# Research-Based Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity

**Michele DiPietro,** *Kennesaw State University*

A cursory glance at the literature on cheating paints a bleak picture. In the past decades, the prevalence of cheating has hovered at discouragingly high level, with about 75% of students admitting to some sort of cheating, and with peaks of over 90% in some prevalence studies. Given these figures, where does a well-intentioned instructor start? A good place to start untangling this complex problem is to understand it better. Academic dishonest behaviors vary in their frequency, seriousness, and motivations behind them, but they have been extensively researched, and we can abstract general principles to conceptualize this problem. Once we understand the dynamics better, we can try to adopt contextualized approaches that get at the root of the problem instead of stopgap measures. Below are some highlights from both the leading theoretical models and the available empirical evidence.

**Cheating decreases as a function of the consequences.**
As with other undesirable behaviors, we can try to curtail cheating by attaching consequences to it. Research shows that if students think they won't be able to cheat with impunity they are less likely to cheat. Conversely, if they think they can plead their case successfully if they get caught, or if they don't deem the consequence severe (like a failing grade on the homework in question), they are still likely to cheat. While this approach regards students like rats in a maze, following the path of least resistance

while trying to obtain rewards and avoid punishments, the research finding nevertheless holds (Zimring & Hawkins 1973).

## Cheating is a function of the benefits relative to the consequences.

Everything else being equal, students are more likely to cheat if they expect a significant gain from cheating compared to the possible consequences they might incur. In essence, the decision to cheat is the result of a mental cost-benefit analysis, where the costs of cheating (e.g., not learning the material, failing the assignment or the course, being expelled from the university) are weighed against their likelihood and compared to the potential benefits (e.g., a better grade, time saved on an assignment, maintaining a certain GPA). What this means is that students are more likely to cheat when they feel overwhelmed by the workload, or on high-stakes assessments that count for a large percentage of the grade, or when they are in dire straits, such as students on academic probation who risk being expelled if they fail the course (Cornish & Clarke 1986).

## Cheating is a result of the opportunity to cheat coupled with the intention to cheat.

Predictably, students are less likely to engage in cheating when instructors make it more difficult for them to do so, for instance by heavily proctoring exams. However, even if instructors succeed at curtailing cheating in certain situations by being more vigilant and enforcing more rules, they are not solving the problem at the root. Their students will still look for the next available opportunity to cheat. Conversely, if students feel an obligation to avoid cheating, they are less likely to do so. These findings together usher in the idea that students are more than strictly rational decision-makers, and that moral considerations can enter their cost-benefit analysis when those ideas are inculcated into them (Ajzen 1969).

## Cheating happens in a context.

Students don't make the decision to cheat in a vacuum. Their social and cultural context influences their behaviors. Students are more likely to cheat in more competitive majors or courses or if they feel pressure (for instance, from the family) to achieve a certain GPA. Likewise, if the campus culture regard cheating not as a negative act but as a neutral one (a victimless crime) or even a desirable one – as

in the case of a student 'helping out' a friend, roommate, or fraternity brother – cheating will increase in this environment. Conversely, on campuses with honor codes, where students sign an academic integrity pledge, commit to report any observed cheating, and in return serve on academic review boards and enjoy un-proctored exams, cheating is less likely. These findings caution us to think systemically, and not just in terms of the single offending student (Sykes & Matza 1957).

**Cheating is a function of the developmental level of the student.**
Research shows that students are less likely to cheat once they age, get married, move off campus, start holding a job and rely less on parental support. In other words, cheating decreases as students mature, develop independence, start taking responsibility for themselves and their actions, acquire perspective and focus their priorities on things more meaningful than getting an A. Unfortunately, development cannot be forced, but these findings suggest that effective approaches must foster holistic student growth (Whitley 1998).

**Many students do not understand issues of academic integrity and the rationale behind them.**
Several studies document that, while agreeing on clearly egregious behaviors, students disagree on whether some behaviors constitute breaches of academic integrity, or on the seriousness of the breach. This is especially true when it comes to plagiarism and appropriate collaboration. While it is disconcerting that students can make it to college without a basic understanding of plagiarism, it is important to remember that, for these students, there might be no malice involved (Power 2009).

Below are some of the immediate implications of these research findings. Not all of them will apply to everybody's specific situation, but instructors can go back to the findings and extract more strategies.

**Reduce the opportunities to cheat.**
Instead of letting students sit in the back of the room or next to their friends, which we know facilitates cheating, use a seating chart, leave

an empty seat between students, and use multiple versions of the exam, all prevention measures proven to reduce cheating.

**Report cases of cheating to the academic review board.**
Instructors do not like to report cases to central administration, either because of the hassle involved in the process or because of distrust in it. And yet, if the consequences for cheating are only at the homework or course level, this will not be enough to deter the students from cheating.

**Lower the stakes.**
When appropriate, use policies that allow students to drop the lowest score and grading schemes that distribute the total points across a variety of assessments (rather than, say, just a midterm and a final). This will take the pressure off any particular assessment.

**Create assessments that discourage cheating and promote or extend learning.**
Generally speaking, assessments based on memorization and regurgitation or employing multiple choice and true/false questions are easier to cheat on. More importantly, these forms of assessment tend to not promote deep learning. Whenever possible, create assessments based on analysis, synthesis, and higher level thinking skills, or assessments that more authentically mirror ways in which professionals in the field use knowledge. As we treat students as pre-professionals, we foster their development and maturity.

**Clearly articulate your expectations and policies.**
Just like for students, research shows that, other than the most egregious cases, instructors too disagree on what constitutes cheating or on the severity of the infraction. What is forbidden in one course, or discipline, or culture, might be allowed or even encouraged in another, especially when it comes to appropriate vs. inappropriate collaboration or rules for citing sources. Use the syllabus, rubrics, other handouts, and even class time to make your expectations to the students as explicit as possible.

**Clearly articulate the rational behind your policies.**
If students understand that certain policies are not our pet peeves, but are grounded in strong arguments of fairness, pedagogy, intellectual

property, and so forth, they might cease to see cheating as a victimless crime, thereby de-neutralizing it and decreasing their motivation to cheat.

**Lobby to introduce honor codes at your institution.**
Since research shows they are effective at reducing cheating, it makes sense to adopt them. Some institutions have introduced modified honor codes, adopting only parts of the code (for example, dropping the peer reporting requirement, or the un-proctored exams). These modified honor codes are still better than no honor code at all, but much less effective than a full honor code. In particular, some schools have dropped the peer reporting requirement because it makes some students really uncomfortable, but that is the most effective clause.

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