

Confronting college cheating

Recent studies have shown that a steadily growing number of students cheat or plagiarize in college — and the data from high schools suggest that this number will continue to rise.

A study by Don McCabe of Rutgers University showed that 74 percent of high school students admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating on tests. Even more disturbing is the way that many students define cheating and plagiarism. For example, they believe that cutting and pasting a few sentences from various Web sources without attribution is not plagiarism.

Before the Web, students certainly plagiarized — but they had to plan ahead to do so. Fraternities and sororities often had files of term papers, and some high-tech term-paper firms could fax papers to students. Overall, however, plagiarism required forethought.

Online term-paper sites changed all that. Overnight, students could order a term paper, print it out and have it ready for class in the morning — and still get a good night's sleep.

One response to the increase in cheating has been to fight technology with more technology. Plagiarism-checking sites provide a service to screen student papers. They offer a color-coded report on papers and the original sources from which the students might have copied. Colleges qualify for volume discounts, which encourages professors to submit whole classes' worth of papers.

The technological battle between term-paper mills and anti-plagiarism services will undoubtedly continue to escalate. The cost of both plagiarism and its detection will also undoubtedly continue to spiral.

But there is another way. Our first and most important line of defense against academic dishonesty is simply good teaching. Cheating and plagiarism often arise in a vacuum created by routine, lack of interest and overwork. Professors who give the same assignment every semester, fail to guide students in the development of their projects and have little interest in what the students have to say contribute to the academic environment in which much cheating and

plagiarism occurs.

Consider, by way of contrast, professors who know their students and who give assignments that require regular, continuing interaction with them about their projects — and who require students to produce work that is a meaningful development of their own interests. These professors create an environment in which cheating and plagiarism are far less likely to occur. In this context, any plagiarism would usually be evident to the professor, who would see it as inconsistent with the rest of the student's work. A strong, meaningful curriculum taught by committed professors is the first and most important defense against academic dishonesty.

The second remedy is to encourage the development of integrity in our students. A sense of responsibility about one's intellectual development would preclude cheating as inconsistent with one's identity. It is precisely this sense of individual integrity that schools with honor codes seek to promote.

Third, we must encourage our students to perceive the dishonesty of their classmates as something that causes harm to the many students who play by the rules. The argument that cheaters hurt only themselves is false. Cheaters do hurt other people, and they do so to help themselves. They get better grades and more advantages with less effort. Honest students lose grades, scholarships, recommendations and admission to advanced programs. Honest students must create enough peer pressure to dissuade potential cheaters. Ultimately, students must be willing to step forward and confront those who engage in academic dishonesty.

Addressing these issues is not a luxury that can be postponed until a more convenient time. It is a short step from dishonesty in colleges to dishonesty in business. It is doubtful that students who fail to develop habits of integrity and honesty while still in an academic setting are likely to do so once they are out in the "real" world.

Hinman is a professor of philosophy and director of the Values Institute at the University of San Diego. He wrote this for the Washington Post.