

# Enlisting Students to Create a Culture of Academic Integrity



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**Over at least the past decade, academic cheating has become more widespread and more accepted by many students. One researcher is piloting a project in which students and staff create, implement, and enforce academic integrity policies to help reduce cheating. [Included: Information about academic integrity policies.](#)**

While cheating always has been a part of academic life, the prevalence and acceptance of cheating among students has reached epidemic levels, according to some reports and researchers. In a national survey of more than 25,000 high school students conducted from 2001 to 2008 by Don McCabe, 65 percent admitted to cheating on a test, 57 percent admitted to plagiarism, and 94 percent admitted to at least one form of cheating, from copying homework to cheating on a test.

In an effort to help students understand the importance of academic integrity, Dr. Jason M. Stephens, an assistant professor in the [University of Connecticut's department of educational psychology](#), has teamed up with Dr. David B. Wangaard of the [School for Ethical Education](#) to pilot a program called the [Achieving with Integrity Project](#). The program involves six Connecticut schools; two urban, two middle-class, and two upper-class that have been paired. In one school in each group, teachers, administrators, and students have been asked to form an academic integrity committee (AIC). The goal of the committee is to write, implement, and evaluate a two-year strategic plan promoting academic integrity in the school. The second school acts as the control.

If the project is successful, it may be expanded to more schools in the state, and then create an anti-cheating model that schools across the U.S. can use.

Stephens talked with Education World about the need to make students part of the anti-cheating solution and some of the reasons why cheating has become so rampant in education.

**Education World:** Why do you think getting teachers and students involved in anti-cheating efforts will help reduce cheating?

**Dr. Jason Stephens:** There are both philosophical and practical reasons why teachers and students working together to address the problem of academic dishonesty is a central tenant of the [Achieving with Integrity Project](#). Philosophically, my partner David Wangaard and I believe strongly in the moral and civic purposes of schooling. Specifically, we believe that a good education not only prepares students for gainful employment, but also for lives of moral and civic responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, the capacity to make sound moral judgments and put them into action; to value the good and take personal responsibility for enacting it.

Consequently, we see the problem of academic dishonesty as an opportunity to foster students' moral development; to give them an opportunity to discuss and understand the ethical dimensions of



Dr. Jason M. Stephens

dishonesty, and to commit themselves to achieving with integrity; and to holding each to account for their behavior so they might create and learn in a culture of that values effort and integrity. In short, education should help students become productive and responsible adults, leaving them with not only the capacity to know the good but also possessing the skill and will needed to do it.

On a more practical note, what's the alternative? A top-down, police-and-punish approach, wherein the adults dictate the rules and vigilantly monitor their enforcement? To a large degree, that's the prevailing system in schools today, and many studies provide testimony to its ineffectiveness. Certainly, school administrators and teachers could do more to "police-and-punish" but this is a dubious approach in a place called school. Principals and teachers aren't and don't want to be law enforcement officers, and asking more of them [to take on that role] by way of surveillance and social control runs the risk of creating a prison-like atmosphere. Moreover, as some research has shown, policies and procedures such as those found at institutions with honor codes, which educate students about the meaning and importance of academic integrity, and that entrust students with considerable responsibility for adhering to and enforcing those policies, reduce dishonesty by a third to a half.

**EW:** What needs to be in an academic integrity policy for students to feel invested in it? Also, what role can teachers play in reducing cheating?

**Stephens:** As alluded to above, students need to have a strong and active voice in both the creation and regulation of academic integrity policies. Adults cannot simply enforce integrity by fiat. It needs to be *their* code, *their* commitment to each other, not just something they are promising to teachers and administrators. So, they need to be involved in defining what behaviors constitute academic dishonesty and in determining the consequences for engagement in those behaviors. They also need to be involved in shaping the procedures to be employed when one of them is accused of violating their code.

In addition, they need to be responsible for educating each other, especially new members of the community such as incoming freshmen and transfer students, about the policies and procedures; thus, helping to create culture in which academic integrity is a clear and unequivocal value. Finally, they need to be involved in the enforcement of their code, not only in terms to holding high ethical standards for each other but also in the adjudication of violations of those standard, such as serving as voting members on panels that determine if a student is responsible for violating the code.

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Teachers have a very important role to play as well. They need to be supporters if not co-participants with students in all of the foregoing processes. They also need to do several things on their own to ensure that their school and classroom are places where integrity is clearly valued and dishonesty clearly unacceptable. In this regard they need to communicate to students that they care about their integrity and create policies that promote academic engagement and reduce the near monomaniacal obsession with test scores and grades. Teachers need to help focus or refocus students on the true purpose of learning: their individual growth and understanding, not some test score, percentile, or ranking that indicates how they're stacking up against other students.

**EW:** What has fueled the cheating epidemic?

**Stephens:** The first thing to note is that academic dishonesty among high-school students reached epidemic levels decades ago. For example, according to 1991 research done by Fred Schab, the percentage of students who reported using unpermitted notes, that is, cheat sheets, during a test or exam moved from 33.8 percent in 1969 to 59.5 percent in 1979 to 67.8 percent in 1989. In short, the epidemic is real but not new.

