

excellence & ethics



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The Education Letter of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative

Academic Integrity: A Critical Challenge for Schools

by David Wangaard and Jason Stephens

This world has become very competitive, and cheaters sometimes win. I study so hard, and it's a real slap in the face when I see kids cheating and scoring higher grades than me on a test and getting away with it.

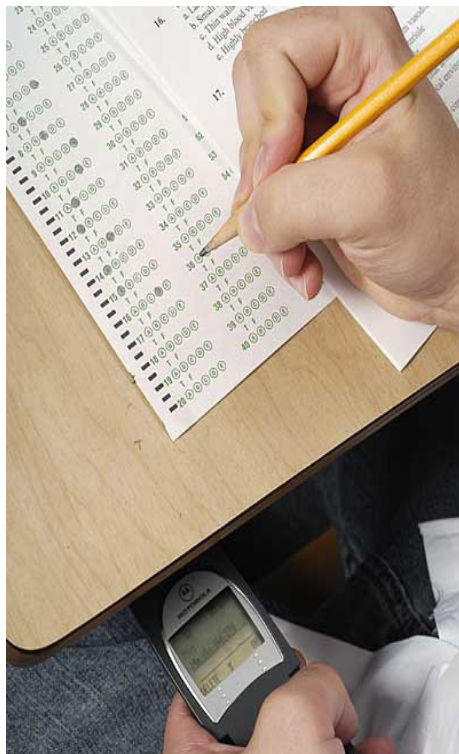
—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Our schools are facing a crisis of academic integrity. In our recent three-year study of academic motivation and integrity, we surveyed over 3,600 students from six economically and ethnically diverse high schools in the northeastern United States. Ninety-five percent of these students reported engaging in at least one form of academic cheating during the past academic year. More troubling still, 57% of these students also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "It is morally wrong to cheat."

While academic dishonesty may not be the gravest moral problem facing our youth, it is certainly the most ubiquitous. Practiced habitually, cheating becomes, for moral character, a kind of "death by a thousand tiny cuts."

In our study, 44% of students reported

seeing test cheating weekly; 82% reported seeing homework cheating weekly. But only 12% of students reported seeing others being caught cheating in any given week. The failure of schools to enforce their academic integrity standards may be one reason why only 11% of students in our study expressed support for their schools' academic integrity policies.



In the Smart & Good Schools vision, academic integrity is a crucial intersection of moral and performance character.

Students' Free-Response Comments

Our survey also included a free-response section. We asked students:

1. *What specific changes would you like to see your school make in support of academic integrity? What role should students play in this process?*

2. *Please add any other comments you care to make about cheating.*

We received 852 free-response statements from 638 students. (See page 3 for student response themes and sample quotes for each.)

The most frequently occurring theme expressed students' desire to have adults take stronger steps to reduce academic dishonesty. Many students asserted that their schools should—whether through stricter policy enforcement or more meaningful and effective teaching—do more to create a culture of academic integrity (page 3, themes 1 and 2).

Students want their schools to do more to promote and enforce academic integrity.

Creating a Culture of Integrity

We know that cheating is reduced by a third to a half in schools that have created a culture of academic integrity.¹ School communities can create such a culture through the use of honor codes, commitments and committees focused on the mission of integrity, and the school-wide communication—and embrace of—fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Research has also demonstrated that academic dishonesty is reduced by curriculum, instruction, and assessment that

orient students toward *task mastery* goals (i.e., the development of one's own understanding and competence) and not simply performance goals (showing competence through high test scores and grades).²

This research, along with studies of students' justifications for cheating, has led us to design a 4-component model for creat-

Cheating violates core values of trust and fairness.

ing a schoolwide culture of **Achieving with Integrity**. This model's four components are: (1) community, (2) core values, (3) commitments, and (4) curriculum.

COMPONENT 1: COMMUNITY

Our model for building a culture of integrity seeks to maximize the synergy and power of a school community working together to create and sustain an authentic dialogue that advances academic integrity. We recommend, as the heart of this model, the formation of an **Academic Integrity Committee (AIC)** that includes influential adult and student leaders representing a variety of disciplines and peer subcultures.

The AIC becomes the organizing force that engages the whole school community in a series of strategic processes. These include a climate survey (such as our *Academic Motivation and Integrity Survey* and McCabe's *Academic Integrity Survey* on p. 5) to assess students' and teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to cheating. A survey provides baseline empirical data about the nature and extent of the problem of academic dishonesty at the school.

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COMPONENT 2: CORE VALUES

Analyzing the survey data helps the AIC identify its core values and create a mission statement to support the development of a strategic plan advancing academic integrity. A focus on core values—such as respect, trust, and responsibility—highlights the fact that cheating is not merely a personal choice affecting oneself but also a social problem affecting others. Left unaddressed, it undermines the trust and integrity that bind students and educators together as a community.

Commitments

Honor Pledge & Honor Councils



Community

Shared Responsibility: Students, Teachers, Parents, Administrators

Students will support academic integrity policies, including penalties for cheating, when they recognize that these policies protect fairness in grading and assessment. Linking academic integrity to the school's core values helps the school community make a moral claim regarding cheating, namely, that *it destroys trust and is unfair to all those who aren't cheating*.

COMPONENT 3: COMMITMENTS

The research is clear that strategies like honor pledges, honor codes, and honor councils will be effective only if there is authentic buy-in, particularly among students.³ Developing strategies to get and sustain this kind of buy-in is an important mission of the AIC. One simple commitment that the school community can make to the AIC is to provide a budget and staff time to support AIC projects, publications, and participation in conferences on academic integrity or other professional development.

