

# WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT CHEATING IN COLLEGE

## *Longitudinal Trends and Recent Developments*

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**T**oday's college students have grown up in a society where ethical transgressions by leaders in government, business, sports, and academe fill the news. Not surprisingly, these students are somewhat skeptical when they arrive on campus and hear orientation speeches about the lofty virtues that underlie the educational process. For many, these virtues seem to have little to do with the "real" world or why they are going to college.

They have come to college to get a credential—a credential that will allow them to pursue a chosen career. How they get that credential is often less important than simply getting it. As a student at a major university in the Southeast said to us, "It's amazing how many students don't think twice about cheating or copying others' work. It shows how little they understand what an education really is. I'd estimate that more than 85 percent of students just want the degree itself

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and try to get it with the minimum work possible. Hence the prevalence of cheating."

In such an environment, we are hardly surprised when we hear about the academic transgressions of students, whether at the Naval Academy, MIT, or our local community college. It becomes easy to believe media reports that today's students have lost the sense of honor that seemed to characterize previous generations of students. But new research suggests the picture is not so simple.

### WHAT WE KNOW

Student cheating has been the subject of much research, but most studies have focused on a single campus and yield little insight into general patterns of student cheating. In addition, there is a shortage of data that help us understand how student cheating has changed over time.

However, there have been at least two major studies involving multiple campuses. First is the landmark study Bill Bowers conducted in 1963 involving more than 5,000 students on 99 campuses of all sizes and descriptions. In the 1990-91 academic year, we (the authors) surveyed over 6,000 students at 31 campuses around the country, using a sample of schools generally small to modest in size that had highly selective admissions policies. (As shown in the Resources box, the Bowers study was published in 1964 and the Mc-

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## SUMMARY FINDINGS ON COLLEGE STUDENT CHEATING

- Although more than 80 percent of students agree with the statement, "Under no circumstances is cheating justified," cheating among college students is prevalent.
- Students believe few cheaters are caught and that punishments for cheating are generally lenient.
- The behavior of a student's peers is a strong influence on his or her own likelihood of cheating.
- Selective admissions, smaller enrollments, and a high percentage of students living on campus are associated with lower levels of cheating.
- Lower levels of cheating are found where the primary responsibility for academic integrity has been placed in the hands of students, generally through an honor code.

Cabe/Trevino study in 1993.) Both studies asked students about academic dishonesty on tests and examinations and on major written assignments. Although the differences in the samples used in these two studies limit direct comparisons, together they do provide an important perspective on student cheating. It may surprise some that despite the passage of 30 years, the fundamental conclusions of both studies are highly consistent.

Perhaps the most significant findings are about the prevalence of cheating among college students. Three out of four students in the Bowers sample admitted they had engaged in at least one of the 13 questionable academic behaviors he studied. These included some of the most explicit forms of cheating (such as using unauthorized crib notes on a test or copying from another student on a test) as well as behaviors some might consider less serious (padding a few items on a bibliography or collaborating on homework assignments when the teacher specifically does not allow it). The McCabe/Trevino study reported that two out of three students admitted to having engaged in at least one of 14 questionable academic behaviors, 10 of which were identical to the behaviors studied by Bowers.

Both studies develop a picture suggesting that the climate or culture of academic integrity found on a campus may be the most important determinant of the level of student

cheating on that campus. For example, Bowers observed that "the most important determinant of changes in cheating between high school and college is the level of disapproval of cheating among a student's college peers." Our findings also suggested that the most important question to ask concerning academic dishonesty may be how an institution can create an environment where academic dishonesty is socially unacceptable.

One of the most discussed strategies for creating such environments is academic honor codes. Although such codes do not guarantee lower levels of student cheating, both studies provide convincing evidence that cheating is generally lower on campuses with such codes. For example, in the McCabe/Trevino study, 53 percent of students attending schools that did not have honor codes self-reported one or more instances of test cheating, whereas only 29 percent of students at honor code schools did so. Similar differences were found regarding written work—66 percent of students at non-code schools reported one or more transgressions on written work compared to 42 percent of students at code schools. Although there is no simple explanation for why honor codes reduce cheating, their success suggests that students respond positively to strategies that place responsibility on them for governing and adjudicating issues of academic dishonesty. Students appear willing to accept this responsibility in exchange for the privileges often associated with honor codes, such as unproctored examinations.

### LONGITUDINAL TRENDS

Although the Bowers and McCabe/Trevino data provide considerable insight into college cheating at two different points in time, direct comparisons between these studies are difficult because of differences in the two samples. Our study's focus on small- to medium-sized, highly selective private colleges and universities provides a limited perspective. Although factors such as coeducation and increasing ethnic diversity have led to many changes on these campuses in the last 30 years, the schools have remained relatively unchanged in size, in selectivity, in residential character, in their fundamental missions, and in many of their traditions. They also have been enrolling a declining percentage of the nation's total college population as public colleges and universities have expanded at a much greater rate. To get a more representative picture of trends in cheating among college students, it is necessary to understand what has happened at the latter institutions as well.

