

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY IN THE 1990s

By Stephen F. Davis

The first class period of each new college term is a unique occurrence for teachers and students alike. As professors, we are hopeful that these students will find our classes intellectually stimulating and rewarding, if not enjoyable. Standing in front of that sea of faces at the initial class session, another more sobering prediction can be made with no small degree of certainty. Some of these students will engage in, or at least attempt to engage in, actions that are academically dishonest.

Prevalence

Unfortunately, academic dishonesty appears to be a perennial problem associated with higher education. Despite the fact that reports of dishonest practices have appeared for decades, if not centuries, concerted research efforts appear to have been mounted only during the past two decades. This recent surge of interest may be attributed to the fact that some educators, such as Singhal (1982), feel that "cheating has become one of the major problems in education today" (p. 775). Similarly, Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, and Clark (1986) have concluded that "student dishonesty on college campuses throughout the nation has been widely recognized as epidemic" (p. 342).

An analysis of reports over the past 50 years suggests that these views may well be accurate. Drake (1941) reported a cheating rate of 23%, while Goldsen, Rosenberg, William, and Suchman (1960) reported rates of 38% and 49% for 1952 and 1960, respectively. Hetherington and Feldman (1964) increased the rate to 64%, while Baird (1980) indicated that 76% of his sample admitted to cheating in college. While rates as high as 82% (Stern and Havlicek, 1986) and 88% (Sierles, Hendrickx, and Circle, 1980) have been reported, Jendreck (1989) places the typi-

cal rate between 40% and 60%. Clearly, academic dishonesty is an issue worthy of research and understanding.

I became interested in the study of academic dishonesty seven years ago. This led to the development of two survey instruments which have been administered to over 8,000 students at a variety of institutions—large state schools, medium state schools, large and small private institutions, and two-year colleges, from disparate locations in the United States.

In all of our samples, the percentage of students answering yes to the question, "Is it wrong to cheat?," has never fallen below 90%. This opinion stands in sharp contrast to the percentage of students who report they have cheated. Concerning cheating in high school, the percentage answering yes to the question, "have you ever cheated on an exam?," ranges from a low of 51% to a high of 83% (among the schools where I have surveyed the students).

At the collegiate level, I have found that the overall percentage is lower than in high school. Excluding the small, private liberal arts colleges, which consistently report lower rates of cheating, the typical rate of admitted academic dishonesty falls between 40% and 60%.

Repeat Cheats

Evaluation of repeat offenders yielded some rather disturbing results. In high school the majority (52%) of those who cheated were repeat offenders; the average number of reported offenses was 6.47. The figures are only slightly more encouraging when we consider repeat offenders in college. Forty-eight percent of those who cheat in college do so on multiple occasions. The average number of offenses for collegiate repeat offenders is 4.25.

A closer analysis provides a clue concerning the genesis of the collegiate repeat offender. Virtually all (99%) of the collegiate multiple offenders had *also* cheated on multiple occasions in high school. Of the students who reported cheating only once in high school, only 24% reported cheating in college, and then on no more than one occasion. Of the students who did not cheat in high school, only 2% reported cheating in college, and then on no more than one occasion. The message inherent in these results and its potential extrapolation to future behaviors are clear: Don't let habits of cheating get started.

Motives, Detection, and Fear

Over 50 years ago, Drake (1941) proposed that stress and the pressure for good grades were important determinants of academic dishonesty. Reflecting the continued importance of these factors, Keller (1976) reported that 69% of the students in his study cited pressure for good grades as the major reason for cheating, Baird (1980) and Barnett and Dalton (1981) indicate that these pressures remain important.

In my research, the most frequently cited reason for cheating is, "I do study but cheat to enhance my score" (30%). "My job cuts down on study time" (14%) and "Usually don't study" (14%) also are high on the list. "I cheat so my GPA looks better to prospective employers" (8%), and "I feel pressure from parents to get good grades, so I cheat," (7%) both receive substantial mentions. A variety of other reasons, such as:

- "pass the class"
- "class is too hard"
- "only if I'm not sure of my answers"
- "if I blank out and someone else's paper is in clear sight"

provide considerable food for thought and account for 27% of the reasons given for cheating.

The fact that many students have the opinion that “everyone cheats” (Houston, 1976, p. 301) or that cheating is a normal part of life (Baird, 1980), certainly does little to discourage cheating. In fact, it appears that the old adage, “cheaters never win,” may not be applicable in the case of academic dishonesty. With cheating rates that may be as high as 75% and detection rates as low as 1% (Haines, et al., 1986), it would appear that this behavior currently is being reinforced, not extinguished. Even if cheating is detected, one cannot be assured that swift and appropriate punishment will be forthcoming. In fact, Singhal (1982) contends “...that most educational units in a college do not pay adequate attention to cheating and moreover do not have techniques to deal with cheating if it is detected” (p. 775).

