

Everybody Does It

Academic cheating is at an all-time high. Can anything be done to stop it?

Regan McMahon

Sunday, September 9, 2007



If there were a test on the current state of cheating in school, I would have gotten an F. My knowledge was as outdated as the stolen answers to last week's quiz. Ask a high school or college student about cheating, and before you can finish the sentence, the person will blurt out two things: "Everybody does it," and "It's no big deal." Survey statistics back up the first statement, and the lack of serious consequences and lax enforcement of academic integrity policies in schools support the second.

Not only is cheating on the rise nationally - a 2005 Duke University study found that 75 percent of high school students admit to cheating, and if you include copying another person's homework, that number climbs to 90 percent - but there has also been a cultural shift in who cheats and why.

It used to be that cheating was done by the few, and most often they were the weaker students who couldn't get good grades on their own. There was fear of reprisal and shame if apprehended. Today, there is no stigma left. It is accepted as a normal part of school life, and is more likely to be done by the good students, who are fully capable of getting high marks without cheating. "It's not the dumb kids who cheat," one Bay Area prep school student told me. "It's the kids with a 4.6 grade-point average who are under so much pressure to keep their grades up and get into the best colleges. They're the ones who are smart enough to figure out how to cheat without getting caught."

Denise Pope agrees. She's an adjunct professor in the School of Education at Stanford University, founder and director of Stanford's SOS: Stressed-Out Students Project and author of "Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students." "Nationally, 75 percent of all high school students cheat. But the ones who cheat more are the ones who have the most to lose, which is the honors and AP (advanced placement) students. Eighty percent of honors and AP students cheat on a regular basis."

The pressure to succeed weighs heavily on these students. An upper-middle-class senior at an East Bay private high school, whom I'll call Sarah (who like many high school and college students I interviewed insisted on anonymity), sums it up succinctly: "There's so much pressure to get a good job, and to get a good job you have to get into a good school, and to get into a good school, you have to get good grades, and to get good grades you have to cheat."

Pope understands how Sarah feels, considering the college admissions climate, where one B can put your application on the reject pile. "For kids with a very high GPA and very high SAT scores, who have taken a

ton of AP classes, what distinguishes them is how perfect they are. So there's no room for any kind of error. And if there's no room for error, you tend to cheat, even though these students would have done just fine on the test. They say they cheat because 'this is my safety net.' "

Cheating to win

The other group of students recently revealed to be most like likely to cheat is athletes. In a landmark survey of nearly 5,300 high school athletes conducted in 2005 and 2006 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles, 65 percent admitted to cheating in the classroom more than once in the previous year, as opposed to 60 percent of nonathletes, a percentage that institute founder Michael Josephson says is statistically significant. And varsity athletes were more likely to cheat than nonvarsity.

Athletes in the high-profile male sports such as football, baseball and basketball are more willing to cheat than other athletes. The one women's sport that yields similar results is softball. For generations, sports have been perceived as an endeavor that builds character and instills positive values in youth. These study results, released in February, prompted many to ask: Just what are the coaches teaching these kids?

The fact that athletes must maintain a minimum GPA to stay on the team is one factor, but Josephson thinks there's something deeper going on. "The major male sports seem to be spawning a win-at-any-cost mentality that carries over into the classroom. Thirty-seven percent of boys and 20 percent of girls said it was proper for a coach to instruct a player to fake an injury. Forty-three percent of boys and 22 percent of girls surveyed said it was proper for a coach to teach basketball players how to illegally hold and push, for example. "Now that is clearly illegal," says Josephson. "Whether you call it cheating or just breaking the rules, it's illegal. It changes the game. You're not supposed to hold. In the survey, a substantial number of the young people thought that was permissible. So you have to ask yourself, what is that telling us about the values that sports are generating?"

He understands the minimum-GPA factor and the time-management issue - fitting studying in amid the practices and games. "I think what allows them to succumb to it is also the fact that there's a sort of mental attitude that it's not that big a deal. I don't think they lose a lot of sleep over it. So as an ethicist, that's the piece of it I worry about. Is there no conscience operating? Because without a conscience, you have Enron."

Madeline Levine, Marin author of "The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids," says it's worrisome that the highest-performing kids in high school have few qualms about cheating. "They will be our doctors, our lawyers, our policymakers. And if the issue of integrity is on the back burner, that doesn't bode well for all of us."

