

# Pursuing mediocrity: academics should be ashamed

C Nick Kalman\*

**Abstract** Compared to students, the big cheats are academics. They show gross prejudice in hiring decisions, and anything else relevant to advancement. Second-raters need not fear for their future: they just need to polish their bootlicking. Don't complain unless you want to be a loser in this competition.

## Key Ideas

- Any academic who's been around can tell you many a story about bias and abuse.
- The way to get ahead is to suck up or at least just keep your head down and avoid making waves.

**Discussion Question 1** Why are academics so exercised by student cheating when they see their colleagues bending the rules all the time?

**Discussion Question 2** Why are some people silly enough to try to do something about it?

It really annoys me, all this attention to student plagiarism and student cheating and so on. For sure, a few students get away with it and get degrees they didn't deserve. But it's only after graduation that the real action starts: bias in getting jobs and getting promotions and getting the shaft. Why don't academics look at the big problems? Well, I know why but I'll get to that later.

Let me tell you a few stories. These are from several Australian higher education institutions over many years. I've made them anonymous. Why? Well, several reasons. One is that I'm a coward; I'll return to that.

**Episode 1** The department had been stewing in its juice for years. It was preoccupied with infighting and didn't have any stars or excitement. So the idea was to appoint a gun professor who would pick up the game. But this was so threatening to some of the poor performers that a couple of selection committees refused to make an appointment. Eventually management got fed up and said you've got to appoint by the end of the year or else the position's gone. So they grabbed some poor second-rater who was no threat to anyone.

**Episode 2** This department — a different one — had similar cold feet. It put out an advertisement and one applicant was a star. She published more than

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everyone in the department combined, with a reputation of challenging conventional wisdom. The locals left her off the short list. The external member of the selection committee was so disgusted that he resigned, but it made no difference. One of the more ordinary applicants got the job.

**Episode 3** An interdisciplinary school included several ambitious figures who had the ear of the head. They targeted one productive academic who just did his job extraordinarily well, being popular with students and bringing in lots of grant money. One of the grants employed an impressionable lad. The conspirators sweet-talked this fellow and got him to make a complaint about his supervisor, the productive academic. The complaint was blown out of proportion and a formal inquiry was established. The poor guy was out of his depth and ended up resigning, while the conspirators were able to take control of his grants by lying to the grant body. It wasn't right but who was paying attention?

**Episode 4** There was this young scholar who roasted wafflers at seminars. She was sharp and tough and wasn't afraid of anyone. A bit of a sharp tongue, but always on the ball and producing good work. She couldn't get a job for hell or leather. At one place, she wasn't put on the short list, though several inferior candidates were on it — they didn't even have the degree listed as 'essential'. The reason: one member of the selection committee had been embarrassed by being shown up at a seminar and didn't have the courage to admit being wrong.

**Episode 5** Back in the old days, a department appointed a favoured son to a fixed-term lectureship. Within a couple of years this guy had done precious little work but had charmed the senior figures in the place. How were they going to appoint him permanently when he had such a poor record? This was a field where there were hoards of eager job-hunters coming from several areas. The usual trick is to write the ad so only the favoured candidate fits the specifications, but this would have been a bit too obvious to other departments, who were on to the bootlicker. So they put out a general ad and received over a hundred applications. Then, when the shortlisting took place, the department heavies said, what we really want is someone in this particular theory area because it's essential to a new expanding area. The others went along with this fiction and suddenly there were only three candidates in the running. The heavies had picked their topic carefully: they knew one of the other candidates, the one with better credentials, didn't really want the job, so Mr Charmer got the nod. Surprise, surprise. I won't bother you with what happened next, but it was no better.

**Episode 6** There was this guy who was a mediocre researcher and a mediocre teacher and somehow he got to be an administrator. The thing was, he couldn't write a competent sentence. He had a secretary (this was in the old days) who wrote beautiful letters based on this guy's scribbled notes or his dictations. Only a few found out that this secretary was doing more than writing letters; she was also writing his policies and his occasional scientific papers. How he became a deputy vice-chancellor I don't know. Actually, I do know. He was pleasant enough and didn't ruffle any feathers and pleased those higher up.

**Episode 7** There was this innovative young researcher who was in a junior position. He wrote this brilliant research grant application but because he was in an untenured position he recruited a senior scientist to be nominal chief investigator. Big mistake. The grant was successful but the senior guy insisted on being lead author on every paper despite doing no work and somehow was able to claim credit to the key innovative technique. The young gun was so

demoralised that he dropped out of the field entirely. He did all right but was never as enthusiastic and confident again.

I could go on with lots more examples especially as these are actually mild episodes, not wanting to stretch your credulity with the ones involving sex, but I think you get the drift. The lesson from these stories from the academic trenches is that who you know is just as important as what you know (or do) and that being second-rate is no barrier to an academic career.

This is why I get so pissed off at the attention to student cheats. What about the academic cheats? They get ahead on mediocre output and do in their rivals to boot. Did you ever hear of a student cheat who tried to sabotage another student's career? Well, I'm sure it happens but it couldn't be nearly as common as what goes on higher up.

Why isn't something done about this? The answer's obvious: it's too dangerous. You can write to your heart's content about student plagiarism because what student is ever going to hold you to task and threaten your career? But to take on a shonky colleague is risky indeed.

I'm no better than anyone else in this regard. You might think I'm bitter and twisted because my career went down the drain through an episode like I've described, but you'd be wrong because actually I did okay. I wasn't one of the perpetrators, at least not too often, but I didn't say anything when the dodgy deals occurred. I listened like everyone else and kept quiet like everyone else because I knew that if I tried to do anything my own career would be toast. Like I said, I'm a coward, which is why I'm still afraid to put my name to this little bile-filled epistle.

Brian Martin has kindly edited my submission to tone down the expression. My language was a bit ruder in the original but I went along with his advice to hide my identity partly through his editing. He also referred me to his article 'Academic patronage'<sup>#</sup> which covers some of the same ground as me but is oh-so-polite. It could be much much stronger. But then who am I to complain as I hide behind my mask of anonymity?

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<sup>#</sup> 'Academic patronage', *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 5(1), 2009, 3–19.