To what extent do students fear being caught? My data indicate that of those students who report cheating in college, fewer than 50% expressed concern about being detected. The majority (63%) of the students who expressed concern over detection were those who reported cheating on only one occasion. Moreover, the fear of detection differed in intensity between one-time and multiple offenders. On a scale that ranged from minimally fearful (1) to very fearful (7), the average score of the multiple offender was 3.12, while the average score of the one-time offenders was 5.87. In sum, fewer multiple offenders fear being caught, and what fear they have is less intense than that of the one-time offenders.

Creative Cheating

Having considered the prevalence of cheating and some of the motives for engaging in this behavior, it seems relevant to examine how this crime is being perpetrated. My surveys have provided data on this topic. It will not be surprising to learn that copying answers from a nearby paper and using crib notes or cheat sheets are the two most frequently cited methods of cheating. If students are going to cheat,

one of these two methods will be used approximately 80% of the time. Twenty percent of the reported cheating techniques fall into that amorphous “other” category. The respondents were asked to describe these other methods, if they used them. These answers provided some real food for thought. If we could only harness the following creative energies in a more productive manner!

- “We worked out a system of hand and feet positions.”

- “Each corner of the desk top matched an answer—A, B, C, or D. We simply touched the corner we thought was the right answer.”

- “I stole a copy of the test and looked up the answers ahead of time and memorized them.”

- “I hid a calculator down my pants.”

- “We traded papers during the test and compared answers.”

- “Opened up my book during the test and looked up the answers.”

- “The answers were tape recorded before the test and I just took my Walkman to class and listened to the answers during the test.”

- “I had small velcro fasteners attached to my boots. I wrote the answers on paper that had velcro backs and attached them to my boots. To see the answers, all I had to do was cross my legs.”

- “I’ve done everything from writing all the way up my arm, to having notes in a plastic bag inside my mouth.”

- “I would make a paper flower, write notes on it, and then pin it on my blouse.”

- “One student fills in two ‘scantron’ answer sheets and passes one to a friend.”

- “I wrote the answers on my thigh and raised my skirt to see them during the test.”

This sampling of creative methods indicates that faculty members may not be able to afford themselves the luxury of reading a book, writing, or grading papers during an examination. Vigilance appears to be the key.

Discouraging Cheating

Should faculty members be concerned with academic dishonesty? The concept of academic integrity, upon which teaching is based, is a compelling argument in the affirmative. Paradoxically, those same students, whose cheating we have been considering, agree. In no sample have we obtained fewer than 90% responding “yes” to the question, “Should an instructor care whether or not students cheat on an exam?”

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Let’s assume for the moment that you agree with the students’ perception and as an instructor you *are* concerned with cheating. What measures can be taken to deter or discourage such behavior in your classroom?

Regardless of the size and type of institution, my data indicate that there is consensus among the students concerning measures that would deter cheating *during* an examination period. The most popular deterrent was preparation of separate forms of the test. This option was followed closely by:

- Simply inform the students why they should not cheat. In other words, explain the consequences.
- Arrange seating such that the students are separated by a desk.
- Walk up and down the rows during the test.
- Constantly watch the students.

While these measures may help deter cheating during an examination, they do not say what would help keep students from considering cheating as an alternative *prior* to it. In response to the question, "If a professor has strict penalties for cheating, and informs the class about them at the beginning of the semester, would this prevent you from cheating?," over 40% of the men in each sample responded "No." But many other students, especially women, are more responsive to potential penalties. Among the potentially effective penalties that were listed are:

- Expulsion from the institution.
- Fail the class.
- See the Dean.
- Receive a 0 on the test.
- Public humiliation.

A closer inspection of the data indicated that the majority of students in each sample of "no" respondents reported cheating in college. Students who were not influenced by instructor-announced penalties listed death and "nothing" as possible deterrents. In short, if students have cheated in the past and plan to cheat again, there is precious little that will sway their course of action.

The Need for Proper Values

It would be hasty and ill-advised to conclude that all of the castigation for cheating should fall on one generation—

today's adolescents and college students. While cheating rates in high school and college are high and the number of repeat offenders is alarming, other factors need to be considered. For example, what examples do parents and other adults set? Consider the following and draw your own conclusions:

- Many automobiles are equipped with "fuzz-busters" in order to disobey traffic laws and not be caught.
- It has become common practice to find all the possible "loopholes" on tax returns.
- How many people will return to a store or restaurant to return money when an error has been made in their favor?
- How many items are taken from hotels and motels annually?

For whatever set of reasons, *many* of the 8,000+ students I have surveyed do not have a well-developed sense of integrity, academic or otherwise. Hence, their behavior is directed, to a great extent, by external pressures.

While many of the preventive measures we have considered *may* deter cheating on a situation-to-situation basis, the data also indicate that such measures will not succeed in the long run. Only when students have developed a stronger commitment to the educational process and an *internalized* code of ethics which opposes cheating will the problem be dealt with effectively.

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