

Carnegie Mellon University – Office of the Dean

Why do students cheat?

It is a rare individual who actively chooses to be dishonest. But why do a few students make compromising choices? What can lead people to act in ways that they aren't proud of? Below are some underlying beliefs and confusions which students at Carnegie Mellon give as explanations for slipping standards of integrity.

A Victimless Crime?

Students generally are familiar with the disciplinary actions and penalties for getting caught. However, they may fail to understand that one of the personal consequences of cheating and/or plagiarism is that they aren't actually learning or practicing the material. They may not realize that they will actually need and be accountable for certain knowledge and skills.

Instructors may not explain the personal consequences and loss of trust that accompany academic dishonesty if they are focused mainly on stating the procedures and punishments related to academic disciplinary actions. They may not tell students how dishonesty damages their trust in a student and his or her work which can affect a student's ability to get a strong recommendation for employment or graduate school.

It's a "Dog-Eat-Dog" University

Students and their families often have very high expectations about grade achievements because they are accustomed to getting As. More pressure comes from the emphasis on grades in hiring and graduate admissions. Some students may feel pressured to develop unorthodox means to get competitive and marketable credentials.

Instructors sometimes evaluate the performance of one student against the performance of others instead of measuring each student's achievement with respect to specified criteria. If students must compete with other students to get one of a limited number of As, they begin to look for ways to "get ahead."

If Everyone Else Jumped in a Lake . . .

Students sometimes view cheating as a necessary, not totally unacceptable method for academic survival. If they believe that "everyone cheats sometimes," they may not seriously ask themselves, "Why shouldn't I?"

Professors and teaching assistants do not always confront suspected breaches of academic integrity. If they perceive that others do not pursue the formal process or that it is difficult to prove a breach has occurred, instructors may decide not to talk directly with students about potential problems. Instructors may not report an incident from their course believing that the student has "learned their lesson" but with no official record of the

incident there is no way of knowing whether the student had cheated before or cheats again.

Too Much Work, Too Little Time?

Students often have multiple assignments due on the same day and in some courses may have only a few opportunities to demonstrate what they know. Cheating can be a tempting path when they have difficulty managing their time. Some may have little remorse because they rationalize "doing what it takes" to get all of their work done. One poor performance on a high-stakes assignment or feeling "shafted out of an A" by a curve may increase the perceived pressure to switch from honest work to questionable "shortcuts."

Instructors often underestimate students' need for multiple assignments to get feedback, to receive a fair grade, and to stay motivated to learn. Sometimes in an effort to reduce the workload, they may not think about the intense pressure on students when a course grade is based only on a midterm and a final. Or, in an effort to provide lots of timely practice and feedback, others may lose track of how much pressure students feel to meet deadlines.

The Past is Passed On

Students are accustomed to sharing their work from past semesters with others and using friends' old exams to study, and they are often encouraged to do so. But the limits of a good learning strategy can be stretched too far if students "borrow" from papers, homework sets or lab reports done by other students.

Instructors often do a good job of varying exam questions and assignments from semester to semester. But they may begin to resent the time and suspicion involved in altering effective materials just to take precautions against potential cheating or plagiarism. Even if specific instructions are given for students not to access past materials, students report that past materials are very easy to come by and often too alluring to pass up.

Do We Have to Spell Everything Out?

Students recognize the obvious examples of academic dishonesty such as copying during an exam or quoting extensively without a citation. They can be much less clear on how much collaboration is allowed, what kind of paraphrasing is appropriate to summarize a source or whether one assignment can be turned in for two different classes. If students are not accustomed to thinking about the ownership of ideas, they tend to underreport their sources.

Instructors often state their expectations for tests and about quoting, footnoting, and paraphrasing in papers and they outline the consequences of being dishonest. However,

they may not state precisely what they consider to be appropriate collaboration (if any) and what they recommend as guidelines for teamwork.

Playing the Odds

Students sometimes feel that receiving a zero for an exam or a paper is a justified penalty for cheating, but they may also convince themselves that they won't get caught. And they can be reinforced in this thinking if grading procedures aren't planned carefully or if instructors don't follow up on suspicious incidents.

Instructors may have difficulty discovering that students copied or inappropriately collaborated on assignments when a large number of exams and papers must be graded. Grading procedures which include comparison among students and across multiple sections take extra time so instructors sometimes bet on their ability to spot students' papers which are strikingly similar.

Don't Rock the Boat

Students often feel they need to stick together and watch out for each other; thus, they feel extremely reluctant to report a peer's academic dishonesty, even when they suspect someone they don't like. They think, "Would I want them to report me if they thought I was cheating?" The answer usually is no, so they often let it slide. To avoid confrontation, they may not even talk to a friend.

Instructors sometimes avoid discussions of questionable behaviors with individual students. Some are honestly confused about whether an initial discussion has to lead to a charge of dishonesty and a potentially long procedure (it doesn't). Instructors may also be reluctant to approach a student about questionable work without solid evidence because they don't want to make unwarranted accusations.