”*

This is more than a job for our faculty and more than just worldly education for our students. Hearts and habits are tended to here.

*“...of academic excellence...”* We are teaching young men and women how to be excellent not only in outcomes but also in the process they take to achieve those ends.

Part of how the school influences students is the Wesleyan Honor Code. “At the top of the list of character traits that we hope our students and alumni will embody is truly prizing honor. Men and women whose word is their bond. Men and women who can be counted on to do the things they say they are going to do,” explains **MARC KHEDOURI, assistant head of school for advancement**. “We so hope that honor and integrity are deeply woven into the very fabric of their lives. It just becomes who they are. In a world in which ‘truthiness’ prevails, they will ‘shine like stars in the universe.’”

“Honor codes are fairly germane to independent schools,” Khedouri goes on to say. “At Wesleyan, we believe that part of fulfilling our mission is teaching students the ‘why’ behind integrity. We want them to understand that their word is their bond. This is consistent with what scripture teaches.”

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TECHNOLOGY

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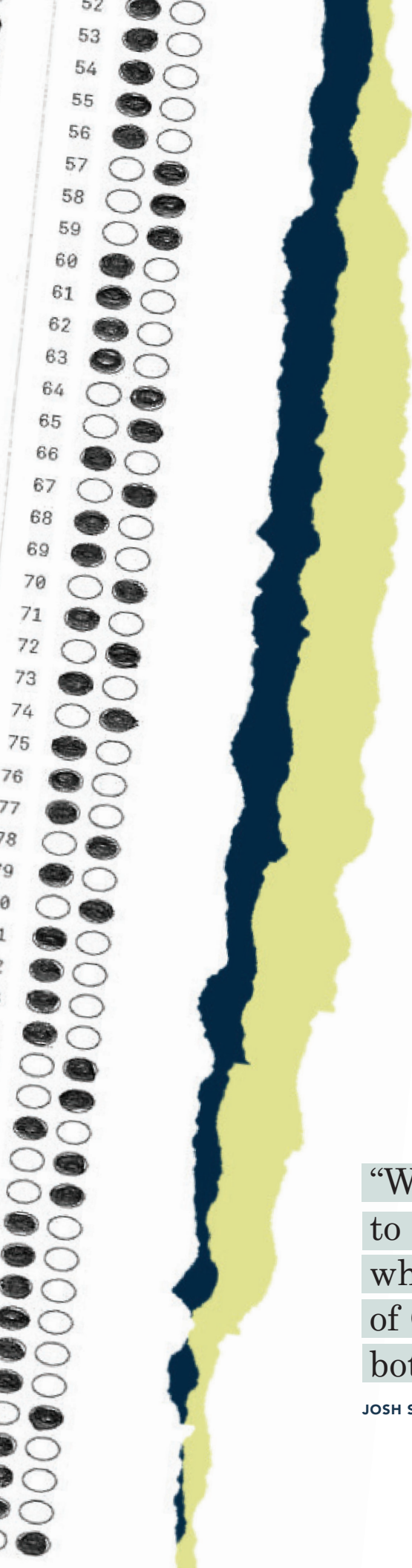
TECH

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In Luke 16:10 Jesus teaches, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much." Wesleyan administrators believe that the making of small decisions builds habits of choosing integrity over convenience or a temporary achievement.

"Integrity is its own reward – granted it is a delayed reward, and that can be difficult," Khedouri continues. "Our desire is that our students learn that delaying the gratification is worth it and that their integrity is to be valued. This is a critical way we both challenge and nurture the minds and spirits of our students, another key component of Wesleyan's mission."

### SCHOOL AS AN INCUBATOR FOR INTEGRITY

The sheer amount of time spent at school provides a significant training ground for integrity development. "Personal integrity is like a muscle," reflects **MARY BLALOCK '04, high school dean of student life**. "If you don't use it, it will atrophy. Likewise, exercising it intentionally creates muscle memory. Making the right choices becomes more obvious and a bit easier when you are accustomed to doing so.

