It Takes a Village
Academic Dishonesty

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FEATURED TOPIC

> If we truly believe in our role as educators, we would do better to view most instances of cheating as educational opportunities

FOR THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS, I have researched questions of academic integrity. My initial interest in these questions was driven by my own experience as an undergraduate at Princeton University in the mid-1960s. Graduating from a high school where cheating was common, I was particularly intrigued by one item I received among the blizzard of forms and papers Princeton sent me as I prepared to matriculate: information about the Princeton honor code. I was informed that exams would be unproctored; that, on every exam, I would have to affirm that I had not cheated or seen anyone else cheat by signing a pledge (which I can still recite verbatim almost forty years after my graduation); and that all alleged violations of the code would be addressed by a student honor committee. Although somewhat skeptical in light of my high school experience, I headed off to Princeton confident I would do my part to uphold this seventy-year-old tradition. Apparently, the overwhelming majority of my classmates felt the same way. During my four years at Princeton, I never observed, suspected, or heard of anyone cheating, although surely there were at least some minor transgressions of the code.

When I returned to academia after more than twenty years in the corporate world, where I witnessed at firsthand the continuous erosion in the ethical values of recent college graduates, I was intrigued by the opportunity to conduct meaningful research on academic integrity. I was particularly curious to see whether campus honor codes were still a viable strategy and to explore the impact they were having on a new generation of students. While I remain a strong advocate of honor codes, my thinking about academic integrity has evolved over the last fifteen years—often in surprising ways.

The problem

In the fall of 1990, I surveyed students at thirty-one of the country's most competitive colleges and universities (McCabe and Trevino 1993). Fourteen institutions had traditional academic honor codes, and seventeen did not, having chosen instead to "control" student dishonesty through such strategies as the careful proctoring of exams. From the more than six thousand students who responded, I learned several important lessons.

The incidence of cheating was higher than I expected, and many students were quite willing to admit their transgressions. For example, 47 percent of students attending a school with no honor code reported one or more serious incidents of test or exam cheating during the past year, as did 24 percent of students at schools with honor codes. While such comparisons would seem to support the power of honor codes, it was not the code itself that was the most critical factor. Rather, the student culture that existed on campus concerning the question of academic integrity was more important. The existence of a code did not always result in lower levels of cheating. More importantly, the converse was also true: some campuses achieved high levels of integrity without an honor code. While these campuses were doing many of the same things as campuses with codes—e.g., making academic integrity a clear campus priority and placing much of the responsibility for student integrity on the students themselves—they did not use a pledge and they did not mandate unproctored exams. What was important was the culture of academic integrity to which incoming students were exposed.

Many of the students I surveyed were troubled by the failure of their institution, and often its faculty, to address the issue of cheating. Because they believed that weak institutional policies and unobservant or unconcerned faculty were "allowing" others to cheat and, thereby, to gain an unfair advantage, students viewed cheating as a way to level the playing field. This was a particular problem on large

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campuses and in courses with large enroll-
ments—environments where, arguably, it is
harder to establish a strong, positive commu-
nity culture.

In 1993 (McCabe and Trevino 1996), I sur-
veyed nine medium to large universities that,
thirty years earlier, had participated in the
landmark study of college cheating conducted
by William Bowers (1964). Bowers's project
surveyed over five thousand students on
ninety-nine campuses across the country and
provided considerable insight on how often
students were cheating and why. Two out-
comes of my 1993 project are particularly
noteworthy in comparison to Bowers's results.
First, there were substantial increases in self-
reported test and exam cheating at these nine

schools. For example, 39 percent of students
completing the 1963 survey acknowledged
one or more incidents of serious test or exam
cheating; by 1993, this had grown to 64 per-
cent. Based on student responses to the 1993
survey, however, it was difficult to tell how
much of this change represented an actual in-
crease in cheating, and how much was simply
a reflection of changing student attitudes
about cheating. In 1993, many students sim-
ply did not see cheating as a big deal, so it was
easier to acknowledge—especially in an
anonymous survey.

