

IS STUDENT CHEATING AS EXTENSIVE AS WE FEAR?

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ABSTRACT

Currently there is much discussion as to whether our society is in the midst of a moral crisis or whether awareness of such problems are merely heightened as a result of improved reporting by a more sensationalized media. Hardly a day goes by where the media does not report breach-of-ethics scandals involving politicians, businesspersons, or celebrities. Of major concern is how this heightened awareness of moral indiscretion affects the behavior of our citizens, especially the young who are more vulnerable. As an example, when Oliver North publicly defended lying during the Iran-Contra hearings, what kind of message did that convey to our young? Although a question of such societal magnitude is difficult to answer, this paper attempts to examine a microcosm of the moral fabric of our society as it relates to education.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The incidence and methods behind student cheating on examinations in higher education are investigated in this study. There have been reports of increases in cheating recently that should peak educator interest in this subject. As an example, a UCLA study (Deutsch 1988) asked a quarter of a million college freshmen whether they had cheated on a test during their senior year in high school. About 30% indicated yes, which is a marked increase over a 1966 version of the same study which reported about 20% having cheated. Although these numbers are not shocking, they do note an increase in the wrong direction. A number of factors are most likely to blame, including pressure to succeed, a higher level of competition to enter professional programs, higher incidence of divorce and other family problems, changes in our country's work ethic, educational impersonalization, height-ened awareness of other indiscretions, and so forth.

RELATED LITERATURE

Although the pressure to succeed is an important reason to study cheating, it does not rest solely on the shoulders of students.

California Assessment Program (CAP) scores are widely used by parents in California as a means of judging the quality of their children's schools. These scores pressured forty elementary schools in California to cheat on the 1985-86 CAP test used to measure school progress in the basic skill areas of reading, mathematics, and writing (Woo 1988). It seems that a computer program detected a higher than normal incidence of erasures where school personnel had changed answers.

South Carolina also has a comprehensive test of basic skills. Nancy Yeargin, a model teacher, admitted that she had given students in two low-ability geography classes the answers prior to the test (Putka 1989). As a result, she was fired and prosecuted under a South Carolina law that makes it a crime to breach test security.

Other studies reaffirm the problem. A 1985 study (Deutsch 1988) showed that three-fourths of all California high school students cheated on exams. A 1987 study of students in the affluent Amherst, N.Y. suburb revealed that more than 80% had cheated at least once that year.

If cheating occurs at the high school level, does it stop there? Apparently not. One entrepreneurial student at Rutgers has published a book entitled Cheating 101: The Benefits and Fundamentals of Earning the Easy A that helps students develop and refine their methods of cheating on exams and papers (Peyser 1992). But what evidence is there that university students actually carry through and cheat? All too much.

After a Rutgers student turned down an invitation to join a cheaters club she conducted a random survey of students in the campus center (Norman 1988). Two-thirds admitted to having cheated and 95% noted that they had cheated more than once.

In another study conducted at Rutgers (Collison 1990), one-third of the 232 students enrolled in an anthropology class admitted to hard-core cheating (defined as cheating in eight or more classes during their college career). Only one-fifth mentioned that

they had never cheated. Economics majors were found to be more likely to cheat than people in other majors.

In a more comprehensive study (Tetzeli 1991) a professor of business ethics surveyed 6,096 students at 31 of the nation's most prestigious universities. Seventy-six percent of those planning business careers indicated that they had cheated on at least one test, which gives business majors the dubious honor of having the highest incidence of cheating. They were, however, followed closely behind by engineering (71%), medical (68%), and public service and government students (66%). Nineteen percent of the business students further admitted to being regular cheaters (cheating on four or more tests), which is considerably more than the next highest groups, engineering and law students (12%). The results further revealed that 74% of female college students headed for MBA programs cheat, which is more than any other group of women bound for graduate schools. Finally, students from families earning \$150,000 or more were found to be 50% more likely to cheat than those whose parents earned less than \$25,000 annually.

These results do not bode well for students in our discipline. In a survey of business students and professionals, Wood, et al. (1988) revealed more disturbing news about our students. In about half of a set of situations involving ethical dilemmas, business students were significantly more willing to engage in questionable behavior than their professional counterparts.

Cheating on college campuses is apparently so prevalent that two Chemistry professors at McGill University have developed computer programs that help identify exam cheaters (Park 1991). The first program identifies multiple choice papers for unusually similar answer patterns, while the second one calculates the probability that similar papers could be written by chance. For final confirmation, seating charts are consulted to see if suspected students were sitting next to each other. With statistics found from other studies the two professors developed a profile of cheaters. It seems that the cheaters were more likely to be male science students whose average marks were 75 and above. Further, they tended to be those who were trying to get into highly competitive courses of study such as medicine.

In summary, much of the research dealing with university-level cheating has been conducted at large enrollment and/or prestigious universities. This study will attempt to answer whether this phenomenon is also prevalent at the mid-sized public university.

RESEARCH METHODS

A self-administered questionnaire was completed by 150 undergraduate students at a medium-sized (14,000 total students) public university in the west. Although this was a non-probability sample, efforts were made to select classes that would produce a representative cross-section of students and majors. As a result, ten sections were selected from university-required courses during May 1991. Each student in the selected classes was invited to fill out the questionnaire which asked about the incidence and methods of exam cheating in college.

RESULTS

Incidence of Cheating

Of those students surveyed, 40.7 percent revealed they had cheated on an exam sometime during their college career. For clarity, those who have ever cheated in college exams will be referred to as "cheaters." These results show a modestly higher participation level than found in the Rutgers anthropology class sample (Collison 1990) but a much lower level than found in the Rutgers general student study (Norman 1988).