COMPONENT 4: CURRICULUM

Faculty must also support academic integrity by making relevant pedagogical and curricular connections. Teachers must use academic integrity as an important way to create and sustain a moral

community in their classrooms. Teachers who integrate the theme of integrity into their class expectations, syllabi, moral discussions, and class procedures can reduce cheating.

The Academic Integrity Committees in our project schools have made good progress in using our Achieving with Integrity model to develop a community of students, staff, and parents; advance core values that support integrity; encourage commitments in the form of pledges and policies; and promote teaching practices that foster academic integrity.

As our project developed, we also used Rest's 4-Component Model of moral functioning⁴ to design classroom lessons that promote academic honesty. Efforts to build a schoolwide culture of integrity are vitally important, but classroom teachers must also engage students in developing the moral awareness, judgment, and commitment to act with integrity. ■

Notes

¹D. McCabe & L. Trevino, "Academic dishonesty: Honor codes and other contextual influences," *Journal of Higher Education*, 1993, 64(5): 522-538.

²J. Stephens & H. Gehlbach, "Under pressure and under-engaged: Motivational profiles and academic cheating in high school," in E. Anderman and T. Murdock (Eds.) *The psychology of academic cheating*. (New York: Elsevier, 2007).

³D. McCabe, L. Trevino, et al., "Cheating in academic institutions: A decade of research," *Ethics and Behavior*, 2001, 11(3): 219-232.

⁴J. Rest, D. Narvaez, et al., *Post-conventional moral thinking: A neo-Kohlbergian approach*. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999).

Visit www.ethicsed.org for:

- The authors' *Academic Motivation and Integrity Survey*
- Opportunities for dialogue through the Academic Integrity Network
- Ideas for Academic Integrity Committees and Integrity Works! (www.ethicsed.org/programs/integrity-works/index.htm).

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THEMES OF STUDENTS' COMMENTS (from most to least frequent) IN RESPONSE TO: "What Changes Would You Like to See Your School Make in Support of Academic Integrity? What Role Should Students Play? Other Comments?"

1. THEME: *Schools should create and enforce stricter consequences for dishonesty.*

"Academic integrity isn't really enforced. Students cheat. They don't get caught. I wish the school had a program that would help prevent cheating."

2. THEME: *Teachers should teach more effectively and provide more academic assistance.*

"I'd like to see changes in the way teachers teach. Most of them just try to make us memorize things, and that is not what people do well, so they cheat. If teachers actually made us critically think through questions using knowledge learned in class, then there would be less cheating."

"A school should focus more on creating teacher-student relationships so that students feel less stressed when they need to ask for help on something."

3. THEME: *Students should cooperate in support of academic integrity policies.*

"It is up to the students to maintain their integrity."

"Students should realize that the purpose of learning does not lie in the grades."

4. THEME: *Students cheat because of excessive academic pressure.*

"Kids usually cheat because of high pressure from parents or an unrealistic amount of work from teachers."

"I think cheating is morally wrong, but when there's pressure to maintain good grades, it's hard not to give into temptation because grades determine what college you attend and what kind of job you get."

5. THEME: *No specific changes should be made because school policies are clear and enforced.*

"In my opinion, the academic integrity of our school is good. There is a large focus on grades here, and most people try their hardest and usually achieve success fairly."

6. THEME: *No changes would be helpful because cheating is unpreventable.*

"Students understand that cheating is wrong, but we don't feel bad about doing it because we put the blame on the school and don't accept responsibility. We say instead that the test was too hard or so-and-so is a horrible teacher. We cheat when we're stressed."

"Kids who are going to cheat are going to cheat. They'll find a way around any roadblock you throw at them."

7. THEME: *Cheating is morally wrong.*

"I don't cheat, and neither do most of my friends. I'm a smart person, and people ask to cheat off me, and I say no. They get upset and make fun of me a little, but they know deep down that it's the wrong choice to cheat."

8. THEME: *Some acts of cheating are acceptable.*

"Cheating is considered wrong, but there are circumstances when everyone accepts it, such as if you're going to get a bad grade because you didn't have time to study and your teacher doesn't allow extensions."

"I don't like it when people cheat off of me or anyone else, but I let them cheat because they need the help."

9. THEME: *Cheating is neither an important nor a pressing issue; no one cares.*

"Cheating is a choice made by people who don't like school. It's no big deal."

10. THEME: *Commitment to academic integrity comes from individual choices.*

"Students should make an effort to show integrity throughout their career in high school."

"The reason I don't cheat is not so much the ethical reason. It's the fear of being caught and the punishments for it."

11. THEME: *Schools should emphasize the importance of academic integrity.*

"I'd like our school to let everyone know how important integrity is—how it can help you beyond high school and how it can help you become respected and successful."

12. THEME: *Students must become involved in the prevention of cheating.*

"We need some kind of anonymous system to report cheating and things (like drugs, alcohol, etc.) because I've seen all these things and have no way to tell anyone really."

13. THEME: *Students should not be held responsible for monitoring cheating.*

"There's no way to report on cheating without committing social suicide." ■

INTEGRITY: adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.

—www.dictionary.com

Integrity includes:

- Honesty with others and honesty with ourselves (not rationalizing bad behavior by making excuses)
- Sticking to and standing up for moral principles
- Ethical consistency—practicing what we preach.

—Editors