Second, there was no change in the inci-
dence of serious cheating on written work; 65
percent of students in 1963 acknowledged
such behavior, and 66 percent did so in 1993.

However, student comments in the 1993 survey suggested that this younger generation of students was more lenient in defining what constitutes plagiarism. Although survey questions were worded to ask students about a specific behavior, without labeling it as cheating, more than a trivial number of students in 1993 said they had not engaged in a particular behavior, while providing an explanation of why the instances in which they actually had done so were not cheating. The ethics of cheating is very situational for many students.

Just as technology has enabled new forms of cheating that are becoming popular with students, that same technology has made it easier to reach large numbers of students in surveys. Since 2001, I have been conducting Web-based surveys that make it possible to reach an entire campus population with relative ease. However, many students are concerned that it is easier to identify the source of electronically submitted surveys, so they elect either not to participate or to do so while being cautious about what they say. While it is hard to get people to be honest about their dishonesty in any circumstances, it is even harder to get them to do so when they are concerned about the anonymity of their responses. This is reflected in notably lower rates of self-reported cheating in Web surveys and lower levels of participation (as low as 10–15 percent on average compared to 25–35 percent for written surveys in this project).

Nonetheless, in these Web surveys of over forty thousand undergraduates on sixty-eight campuses in the United States and Canada, conducted over the last two academic years, 21 percent of respondents have acknowledged at least one incident of serious test or exam cheating, and 51 percent have acknowledged at least one incident of serious cheating on written work. Although most had engaged in other cheating behaviors as well, four out of every five students who reported they had cheated on a written assignment acknowledged that they had engaged in some form of Internet-related cheating—either cut-and-paste plagiarism from Internet sources or submitting a paper downloaded or purchased from a term-paper mill or Web site. Although the self-reported rates of cheating found in these Web surveys are lower than in earlier surveys, they clearly are still of concern. In addition, the difference may relate more to research methodology than to any real change.

Of concern to whom?

Each campus constituency tends to shift the "blame" for cheating elsewhere. This is a major problem. Many students argue, with some justification, that campus integrity policies are ill-defined, outdated, biased against students, and rarely discussed by faculty. They also fault faculty who look the other way in the face of obvious cheating. They are even more critical of faculty who, taking "the law" into their own hands when they suspect cheating, punish students without affording them their "rights" under the campus integrity policy. Many faculty believe that these campus policies are overly bureaucratic and legalistic and that they often find "guilty" students innocent. Some faculty argue that they are paid to be teachers, not police, and that, if students have not learned the difference between right and wrong by the time they get to college, it's not their job to teach them—especially in a publish-or-perish world. Although the evidence suggests otherwise, many also believe it's too late to change student behavior at this point.

Faculty also complain about administrators who fail to support them in the face of what they perceive as obvious cases of cheating. They complain about administrators who, at least in the minds of some faculty, are more concerned with whether the student is a star athlete, the child of a major donor, or has achieved some other favored status. Of course, many administrators can detail a litany of the ways in which they think faculty shirk their responsibilities in the area of academic integrity. Still others complain that students are only concerned with grades; how they obtain those grades is less important for many.

The most appropriate response to student cheating depends in large part on the goals of the institution. If the primary goal is simply to reduce cheating, then there are a variety of strategies to consider, including increased proctoring, encouraging faculty to use multiple versions of exams and not to recycle old tests and exams, aggressively using plagiarism detection software, and employing stronger sanctions to punish offenders. But while such strategies are likely to reduce cheating, I can't imagine many people would want to learn in such an environment. As educators, we owe our students more than this, especially when cheating may reflect cynicism about what they perceive as eroding moral standards in the academy and in society.

Today's students seem to be less concerned with what administrators and/or faculty consider appropriate behavior and much more concerned with the views and behavior of their peers. Students do expect to hear the president, the provost, a dean, or some other official tell them during orientation how they are about to become academic "adults," adults who respect the learning process and who, among other things, don't cheat. And many students want to hear this message. But it's clear from student comments in my surveys that the real "proof" for students is in the behavior of their peers and the faculty. Regardless of the campus integrity policy, if students see others cheating, and faculty who fail to see it or choose to ignore it, they are likely to conclude that cheating is necessary to remain competitive. Many students ask, "if faculty members aren't concerned about cheating, why should I be?"