"It is our belief that this sets the tone for the rest of a student's life," Blalock continues. "Holding a high standard at Wesleyan not only impacts their experience as a student but also in their lives as a friend, son or daughter, and one day as an adult."

When Blalock and **JOSH SMITH, high school assistant dean of student life**, speak with students about integrity, they often share the example of trusting the integrity of a building. Sitting inside of a building, occupants inherently trust the structure of the building itself – that it will not have cracks or issues with the foundation that could cause it to topple with them inside. At the same time, occupants trust the integrity of the builder.

"We believe it is not an oversimplification to say that a life of integrity is not only what we are called to model as followers of Christ, but it also leads to happiness both individually and as a community."

**JOSH SMITH, high school assistant dean of student life**

I pledge my honor that I have  
neither given nor received any unauthorized  
aid on this assignment.

"Just like with the building analogy, healthy relationships have a foundation in trust that no cracks of dishonesty or betrayal exist," says Smith. "Healthy relationships are a leading indicator of happiness, and we believe it is not an oversimplification to say that a life of integrity is not only what we are called to model as followers of Christ, but it also leads to happiness both individually and as a community."

#### CULTIVATING INTEGRITY STARTS AT HOME

Early in their school careers, students look to their parents for the most support – in everything from their school attendance to completion of assignments. This reality can be tricky for parents.

When teaching children about academic integrity, how can parents strike a balance between supporting their child appropriately and crossing the line into doing too much work? Lower school administrators suggest it comes down to keeping the big picture in mind.

"We've all been there!" says **DR. JASON ERB, lower school principal**. "Your child is working on an assignment, and you just can't help but see that they are about to make a big mistake. As the adult who can easily accomplish what they are learning, it can be tempting to step in and 'help' when in reality we are doing the work for them."

Erb cautions that this sends the unintentional message to students that it is ok to let someone else do your work and claim it as your own.

"A good litmus test I often share with parents as they try to strike this balance is this: if the pencil (or marker or keyboard) ends up in your hand, you're probably crossing the line into too much support and possibly putting your child in an honesty bind," clarifies Erb. "My guidance has usually been to err on the side of student independence, even if it means they may miss a few points on an assignment."

With the big picture of character in mind, parents can step back, allow their child to complete the assignment with their own level of knowledge and ability, and develop their child's persistence and integrity in the process.

"Allowing your child to experience failure is one of the hardest parts of parenting," explains **NANCY JONES, lower school dean of counseling and student services**. "But it is one of the most impactful things a parent can do. If we don't allow children to experience not getting it right, we rob them of the opportunity to learn. If we are showing them short cuts, we may also unintentionally teach them the ends justify the means."

Parents and schools can be great partners with one another as students navigate the day-to-day choices about the type of person they want to become. Those everyday choices are excellent building blocks for character development.



## ANCHORING OUR IDENTITY TO CHRIST

As students grow, the opportunities to reinforce making the “right” decisions increase as does their ability to define their own “why” behind their choices. “Every one of us is susceptible to temptation,” says **RICH BILLING, middle school dean of student life**.

“Every person in our building is equally human and could make a choice to lie, cheat, or steal. The temptation for those choices will always be present; the mechanism through which they can do so just changes. If we don’t help students identify the ‘why’ for making the choice to protect their integrity, they can get tripped up on the many ways in which they can make compromises.”

Cultivating a healthy self-identity might be most challenging during the middle school years when students are beginning to sort out who they are while clamoring for the approval of their peers, teachers, and parents. If a child’s identity is grounded in things like the approval of others or achievement, their “why” may drive them to make choices that compromise their integrity.

“Sometimes, adults in their lives may inadvertently send messages that a student’s performance – in the classroom, on the field, on the stage – is what identifies them,” Billing goes on to say. “If we overemphasize outcomes, we could inadvertently leave them feeling as if they do not have any choice but to take the short cut for the short-term reward.”