With that said, it is possible that underlying causes for the epidemic have changed over time. For example, Schab's research showed the percentage of students who indicated that dishonesty was sometime necessary increased two-fold from 33.5 percent in 1969 to 66.6 percent in 1989. This shift in students' belief about the necessity of cheating is likely related to increased performance and time pressures placed on students, not to mention the increased commodification of education, over the past several decades. Schooling has become a means to end for the majority students today: a means, that is, to financial success rather a journey of discovery and understanding.

The broader cultural shift in the perceived value or purpose of education has created an environment where cheating is a viable and even necessary -- in the eyes of students -- strategy. After all, if one's primary goal orientation is getting high grades to get into a good college to get a well-paying job, then cheating can be an effective -- even if unethical -- strategy. Conversely, if one's primary goal orientation is developing one's own understanding and competence, then cheating is problematic as it short-circuits learning and undermines the validity of assessments of one's progress. In short, when performance goals -- that is *demonstrating* one's competence or superiority through high test scores and grades are seen as more important than mastery goals -- *developing* one's competence or understanding through sustained study and effort -- then cheating is significantly higher.

In sum, I believe today's epidemic of cheating is largely, but not exclusively, fueled by our broader culture; a culture where getting ahead and the *appearance* of success have become more valued than integrity and genuine achievement. The problem of cheating is not limited to schools, but pervasive in all sectors of society. From dishonest politicians to corrupt corporate raiders, there's no shortage of good modeling of bad behavior and misplaced values in our society. And while our students may be young, they are not naïve.

**EW:** How early does cheating seem to start, and why? What would motivate elementary and middle school students to cheat?

**Stephens:** The vast majority of research on academic dishonesty -- more than 200 published studies in the past four decades -- has focused on college undergraduates. Fewer than 20 percent have focused on high-school students and much fewer still on middle-and elementary students. Consequently, we know relatively little about the onset, prevalence, and motivational dynamics of academic dishonesty during childhood and early adolescence. That said, there are studies that document cheating behaviors as early as third grade, as in copying of assigned work. The problem seems to grow in both scope and prevalence through middle school before reaching epidemic proportions in high school.

As for the motives for cheating, while there is some evidence that a small percentage of students -- fewer than 10 percent -- engage in cheating for the challenge or excitement of getting away with it, the primary motive is clearly grades. Specifically, students cheat to receive credit or a higher score than one would or could have earned honestly. Within this broad end goal, there is considerable variation in the more immediate circumstances or reasons for cheating. In a recently published study by a colleague and I, we described three of the most common motivational patterns associated with cheating: under pressure, under-interested, and unable.

Students who are under pressure feel tremendous pressure to earn high grades. This pressure may start as external pressure from others, such as parents or teachers, but seems to be internalized by mid- to late-adolescence. The pattern is most typical among high-achieving students, those with aspirations to attend a very good or elite college or university. Students who are under-interested do not find the material being taught especially interesting, useful, or important. Cheating offers a way to receive passing or very good grades without investing much time in learning "boring" material. Students in the unable category are those who feel they lack the knowledge, skill, or time to do the work required to earn the grade desired or needed. These students,

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especially those who feel academically unable and not simply short on time, tend to feel a bit of shame related to their cheating. These three patterns or categories did not cover the full range of motives or circumstances under which students cheat, but they do appear to be the most common.

**EW:** How do you think the emphasis on testing and accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act has affected the level of cheating?

**Stephens:** Testing and accountability, as mandated by the NCLB legislation, have worsened the situation. We are now facing a growing crisis of *teacher* cheating. As documented in the report, [Rotten Apples](#), by Brian A. Jacob and Steven D. Levitt, as well as in numerous newspaper reports from Texas to Massachusetts, teachers and administrators are now engaging in various forms of academic dishonesty to ensure they meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). In short, the performance pressure for high test scores that leads many students to cheat is now leading many educators to cheat. It's a regrettable and unnecessary situation.

This is not to say that I am opposed to accountability and testing. Nor am I opposed to the stated goal of NCLB -- to ensure that all learners reach proficiency in various academic domains. I don't know of any research that has drawn direct links between NCLB and its brand of high-stakes testing with increases in student cheating. It's reasonable to imagine that there are indirect effects. For example, as a result of NCLB, teachers are spending more time teaching to the test and less time engaging students in more open-ended inquiry or problem-based learning. With the tightening of the curriculum, that is, focusing on numeracy and literacy, and the constriction of pedagogy to a more direct instruction and drill and practice approach, it's easy to imagine that students' performance orientation is heightened and their interest in learning compromised. Two factors, as noted earlier, that have been associated with cheating behavior.

This e-interview with Dr. Jason Stephens is part of the Education World Wire Side Chat series. Click [here](#) to see other articles in the series.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [What Can We Do to Curb Student Cheating?](#)
- [Uniting Against Cheating](#)
- [Curb Cheating With Prevention Strategies](#)
- [A Guide to Doing the Right Thing](#)