It takes a village

I have always been intrigued by the African tribal maxim that it takes a village to raise a child. In a similar sense, I would argue it takes the whole campus community—students, faculty, and administrators—to effectively educate a student. If our only goal is to reduce cheating, there are far simpler strategies we can employ, as I have suggested earlier. But if we have the courage to set our sights higher, and strive to achieve the goals of a liberal education, the challenge is much greater. Among other things, it is a challenge to develop students who accept responsibility for the ethical consequences of their ideas and actions. Our goal should not simply be to reduce cheating; rather, our goal should be to find innovative and creative ways to use academic integrity as a building block in our efforts to develop more responsible students and, ultimately, more responsible citizens. Our campuses must become places where the entire "village"—the community of students, faculty, and administrators—actively works together to achieve this goal. As Ernest Boyer observed almost two decades ago (Boyer 1987, 184), "integrity cannot be divided. If high standards of conduct are expected of students, colleges must have impeccable integrity themselves. Otherwise the lessons of the 'hidden curriculum' will shape the undergraduate experience. Colleges teach

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values to students by the standards they set for themselves."

In setting standards, faculty have a particularly important role to play; students look to them for guidance in academic matters—not just to their peers. In particular, to help students appropriately orient themselves and develop an appropriate mental framework as they try to make sense of their college experience, faculty must recognize and affirm academic integrity as a core institutional value. Without such guidance, cheating makes sense for many students as they fall back on strategies they used in high school to negotiate heavy work loads and to achieve good grades.

One of the most important ways faculty can help is by clarifying their expectations for appropriate behavior in their courses. Although faculty certainly have the primary responsibility here, they should share this responsibility with students. Not only does such "consultation" result in policies in which students feel a greater degree of ownership and responsibility, but it also helps to convince students they truly are partners in their own education. Nonetheless, faculty do have a unique and primary role to play in the classroom, and it is incumbent upon them not only to minimize opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty (even if only out of fairness to honest students) but also to respond in some way when cheating is suspected. While some may argue over the most appropriate response, it is essential that there be *some* response. As noted earlier, students suggest that faculty who do nothing about what appears to be obvious cheating simply invite more of the same from an ever-increasing number of students who feel they are being "cheated" by such faculty reluctance.

While faculty can do much to improve the climate of academic integrity in their campus "villages," they should not be expected to shoulder this burden alone. University administrators need to look more carefully at the role they play. The Center for Academic Integrity at Duke has encouraged, and helped, many campuses to examine their academic integrity policies, yet there are still many schools that have not reviewed their policies in decades. Instead of reacting to an increasing number of faculty complaints about Internet plagiarism by simply subscribing to a plagiarism detection service, for example,

perhaps these schools should take a more comprehensive look at their integrity policies. While some may decide that plagiarism detection software is an appropriate component of their integrity policy, I trust many more will conclude that it's time to abandon their almost exclusive reliance on deterrence and punishment and to look at the issue of academic dishonesty as an educational opportunity as well.

Over the last fifteen years, I have become convinced that a primary reliance on deterrence is unreasonable and that, if we truly believe in our role as educators, we would do better to view most instances of cheating as educational opportunities. While strong sanctions clearly are appropriate for more serious forms of cheating, it's also clear that most student cheating is far less egregious. What, for example, is an appropriate sanction for a student who cuts and pastes a few sentences from a Web site on the Internet without citation? In some cases, this behavior occurs out of ignorance of the rules of citation or is motivated by a student's failure to properly budget his or her time. In a last minute effort to complete the two papers s/he has due that week, as well as study for a test on Friday, s/he panics. If the student is a first-time "offender," what's the educational value of a strong sanction?

