

Cheating: how to change the academic culture

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Focus on Ethics Can Curb Cheating, Colleges Find

Behavior: Academic dishonesty is rampant, but students will respond to higher standards of integrity, a study shows.

DAVIS, Calif.—Grappling for ways to halt the spread of plagiarism and other cheating in college, professors often get stuck on the idea that it's too late to change students' behavior by the time they reach college.

But a growing number of campuses, backed by new research, are out to prove otherwise.

" Student behavior is affected by the communities we build," said Gary Pavela, the University of Maryland's director of judicial programs and student ethical conduct.

Students cheat in high school in part because they think everyone else does. But students can change their ways if colleges clearly demand honesty, engage students in ethical issues and put them in charge of enforcement, said Pavela and his colleagues at such schools as UC Davis and Kansas State University, which are in the vanguard of a new movement to change the academic culture.

A new large-scale study suggests they may be right.

Although a startling 68% of college students admitted in an anonymous survey last fall that they engaged in some form of serious cheating, self-reported cheating was 10 percentage points lower on campuses that simply

make a big fuss about academic integrity. The rates dipped even lower at colleges with formal honor codes.

The survey results, which are to be released this week, are the first indication that anti-cheating campaigns are making inroads at the large public universities where many professors fear a spreading epidemic of academic dishonesty.

“ The results directly challenge the broad view that a kid’s ethical views at age 17 or 18 are set by their parents for good or ill,” Pavela said.

Administrators and student leaders have cribbed ideas from smaller colleges with traditional honor codes and modified them to work on large campuses.

At UC Davis, the topic of academic integrity is everywhere, brought up by the students themselves. As final exams approach each term, students give their peers free cards stamped, “ Honesty is the only policy,” and free No. 2 pencils with the inscription: “ Fill in your own bubble or be in trouble.”

Older students do skits to show incoming freshmen what can happen if they violate the code of academic conduct. Professors and their teaching assistants regularly turn in undergraduates for the smallest of infractions.

In case students somehow miss the point, every Wednesday the campus newspaper’s judicial report reveals all the embarrassing details—except for names—of what one sophomore calls “ a parade of unbelievably stupid acts” of plagiarism, improper collaboration and wandering eyes.

All this attention on cheating seems to make a difference.

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“ I would never want to cheat here-it’s just too scary,” said Tina Valenzuela, a UC Davis senior who wants to go to veterinary school. “ Just the fact that if you get caught, you’d read about it in the paper.”

At UC Davis, only 31% of students reported that they got the questions or answers from someone else who had already taken a test before they did-one of the most common forms of cheating.

By comparison, on campuses that place less emphasis on academic integrity or ignore the issue altogether, 54% of students reported getting questions or answers.

A skeptic might ask if students at schools with honor codes are simply less likely to admit-even anonymously-that they have violated the rules. Donald L. McCabe, the Rutgers University management professor who conducted the newest study, part of a decade of research on the subject of cheating, thinks not.

Lower cheating rates at honor code schools are validated by surveys of faculty and by students who have attended both kinds of institutions, McCabe said.

McCabe’s latest survey, which last fall collected the responses of 2, 100 students and 1, 000 faculty members at 21 campuses across the country, showed that:

Nationwide, most forms of cheating remain at or near record levels.

Men admit to more cheating than women, fraternity and sorority members more than nonmembers; students with lower grade-point averages say they cheat more than those with high GPAs.

Students pursuing degrees in journalism and communications, business and engineering reported cheating more than those in the sciences, social sciences or humanities.

Only 9.7% of students reported “plagiarizing a paper in any way using the Internet,” suggesting that such cheating is not as rampant as some fear.

Nearly 88% of faculty reported that they observed some form of serious cheating, yet 32% never did anything about it.

When asked why they ignored the problem, professors routinely told McCabe that they feared they wouldn't be backed by administrators and could end up facing legal liability.

A typical fear, he said, is expressed this way: “I accuse someone of cheating and the next thing I know I'm sitting in the administration building with the student, the student's parents and the family lawyer.”

Robert Redinbo, professor of electrical and computer engineering at UC Davis, said that such hassles often dissuade professors at other campuses from turning in students. “It's a lot of paperwork and committees and headaches, so they don't do it.”

