Cheating in the Community College: Generational Differences among Students and Implications for Faculty

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Abstract
The author provides insight into differing definitions of and attitudes toward cheating among today's college students and argues that community college faculty must educate students about what is and what is not appropriate behavior in their courses.

Student cheating has been the subject of much despair and considerable research in higher education. Colleges often include character education in their missions (Damon, 2005), so to be confronted with student cheating is, for some faculty and administrators, to be confronted with failure. The Center for Academic Integrity, a consortium of some 200 college and universities, argues that colleges must address this problem:

> Academic integrity is essential to the success of our mission as educators.
> It also provides a foundation for responsible conduct in our students' lives
> after graduation . . . . Raising the level of student academic integrity should
> be among our highest priorities on college and university campuses. (1999, p. 1)

Community colleges share this concern.

Compared to most four-year institutions of higher education, community colleges serve a student body of greater diversity (AACC, 2000). William Strauss and Neil Howe describe significant differences among American generations in values, perspectives, and behaviors, putting generations in context among one another and historical events (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Strauss & Howe, 1997). As community colleges find student Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials sitting in the same classrooms and seeking the same support services, we all – faculty, staff, and administrators – must understand the generational differences among these students in order to best serve them all. According to the forces and perspectives described by Howe and Strauss, what is labeled as "cheating" by a Baby Boomer may well be labeled "team-work" by a Millennial. An understanding of these differences is essential to fulfillment of the academic mission to promote integrity.

Prevalence of Cheating

Numerous studies use self-report surveys to determine the prevalence of cheating among college students, primarily at four-year institutions. Many studies classify students as cheaters if they acknowledge having ever cheated at any time, in any way, during their college studies. The reported rate of cheating at American four-year institutions using this definition ranges from 47.2 percent (Pino & Smith, 2003) to 70 percent (McCabe & Trevino, 1977). One study specifically defined cheaters as those who admitted to having cheated in one class during a period of time slightly less than one semester, with a cheating rate of 11.4 percent (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999), but another that limited reports to the prior academic year found 91.7 percent (Roberts, Anderson & Yanish, 1997). Community college students surveyed about their entire college careers reported cheating at a prevalence rate of 45.6 percent (Smyth & Davis, 2003), lower than the rate of any of the four-year institutions reported above using the equivalent reporting period. This finding could be explained in part by the presumably shorter average duration of students' college careers at the community college compared to those at four-year institutions.

Characteristics Associated with Cheating

Who cheats? Findings regarding the relationship of gender to cheating are mixed. Many studies report significant differences in cheating by gender, with males reporting more cheating than females (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Pino & Smith, 2003; Roberts, Anderson, & Yanish, 1997; Smyth & Davis, 2003; Tang & Zuo, 1997), but some report no such differences (Carpenter, Harding, Montgomery, & Steneck, 2002; Diekhoff, LaBeff, Clark, Williams, Francis, & Haines, 1996; Jordan, 2001; Nowell &

Laufer, 1997; Robinson, Amburgey, & Swank, 2004), and in one study, females cheated at higher rates than males (DePalma, Madey, & Bornshein, 1995). In a meta-analysis of 48 studies, Whitely, Nelson, and Jones (1999) determined that males reported cheating more often, but by such a small margin that the statistically significant difference may be an artifact resulting from large sample sizes. In other words, gender does not identify cheaters.

