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QUALITY

Corruption in Higher Education: Old Problems and New Challenges

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Corruption in higher education threatens academic integrity and public trust in universities worldwide. Issues like bribery, plagiarism, and AI-assisted cheating are exacerbated by financial pressures and political influences. Addressing this crisis requires governance reforms, ethical awareness, and global collaboration to preserve education's core mission and prevent further erosion of academic standards.

Corruption in academia is not just a peripheral issue—it is a systemic crisis that threatens the legitimacy of higher education worldwide. From bribery in admissions and degree mills to plagiarism and artificial intelligence(AI)-assisted cheating, corruption has infiltrated every level of academia, at all types of universities, in both low-income and middle- to high-income countries. As universities face increasing financial pressures, globally competitive institutions tend to prioritize rankings and political interests over academic integrity, which can create improper dependencies within the higher education sector. Not only does corruption undermine the quality of education, it also erodes public trust in universities as important societal institutions that are expected to conduct research, teach students, and offer services in an ethical manner.

Key debates on this issue center on whether academic corruption is a reflection of broader societal norms or a distinct phenomenon requiring unique countermeasures. Some argue that corruption in higher education is inevitable given the massification and commodification of higher education, and the influence of political and economic forces. Others contend that universities have a moral responsibility to uphold integrity, as they shape future leaders, policy makers, and professionals. Additionally, the rapid rise of AI technologies has exacerbated these challenges, rendering traditional anticheating mechanisms obsolete, and forcing institutions and faculty to rethink assessment methods and adjust policies.

Addressing and Mitigating the Right Issues

Key debates also involve the definition and scope of academic corruption. In some countries, corruption can be endemic, and minor deviations—like students who occasionally cheat or authorship for sale among faculty—might be indulged to some extent, as bigger and more urgent problems require more attention and action. In some countries, anticorruption efforts can be effective and progressive but highly politicized, like closing "fake" programs or "fake" universities for offering too liberal and democratic agendas or deducting points from students for citing "unappropriated" authors. Ambivalence is the next key topic in the debates surrounding corruption in higher education. The "Operation Varsity Blues" scandal in the United States in 2019, involving prospective students entering colleges through "side doors" by falsifying SAT exams or manipulating sports achievements, is a great example of the ambivalent behavior of parents, who equate the use of such services with acting as caring parents. Last but not least, some forms of corruption can be less visible to outsiders and are therefore seldom addressed in public discussions and policy making, although they are by no means less important, such as sextortion or sex in exchange for grades, promotions, or other benefits.

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Addressing academic corruption requires a multifaceted approach—one that goes beyond policy reforms to actively reshape institutional culture. Universities must not only strengthen their governance and enforcement mechanisms but also foster ethical awareness among students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. Moreover, international collaboration is essential for tackling cross-border fraud, fake credentials, and unethical research practices. Without urgent action, the erosion of academic integrity will continue to deepen global inequalities and compromise the fundamental purpose of education.

Next Steps

Corruption in higher education is a fast-growing interdisciplinary field that uses various theoretical perspectives, research designs, and methods to examine different stakeholders in academia. Despite the growth and significance of the field, there has been a call for a holistic theoretical approach and a strong need to further develop the theory. While theory-building is important, it is crucial to develop innovative approaches to mitigating corruption in all environments, even those determined to be endemically corrupt. Additionally, it is important to look at secondary schools, assuming that students who cheat at university have had some experience perpetuating or observing misconduct in the past. Starting to analyze this issue before they enter university could prevent and/or combat cheating within higher education institutions more efficiently. It is also important to observe all technological trends, including AI, as well as their challenges and opportunities. Because of the rapid spread of technology, scholars, educators, parents, and other decision-makers remain unaware of many cheating techniques, particularly those used by young people. Finally, while international students are the focus of mainstream coverage on academic integrity, it is important to remember that domestic students also engage in misconduct. Whether domestic students simply do not get caught as often or international students are the subject of bias should be studied. Overall, in order to advance the research agenda on academic integrity, the field would benefit from close cooperation among scholars and practitioners around the world, and from conducting, publishing, and reflecting studies in languages other than English.

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