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Reinforcing that each student is made in the image of Christ and that He can be the cornerstone of their identity helps keep things in perspective as they face hard decisions. As they move through middle school and into high school, students take on greater and greater ownership of their academic and social lives. Keeping the big picture in mind of where their identity is grounded can be a compass to help students navigate the decisions ahead.

## THE DEFENDER OF THE J.O.Y. MOTTO

In high school, the expectations of academic independence and personal decision-making continues to increase. Whether a take-home assignment like a research paper, a group project with multiple contributors, or in-class assessments, students must decide daily how they will engage honestly.

“Learning requires the student to process information and then answer the call to demonstrate their own level of understanding,” says **JOSEPH KOCH, high school principal**. “If students choose to misrepresent the work of someone – or something – else as their own, they are lying to their teacher, and they are cheating, both on the assignment itself and on their own education. This shortchanges the entire classroom and ultimately our entire community.”

Educators know that the best learning takes place when relationships are strong. This is one reason why Wesleyan places such a high premium on relationship building across campus. Programs like mentor time and peer leadership all exist to cultivate relationships. Healthy relationships are grounded in trust, and for a community hallmarked by deep relationships, a threat to trust is a threat to our community.

“We take this so seriously, not just for student development,” Koch goes on to say, “but also because we do not want Wesleyan to become a place where community members are not trusted. That fundamentally

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**JOSEPH COOPER, high school Latin and English teacher, honor council sponsor**

shifts the entire feel of our school.”

The Wesleyan Honor Code says, “Every student is honor-bound to refrain from lying, cheating, and stealing. A student’s word is his or her bond.” Posted in every classroom, this code is a communal agreement to place the relationship with others ahead of one’s own temptations to take short cuts or get ahead.

“The Wesleyan Honor Code can almost be seen as the defender of our J.O.Y. motto,” reflects **JOSEPH COOPER, high school Latin and English teacher, as well as honor council sponsor**. “We ask students to affirm not only to their teachers, but also to one another as part of our greater community, that their work reflects their own knowledge and understanding.”

“Our entire honor program centers around protecting our community from lying, cheating, and stealing,” continues Cooper. “These are natural temptations for all people, and our hope is that when we frame our honor program through the lens of the gospel, we can help students see it as an extension of the J.O.Y. motto. When they make honorable choices, they are choosing to prioritize Christ and others before satisfying their own desires.”

The temptation to take short cuts is universally human. The tendency to place our identity in people’s opinions or accomplishments is a very real inclination that can hinder a student’s character development. With an eternal perspective in mind and partnership between parents and school, it is possible for today’s students to excel in school with their academic integrity fortified. ■

## About the High School Honor Council

From time to time, students in any grade can make an academic integrity misstep. When that occurs in high school, the student may appear before the honor council, a group of students serving primarily to educate their peers about community and integrity.

“We find that sometimes students are truly misinformed or not fully considering where the boundaries of integrity exist,” explains **JOSEPH COOPER, high school Latin and English teacher, as well as honor council sponsor**. “One of the honor council’s jobs is to help students see those boundaries, examine how they reached the point of making a less than honorable choice, and identify alternative choices when faced with the same temptations in the future.”

Honor council is not part of any disciplinary next steps and is solely a peer to peer evaluation and discussion of what took place. Student honor council members are guided by faculty sponsors but run the confidential proceedings entirely on their own.

“Our goal as the honor council is not to shame our peers or even to pass judgment,” says **RJ DEVLIN ‘23, president of the 2022-2023 honor council**.

“The aim of our work is to understand and educate. Peer to peer evaluation of what has taken place when there is an honor violation is a way that we can work together as classmates to hold each other accountable in maintaining the standards of our community. It is a way for us to support one another as we continue to learn about integrity and the importance of honesty in relationships.” ■