

## Justice or Just us? What to do about cheating

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**Abstract:** A commentary that looks at the pervasiveness of student cheating and responds to the question, "What is the significance of this behavior and what can be done?"

### **Essay:**

Earlier this year, local papers were full of horrified reports of cheating in an affluent Silicon Valley high school. Stories like this are a regular occurrence. Last year cheating at the University of Virginia made headlines, and before that, it was the military academies.

Adults always seem shocked and surprised to learn of cheating, especially in high-achieving and high-socioeconomic settings. They shouldn't be so surprised. Research on cheating has shown over and over that most students do cheat, at least some of the time. Research in high schools shows that two thirds of students cheat on tests, and 90 percent cheat on homework. The figures are almost as high among college students. Furthermore, it is clear that rates of cheating have gone up over the past three decades.

Why? Do students fail to understand that cheating is wrong? Well, yes and no. In a recent study of high school students that I conducted, many students acknowledged that cheating is wrong but admitted they do it anyway, seemingly without much remorse. Jane, a tenth-grade honors student, is typical of these students:

Like people have morals, they don't always go by them. ... So I mean, even if you get that test and you're like, "Oh yeah, I cheated on this test," it doesn't lessen that grade. It says an A on the paper and you don't go, "Oh, but I cheated." You're just kind of like, "Hey, I got that A." So it doesn't

really matter necessarily, if it has to do with your morals or anything, you just kind of do it.

Like Jane, other students in the study said that they cheat for simple, pragmatic reasons—to get high grades and because they don't have time to do the work carefully. Especially for college-bound students, the pressure for grades is real. According to the Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey, 47 percent of incoming college freshmen in 2003 reported having earned an A average in high school. As Jane put it:

It's not always necessary (to cheat). I guess if you already have straight A's, then why cheat? But yet, we still seem to do it. It's kind of like insurance, like you feel better, you feel safer, if you do it. ... Then I will have that 95 instead of like the 90, because that's almost like a B or something.

But despite the pressure for consistently high grades, students don't generally cheat in all of their classes. And somewhat surprisingly, it is not the difficulty of the course that predicts in which classes they are more likely to cheat. Instead, I found that high school students cheat more when they see the teacher as less fair and caring and when their motivation in the course is more focused on grades and less on learning and understanding. At least in these classes, they can justify cheating. They don't claim it is morally acceptable, but they don't seem to feel that it really matters if they cheat under these circumstances.

In most studies of cheating, the researcher decides which behaviors constitute cheating, and students are only asked to report how often they engage in those behaviors. In my survey of high school students, I asked them to report both their level of engagement in a set of 12 "academic behaviors," as well as their beliefs concerning whether or not those behaviors were "cheating." Not surprisingly, the vast majority (85 percent or more) indicated that behaviors such as "copying from another student during a test" and "using banned crib notes or cheat sheets during a test" were cheating. However, only 18 percent believed that "working on an assignment with other students when the teacher asked for individual work" was cheating. Subsequent interviews with a small sub-sample of these students revealed that students regarded this forbidden collaboration as furthering their knowledge and understanding, and therefore saw it as an act of learning rather than a form of cheating. These findings suggest that students make a distinction between behaviors that are overtly dishonest (such as copying the work of another, which effectively serves to misrepresent one's state of knowledge) and behaviors that are not inherently dishonest (such as working with others, which can serve to enrich one's interpersonal skills and academic learning). Educators, too, should be cognizant of this distinction and be judicious in prohibiting collaboration.

With this pervasiveness of acceptance by students, is it acceptable to us as a society to tacitly accept cheating as a fact of life and not be so shocked when it comes to light? I don't think so. Cutting corners and compromising principles are habit-forming. They don't stop at graduation, as we have seen in recent scandals in business and journalism. And cheating or cutting corners in one's professional or personal life can cause real

damage—both to oneself and to others. We need to care about it.

And I believe we can do something about it. The best ways to reduce cheating are all about good teaching. In fact, if efforts to deal with cheating don't emerge from efforts to educate, they won't work—at least not when vigilance is reduced. These suggestions are easier said than done, but I believe they point in the right direction, both for academic integrity and for learning more generally.

- Help students understand the value of what they're being asked to learn by creating learning experiences that connect with their interests and have real-world relevance.
- Consider whether some of the rules that are frequently broken are arbitrary or unnecessarily constraining. For example, is individual effort on homework always so important? Given the evidence that collaboration in doing homework supports learning, it doesn't seem so.
- As much as possible, connect assessment integrally with learning. Create assessments that are fair and meaningful representations of what students should have learned. Make sure assessments provide informative feedback and thus contribute to improved performance. When possible, individualize evaluations of students' progress and offer them privately. Avoid practices that invite social comparisons of performance.
- Give students images of people who don't cut corners: scientists who discover things they don't expect because they approach their work with an impeccable respect for truth and a genuinely open mind; business people who exemplify integrity even when it seems like it might cost them something. But don't preach. Take seriously the fact that, in some contexts, being consistently honest can be hard.

Finally, as educators, we must do our best to exemplify intellectual integrity ourselves—in everything from how we treat students and each other to how we approach the subject matter, to how we approach mandatory high stakes testing to how we think and talk about politics. We need to look for ways to make deep and searching honesty both palpable and attractive.

About the Author: Jason M. Stephens has been a research assistant at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching since 1998, where he has worked on the Political Engagement Project and the Project on Higher Education and the Development of Moral and Civic Responsibility. He will receive his Ph.D. in educational psychology from Stanford University this June and join the faculty in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut in August 2004.

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