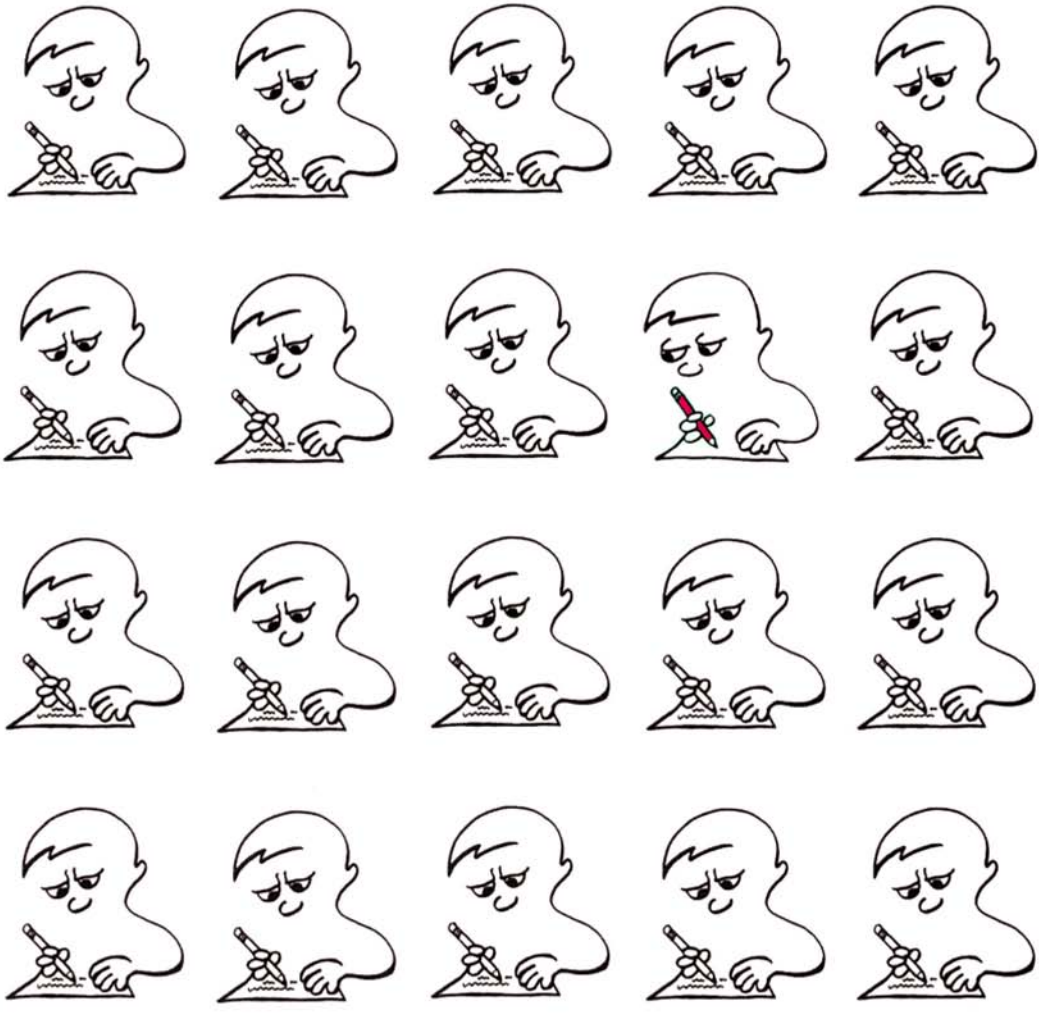
Academic Dishonesty

An Educator's Guide



Bernard E. Whitley, Jr. • Patricia Keith-Spiegel

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Bernard E. Whitley, Jr.
Patricia Keith-Spiegel
Ball State University

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Preface

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- Why do students cheat?
- What can be done to prevent it?
- What are the consequences of ignoring academic dishonesty?
- How should suspected students be confronted?
- What sanctions are appropriate for students who violate the academic honesty policy?
- What can the institution do to encourage a campus ethos of integrity?