Endemic in college

The pressure to succeed at all costs has boosted cheating levels in college to record levels also. A graduate of San Francisco's independent Urban School, whom we'll call Ellen, now a junior at the University of Southern California, says, "Everyone cheats. There is no cushion, so you have to do well; there isn't a choice. In college, there is no room for error. You cannot fail. You refuse to fail. People become desperate, so they'll do anything to do well. That's why people resort to paying others to do their papers. Because you feel: Mess up once and you are screwed. The end."

Tests are a big part of the grade in college, she says, and those are largely multiple-choice, which were a rude shock to someone coming from a progressive high school. "It's just memorization," says Ellen. "I came from Urban, where I was taught to bask in the glory of learning something, not to just sit down the night before with a bunch of kids on Adderall and go through the 30-page study guide and memorize as much as I can. And you can say that taking a drug to stay up so you can study is another form of cheating."

From her research, Pope is well aware of the widespread use by high school and college student of the drugs Adderall and Ritalin, normally prescribed to kids diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. Students without the disorder find them easy to obtain legally (college students often use the phrase "I'm having a little trouble focusing" at the campus health center to get a prescription) or illegally from students sharing their prescription or selling pills for profit. Ellen says some college students will trade marijuana for Adderall.

Pope says use of stimulants is on the rise in high school, and more and more kids are using them to take the SAT. As in the debate over the use of steroids in sports, some students don't feel it's morally wrong - because it's still *your* brain at work - and are ignoring the health risks of taking a drug not meant for them, with no monitoring of dosage or side effects by a doctor. Pope says when she wrote "Doing School" (published in 2001), "it was No-Doz and caffeine. Now, especially in the past five years, it has switched to Adderall, Ritalin and illegal stimulants."

Pope says a lot of students' philosophy is "Cheat or be cheated." So many of their friends are cheating, they figure they'd be a chump not to. "If you're the one honest kid, you're actually going to get the lower grades or the lower test scores."

And Josephson points out that according to one study, less than 2 percent of all academic cheaters get caught, and only half of them get punished. So there's almost a 99 percent chance of getting away with it.

Pirouz Mehmandoost graduated from Washington High School in Fremont in June and is about to enter California State University, Stanislaus. He says cheating is so common in middle school and high school that after a while "you just get used to it. It's not even a moral issue for high schoolers. Kids have become immune to it."

He says a popular method of cheating is networking, which he defines as "the easygoing smart kid gives the answers to some other kid."

"There was one time in a science class in freshman year," he recalls, "when I was networking with some other girl and we didn't get caught. We both got A's. It was a *great feeling*, actually, I'd have to say with no regret, mainly because I knew I would never have to use that information ever again."

Technology has made cheating easier and more sophisticated. But Pirouz says it's not causing the rise in cheating. "Cheaters are causing the rise. Technology is a catalyst, but text-message cheating is big because the cheaters are sending out the message. Some people keep their integrity, but some fall into the trap when it's suggested."

The Internet has provided all sorts of shortcuts for cheaters. They have Wikipedia at their fingertips, and thousands of ready-made term papers available for downloading from sites like Cheaters.com,

Schoolsucks.com and Schoolpapers.com.

Some schools have tried to combat plagiarism by using a scanning service such as TurnItIn. com. The students are instructed to turn each paper in to the service, which uses a computer program to scan it for instances of plagiarism by comparing it against all published materials and previously submitted papers in the company's database. Any phrases in common are then highlighted for the teacher to see. According to the company, significant levels of plagiarism appear in 30 percent of papers submitted.

Kids use survival-mode thinking and exercise risk management when they decide to cheat, says Pope. Suppose someone gets to the end of several hours of homework and it's 10 p.m. and she still has an English paper to write. If she turns in nothing, she knows it's a guaranteed zero. If she downloads a paper from the Internet, she might get caught and get a zero. But if she doesn't get caught, she might get an A. So it seems worth it to many to turn in the plagiarized paper.

That's not cheating, it's helping

One of the most disturbing trends is that behavior once considered cheating is no longer thought to be so. Copying homework, for example. An eighth-grader in private school says, "That's not cheating, it's helping."

