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ABSTRACT

This monograph addresses some common questions about academic dishonesty in higher education and reviews issues affecting these institutions in light of existing research. The extent of academic dishonesty and the perception that it is increasing is examined. Three studies cited indicate that cheating is chronic and that 60 to 75 percent of students do cheat. A look at causes of cheating include ignorance of concepts such as collaboration, fair-use, and plagiarism, and also stress, and competition for jobs, scholarships, and admission to post-college programs. Research indicates that cheating depends significantly on situational characteristics of the classroom or institutions and that cheating is less likely to occur when there are threats of detection or sanctions. Faculty reaction research suggests that despite concerns, faculty rarely discuss rules on academic dishonesty in their classrooms. Findings also indicate that faculty often bypass university policy and handle cheating incidents on an individual basis. Research on how institutions respond to cheating incidents finds that key issues are: how academic dishonesty is defined, how cases are assessed, and how cheating is monitored. The paper concludes that institutions must take a proactive stance to reduce the incidence of cheating and to improve the climate for honesty. Contains 44 notes and 3 references. (JB)

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ISSUES IN EDUCATION

Academic Dishonesty Among College Students

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Academic Dishonesty Among College Students

Traditionally, colleges and universities were expected not only to develop students' academic abilities and expand their knowledge but also to instill values, to impart standards of conduct, and to mold character. Now they are called upon to respond to an apparent increase in ethical misconduct. This brief addresses some common questions about academic dishonesty in higher education and reviews issues affecting institutions in light of existing research.

Is there an epidemic of cheating on college campuses?

Talking about the high incidence of cheating in college during the 1930s, a college admissions advisor pleaded to a group of high school teachers to "send them to us honest."[1] For more than 50 years, we have been warned of a problem that threatens the foundation of higher education: students' lack of appreciation for integrity in the quest for truth and knowledge. Today, nearly every published article on academic dishonesty concludes that student cheating on U.S. campuses is both rampant and on the rise.

How accurate is this perception?

Reported percentages of cheating among college students range anywhere from 9 percent[2] to 95 percent.[3] This variation may be caused by several factors, most importantly, sampling techniques and sample sizes, design strategies (survey questionnaires versus true experiments), types of cheating measures, the institution from which respondents were sampled, and categories of cheating included in the study. Cheating takes many forms—from simply copying another student's paper to stealing an exam paper to forging an official university transcript (table 1). Since most researchers have focused their attention on cheating during examinations or plagiarism of term papers, little is known about incidences of other forms of cheating.

Findings from recent, large-scale, national surveys are consistent with an earlier study conducted 30 years ago by Bowers (1964) who found that over 75 percent of the 5,000 students surveyed in 99 institutions admitted cheating in college. Davis et al. (1992) surveyed a sample of 6,000 students from 35 institutions and reported cheating rates from 9 to 64 percent. Using a survey of 31 highly selective institutions and a sample of 6,097 students, McCabe (1992) found that 67 percent of the students admitted some form of academic dishonesty. Although we cannot determine the actual rates, these studies suggest that academic dishonesty is a chronic problem.

Table 1.— Examples of cheating activities found in questionnaires and surveys

- Copied from another student's exam
- Took an exam for someone else
- Purchased term papers and turned in as own work
- Copied materials without footnoting
- "Padded" items on a bibliography
- Feigned illness to avoid a test
- Submitted same term paper to another class without permission
- Studied copy of exam prior to taking make-up
- Gave another student answers during an exam
- Reviewed previous copies of an instructor's test
- Used notes or books during exam when prohibited
- Reviewed a stolen copy of an exam
- Turned in a dry lab report without doing the experiment
- Sabotaged someone else's work (on a disk, in a lab, etc.)
- Failed to report grading errors
- Collaborated on homework or take-home exams when instructions called for independent work
- Gave test questions to students in another class
- Shared answers during an exam by using a system of signals
- Developed a relationship with an instructor to get test information
- Plagiarism
- Studied tests or used term papers from fraternity or sorority files
- Engaged in bribery or blackmail
- Attempted to bias instructors' grading after an exam
- Wrote term paper for another student
- Hired a ghostwriter
- Altered or forged an official university document

Why do students cheat?