Our goal is to provide readers with a concise handbook covering the full spectrum of issues related to academic dishonesty. To do so, we present research and theory on academic dishonesty and strategies for preventing, confronting, and managing the problem.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part reviews the existing published literature about academic dishonesty among college and university students and how faculty members respond to the problem. Chapter 1 addresses the issues of why academic dishonesty is an important problem in academia, the prevalence of the problem, the rationalizations some instructors use to minimize its importance or deny its existence, and some of the real difficulties involved in confronting the problem. In chapter 2, we focus on definitions of academic dishonesty and how student and faculty differ in their perceptions of what behaviors constitute academic dishonesty. This chapter also describes the reasons and justifications students give for their dishonest acts, some of the institutional and student characteristics associated with academic dishonesty, and a theoretical model that helps explain the conditions under which cheating is most likely to occur.

The second part of the book presents practical advice designed to help college and university instructors and administrators deal proactively and effectively with academic dishonesty. Chapter 3 offers techniques for fostering academic integrity in the classroom. Chapter 4 presents tech-

niques that are helpful in preventing academic dishonesty from occurring. Chapter 5 presents methods of detecting academic dishonesty, and also discusses the difficult problem of confronting and dealing with students suspected of cheating. The last part, chapter 6, considers the broader question of academic integrity as a system-wide issue within institutions of higher education.

Because our topic is academic dishonesty, we may appear to be taking on an adversarial "us against them" attitude toward students. That is definitely not our perspective. We know that a great many students value their educations and work diligently to learn. These are the students who make our jobs joyful. Indeed, part of our own interests in the nature, prevention, detection, and remediation of academic dishonesty stems from our commitment to the welfare of honest students. Cheaters *do* hurt themselves, but they do not *only* hurt themselves: They also degrade the education of and affront the integrity of their honest peers. We believe that the best way to pay our respects to honest students is to be actively involved in maintaining a climate of integrity in the classroom and throughout the entire campus. We have written this book to help others serve their students, their colleges and universities, and the academic community in that way.

As we were completing this book, we found an article describing the problem of academic dishonesty in high schools (Bushweller, 1999) and were struck by the similarities of the problem in the high school and college/university contexts. Although we are college instructors and wrote this book with the college/university context in mind, we believe that the principles we describe are also applicable to the high school environment. We are aware that implementing our suggestions in the high school environment raises issues, such as the fact that almost all high school students are minors, which college and university faculty and administrators do not face. Nonetheless, as Bushweller has shown, appropriate academic integrity policies can be developed and implemented in high schools with positive educational effects. We hope that our book can provide some ideas that high school faculty and administrators find useful.

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—Bernard E. Whitley
—Patricia Keith-Spiegel

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Definitions, Incidence, Research, and Theory

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Academic Dishonesty: The Enemy Within Our Gates

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> The university at the undergraduate level sounds like a place where cheating comes almost as naturally as breathing, where it's an academic skill almost as important as reading, writing and math. —*Moffatt (1990, p. 2)*

Moffatt's view may strike many readers as overly cynical, but there is a growing recognition that academic dishonesty is a major problem on college campuses (e.g., Maramark & Maline, 1993) and increasing numbers of students are engaging in it (e.g., Collison, 1990; Peyser, 1992). These concerns have been reinforced by the publication of how-to books on cheating, such as Corbett's (1999) *The Cheater's Handbook* and the establishment of what might be called *cheaters' sites* on the World Wide Web (WWW). Collectively, these sites provide thousands of term papers and examinations (e.g., Hickman, 1998; McCollum, 1996).

Although Fass (1990) attributed high levels of contemporary academic dishonesty among college students to their having been "raised in an era of decline in public morality" (p. 171), cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty are not new problems. These behaviors have existed as long as there have been tests and will probably continue as long as students are evaluated. Brickman (1961) noted that attempts at cheating were so common during the ancient Chinese civil service examinations that candidates were searched for crib notes and confined to individual examination rooms for the duration of the examination (usually 3 days) to prevent collaboration. The government further attempted to discourage cheating by imposing the death penalty on cheaters. Despite these precautions, examination candidates still tried to cheat, such as by having concealed pockets sewn into their clothing in which crib notes could be hidden.