"We call it the morning scramble," says Pope. "In the morning at a high school, you see a ton of kids sitting around copying each other's homework. Because a percentage of their grade is based on their turning in their homework. And a lot of these kids are doing so many classes and after-school activities that there's no way they could possibly do all the work required of them. So kids don't even count that as cheating. That's just sort of survival for them: divvying up the work. That's why they're IM-ing (instant messaging) all the time while they're doing homework. It's another way of divvying up the work. It's a way of ensuring that you get it done. It doesn't matter how you do it, just get it done and get it in."

Pope has done a survey of cheating in 10 Bay Area middle school and high schools, both public and private. The results have not been published yet, but she shared some of them with The Chronicle. Students are given examples of cheating and then asked to indicate if they have done it more than once, and if they consider it not cheating, trivial cheating, regular cheating or serious cheating. At a local private high school, when presented with the phrase "Working on an assignment with others when teacher has asked for individual work," 60 percent said they had done that more than once, and 36 percent see it as not cheating. Of students at a large public high school responding to the same phrase, almost the same number: 61 percent, said they had done it more than once, but an even higher number, 42 percent, see it as not cheating.

The adults are doing it

With examples of cheating ever-present in the news - the BALCO scandal, point shaving by an NBA ref, grade changing at Diablo Valley College; and frequent examples of cheaters in at the highest levels of the corporate world, Washington and Hollywood escaping harsh penalties - many suggest kids learn to cheat from the larger culture.

Ethicist Josephson says, "The rule of thumb we use is: Whatever you allow you encourage. So whether

they're seeing it with Enron or Barry Bonds or Paris Hilton, somewhere here or there, they are seeing people get away with stuff. The truth is they don't have to look further than their own high school. There is so much cheating going on in their own school by their own colleagues, with their teachers looking the other way, in a way that almost looks like passive approval. There's a culture that begins to develop, when you see people do this, and it provides the moral cover they need to insulate themselves from a conscience. It's like saying, 'Come on, I'm not the only one, it's happening all the time.'

"One of the marker questions we use is, 'People have to lie and cheat occasionally to succeed.' People who answer that affirmatively - and just under 50 percent of the whole sample of high school students answers that affirmatively, and half of the males - are more likely, the correlation shows, to cheat. You could infer that if you think you have to cheat in order to succeed, then your choice is between not cheating and not succeeding. If, on the other hand, you believe you can succeed without cheating, though it may be harder, there's a much greater chance you will resist the temptation."

David Callahan, author of the 2004 book "The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead," says there are two economic explanations for the rise of cheating. One is that there's more to gain. "We live in a time when the winners are getting ever more lavish rewards and the incentives to get to the top are greater than they've ever been before. In the late 1960s, if you were a CEO and you inflated the value of your company's stock by cooking the books, maybe you'd make a couple of extra million dollars when your stock holdings went up. But if you do that now, there's the potential to make hundreds of millions of dollars. If a top baseball player took performance-enhancing drugs 20 years ago and hit more home runs, maybe he'd make \$1 million a year, which is how much the top players got paid in the mid- to late 1980s. Now, if you can join the ranks of the super top players, you can sign a \$150 million, five-year contract."

The other economic reason is there's more to lose. The penalties for failure, or for simply being ordinary, have grown. The middle class has been squeezed, so it's harder and harder to maintain a decent standard of living.

Callahan says the two other things that account for the rise in cheating are lack of oversight and enforcement (as in deregulation in business and lack of serious consequences for violations in business, politics and the academic world) and a change in American culture, ushered in the 1980s with "greed is good" individualism and a shredding of the social contract. "In that cultural context, it's not surprising that people are willing to cut corners to advance their own self-interest."

But even if kids are not aware of cheating scandals like Enron, says Pope, "they are absolutely influenced by the role models they see close to them." So when they see their parent go "diagnosis shopping" to get a doctor to say they have ADD so they can have extra time to complete their SAT test, or they hear a coach tell them to fake an injury in football when their team is out of time-outs to gain an unofficial one, kids get the message that it's OK, even necessary, to do take whatever steps to gain an advantage. And to an adolescent that may translate as lie, cheat and steal.

