

# Researcher Studies Epidemic Of Student Cheating

Pilot Program Aims To Promote Academic Honesty In Schools

By GRACE E. MERRITT | Courant Staff Writer  
*September 8, 2008*

JASON STEPHENS, an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut, is conducting a pilot program at six Connecticut high schools in an effort to promote academic integrity and encourage teachers to emphasize learning over simply acing tests and getting a good GPA. (MARK MIRKO / HARTFORD COURANT / August 14, 2008)

STORRS — - Jason Stephens, a rising star in the field of academic dishonesty, believes that cheating in high school is rampant.

Consider that 65 percent of high school students admitted to serious test cheating and that 57 percent admitted to plagiarism in a national survey of more than 25,000 high school students conducted from 2001 to 2008.

But Stephens, an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut, thinks he has an answer for what he describes as a cheating epidemic.

He wants to let students and teachers come up with a strategic plan to promote academic honesty in their school and encourage teachers to emphasize learning over simply acing tests and getting a good GPA.

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**In a national survey of more than 25,000 high school students conducted from 2001 to 2008:**

- ● **65 percent** admitted to cheating on a test.
- ● **57 percent** admitted to plagiarism.
- ● **94 percent** admitted to at least one form of cheating, from copying homework to cheating on a test.

He is testing the theory now in a three-year pilot program at six Connecticut high schools. If it works, he hopes to expand it to a full-scale trial at 30 high schools, then develop it into a sort of anti-cheating tool kit for high schools nationwide.

Stephens and others say cheating has become widespread over the last 30 years. In the aforementioned national survey, a full 94 percent of high school students admitted to at least one form of cheating, ranging from allowing someone to copy their homework to cheating on a test, according to Don McCabe, a professor of management and global business at Rutgers University who has done extensive surveys on cheating.

Stephens doesn't blame students for the phenomenon.

"Virtually all of them are cheating because the pressures of having good grades is extraordinary, more so now today than 20 to 30 years ago," he said. "It's not because these kids are morally bad. It's because the stakes are higher and the time is less." The competition to get into a top college is fiercer than ever.

"It's not enough to get a 4.0 grade point average. It's also being involved in a varsity sport, volunteering in the community, maybe having a part-time job — along with the social lives these kids live," Stephens said. Cheating is an expedient, if deceptive, way for time-crunched students to get it all done, he said. "Most kids see that as wrong. The sad thing is that most kids do it anyway," he said.

Underlying all this is a major cultural shift toward achievement and materialism over the last 30 years, he said. A national survey of college freshmen shows that most students now view college as a steppingstone toward the ultimate goal of getting a lucrative job, a radical shift from 1967, when the survey began, he said.

"They've gone from looking at college as a place of enlightenment or the development of a meaningful philosophy to being a place where you get status and credentials in order to get a well-paying job. I even had a student refer to himself as a client the other day," Stephens said.

Stephens, who has partnered on the project with David Wangaard of The School for Ethical Education in Milford, has targeted six high schools for the project — two in a wealthy suburb, two in a middle-class neighborhood and two in an urban setting. One of each pair is working on the anti-cheating strategies; the other is a control group.

Stephens surveyed all six schools about their attitudes on cheating before the program and will do it again at the end to see if it made a difference. He declined to identify which high schools were being targeted. The three-year project is being funded by a \$400,000 grant primarily from the Templeton Foundation.

Stephens and Wangaard have been meeting once every two weeks with a small group of students and teachers to craft their own academic integrity policy. The groups talk about cheating in their school to get a handle on what the problems are and what's considered the norm. This year, the groups will finish writing their strategic plan, which might include a combination of an honor code, a public awareness campaign about the importance of academic honesty, and setting consequences for cheating.

"We are not describing a police action here," Wangaard said. "We want school to be a place that they can be proud of, proud of its academic integrity and of their work."

As part of the project Stephens plans to hold professional development workshops for teachers to show them ways they can deter cheating by creating an environment that stresses learning and mastery of the subject over test scores and high grades.

For example, rather than loading up students with excessive amounts of homework and posting a list of top performers in the classroom, teachers should create an environment that puts the emphasis on learning, he said. Rather than tests, teachers could assign students projects where they must apply new math skills to solve problems, he said.

He also wants to urge teachers to talk to students about cheating and to encourage academic honesty.

"I'd like to see them tell students, 'Look, if you find yourself in situation where you think you're going to cheat — don't. Come to me and we'll talk about it. I'll give you an extension,' " he said.

Stephens also plans to work directly with students to teach them about the psychological mechanisms that allow them to justify cheating. They might, for example, displace personal responsibility for cheating, saying, "it's not my fault, it's the teachers fault." Stephens' goal is to help them cultivate a sense of personal responsibility.

McCabe, an expert in cheating research, said he is a strong believer in giving student greater input and letting them establish the rules under the assumption that they will have more respect for the system and be more likely to follow it.

Stephens' experiment, particularly because of its control group, is unique in the growing field of academic dishonesty, said McCabe, who predicted that Stephens' approach will result in some reduction in cheating in those high schools.

Stephens' research over the years has explored the psychological, social and situational factors that shape a student's decisions to cheat. He has interviewed and surveyed thousands of high school and college students.

McCabe describes Stephens as a rising star in the field of academic cheating and predicts he will continue to blaze a trail after McCabe, 64, retires. "I know he's going to carry the torch. I think very highly of him," McCabe said.

Stephens, who admits to having cheated twice as an undergraduate at the University of [Vermont](#), said he was inspired by [Stanford](#) University, where he earned his doctorate. Stanford, he said, puts a high value on academic honesty and requires every incoming freshman to spend a half day talking about academic honesty and requires them to sign an honor code.

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