The causes of student cheating are complex. Common themes—stress and competition—are two major factors that have been identified across generations of students.[4] Specifically, competition for admission into graduate schools, for scholarships, and for jobs after graduation are influences driving today's students to cheat.[5] Some researchers believe students may be indifferent toward cheating because of a social climate of cheating by authority figures (parents, teachers, business executives, and government officials).[6] Although many students admit that cheating is morally wrong,[7] they rarely report another student's cheating.[8] Research indicates that some students view cheating as a legitimate means for getting ahead and coping with stress,[9] and this perception may be reinforced by minor or nonexistent sanctions for cheating.[10]

Researchers have also suggested that some students cheat because of ignorance, uncertainty, or confusion regarding what behaviors constitute dishonesty.[11] For example, concepts such as collaboration, fair-use, and especially plagiarism, are routinely misunderstood by students.[12]

What kinds of students cheat and when?

Some researchers advocate that cheating and other forms of deception involve complex interactions of situations and the individual's own unique characteristics and experiences.[13] This may explain their difficulty in addressing why some students cheat and others do not. Frequently examined student background variables such as sex, intelligence, previous academic standing, academic major, anxiety, and fraternity membership[14] have yielded inconsistent findings.

Instead, cheating seems to depend more on situational characteristics of the classroom or institution such as exam seating arrangements, the relative importance of the exam, or the difficulty level of exams.[15] Studies examining other situational factors, such as the use of sanctions, suggest that cheating is less likely to occur when there are threats of detection[16] or sanctions.[17] Thus, administering multiple choice tests in large, inadequately proctored lecture halls or administering the same test to different classes, both situations where the chances of getting caught are minimal, increase the likelihood of cheating.

How does the faculty react?

Although studies on faculty variables are limited,[18] research to date reveals that despite concerns about student cheating, faculty rarely discuss rules on academic dishonesty in their classrooms.[19] Research findings also indicate that faculty often bypass university policy and handle cheating incidents on an individual basis.[20] Nuss (1984) reported 39 percent of the faculty surveyed at a large public university would report a cheating incident at the administrative level. Similar findings, reported by Singhal (1982), revealed that of the 65 percent of students who were caught cheating, only 21 percent were referred to the campus judicial system. In examining actual compliance with university procedures, Jendrek (1986) noted that of the 60 percent of faculty who observed cheating activities, 33 percent reported cheating incidents at the administrative level, but only 20 percent of those faculty actually complied with university policy in the process of reporting.

The following reasons have been cited to explain faculty's reluctance to report academic dishonesty:

- Lack of knowledge of institutional procedures;[21]
- Cases are difficult to prove;[22]
- Sanctions are inappropriate for offense;[23] and
- Fear of litigation.[24]

In addition, faculty may resist reporting a cheating incident if it is likely to damage the student's reputation or career[25] or reflect negatively on their teaching skills.[26]

Few studies have examined faculty alternatives to handling individual cheating cases. Results of one study[27] indicated that common faculty options were either to confront the student and lower the student's grade or simply issue a warning. Most faculty indicated, however, that the nature and severity of the offense dictated how each case would be handled.

How do institutions handle academic dishonesty cases?

Three major issues affect the institution's role: how academic dishonesty is defined, how cases are assessed, and how cheating is monitored. Research study results have helped us gain insight on these issues.

Defining academic dishonesty. Colleges and universities vary in their methods of communicating standards and violations of academic honesty. Definitions vary across college campuses[28] and may also differ among disciplines within institutions.[29] However, most colleges include little information about academic dishonesty in their handbooks. Fass (1990) speculates that one reason for this omission is that obvious forms of cheating do not require description or elaboration. Interpreting the gray areas of cheating activities, such as recycling excerpts from one's own paper to use in other courses or determining what is fair use of a tutor or resource person,[30] however, has been a problem for both faculty and institutions. Problems with definitions often lead to inconsistent application of penalties (ranging from reprimand to expulsion) leaving students confused about what specific activities constitute cheating or believing that less serious forms of cheating are acceptable.[31] Fass submits that a comprehensive definition of cheating must, at minimum, cover several areas including the ethics of examinations, use of sources in papers and projects, writing assistance and other tutoring, collection and reporting of data, use of academic resources, respect for the work of others, computer ethics, assistance to others, and adherence to academic regulations.