If the time frame is narrowed to within the past year, only 28 percent of the students admitted to cheating. These students who have cheated within the past year will be referred to as "recent cheaters." Of those who are admitted cheaters, 69 percent are recent cheaters. Most of the recent cheaters had cheated once or twice in the past year, but several had cheated as many as 10 to 14 times during that span. The average number of incidents where recent cheaters have cheated within the past year was 4.1 times.

Nearly two-thirds (65.6%) of the cheaters began cheating during their freshman year, which supports the notion that cheating behavior starts in high school or even earlier. Of those who are cheaters, 18 percent said that they would do it again, 49.2 percent said that they would not cheat again, while

32.8 percent indicated that they were not sure. This is fairly consistent with the fact that 70.5 percent of the cheaters claim that their frequency of cheating has decreased since they began, whereas only 16.4 percent claim to have had an increase in their frequency of cheating.

Who Cheats?

A slightly higher proportion of females (43%) admitted to being cheaters than did males (38%). Further, the age group which was the most likely to contain cheaters was between 21 and 24. Sixty three percent of students in that group were cheaters.

When cheaters were categorized by year in school, it was found that juniors had the highest incidence of being a cheater (53.3%), while freshmen had the lowest incidence (22.8%).

The great majority of cheaters mentioned that they began their exam cheating during their freshman year. However, with only 22.8 percent of current freshmen admitting to cheating, there may be some hope for higher ethical conduct in the future.

The total sample consisted of students coming from 22 different majors, which were then aggregated into six categories: business, social science, science, arts and letters, other, and undecided. Arts and letters students had the highest proportion of cheaters (50%), followed closely by business students (49%) and then by social science (43%), undecided (38%), science (27%), and students from other majors (22%).

Methods of Cheating

The most frequently mentioned methods of cheating were using old tests (22.9% of cheaters using), copying a neighbor's exam (19.7%), allowing a neighbor to copy (16.4%), and using a crib sheet (18%). Some of the other, less frequently used methods included having notes between their legs; using a stand-in to write the exam; writing formulae and answers on desks, palms of hands, and soles of shoes; pre-writing answers in a blue book; programming information in a calculator's memory; and communicating with someone outside of the class using a radio transmitter. Many of these methods are similar to those mentioned in the Collison (1990) article, but there the most popular

method of cheating was copying from another student's paper.

Understanding which type of exam attracts the higher probability of cheating is also of interest. Two-thirds of the cheaters found it easiest cheating on scantron exams, 18 percent on fill-in the answer exams, four percent on essay exams, and 12 percent on other kinds of exams. This suggests that the more free-hand writing a student has to do on an exam, the less likely it is for them to cheat, and, hopefully, the less likely they are to cheat. Further, cheaters indicated that large classes (defined as size 50 and above) were the easiest to cheat in.

All students, cheaters and non-cheaters, were asked what they thought could be done to decrease the amount of exam cheating. The most prominently-mentioned strategies that they thought would deter cheating included having different versions of a test (16%) and having more monitors present (15.3%) to watch for cheaters. Other, less mentioned, ideas included giving essay tests, less emphasis on grades, and having vacant desks between students. Interestingly, 14 percent of the students thought that nothing at all could be done to prevent cheating, presumably because if people want to cheat badly enough they will find a way.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These and other results have shown that cheating does occur on college campuses and at an uncomfortably high rate. Not only does cheating occur in large universities and more competitive prestige schools, it appears frequently in mid-sized state schools too. Unfortunately, this and several other studies point to the fact that business students are often among the leading culprits. As a result, we, as business educators, need to be more aware of how students cheat, why they cheat, and what we can do to prevent them from doing so.

The reasons why people cheat were not addressed in this study, but the Collison (1990) article suggests that the tendency toward mass education could have a negative effect. The sponsor of the Rutgers anthropology class study said that students were angry at institutions that they saw as large and impersonal. One student in that survey complained about 600 student classes and teaching

assistants who could barely speak English. Further, the student responded "everyone I know uses cheating as a way to get back at the university for screwing us around." In the other Rutgers study, Norman (1988) reports that students mostly cheated because they did not know the material and because they wanted to keep up their grades. One-fourth of those students, however, indicated that they cheated simply because they could get away with it. Perhaps educators can learn from this literature and make it more difficult for students to "get away with it."

There are a number of clear directions that we can take to reduce the magnitude of this embarrassingly dishonest behavior. First, try to minimize large class sizes. Collison (1990) notes that students said they were far less tempted to cheat in smaller classes because they were worried that they would get caught. Given these times of educational austerity this may not be a practical solution.

It is important to make it clear to students that cheating will not be tolerated and to explain what the consequences are if they are caught. This can be explained orally, but should also be written in one's class syllabus.

As the results suggest, try to give essay exams. Surely, they are more difficult to grade, but an added advantage is that the student might be forced to learn the material more thoroughly because they have to articulate their knowledge as opposed to filling in a space with a number two pencil.

Finally, three other strategies are suggested from the data. Where appropriate, provide alternative forms of the exam--possibly with as little effort as rotating the order of questions. Next, if the classroom size permits, spread the students out--preferably having a vacant seat between each test taker. Finally, have more than the professor in the class as a monitor. The more eyes that watch for cheating, the more reluctant the students will be to attempt it.

It is a real challenge to utilize one or more of these preventative measures without offending non-cheating students or making the classroom look like a police state. However, a quiet, non-brow-beating presence can help bring more validity and respectability to the testing aspect of our profession.

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