EIGHT REASONS THAT EDUCATORS SHOULD BE CONCERNED ABOUT ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Why should we, as faculty members and administrators, be concerned about cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty? There are eight reasons.

1. *Equity.* Students who cheat may be getting higher grades than they deserve. For example, a survey of high school teachers found that 58% believed that cheating is partly responsible for grade inflation (Bushweller, 1999). In addition, when student grades are assigned on the basis of the average score in the class or other norm-referenced means, students who do not cheat may get lower grades than they deserve whenever cheaters raise the class average. Teachers have an essential ethical responsibility to treat their students fairly (Keith-Spiegel, Wittig, Perkins, Balogh, & Whitley, 1993); failure to deal with academic dishonesty is a violation of this ethical obligation. Both instructors and students view a college teacher's ignoring evidence of academic dishonesty as a severe ethical violation (Morgan, Korschgen, & Gardner, 1996; Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991).

2. *Character development.* Moral and ethical development of students is an important mission of higher education (e.g., Dalton, 1985; Kibler, 1993a; Kibler, Nuss, Paterson, & Pavela, 1988)—one that has been endorsed by the U. S. legal system in its decisions on legal challenges to institutional disciplinary actions in cases of academic dishonesty (Kibler et al., 1988). Although many faculty members, especially those at research-oriented universities, no longer see student character or moral development as part of their calling (e.g., Sandeen, 1985), faculty responses to academic dishonesty can strongly influence students' personal development. When students see other students cheating and do not see faculty members and administrators addressing such behavior, they may decide that academic dishonesty is acceptable or at least permissible. Because norms supportive of academic dishonesty tend to encourage such behavior (Whitley, 1998), faculty and administration that appear unconcerned about it may reinforce any such norms that already exist (Gehring & Pavela, 1994). Conversely, a normative context that eschews academic dishonesty, such as the existence of an honor system, tends to discourage the behavior (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999).

3. *The mission to transfer knowledge.* Central missions of every institution of higher education are preservation and search for knowledge, transmission of that knowledge to a new generation of citizens and scholars, and personal, social, cultural, and intellectual development of the members of the college or university community. Students who cheat their way through the higher education system do not acquire the knowledge to which their degrees are supposed to attest nor do they engage in the intellectual and moral struggles that foster personal development (Gehring & Pavela, 1994). Toleration of academic dishonesty, therefore, diminishes the intellectual and moral capital required by society for its common development and progress.

4. *Student morale.* When honest students see some of their peers cheat and get away with it, especially if it appears that instructors do not seem to care, they become frustrated and angry (e.g, Jendrek, 1992). Seeing other students gain the same rewards for cheating as they do for effort may lead them to become disenchanted with and cynical about higher education. These negative emotions may, in turn, lower honest students' motivation to learn. Some students may abandon effort as a success strategy and come to view cheating as the only way to keep up with everyone else.

5. *Faculty morale.* Faculty members who learn that students have cheated in their classes often feel personally violated and mistreated by their students, reacting with feelings of anger and disgust (e.g., Jendrek, 1989; Johnston, 1996). Instructors also describe dealing with cheating as one of the most stressful aspects of their jobs (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley, & Washburn, 1998). These negative emotions can be compounded by perceptions that administrators do not support their efforts to control academic dishonesty and punish cheaters (e.g., Schneider, 1999; Wilson, 1998). Over time, these emotions can result in cynical attitudes toward students, administrators, and the educational process (e.g., Schneider, 1999).

6. *Students' future behavior.* Students who cheat in college frequently go on to cheat in graduate and professional school and to engage in unethical business practices (e.g., Baldwin, Daugherty, Rowley, & Schwarz, 1996; Sims, 1993). Because having successfully cheated at the undergraduate and graduate levels can make it easier to cheat in one's professional career, failure to deal adequately with academic dishonesty and educate students about the consequences of their behavior constitutes a disservice not only to the academic community but to society in general. In contrast, students who have been held to high academic ethics standards as undergraduates

are less likely to commit ethical violations in the workplace (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1996).

