

Battling the Cheats

Surveys show dishonesty is on the rise, helped by the Internet, but professors fight back.

EARLY in the fall semester, a professor of American studies at Cornell found a three-page paper on the Internet analyzing a poem by Anne Bradstreet. A student in his course had just handed in that very paper. Accused of plagiarism, the student confessed that she had taken the paper from an Anne Bradstreet Web site. She had locked herself out of her apartment the night before the paper was due, she said, and without access to her notes had panicked.

Two weeks later, the professor's wife, who teaches psychology, gave an examination to her advanced class. Halfway through the test a student asked to go to the bathroom. She was gone a long time, but the psychologist, who employed the young woman as a lab assistant and was directing her honors thesis, suppressed her suspicions. That evening, she visited the ladies room. In the toilet stall she noticed a sheaf of papers stuffed behind a plumbing pipe. They turned out to be handouts distributed in the course, covered with notes in what she believed was the student's handwriting.

Measured by recent surveys, cheating has reached epidemic proportions in high schools and colleges. In a survey of 21,000 students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, 70 percent of high school students and 54 percent of middle schoolers admitted that they had cheated on an exam. That is up sharply from a study cited in "The State of Americans: This Generation and the Next," edited by Urie Bronfenbrenner and others. That study found that 33.8 percent of high school students used a "cheat sheet" on a test in 1969. By 1989 the percentage had risen to 67.8. Furthermore, 58.3 percent of high school students let someone else copy their work in 1969, and 97.5 percent did so in 1989.

A recent study by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University yielded results similar to the Josephson study, with almost 75 percent of college students acknowledging some academic dishonesty.

In four focus-group discussions conducted by the Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University, many students appeared blasé about academic dishonesty. "I guess the first time you do it, you feel really bad, but then you get used to it," said one.

Another asserted: "People cheat. It doesn't make you less of a person or worse of a person. There are times when you just are in need of a little help."

Professors and teachers, of course, take quite a different view, and many are trying to halt what they see as an epidemic. A sharp increase in prosecutions and convictions and publicity in campus publications may well be putting some would-be miscreants on notice. At Ohio University, in Athens, only 59 cases of academic misconduct reached judiciary boards between 1994 and 1999. During the 1999-2000 academic year, 35 cases were filed. At Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., during the same period 32 students were found to have violated the honor code. The dean, Freddie L. Hill, called that "a precipitous increase."

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Faculty members and administrators are also finding policies and pedagogies that appear to deter cheating. Citing studies that academic dishonesty can be reduced significantly simply by announcing in classes that integrity codes will be enforced, the University of Minnesota recently required that all students sign a pledge not to cheat and to renew it every time they take a test or complete an assignment.

In the past, many faculty members were reluctant to charge academic misconduct for fear of subjecting themselves to adversarial proceedings, unfamiliar rules of evidence, phone calls from parents, aggressive lawyers and uncertain outcomes. The Cornell psychologist, for example, decided not to go forward after her student insisted that she had reviewed the notes in the bathroom before the exam.

BECAUSE papers taken from the Internet often provide an "open-and-shut case," and perhaps because the increase in cheating has persuaded some professors to end their silence, more faculty members seem willing to use the judicial process. The professor of American studies held a preliminary hearing, elicited a confession, gave the student an F on her paper and filed a report with the Academic Integrity Board at Cornell.

Whatever the root causes of cheating and its increase, the ease with which students can find what they want on the Internet is surely part of the problem. Schoolbytes.com provides plot summaries and historical time lines written by "really smart" graduate students for the undergraduate who just realized he didn't bother to read for class and has "about 20 minutes to read eight chapters," according to its Web site.

Schoolsucks.com (which claims 10,000 visits to its site each day) delivers papers "instantly to your screen" at \$4.95 a page. A disclaimer adorns each site. Cheater.com, by the way, uses a run-on sentence to explain its operation, saying, "We provide a service for students, like anything it can be abused if used improperly." Plagiarism is illegal, the home page concludes,

with a wink and a nod, "and Cheater.com does not support it in any way, shape, or form."

Cheats, however, may soon learn that what the Internet giveth, it can taketh away. For the last few years, according to Alisse Theodore, assistant professor of English language and literature at the University of Michigan, "students were much more Web-savvy than most faculty and T.A.'s I knew." But now, e-mail messages identify search engines that can find strings of text that plagiarists might have used, and faculty members are much adept at using the software.

Plagiarism.org, a service that helps professors fight plagiarism, has a database with tens of thousands of essays, available at various sites on the Web, as well as papers turned over to it by instructors. The technology can also identify papers cobbled together from bits and pieces of material from several texts. IntegriGuard.com offers access to similar services for \$5 a month. Colleges often pick up the tab.

Glatt Plagiarism Services takes a different approach, offering a computer-assisted program to instruct students about what constitutes plagiarism and help them identify unintentional borrowing. Suspicious teachers may also use the program.

By all estimates, most cheating remains undetected. But programs at colleges, like a campus-wide discussion on cheating at the University of California at Davis, can have an impact. At Davis, freshmen see skits about what can happen if they violate the code. In a further — perhaps demeaning — attempt at consciousness-raising, No. 2 pencils are distributed during finals with the inscription, "Fill in your own bubble or be in trouble." And every Wednesday without disclosing names the campus paper carries a judicial report detailing cheating cases and their disposition, what one student called "a parade of unbelievably stupid acts."

The results: more than three times as many students are prosecuted for cheating at Davis than at any other University of California campus, and only 31 percent of undergraduates (as opposed to 54 percent elsewhere) report that they got questions or answers from someone who took a test before they did.

In a study of 597 students, enrolled in 12 economics classes in two universities, Joe Kerkvliet and Charles Sigmund wrote in *The Journal of Economic Education* that the physical distance between students and the use of multiple choice exams neither deterred nor encouraged cheating. But adding an additional version of the test (with the questions arranged in a different order) and the use of faculty members rather than teaching assistants as exam proctors reduced it significantly.

Many of my colleagues now insist that students turn in drafts of papers and have their research notes available; they no longer give take-home exams without specific instructions about the subject, and they tell students when consulting with one another is appropriate.

It is far too early to declare victory, or even to be certain that colleges are on the right track. Cheating, after all, is simply one manifestation of moral laxity that will not go away without a transformation in values. But maybe, just maybe, pervasive academic dishonesty has peaked and something is being learned about deterrence and the ethical education of students. ■