Academic evaluation versus disciplinary procedures. Confusion also exists among administrators as to whether cheating should be treated as part of disciplinary misconduct procedures or in the context of academic evaluation. A preference for handling academic dishonesty as a disciplinary issue is growing[32] since student due process is assured, thus reducing the likelihood of faculty liability.[33] Disciplinary procedures also may be more effective than merely reducing a student's grade, as students are unlikely to explain to parents, graduate schools, and employers that they received a failing grade for cheating.[34]

Faculty proctors versus honor codes. Evidence on the effectiveness of honor codes versus faculty or proctored monitoring systems in reducing the frequency or seriousness of cheating activities has been inconsistent.[35] Honor codes, which are student monitored and under which exams are unproctored, typically require students to sign a pledge of academic integrity and report those in violation of the code. Codes appear to work

well at military and small schools because of a shared allegiance to the school and values.[36] How useful codes are at larger schools, with more diverse student bodies, has caused considerable discussion.[37]

One recent article suggests that few institutions use honor codes.[38] According to McCabe (in press), however, there has been renewed interest in the honor code system. In his analyses of 31 institutions, McCabe found that those with honor codes had the lowest cheating rates. He also found a greater willingness by faculty to use established judicial procedures to prosecute cheating offenders. An increase in modified honor systems at larger institutions is being reported, as well as use of these codes within specified units, such as within colleges or disciplines.[39]

Conclusions and recommendations

Cheating among college students remains a serious issue for educators.[40] To ensure that it is neither ignored nor tolerated, institutions must take a proactive stance. They should consider the following issues and proposals:

- Unclear definitions, vague policies, and poorly implemented detection strategies may send messages to students that cheating is not serious enough to warrant enforcement of the institution's position against dishonesty. Universities must enforce a solid policy on academic dishonesty. A report sponsored by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, *Issues and Perspectives on Academic Integrity* (Gehring et al., 1986) is a practical guide institutions can use to stimulate discussion of academic dishonesty on their campuses and subsequently develop policy.

- More researchers are saying grade penalties are no longer adequate and proposing stronger sanctions appropriate to the severity of the offense.[41] The University of Maryland, for example, imposes a transcript notation called an XF grade penalty. Since punishment through grade reductions or expulsions may not reform behavior, institutions are advocating programs to specifically address dishonest behavior, such as required counseling or attendance at a seminar about cheating.[42] At the University of Maryland, the X notation can be removed from the transcript after one year if the student completes a seminar on academic integrity.

- Students will not internalize ethical values if they believe faculty are apathetic or uninformed about the process of detecting and sanctioning offenders. Faculty must clearly understand institutional policies on academic dishonesty for students to understand what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Administrators must ensure clear policies and guidelines are in place to support faculty. More research is needed to help faculty and institutions to handle dishonesty cases appropriately and effectively.

- To assist colleges and universities, the National Center for Academic Integrity offers opportunities to share information on institutional policies, successful programs and strategies, research findings, and training materials. The Center sponsors an annual conference where students, faculty, and administrators can interact with one another and address the challenges facing academic integrity issues on their campuses.[43]

- Institutions need to emphasize to students the basic tenets upon which higher education was founded—academic honesty and scholarship. Research clearly shows we can no longer assume students will understand or unequivocally accept institutional statements reflecting these values.[44] Students need to learn that upholding these standards is a shared responsibility. In doing so, society can be assured that students will be able to handle the responsibilities of citizenship and make honorable contributions to their professions and to their communities.

This brief was prepared by Sheilah Maramark and Mindi Barth Maline, Division of Higher Education and Adult Learning, Office of Research. For further information, please call (202) 219-2243 or write to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 615, Washington, DC 20208-5647.

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