7. *Reputation of the institution.* Incidents of academic dishonesty, especially when they involve the collaboration of many students (e.g, a "cheating ring") or an odd feature (e.g., a student's attempt to blackmail an instructor unless copies of upcoming examinations were supplied), are of interest to the media. The name of the institution is prominently linked with the dishonest activity, and such associations can sully, at least temporarily, its reputation. Should an institution experience frequent, publicized incidents of academic dishonesty, its reputation may be more permanently tarnished. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, widely read in academic circles, regularly reports unusual incidents of academic dishonesty among students and faculty, such as the case at the University of Minnesota in which a staff member in the athletics department routinely wrote papers for varsity athletes (Lords, 2000). Occasionally, the publicity reaches the popular press. One example was the 1993 incident at the U.S. Naval Academy in which an estimated 160 midshipmen were believed to have received advanced copies of a final examination. A *Newsweek* headline read, "A growing cheating scandal raises new questions about how the military trains its officer" (Glick & Turque, 1993).

8. *Public confidence in higher education.* The effects of failing to address academic dishonesty contribute to a broader problem: the public's growing lack of confidence in the academy as illustrated by such professor-bashing books as Anderson's (1992) *Impostors in the Temple*, Cahn's (1994) *Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia*, and Sykes' (1988) *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education.* Students who cheat, those who see others successfully cheat, those who hear others brag about how they cheated their way through college, and employers who find themselves with incompetent and dishonest employees cannot help but lose faith in academia. Such loss of faith can easily lead to loss of support for higher education.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY TODAY

The best data on the prevalence of academic dishonesty come from a survey conducted by McCabe and Trevino (1993) of 6,096 undergraduate students at 31 institutions of higher education in the United States. The survey included both institutions with honor codes and those without. The two types of schools were matched on enrollment and academic selectivity

as indicated by students' mean SAT scores. To be classified as an honor code institution, a school had to meet at least two of the following criteria: unproctored examinations, an honor pledge, a requirement for student reporting of honor code violations, and the existence of a student court or peer judiciary board that ruled on alleged honor code violations. Most of the honor code institutions surveyed met at least three of these criteria.

McCabe and Trevino (1993) asked their respondents to indicate how frequently they had engaged in each of the 12 behaviors listed in Table 1.1 during their college careers. Table 1.2 shows the percentage of students who reported engaging in at least 1 of the 12 behaviors at least once. Table 1.2 also shows the percentages of students who reported engaging in each of three categories of behavior at least once: cheating on examinations, cheating on homework assignments, and plagiarism. Overall, almost three quarters of the students reported engaging in some form of academic dishonesty during their college careers, about half reported having cheated on examinations or having plagiarized, and slightly less than half reported having cheated on homework assignments. Cheating rates at institutions with honor codes were almost half those at other institutions. Nonetheless, more than half the students at honor code schools reported having engaged in some form of academic dishonesty, and one quarter to almost one third reported having engaged in each of the specific forms of dishonesty.

Disturbingly, a substantial number of students are repeat cheaters. Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1996) found that 21% of the students in their sample admitted to at least three incidents of cheating while in college, with 9% admitting to six or more incidents. McCabe and Trevino (1995) found that 38% of their respondents admitted to three or more cheating incidents. Defining repeat cheating in a slightly different way, Moffatt (1990) found that 33% of the students in his sample admitted to having cheated in eight or more courses in college. If one assumes that a typical student takes about 40 courses in college (5 per semester), Moffatt's data mean that one student in three cheats in at least 8 of those courses during a college career.

THE COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR AND ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Between 60% and 80% of faculty members report having been faced with instances of academic dishonesty (Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffen, 1994; Jendrek, 1989; McCabe & Trevino, 1995; Singhal, 1982). However,