



## What's wrong with cheating?

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A version of this essay originally appeared as a letter to the editor in the *Iowa State University Daily* in 1993, and was subsequently revised by Professor Bishop for publication in *Synthesis: Law and Policy in Higher Education*. Michael Bishop is the co-author of *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

I caught a student last week rifling through his book bag while taking a makeup exam. It's not the first time I've caught a cheater, and it won't be the last according to a survey I took of my ethics classes. 53% of my upper-class students have cheated on a test or plagiarized a paper while at Iowa State, 91% know someone who has, and 18% know someone who has been punished for academic dishonesty. The figures on my first-year students are, respectively, 19%, 71%, and 10%.

I'll bet these results are as unsurprising to most students as they are shocking to the typical faculty member or administrator. I've met lots of cheaters, both as a professor and as an undergraduate member of a judicial panel that tried cases of academic dishonesty. Most cheaters are neither immoral nor stupid. While they know cheating is against the rules, most of them don't understand how serious it is.

A student caught cheating will typically insist that it was his first time, he thought he could get away with it, it was stupid, he'll never do it again, he's truly sorry, and 'please dear God don't tell my parents.' But get below the surface, and you'll find an implicit attitude that says: everybody cheats, it doesn't really hurt anybody, and this material isn't important to me. There is seldom a deep understanding of why cheating is wrong.

### ***So why is cheating wrong?***

Most obviously, cheating is unfair to honest students. A cheater receives through deception what honest students work hard for; and in classes graded on a curve, he lowers their grades to boot. Cheating also cheapens the diploma. How valuable can a sheepskin be if so many people receive it under false pretenses? But the devaluation is not just figurative. An Iowa State degree is a valuable commodity, only if people trust that it is a mark of excellence. That trust is undermined as people become aware of the amount of cheating on campus.

But more disturbing is that academic dishonesty perverts the central mission of a university . . . An education is much more than just learning facts. And it's more than mastering the ability to solve problems, to understand complicated issues, to detect bullshit (sophistry), and to articulate your views. A quality education requires a commitment to an ever deeper understanding of self and of one's place in the social and natural world; and when successful, it leads to a critical examination of the assumptions that guide one's life.



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The Cheater cheats himself of an education. His actions imply that he either does not understand what a quality education is or does not care about getting one...

But what's worst is that cheating contributes to an environment in which otherwise honest students learn to view education as merely the temporary acquisition of facts. And if it's temporary, what can it matter whether it's understood, memorized, or written on a cheat-sheet?

Many in our community will point to a lack of moral integrity among students who cheat as the primary cause of academic fraud. Others will cite a greed-driven society in which a university diploma is seen as the fastest way to make a buck. These assessments are partially true but ultimately self-serving. They omit the crucial role played by the rest of us (faculty, administrators and honest students) who unwittingly nurture an environment in which cheating is bound to thrive.

A close look at my survey suggests that almost two-thirds of the first-time cheaters are upper-class students. Most people don't arrive here inclined to cheat. Cheating is both cause and effect of an atmosphere in which too many of us ignore or disrespect quality education and minimal standards of decent conduct.

We work very hard to be a place that sends competent people into the world. But we do not work nearly as hard to be a place that sends ethical people into the world. Is this really a wise combination?

We have failed as a community to clearly articulate why academic dishonesty is wrong. We have failed to communicate the academic principles we expect everyone to obey and the consequences of flouting those principles. And we have failed to convince most students of our genuine commitment to academic integrity. No wonder so many of them view cheating in academia as little worse than a white lie. That's not to say that cheaters are innocent victims or that they are not responsible for their behavior. But we must be frank and clear-headed about why academic dishonesty happens if we intend to do anything about it.

## ***So what can we do about academic dishonesty?***

Professors need to discuss with their classes why academic integrity is indispensable to any community of scholars. And we must demonstrate our commitment by confronting cheaters. This involves engaging in a dialogue that gets beyond the student's pathetic pleas and achieves some kind of moral insight. It also involves referring the student to Judicial Affairs.

Too many professors shun the administrative route for fear of a judicial morass . . . hours wasted on interminable proceedings that result in a slap on the wrist or a verdict of not guilty. What justifies this concern? Perhaps a bad experience, but usually it is based on anecdote. The irony is that no professor would ever accept such reasoning from a student. A single experience, or worse yet, a colorful anecdote is no basis for a valid general conclusion. Five minutes of research would furnish a more accurate picture of campus judicial proceedings. And this picture does not justify our turning a blind eye to academic dishonesty.



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By ignoring academic dishonesty we tell students that cheating is a minor infraction. You can get in more trouble for parking in the wrong lot! And without reliable records, it is practically impossible to expose habitual cheaters.

Campus administrators must also combat academic dishonesty. They need to do something about the widespread impression that judicial proceedings are interminable and ineffectual. Insofar as this impression is true, the administration bears responsibility for the amount of cheating ignored on campus. And insofar as it's false, the administration needs to convince skeptical profs.

The administration can lead in other ways. The University of Maryland, for example, used to print in the school newspaper the number of students suspended and expelled for academic dishonesty in a semester. It was an effective way of informing people that cheating was not tolerated.

Honest students, you must also help create a positive environment, worthy of your efforts. The minimum you can do is express disapproval when your friends cheat. This requires moral courage. But if you can't stand up to your friends in a university, where candid debate is supposed to flourish, how will you ever stand up for what's right?

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