

An Epidemic of Cheating?

Several recent studies suggest that academic dishonesty may be on the upswing. In 1987, a national survey conducted by UCLA's Graduate School of Education found that 18 percent of a sample of college sophomores admitted to having cheated on their exams, and that 29 percent said they had copied someone else's homework, 36 percent had done both. More recently, Rutgers anthropology professor Michael Moffatt distributed questionnaires to 232 students and found that 33 percent had cheated on a fairly regular basis and an additional 45 percent admitted to having done so less frequently. Economics majors and members of fraternities or sororities were found to be especially prone to academic dishonesty. Popular methods included copying from another student's test paper, studying with the help of old exams, using "cheat sheets," plagiarizing term papers and even stealing tests in advance. Widely publicized scandals at several military academies reinforce the suspicion that cheating is rampant on some campuses.

Ironically, the Internet hasn't just made research easier, but also cheating as the availability of student papers either for sale or even free has exploded. When Anthony Krier, a reference librarian at Franklin Pierce College searched the net in January 1997, he found about 50 sites that offered term papers. Just six months later, he was able to find about twice as many on-line. Though Krier intended the list for professors worried about plagiarism among their students, he also received requests for the list from students apparently looking for more sites to find papers.

Not that buying papers is a new notion. Traditional term paper mills or the legendary dorm stash have existed for a long time. What is new, though, "is the number of places where papers are available, the ease with which they can be obtained and the often brazen ways that do-it-yourself Internet sites now flaunt the ability to cheat and plagiarize electronically." Some sites add disclaimers, but others openly invite students to use their material to cheat.

Students' reasons for cheating vary, from the time-honored preference for partying over studying to more recent pressures to succeed in an increasingly competitive environment. The fact that academic dishonesty seems to be especially common in large classes and at larger schools suggests that the impersonality of the multiversity may also be a contributing factor. For this reason, Moffatt suggests that smaller classes and more teacher-student contact, along with more frequent revision of tests and less reliance on multiple choice questions may be effective ways of reducing the prevalence of cheating.

Even when it comes to those infamous term papers, Bruce Leland, an English professor at Western Illinois University, doesn't think it is necessarily all doom and gloom. He maintains that the sites simply present a challenge to professors. He says ". . . teachers who tailored assignments to work done in class, monitored the students' progress — from outline to completion, rather than just seeing a finished work — and were alert to papers that were radical departures from a student's past work were unlikely to be fooled."

Sources

Applebome, Peter. "On Internet Sites, Term-Paper Files Become Hot Items." *The New York Times*, August 8, 1997, pp. 1 and 30.

Gordon, Larry. "Survey By a Rutgers Professor Shows Widespread Student Cheating," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 25, 1991).

Discussion Questions

- 1) Ask students how widespread they believe cheating to be on their campus. Do they think that this is becoming an increasingly serious problem? What steps might help to alleviate it?

- 2) Given the sociological definition of deviance, if well over half of the students at a college admit to academic dishonesty, can this practice still be regarded as fully deviant?