By contrast, at UC Davis, where the administration makes it easy to report cheating, faculty members turn in three times more students for cheating

than at any other UC campus, said Jeanne Wilson, director of student judicial affairs.

Unlike traditional honor code schools that automatically expel students for cheating, UC Davis offers milder forms of punishment for students who own up to their mistakes in counseling session with judicial officers. Punishment can be suspension or probation with chores such as writing a paper on why students shouldn't cheat and performing community service to spread the word to their peers.

The escalating problem of cheating isn't unique to college. In fact, it's one of the few things that most students seem to master in high school, if not earlier.

A record 80% of the nation's brightest high school seniors admitted cheating, according to *Who's Who Among American High School Students*.

For many it's a measure of high school bravado, a game of us-against-them: What can thrill-seeking teenagers get away with under the noses of teachers who are either too clueless or battle-weary to care?

The psychology shifts in college—or at least it can, McCabe said. Although McCabe believes every school has a contingent of hard-core cheaters and strict non-cheaters on the margins, the vast majority of students, he said, make up their minds after they get to college.

If they see widespread cheating, students feel compelled to join in to make sure their grades do not suffer from an inflated curve, he said. If they sense

that cheating is rare and socially unacceptable and that they are competing on a level playing field, they are less likely to do it.

“ That’s where honor codes can make a big difference,” McCabe said.

Schools with traditional honor codes, such as Princeton, Rice and the University of Virginia, have some of the lowest rates of cheating, surveys show.

Under traditional honor codes, students sign a pledge that they will not cheat and, in return, professors do not monitor exams. A violation of this trust often means expulsion.

Students say they appreciate the trust and freedom of unproctored or take-home exams and are thus more willing to meet higher expectations.

Yet only about 100 of the nation’s 3, 500 colleges and universities have such traditional honor codes. Many others were casualties of the student movement in the 1960s.

Suddenly, though, a resurgence seems to be underway. The University of Miami, as well as Georgetown, George Washington and Colgate universities have adopted honor codes in recent years, and the University of Mississippi and the University of San Diego are headed that way too.

“ You can only get so far with better faculty enforcement,” said Pat Drinan, dean of the college of arts and sciences at the University of San Diego. “ If you want to make a significant difference in cheating rates, you have to change the culture and move toward an honor code.”

The Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University, founded by McCabe in 1992, now has more than 200 member colleges and universities. Its annual meetings swell every year with more students, faculty and administrators pursuing honor codes.

Cheating generally runs higher on larger campuses, making exams without proctors impractical for classes that enroll 100 students or more.

So places like UC Davis, which has 25, 000 students, continue to monitor exams but also embrace aspects of an honor code that seem to work: putting students in charge of inspiring their peers not to cheat and disciplining those who do.

Under UC Davis' modified honor code, the student-run Campus Judicial Board decides the fate of students in the thorniest cheating cases. The board members—and often the students who come before them—also become campus cheerleaders for academic honesty.

“ The university takes pride in catching people early on and turning them around,” said John McCann, an engineering student. “ I know because I was one of those cases.”

McCann was caught two years ago lifting another student's homework because he couldn't figure out some problems.

“ I knew I made a mistake and I admitted it,” he said. “ I had to take my punches.” Initially threatened with suspension for one academic quarter, McCann ended up on probation with public service.

McCann, now a graduate student and teaching assistant, has found himself turning in undergraduates for copying each other's homework.

"In my classes," McCann said, "I make an announcement: 'You do not cheat. Even if I don't catch you, you won't be able to pretend you know the material. In industry, you cannot pretend. If you don't know what you are doing, you will get fired.'"

Beginning Monday, Judicial Board members will hold seminars and hand out T-shirts and other freebies during the campus' Integrity Week. "De-Stress Day" comes closer to finals, with free ice cream and a chance to dunk an administrator into a tank of water.

"People say, 'I'm not normally the kind of person who cheats, but I was so stressed out,'" said P. J. Haley, a sophomore on the Campus Judicial Board. "We say, the point is not to stress out so much . . . and do the right thing."