Having decided that sanctions do little more than to permanently mar a student's record, an increasing number of schools are taking a more educational approach to academic dishonesty. They are striving to implement strategies that will help offending students understand the ethical consequences of their behavior. These strategies seem often to be win-win situations. Faculty are more willing to report suspected cheating, or to address it themselves, when they understand that educational rather than punitive sanctions are likely to result. A common choice now is to do nothing or to punish the student privately, which makes it almost impossible to identify repeat offenders. On a growing number of campuses, however, faculty are being encouraged to address issues of cheating directly with students. As long as the student acknowledges the cheating and accepts the faculty member's proposed remedy, the faculty member simply sends a notation to a designated party and never gets involved with what many consider the unnecessary bureaucracy and legalisms of campus judicial systems.

When more faculty take such actions, students who cheat sense they are more likely to be caught, and the overall level of cheating on campus is likely to decline. Administrators, especially student and judicial affairs personnel, can then devote more of their time and resources to proactive strategies. For example, several schools have developed mini-courses that are commonly part of the sanction given to first-time violators of campus integrity policies; others have devoted resources to promoting integrity on campus, rather than investing further in detection and punishment strategies. A common outcome on campuses implementing such strategies is a greater willingness on the part of faculty to report suspected cheating. They view sanctions as more reasonable, designed to change behavior in positive ways, demonstrating to students that inappropriate behavior does have ethical consequences. As students quickly learn that second offenses will be dealt with much more strongly, increased reporting also serves as an effective deterrent to continued cheating.

Of course, the most effective solution to student cheating is likely to vary from campus to campus, depending on the unique campus culture that has developed over the course of a school's history. Indeed, no campus is likely to reach the ideal state where the proactive strategies I have described are sufficient in and of themselves. Rather, some balance of punishment and proactive strategies will be optimal on each campus and, although that optimum will vary from campus to campus, punishment will always have some role. The stakes are high for most college students today, who think their entire future—their chances of gaining admission to professional school, getting job interviews with the best companies recruiting on campus, etc.—depends on a few key grades. It is, therefore, unrealistic to think that none will succumb to the temptation to cheat.

Students, even the most ethical, want to know that offenders will be punished so that other students will be deterred from engaging in similar behaviors. In fact, I am often surprised by the comments many students offer in my surveys calling for *stronger* punishments for students who engage in serious cheating. While they are willing to look the other way when someone engages in more trivial forms of cheating to manage a heavy workload, for

example, they are far less forgiving of students who cheat in more explicit ways on major tests or assignments. The difficult task for every school is to find the appropriate balance between punishment and proactive strategies that deters students who would otherwise cheat when the opportunity arises yet that also works to build a community of trust among students and between students and faculty, a campus community that values ethical behavior and where academic integrity is the norm.

The need to achieve some balance between punishment and proactive strategies was well summarized for me this spring when I made a presentation at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. A second classman who was listening to my emphasis on proactive strategies suggested that, since students see so much cheating in high school and in the larger society, deterrence probably plays an important role in reducing cheating in college. In his own case, he suggested that during his first two years at the academy the biggest factor in his decision not to cheat was fear of the strong sanctions that existed and were often used. But during those two years, he was also exposed to many proactive messages about why integrity matters, especially in an occupation where the lives of so many may depend on doing one's job with integrity. He observed that he has now reached the point where he wouldn't think of cheating—no longer for fear of punishment, but because he understands the importance of integrity. However, for him, and perhaps for many other students, those strong rules helped him learn behaviors that he could later understand and value for more idealistic reasons. No campus may ever reach a truly ideal combination, but deterrence and proactive strategies both should play an important role in any academic integrity policy.

Do something

It is impossible to know whether such proposals will work on every campus. But to those campuses that have doubts about the effectiveness of such strategies, I offer the same advice I give students when they express concern about reporting peers they suspect of cheating because of the fear of reprisal or because they believe sanctions on their campus are too severe. Do something! While I'm sure there are some campuses where the modest

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suggestions offered here may not work as well as other possible choices, I'm even more convinced that any campus that has not reviewed its integrity policies for some time is derelict in its responsibilities to its students and likely has a degree of discontent among its faculty. Perhaps even more important, it is depriving its students of an important learning opportunity in the true liberal arts tradition. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, *with the author's name on the subject line.*

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