

Requirements for Integrity in an Era of Accountability

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In his provocative essay, Peter Nelsen addresses a central question critical to our times: *Can educators working within the currently dominant educational paradigm of the accountability movement maintain integrity?* Nelsen and I both find this question critical. Nelsen suggests that the notion of students seen as a means to external ends is a critical part of what he calls “instrumental rationality” — a form of thinking dominant in accountability policy. I agree completely. Viewing students merely as people whose test scores need to be improved on a yearly basis does significant violence to one’s moral commitments to educate them fully. Having a duty merely to raise one’s students’ test scores without honoring one’s personal commitment to developing these students as critical thinkers, caring persons, and democratic citizens confronts creates what Nelson describes as a “tension that can pull at teachers’ senses of moral integrity.”

Nelsen’s essay expands the notion of integrity to include a social dimension; in drawing on the work of Cheshire Calhoun and John Dewey, Nelsen reminds us that individuals are not isolated atomistic selves simply seeking to maintain their integrity by aligning their identity-conferring value commitments with their actions and choices. That “being true to one’s core values and moral commitments” remains a central aspect of the standard view of integrity, however, is an important conceptual point — one that cannot be readily dispensed with, since the notion of integrity in ordinary language is often contrasted with its conceptual opposite — hypocrisy — namely, professing one thing and doing another. The hypocrite gives the lie to his or her professed value commitments; the hypocrite has no integrity; Nelsen, acknowledges two further points I previously made: first, I emphasized that socially oppressed individuals, struggling to survive in a world that disvalues or distrusts them, often have more difficulty honoring their value commitments than those more privileged than they are; second, a person striving to be loyal to her core values need not be viewed as having an essential, unchanging core self, but can be seen as a person capable of being changed through transformative insight; moreover, such insight might even occur while acting on one’s intuition in opposition to one’s core principles; in other words, neither our identity nor our core values and principles need to be viewed as static since our experience always brings us into dynamic interactions with new environments, new situations, and new communities.

Nelsen expands the notion of integrity. He gives us a social conception of integrity — one that explains how our decisions have serious social consequences on the communities to which we belong. In fact, Nelsen argues that integrity should not be viewed primarily as a personal attribute but seen as a social virtue, one that is better viewed as a verb, for a verb would highlight the dynamic way in which our personal choices are both embedded in social contexts and, in turn, influence the

communities and the social contexts in which we work. In his core example, a principal is asked to take a job in a school whose district is enforcing instrumental rationality or turn the job down. Both choices have serious consequences for the professional communities to which she belongs. Thus, his example is a good one.

Clearly viewing integrity through a “social lens” may be useful; however, I still must ask a pragmatic question. How much philosophical mileage do we get from this social lens, and what potential problems are confronted when one uses them? Different lenses provide different perspectives; the social lens, Nelsen argues, is an important and necessary complement to the individual lens but does not replace it. Let me extend Nelsen’s initial scenario and have the principal in question choose to take the job as principal in an inner city school in Oakland, California. Call this principal Mr. John P. Integrity; Mr. Integrity has earned the reputation for being a fair minded, antiracist champion for those who are oppressed. He also believes that a good education requires that people learn to think critically and treat other people with respect. He sees his role as principal as maintaining his own commitments to social justice but also making his school into one with its own institutional integrity as an academic institution; he believes that he could not, in principle, maintain his own personal integrity by compromising it on the altar of promoting higher test scores, and certainly not by engaging in some common practices of other administrators: pushing poor black and Latino students into special education designations or urging some poor test performers to drop out of school, thus raising the school’s test scores. Mr. John P. Integrity believes that he has integrity not only as an individual but also as an academic and professional leader. He must perform his tasks honestly, fairly, justly — aiming to preserve the institution’s well being. Randall Curren describes this additional sense of “professional and academic integrity:” The responsibility to protect the integrity of the institution is far reaching: Academic administrators have a *responsibility* to protect and promote the unity and functional integrity of their units and institutions. The mission and good of their unit and institution must be their own.”¹ So, what must occur for Mr. John P. Integrity to preserve not only his personal integrity, but also his professional integrity and school’s integrity? Nelsen could usefully consider this question if he thinks there is any merit in both the notion of “professional integrity” and the notion of an institution’s maintaining its integrity.

Let’s go forward three years; Mr. John P. Integrity has done several things he feels are morally right both personally and professionally to have his school represent his core values; he has provided extra volunteer tutoring for some of his least prepared students; he has set up volunteer parental education programs; moreover, he has resisted efforts to have students held back in their grades or drop out of school. Nevertheless, each year his school has received “a failing score.” Now a consultant has been assigned to Mr. John P. Integrity and urged him to do more “test preparation in his classes” and cut down on the time assigned to social studies and science as pure academic subjects since these do not really count as much on the tests that really matter, namely the standardized tests in reading and math.

Mr. John P. Integrity has another decision to make; he realizes that cutting down on social studies and science and doing a lot more systematic test preparation has some chance of improving his students' test scores and even having his school removed from the "failing category" it has earned and is likely to maintain after five years when the school will have to be closed or substantially restructured. Now Mr. John P. Integrity faces another crisis of "integrity." Does he compromise his personal and professional integrity and the school's integrity as an academic institution to avoid the painful consequences of having a failing school closed or substantially restructured? How does this new situation of "integrity" fit into Nelsen's model? How does his version of "integrity" as a social attribute rather than an individual one, or an attribute of a professional role or one ascribed to an institution honoring its core principles help Mr. John P. Integrity make a moral decision? Perhaps, his model suggests that personal and professional integrity as well as some institutional integrity must be compromised here — so that the inner city community is not faced with the dire prospect of having its school closed and its principal fired because of NCLB policies. But frankly, I am unsure what his model does suggest. I fear, however, that it may minimize the critical importance of two other forms of integrity at stake here, namely professional integrity and institutional integrity; neither of these forms of integrity receive the necessary attention they deserve in Nelsen's model.

In closing, I want to compliment Nelsen. In doing conceptual analysis for over twenty years through teaching ethics to prospective secondary teachers, I have tried to resurrect important but neglected moral concepts and place them at the center of our ethical concerns; I have included caring, fairness, respect, trustworthiness, and integrity in this pantheon of moral concepts critical to the moral domain of teaching. Thus, I commend Nelsen's provocative treatment of the neglected topic of integrity. That the accountability movement threatens the integrity of teachers and administrators is an important social and moral fact. But the problem of integrity has a much richer significance within our field and within our lives. It is a moral ideal central to our living worthwhile lives — as teachers — as persons — and as social members of multiple communities.

1. Randall Curren, "Academic Integrity" (paper presented at the Inaugural GEICO Lecture in Ethics, Marymount University, Arlington, Va., April 9, 2010), 4.