Learning in an Academic Community
Sandra L. Borden

The first goal listed in Western Michigan University's Mission statement is forging a "responsive and ethical academic community."[1]

What is an **academic community**? And what does it mean for it to be **responsive** and **ethical**?

The purpose of an academic community is to create, share and apply knowledge. The primary activity in an academic community is **learning**. The hallmarks of this community, according to the university's Code of Honor, are "intellectual inquiry, investigation, discovery, an open exchange of ideas, and ethical behavior." By coming here, you are also taking on these commitments.[2]

Learning how to learn
Everything that happens here at Western is geared toward **learning**. As the Code says, everyone who belongs to the University community shares responsibility for it.

You will surely leave here with evidence of what you have learned: your transcript, your diploma, maybe a portfolio documenting your achievements, or scores on a licensing exam.

However, we hope that you will not leave **learning** itself behind when you leave the university. As a result of participating in Western's academic community, we hope that you become a lifelong learner by habit and disposition – something you *are*, not just something you do or something you know.

Being responsive and ethical
Let's take a closer look at some of values mentioned in the University's Code of Honor to see how they might help Western's academic community to be **responsive** and **ethical.**

Honesty. People generally value honesty in any setting, but honesty has particular significance within an academic community.

If faculty can't trust that they're grading work that students have actually done themselves, how can they vouch for the fairness of their grades? And if grades do not reflect what students have actually learned, what value do their diplomas hold? What's a scientific study worth if it isn't based on real data? How can we respect the effort and creativity involved in great intellectual work if authors don't get credit for their accomplishments?

As you can see, honesty is fundamental to creating, sharing and applying knowledge responsibly. That is not to say that people cannot make mistakes. Making "honest" mistakes is part of the learning process. However, people who are mutually committed to **learning**, the way that members of an academic community are, have to be able to trust

that everyone is trying to be truthful. Otherwise, much of what we do here becomes pointless.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness means that others can trust us to do what we're supposed to do without having to worry that we won't. Trustworthiness is essential to **learning**.

How can we be confident taking intellectual chances if we can't trust others to be receptive to new ideas? How can we throw ourselves into collaborative projects if we can't trust our partners to respect our efforts? How can we hope to get better at what we're learning if we can't trust others to evaluate our work based on merit? How can others invest in Western and look to our community for solutions if they can't trust us to be good stewards of our resources and to use what we learn for the good of society?

Although one of the key expectations others have of us is that we'll be honest, you can see that members of an academic community must be trustworthy in many other respects as well.

Respect for others. Respecting others recognizes the dignity of each person in our academic community and acknowledges the part that each of us plays in our different roles.

How would you feel if your classmates responded to your views with prejudice or ridicule? How do you expect university staff to respond to your needs as a student? How much independence do you expect in pursuing your own academic projects as you gain knowledge in your field? What kind of work goes into teaching a class? Does your classroom behavior demonstrate respect for that work?

Members of an academic community relate to each other as persons with their own needs, goals and unique contributions to make.

As you can see, honoring the values of **honesty, trustworthiness** and **respect** contributes to an **ethical** academic community that is **responsive** to the needs and dignity of those who contribute to the learning process and who depend on its outcomes.[3]

Discussion Questions
1. What do you want to get out of college? Can you pursue these goals within the context of an academic community?

2. How can others contribute to your learning? How can you contribute to the learning of others? How can you contribute to your own learning?

3. Western's Code of Honor does not explain the meaning of academic honesty, trustworthiness or respect for others. Can you think of other ways to interpret these values besides what has been suggested here?

4. The Code of Honor also mentions the values of integrity, fairness and personal responsibility. Discuss what these values might mean in the context of an academic community. Would you add any others?

Examples

1. Carla is unhappy with a sketch of a shoe that she has made for an art class. She has tried over and over again, but each time she adds the shading, it comes out looking all wrong. Luckily for Carla, her older sister Anita graduated three years ago as a Fine Arts major. So while they are both visiting their parents for the weekend, Carla takes her sister down to the family room and shows her the sketches. "Where am I going wrong?" she asks. Anita sees the problem immediately, and explains to Carla how she can correct it, doing a quick sketch of a plant in one corner of the room as an example. After watching her carefully, Carla goes back to her room and redraws the shoe—this time with results that she feels much happier about.

2. Shari has missed several theology classes. A nasty bout of the flu early in the semester and the fact that she overslept after an all-nighter two weeks ago mean that she has used up her instructor's strict allowance of three unexcused absences. Now, as she leaves her apartment, she finds that a delivery truck has double-parked right behind her car. After trying for ten minutes to maneuver out of the parking space, Shari calls Jane on her cell phone and asks Jane to sign her name on the attendance sheet in class. "After all," Shari reasons, "it certainly wasn't my fault that I couldn't get to class today."

What do these students' decisions say about their attitude toward learning? Have these students observed the values of honesty, trustworthiness and respect for others? Why or why not? How should the instructors in these scenarios respond to Carla and Shari?

The examples come from Creighton University's handbook, Learning in the Academy: An Introduction to the Culture of Scholarship*, available at: www2.creighton.edu/ fileadmin/user/CCAS/docs/LearningInAcademy.pdf.*

Notes

[1]*To read* WMU's Mission Statement*, go to:* www.wmich.edu/about/mission/

[2] *To read* WMU's Code of Honor and policies on academic honesty, click on the "Academic policies" link for the online Undergraduate Catalog at: http://catalog.wmich.edu/

[3] For more background on the values underlying the academic enterprise, we recommend The Center for Academic Integrity's publication, *The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity*, available at: www.academicintegrity.org/fundamental.asp.