Table 1  
 Percentage of Students Admitting to Selected Cheating Behaviors,  
 1963 and 1993

	1963	1993
<b>Tests/Examinations</b>		
Copied from another student	26%	52%
Helped another student cheat	23%	37%
Used crib notes	16%	27%
<b>Written Work</b>		
Copied material without footnoting	49%	54%
Plagiarized	30%	26%
Falsified a bibliography	28%	29%
Turned in work done by another	19%	14%
Collaborated on assignments requiring individual work	11%	49%

This was the objective of a new study conducted by McCabe and Bowers at nine medium-sized to large state universities in the fall of 1993, each of which had participated in the Bowers study 30 years earlier. In addition to providing data about their personal backgrounds, extracurricular activities, educational and career plans, and their perspectives on issues of academic integrity, the nearly 1,800 students surveyed were also asked to report on their own academic integrity while in college. Their responses were compared with similar—in many cases identical—information available for students who had attended these same institutions in the early 1960s. The dramatic upsurge in cheating heralded by the media was not found. Whereas 63 percent of the students at these nine schools admitted to one or more instances of test cheating in the original Bowers survey, 70 percent of students at the schools admitted to such behavior 30 years later.

Although this increase in the number of students cheating on tests may be lower than many would expect, it masks important trends. In particular, as shown in Table 1, the most serious test cheating behaviors—copying from another student during a test or examination, helping another to cheat, and using crib notes—have all increased substantially. This suggests that although the number of students who cheat has increased only modestly, the students who do cheat are engaging in a wider variety of test cheating behaviors today and are also cheating more often. Although comparable data are not available from the original Bowers survey, 38 percent of the students surveyed in 1993 reported that they had engaged in more than three instances of explicit test cheating while in college, suggesting that

these students have made the decision to cheat rather routinely.

In contrast, most forms of cheating associated with major written work have remained remarkably constant. Excluding the issue of student collaboration, which we will discuss shortly, 82 percent of the students surveyed in 1963 admitted to at least one instance of cheating on written assignments compared to 84 percent of the students surveyed in 1993. As shown in the accompanying table, none of the four cheating behaviors associated with written work has changed dramatically, and plagiarism and turning in work done by another have actually declined.

Of course, many students do not view all of these behaviors as serious cheating. For example, a minority of the students in the 1993 study view fabricating/falsifying bibliographies (42 percent) and copying material without footnoting (26 percent) as serious cheating. In contrast, a strong majority of these same students do view plagiarism (76 percent) and turning in work done by someone else (80 percent) as serious cheating.

#### COLLABORATION

Although some professors rely exclusively on tests and exams to evaluate students, most also utilize various written or laboratory assignments. One of the most significant changes revealed by McCabe and Bowers was a dramatic increase in student collaboration on such assignments where the professor had explicitly asked for individual work. The proportion of students surveyed who admitted to such behavior jumped from 11 percent in 1963 to 49 percent in 1993.

As discussed in an article in the November 1995 *AAHE Bulletin*, collaboration is a difficult issue for most students. While some pro-

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

**F**ounded in 1992, the Center for Academic Integrity is a coalition of over 85 colleges and universities in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The Center's mission is as follows:

"The Center for Academic Integrity provides a forum to identify, affirm, and promote the values of academic integrity among students. This mission is achieved primarily through the involvement of students, faculty, and administrators from the member in-

stitutions, who share with peers and colleagues the Center's collective experience, expertise, and creative energy."

There is no single path to academic integrity, and the Center respects and values campus differences in traditions, values, and student and faculty characteristics.

The Center's activities include:

- An annual conference, mailings, electronic communication, and presentations at other conferences and on campuses;

- Encouraging and supporting research on factors that have an impact on academic integrity;

- Developing a "fundamental standard" that defines the level of integrity that should be expected of all students in their academic work;

- Helping faculty members in different disciplines develop pedagogies that encourage adherence to that fundamental standard; and

- Showcasing successful approaches from schools

around the country—policies, enforcement procedures, sanctions, and education/prevention programs.

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fessors strongly encourage such work, others forbid it, and some fail to delineate their expectations. In the face of such confusion, many students choose the path of least resistance and elect to work together: it is easier, less time-consuming, and students feel they learn more by working together. In addition, corporations are now sending the message that they are looking for people who can work together in teams. Thus many students find it is easier to justify such behavior. Indeed, 83 percent of the students surveyed in 1993 did not think collaboration was serious cheating, and almost one in four did not think it was cheating at all.

### THE ROLE OF GENDER

Although the general pattern of student cheating may not have changed dramatically, some important changes appear to be taking place along gender lines. The increases in test cheating observed at the nine state universities studied by McCabe and Bowers in 1993 were driven by increased levels of test cheating among women. While 59 percent of the women at these schools in Bowers' 1963 sample reported at least one incidence of test cheating, this had grown to 70 percent by 1993. For men, test cheating was essentially unchanged, increasing from 69 percent to 70 percent.

