

Recovering the Ideals of the University

In pursuit of political activism, institutions of higher education have compromised academic integrity

E DUCATION NEXT senior editor Paul E. Peterson recently spoke with James Hankins, professor of medieval and Renaissance history at Harvard University, about an editorial he wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* “Claudine Gay and Why Academic Honesty Matters.”

Paul Peterson: We know that academic honesty matters, but why does it matter? What is the reason people care a lot about plagiarism?

James Hankins: The research university exists inside an ethical framework, which is tied to a structure of incentives. You cannot really conduct modern scientific or scholarly research without preserving that ethical frame. What that consists of is rewarding those who have made discoveries in proportion to their merit and the importance of the discovery, and also making sure that people get credit for what they’ve done and not take credit for things they haven’t done.

The university in modern times has always been ferocious in trying to suppress plagiarism, and we do it most for our own students and graduate students. But it should apply to everyone in the university. In a way, it’s more important for it to apply to the leaders of the university. You have to set an example.

I’ve seen a lot of manuscripts that were copied by monks. Without their copying, we wouldn’t have access to the wisdom of those who wrote in the distant past. Wasn’t copying actually a very honored scholarly practice for many centuries?

Yes, indeed. I once had a plagiarism case, and the witness was someone who understood very well pre-modern understandings of where academic credit should go. He protested against the plagiarism proceeding on exactly the grounds you mentioned, saying that, “Well, if the ancients did it, it’s okay for us to do it as well,” and didn’t I know that “ancient historians constantly copied from each other and they didn’t put quotation marks?”

Well, this is all very true. In the article, I talked about the medieval university and its understanding of intellectual originality, which was about essentially the use of authorities. They always understood that their job was to interpret authorities.

Can you explain what you mean by “authority”?

In the medieval university, there’s civil law and canon law. The authorities of the civil law are basically jurists of previous generations who had been regarded as having successfully resolved cases with wisdom and fairness. In the canon law, the law of the Church, they had wise statements, *sententiae*, which were taken from the works of Christian authors, usually church fathers or councils. They were also considered to be authoritative. The job of the medieval professor was to harmonize all these *sententiae* and come up with a decision that was fair.

This is still done to some extent. Law schools are, in a way, more medieval than the rest of the university. But we don’t do this as much anymore. We still read texts and interpret them, and we still respect and admire. But the research project of the modern university is something that’s quite recent. There’s a different ethos, a different ethical structure that surrounds the modern research university which has to be respected if the university is going to retain its prestige.

Is there any moment when there was a sensational case of plagiarism which really established that rule in the modern university?

Well, there have been numerous controversies about who gets credit for what. The famous case in the 17th century was calculus, because both Newton and Leibniz claimed to be its inventors. That perhaps was not so important as credit would be today, but there are many cases where people have contested where the ideas come from. It is important in the sense that the individuals and the institutions they represent gain

prestige. If they’re stealing prestige from other institutions, then they’re getting, as they say in the military, stolen honor. If you were taking credit for someone else’s achievements, you’re going to get graduate students, you’re going to get honors, you’re going to get prizes. And if those turn out to be fake, your achievements turn out to be fake. An awful lot of resources have been wasted and a lot of individuals who would hope to study with a person of high competence have been deluded.

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James Hankins

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premium on learning-by-doing, AI will make work experience mandatory for every learning journey.”

What does that mean in the classroom? According to Cheng, the California high-school junior, it's less about teaching “how to use AI” and more about how to take the information and skills that they've learned and use them with AI to think critically, creatively, and consciously. “Then even when we're out of school, even when new technology comes around, we'll have a toolkit for how to interact with it,” he said.

Beckett Miller, a senior at Design Tech, concurred. “It's important to have enough knowledge about things and how things work,” he said. But then he argued it's important to learn how to use tools like AI with conscientious intention. He cited the example of using ChatGPT to help him iterate far faster on an essay he was writing, which ultimately helped him deepen and clarify his thinking, as well as improve the communication of his ideas.

To create opportunities that are connected more tightly with the workplace, high schools could source projects from actual employers as part of the curriculum through companies like Riipen, which pairs college students and curriculum-related internships and jobs. Schools also could allow students to take part in curated internships and externships as part of the regular

school year, like the Summit Public Schools charter network in California and Washington State has done with its expeditionary learning blocks. Schools could also turn to organizations like the CAPS Network, which organizes onsite, work-based learning experiences for high school students, to integrate career and technical education for all students. Or schools could offer apprenticeships, akin to what Coweta County in Georgia is doing for sophomores through the Georgia Consortium for Advanced Technical Training. And when schools want to teach about AI itself, they could use up-to-date online courses from places like Coursera rather than seek to reinvent the wheel.

A 2023 IBM report on AI predicted, “AI won't replace people, but people who use AI will replace people who don't.”

AI is more than a homework helper or fast-track to cheating. It is a transformative tool, and students know it. These sorts of innovations could start to address the concerns of students like Peterson, who worries that high schools “are more focused on cheating and stopping AI usage than on how they can use AI to make education better.”

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SCHOOL LIFE

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Harvard's gone through a difficult time the past six months. What do you think is the way forward?

One of the reasons we came to this point was that the university governing bodies were undervaluing the requirements and the ethical framework of the research university and overvaluing political activism and statements about politics in the choice of presidents and other high officials. The university is going to have to recover its commitment to research in order to preserve its academic prestige and the value of its degrees.

One of the things you learn in history is that things can collapse very quickly. Harvard has been the premier university in the country since the Second World War, but things can collapse. I would hate to see this wonderful university with its incredibly generous alumni and many distinguished people losing prestige because of short-sighted actions from our governing boards. The governing boards have to stop trying to turn the university into a training school for political activism and stop trying to send out political messages in their choice of officers.

Can you give examples of universities that have fallen pretty far from the pinnacle they once had achieved?

There's what's called the first-mover phenomenon in universities where the oldest universities are still the leading

universities. The University of Paris, which was founded in 1215, University of Bologna, which was founded around 1190—they are still top universities. And so is Oxford, so is Cambridge, both founded in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. There are a lot of German universities, which were founded in the 14th century, that have gone up and down. Harvard, as a research university, only has really existed since the early 20th century and only tried to be a dominant university in the country since maybe the 1920s and '30s, and it wasn't at that point necessarily the top university.

I'm more worried about the reputation of research universities as a whole in this country. When they start taking sides in politics, it means that the other side in politics automatically regards them as politically motivated. That's not a good thing.

But I don't think it's true. Most of the research of my colleagues in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences is not politically motivated. The ends or the purposes might be shaped by political beliefs, but the research is almost all sound as far as I'm concerned. So it doesn't deserve to lose esteem, but if the university does become a partisan institution, and it's heading for that, then it's going to lose public support.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange podcast. Hear it in full at educationnext.org.