What about other student characteristics? In some studies, students with higher grade point averages (GPAs) are less likely to cheat in college examinations than students with lower GPAs (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Nowell & Laufer, 1997; Tang & Zuo, 1997), but this, too, is not a universally supported relationship (Jordan, 2001). Low mastery motivation (the student's measured desire to master a particular body of information) was a significant predictor of cheating (Jordan, 2001). Having a high academic ethic reduced the likelihood of cheating, while increased television viewing, higher class standing (i.e., being a senior rather than a freshman), and participation in student clubs or groups increased the likelihood of cheating (Pino & Smith, 2003). Higher levels of religious involvement were related to greater classification of certain behaviors as cheating, including "working together with several students on a homework assignment when the instructor does not allow it" (Sutton & Huba, 1995), and the construct of shame was the only form of sanction threat (as opposed to embarrassment and formal sanctions) to influence cheating (Cochran, Chamlin, Wood, & Sellers, 1999). In comparing self-reported cheating among students by intended occupation, McCabe and Trevino (1995) found that business majors reported a significantly higher rate of cheating than medicine, law, or education majors.

Researchers also examine institutional or classroom characteristics in relation to student cheating. In one such study, students who cheated viewed their classes as less personalized, less satisfying, and less task-oriented than students who did not cheat (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999). Among contextual variables studied, peer disapproval, peer behavior, and fraternity/sorority membership provided greater explanations of differences among students' cheating than gender, age, GPA, parents' education, or athletics/ extracurricular activities (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Lower rates of cheating were reported at schools with strong honor codes (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001), in classes taught by tenure-track (as opposed to adjunct) faculty, and in smaller class sizes (Nowell & Laufer, 1997). Students at a rural college mirror those at urban schools in rates of cheating and related behaviors (Robinson et al., 2004).

Qualitative studies substantiate the relationships found in quantitative studies. Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne (1997) concluded that cheating sometimes reflects general malaise, deemed acceptable by students when the material seemed only marginally important, was poorly taught, or was "assessed in a manner that almost invite[d] cheating" (p. 202). Factors that inhibit cheating include personal confidence, positive professional ethics, the professors' knowledge of the subject, and students' need for subject knowledge in the future, while lack of competency and grade pressure contribute to cheating (Love & Simmons, 1998).

Changes over Time

A few studies have tracked changes in cheating over time. In a thirty-year follow-up study comparing male students' self-reports of cheating at nine medium-sized to large state universities, the overall number of students who cheated increased "modestly," from 63 percent to 70 percent. However, students cheating in 1993 compared to those cheating in 1963 engaged in a wider variety of cheating behaviors and cheated more often. Of particular note was an increase in positive responses to "collaborated on assignments requiring individual work," from 11 percent to 49 percent (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). A ten-year comparison from 1984 to 1994 reported similar findings, with overall cheating rates rising from 54.1 percent to 61.2 percent (Diedknoff et al., 1996).

Using an unusual approach, Spiller and Crown (1995) examined 24 studies that used similar methodologies to examine observed (not self-reported) cheating – whether students altered their responses on a self-graded test. Starting in 1927 and ending in 1986, the rate of this particular type of cheating did not increase over time, although the authors caution that their analysis could not confirm that, overall, cheating is not on the rise.

Cheating at the Community College

Although cheating is recognized as a concern for community colleges (Moeck, 2002), little research examines cheating specifically in these institutions.

Smyth and Davis (2003) found that 45.6 percent of community college students reported cheating in college on at least one occasion, with no significant differences in cheating between freshmen and sophomores, dorm residents and commuters, or full-time versus part-time students. However, the community college studied is highly atypical in that (at the time of the study) on-campus housing was provided for about 20 percent of the student body, 83 percent of its students were full-time, and 30 percent did not work.

Generational Issues

In their studies of the Millennial generation (birth years 1982-2000), Howe and Strauss (2003) identified that these students

have "no clear distinction between traditional notions of exam 'cheating' and modern notions of information 'morphing'" (p. 120). For a number of reasons, during the 1990s, "schools prepared Millennials to be outer-driven, ideal-following team players" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 166), but academic honesty was not one of the ideals widely promoted. Stemming from both their socialization to a high degree of team orientation and the intense pressure that many feel for academic success, Millennial students are predicted to have difficulty recognizing traditional operational definitions of academic honesty (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Significant differences in cheating rates by age group were demonstrated in England (18-20 year-olds at 24 percent, 21-24 year-olds at 11 percent, and 25 year-olds and older at 11 percent), but no details were reported about the age composition of the oldest group. Findings of significant discrepancies between the operational definitions of cheating by students compared to those of faculty may reflect a difference in values related to student versus faculty roles (Higbee & Thomas, 2002), but they may also reflect generational differences.

