

Studies Find More Students Cheating, With High Achievers No Exception

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Large-scale cheating has been uncovered over the last year at some of the nation's most competitive schools, like Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, the Air Force Academy and, most recently, Harvard.

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Commencement at Harvard. Officials said last month that they were investigating possible cheating on an undergraduate take-home test.

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Studies of student behavior and attitudes show that a majority of students violate standards of academic integrity to some degree, and that high achievers are just as likely to do it as others. Moreover, there is evidence that the problem has worsened over the last few decades.

Experts say the reasons are relatively simple: Cheating has become easier and more widely tolerated, and both schools and parents have failed to give students strong, repetitive messages about what is allowed and what is prohibited.

“I don’t think there’s any question that students have become more competitive, under more pressure, and, as a result, tend to excuse more from themselves and other students, and that’s abetted by the adults around them,” said Donald L. McCabe, a professor at the Rutgers University Business School, and a leading researcher on cheating.

“There have always been struggling students who cheat to survive,” he said. “But more and more, there are students at the top who cheat to thrive.”

Internet access has made cheating easier, enabling students to connect instantly with answers, friends to consult and works to plagiarize. And generations of research has shown that a major factor in unethical behavior is simply how easy or hard it is.

A recent study by Jeffrey A. Roberts and David M. Wasieleski at Duquesne University found that the more online tools college students were allowed to use to complete an assignment, the more likely they were to copy the work of others.

The Internet has changed attitudes, as a world of instant downloading, searching, cutting and pasting has loosened some ideas of ownership and authorship. An increased emphasis on having students work in teams may also have played a role.

“Students are surprisingly unclear about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating,” said Mr. Wasieleski, an associate professor of management.

Howard Gardner, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said that over the 20 years he has studied professional and academic integrity, “the ethical muscles have atrophied,” in part because of a culture that exalts success, however it is attained.

He said the attitude he has found among students at elite colleges is: “We want to be famous and successful, we think our colleagues are cutting corners, we’ll be damned if we’ll lose out to them, and some day, when we’ve made it, we’ll be role models. But until then, give us a pass.”

Numerous projects and research studies have shown that frequently reinforcing standards, to both students and teachers, can lessen cheating. But experts say most schools fail to do so.

“Institutions do a poor job of making those boundaries clear and consistent, of educating students about them, of enforcing them, and of giving teachers a clear process to follow through on them,” said Laurie L. Hazard, director of the Academic Center for Excellence at Bryant University. In the programs that colleges run to help new students make the transition from high school, students are counseled on everything from food to friendships, but “little or no time is spent on cheating,” she said.

A 2010 survey of Yale undergraduates by The Yale Daily News showed that most had never read the school’s policy on academic honesty, and most were unsure of the rules on sharing or recycling their work.

In surveys of high school students, the Josephson Institute of Ethics, which advises schools on ethics education, has found that about three-fifths admit to having cheated in the previous year — and about four-fifths say their own ethics are above average.

Few schools “place any meaningful emphasis on integrity, academic or otherwise, and colleges are even more indifferent than high schools,” said Michael Josephson, president of the institute.

“When you start giving take-home exams and telling kids not to talk about it, or you let them carry smartphones into tests, it’s an invitation to cheating,” he said.

The case that Harvard revealed in late August involved a take-home final exam in an undergraduate course with 279 students. The university has not yet held hearings on the charges, which may take months to resolve.

Officials said similarities in test papers suggested that nearly half the class had broken the rules against plagiarism and working together; some of the accused students said their behavior was innocent, or fell into gray areas.

Mr. McCabe’s surveys, conducted around the country, have found that most college students see collaborating with others, even when it is forbidden, as a minor offense or no offense at all. Nearly half take the same view of paraphrasing or copying someone else’s work without attribution. And most high school teachers and college professors surveyed fail to pursue some of the violations they find.

Experts say that along with students, schools and technology, parents are also to blame. They cite surveys, anecdotal impressions and the work of researchers like Jean M. Twenge, author of the book “Generation Me,” to make the case that since the 1960s, parenting has shifted away from emphasizing obedience, honor and respect for authority to promoting children’s happiness while stoking their ambitions for material success.

“We have a culture now where we have real trouble accepting that our kids make mistakes and fail, and when they do, we tend to blame someone else,” said Tricia Bertram Gallant, author of “Creating the Ethical Academy,” and director of the academic integrity office at the University of California at San Diego. “Thirty, 40 years ago, the parent would come in and grab the kid by the ear, yell at him and drag him home.”

Educators tell tales of students who grew up taking for granted not only that their highly involved parents would help with schoolwork but that the “help” would strain the definition of the word.

Ms. Gallant recalled giving integrity counseling to a student who would send research papers to her mother to review before turning them in — and saw nothing wrong in that. One paper, it turned out, her mother had extensively rewritten — and extensively plagiarized.

“I said, ‘So what’s the lesson here?’ ” Ms. Gallant said. “And she said, completely serious, ‘Check the work my mom does?’ ”

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