"The interesting thing about cheating is that it's a window into a kid's soul, and into the family's soul, too," says Joe Di Prisco, the Berkeley author who co-wrote "Field Guide to the American Teenager" and "Right From Wrong: Instilling a Sense of Integrity in Your Child" with Mike Riera, head of Oakland's Redwood

Day School. "Because so many of these kids are cheating to please their parents - to get a grade, to get into college, whatever. The 100 or so academic integrity cases I dealt with in 20 years as a high school English teacher and in two years as a vice principal in charge of disciplinary matters showed how desperate kids are to please their parents and help their friends."

The key for him was capitalizing on teenagers' desire to be authentic, to stay true to themselves, "and so you point up the irony that when you cheat you're not representing yourself, and you're helping your friend not to represent himself or herself, and it doesn't feel right, does it?"

"There are just transcendent moments there in that room when kids see themselves, and they hear you saying, 'It's hard to be honest. We all make mistakes. You made a mistake, but we're going to move forward. There are consequences, but I still love you. Don't do it again.' If you do that, the kid will probably not cheat again. Probably."

But, he says, there have to be serious consequences and schools have to enforce them. If schools don't, cheating will increase. "You start expelling some kids for cheating, and cheating will stop."

What will stop it?

Josephson says there are a few steps schools could take that don't cost any money, that would cut the incidence of cheating in school testing by two-thirds in one year: Don't give the same test over and over again, separate kids so they don't see each other's papers, make it clear to students that it is unacceptable, have them sign a document that says they haven't cheated and punish cheaters. Also, don't let them come into tests with PDAs and cell phones.

Ronald Pang, principal of Lincoln High School in San Francisco's Sunset District, has an academic integrity policy at his school. He says it makes both the definition and consequences of cheating very clear. English teachers go over the policy with their students every year, and students and their parents must sign the policy and return it.

Some say schools have been lax on enforcement because today's parents often threaten litigation if a school pursues a cheating charge against their child. Pang says one of the benefits of having the integrity policy is that he can remind parents, "You signed this."

The reason parents aren't outraged about cheating, suggests Levine, is that we have come to value achievement over character.

"You don't find any parent movement saying, 'Oh my God, why is this happening?'" says Josephson. "It's a silent conspiracy creating the disease of low expectations: 'Well, we can't really expect people to be honest anymore.'"

Josephson's institute has worked with thousands of schools across the country to implement his Character Counts! framework for character education, which has reduced cheating in those schools. And Pope has worked with Bay Area schools to establish honor codes, which nationally have been shown in both high schools and colleges to reduce cheating substantially. "It takes a lot more than just saying we're going to slap your hands. You have to infuse it in the culture."

"I hate to put the blame on teachers and schools," she adds. "Schools are so burdened right now, and the teachers say parents won't support them when they catch the kids cheating, and before that, they put so much pressure on the kids to get these grades and test scores. And they set poor examples, like on the sports fields. If the parents aren't doing their job, it's very difficult for the teacher. You've got to have that consistent message across the school, home and coaching environments."

"We have lost our moral compass," says Josephson. "And no one is putting the flag in the sand and saying, 'This is wrong! It's dishonest, it's unacceptable, I don't care what the stakes are and why you're doing it, it's wrong, and we will not permit it.' The solution is in the voluntary commitment of the school system and the people who run it, the boards of education and the parents to say this is not acceptable. If they would do that, they could change it."

Top 5 ways to cheat

- Copying from another student
- Plagiarizing by downloading information or whole papers from the Internet
- Cell phone cheating - text-messaging answers to another student, taking a picture of the test and e-mailing it to another student, or downloading information from the Internet
- Getting test questions, answers or a paper from a student in a previous period or from a previous year
- Bringing a permitted graphing calculator into the test loaded with answer material previously input into the computer portion of the calculator

Top 5 ways to curb cheating

- Create an honor code with student input so they're invested in it
- Seriously punish cheaters according the academic integrity policy
- Create multiple versions of tests to make purloined answer keys useless
- Ban electronic devices in testing rooms
- Develop multiple modes of assessment so the grade is not determined primarily on tests

Regan McMahon is The Chronicle's deputy book editor and author of "Revolution in the Bleachers: How Parents Can Take Back Family Life in a World Gone Crazy Over Youth Sports." E-mail her at rmcmahon@s Chronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/09/09/CM59RIBI7.DTL>

This article appeared on page **P - 18** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections

© 2007 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)