Diekhoff et al. (1996) compared student cheating in 1984 with that in 1994 at the same university. They found a significant increase in overall cheating, from 54.1 percent to 61.2 percent, specifically due to increased cheating on quizzes and homework assignments; however, cheating on examinations remained unchanged. When they examined the moral reasoning students used to justify their cheating, they found that such justification had dropped over the ten years. They comment, "It appears that 1994's students are more cognizant of the immorality of cheating, but care less!" (p. 492). Had these authors considered the generational perspective, they might have omitted the exclamation mark. As Strauss and Howe (1991) describe Gen-Xers, "They look upon themselves as pragmatic, quick, sharp-eyed, able to step outside themselves to understand the game of life as it really gets played" (p. 320).

Without specifically addressing the generational aspect, Higbee and Thomas (2002) conclude their discussion about student and faculty perceptions of behaviors that constitute cheating with the following commentary:

> Researchers can no longer limit their focus to who cheats or why students
> cheat, or whether academic honesty is on the rise or the decline. It is
> imperative that educators conduct further studies to explore how students
> and faculty define academic honesty and share their findings with both
> groups. (p. 5)

Promoting Academic Integrity

Valuable guidance on how to promote academic honesty is available for faculty and administrators from the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University (1999). This group advocates the establishment of clear academic honesty statements and policies, including procedures for consistent implementation, a variety of mechanisms for educating the campus community about them, and systematic assessment/improvement cycles. The Center's website provides a wealth of ideas, sample documents, and links to featured schools (www.academicintegrity.org).

One theme of the Center's works is the education of students on what constitutes academic dishonesty. In order for such education to be effective, the Center contends that special attention must be paid to the nuances of the multi-generational community college student body.

If, on the one hand, instructors and counselors encourage students to form study groups as a strategy for success, is it permissible for homework to be completed in consultation with the group? At what point does proofreading a friend's paper go over the line? What should students do if one member of the team does not fully share in a workload that earns an equal grade for all members of the team? The Center notes that students of different generations will not likely have the same initial responses to these questions; indeed, professors will differ as well. Thus, it is incumbent upon all faculty members to provide clear examples of permitted and prohibited behaviors in each course syllabus (Center for Academic Integrity, 1999).

Based on his analysis of a student's revelation of cheating techniques, Wright (2004) emphasizes the power of the faculty in preventing cheating: actively moving around the room during exams and proctoring from the back of the room not only serve as immediate deterrents to cheating, but also reinforce to all students the importance of academic integrity to the professor.

Additional strategies are listed in *Carnegie Perspectives* (Stephens, 2004). Those who work in community colleges will recognize several of these strategies, as they serve not only to promote academic integrity but also to engage adult learners. Some such strategies are helping students to connect new learning with past experience and real-world situations and providing individualized evaluations of progress that minimize social comparisons. Other strategies may seem more drastic, such as reconsidering whether some of the most often-violated restrictions are truly necessary or even helpful; if collaboration can improve learning, should it be prohibited in the completion of homework (Tanner, 2004)?

More work? Yes. Writing about dealing with academic dishonesty, Clos (2002) notes, "No generation confronted with the ethical challenges of its time has ever felt as if the situation *should* exist." However, students learn honesty and its importance in all human relationships through clear, consistent messages in diverse settings (Damon, 2005).

Clearly, these lessons are part of the mission of community colleges. Because community colleges typically serve students representing a wide diversity of ages, community college leaders and faculty must understand the impact of generational differences in the definition of cheating in order to best foster the academic integrity so vital to their missions.

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