Many factors probably underlie this difference but one that appears to be of particular importance is the increasing number of women who have entered traditionally male-dominated academic majors. Thirty years ago, fewer women were competing with men in majors such as business, science, and engineering—majors that generally have exhibited the highest rates of student cheating. Feedback from women participating in an earlier study sug-

gests that some have resorted to cheating to remain academically competitive with men. Unfortunately, as these majors have become more gender-balanced, the cheating behavior of men has become the model to follow.

Of course, women are not alone when they describe the amount of cheating going on around them as a major factor in their personal decisions concerning academic integrity. Most students feel tremendous pressure to maintain high GPAs—pressure from their parents, from graduate school admissions offices, from corporate recruiters, and from themselves. If students believe unfair competition is taking place, this acts as a justification for their own cheating.

### SUMMARY

Large numbers of students have cheated since time immemorial, and they continue to do so. Although there are new forms of cheating (such as storing crib notes in the memory of a calculator), the overall level of cheating has increased only modestly. However, there have been significant increases in test cheating among women and in unpermitted collaboration among all students on written work. In addition, students report engaging in a greater variety of test cheating behaviors today and there seem to be significant increases in the most explicit forms of test and examination cheating.

Although there are doubtless many factors that explain these trends, changes in the institutional character of many schools have certainly contributed to changing student attitudes about cheating and their resulting behavior. Many college campuses are now larger, with fewer students living on campus, and higher education has become more of a

## RESOURCES

**A**lthough much has been written about the topic of academic integrity and student cheating, most studies have been rather narrow in their focus. We are aware of only two studies that have investigated cheating across multiple campuses and examined contextual influences on student cheating.

- Bowers, W. J. *Student Dishonesty and Its Control in College*, New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, 1964.
- McCabe, Donald L. and

Linda K. Trevino. "Academic Dishonesty: Honor Codes and Other Contextual Influences," *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 64, No. 5, 1993, pp. 522-538.

Empirical data on longitudinal trends in college cheating are rare. In 1994, McCabe and Bowers published an article (not discussed in this article) that examined longitudinal trends in cheating among male college students.

- McCabe, Donald L. and W. J. Bowers. "Academic Dis-

honesty Among Male College Students: A Thirty-Year Perspective," *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1994, pp. 3-10.

A small number of schools (such as Stanford University) have collected some longitudinal data from their own students; however, the data gathered by McCabe and Bowers and discussed in this article are from the only other multi-campus study of which we are aware. Interested readers may obtain further information on this study by

contacting Don McCabe, at [dmccabe@andromeda.rutgers.edu](mailto:dmccabe@andromeda.rutgers.edu).

In 1993, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Research published a monograph (ED/OERI 93-22) entitled, *Academic Dishonesty Among College Students*, which provides an overview of the major research on cheating in college. The best source for information on the variety of strategies currently being employed to address issues of academic dishonesty is the Center for Academic Integrity (see facing box). ☞

business, with schools aggressively competing with each other for the same students. Not only have these factors combined to make the college experience less personal for many students, there is evidence that this development has made students more cynical about cheating.

Students consistently indicate that when they feel part of a campus community, when they believe faculty are committed to their courses, and when they are aware of the policies of their institution concerning academic integrity, they are less likely to cheat. The social pressures not to cheat in such an environment, although not insurmountable, are substantial. This seems to explain the success of honor codes: successful honor codes help create such an environment among students. Students at honor code schools talk about cheating as being "socially unacceptable," about how "embarrassed" they would be if their friends knew they had cheated, about how they "would not violate the trust" placed in them by the faculty and their school, and about how they care about their "relationships with [their] professors."

Although changing faculty behaviors and creating a stronger sense of campus community are difficult and take time, we believe these measures are well advised. As noted earlier, although honor codes are one popular strategy to achieve this sense of campus community, other approaches have met with success. One noteworthy example is the modified honor code that has been developed at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Although Maryland's code does not include provisions for unproctored examina-

tions or obligate students to report any cheating they might observe among other students (a major difficulty for most students at schools with traditional honor codes), it does provide for significant student involvement in the resolution of alleged cases of academic misconduct among students. It also encourages student involvement in promoting academic integrity on campus through a variety of strategies—asking students to sign an Honor Pledge as part of the application process; establishing an Honor Council, which makes various presentations about academic integrity on campus throughout the year; and recommending strategies professors can use to minimize cheating in their classes; among others.

The Center for Academic Integrity, a consortium of more than 85 institutions devoted to enhancing the level of academic integrity among college students, also has recommended a number of strategies (see box). Among them are promoting student discussions of the value of academic integrity; informing students of the campus policies on academic integrity and involving them in the judicial process; encouraging faculty not to use the same exams consistently and urging them to discuss academic integrity in their classrooms (specifying their expectations as to collaboration and clarifying what resources students may use for both tests and written assignments); these strategies communicate, in essence, that academic integrity is one of the institution's core values and that all members of the campus community—students, faculty, and administrators—have an important role to play. ☐