To Cheat or Not to Cheat: a Review with Implications for Practice

Lauren Hensley

Lauren Hensley is the Instructional Systems Specialist at the Walter E. Dennis Learning Center at the Ohio State University and a doctoral candidate in Educational Psychology.

Cheating is antithetical to the goals of meaningful learning and moral development. The more that community college faculty, staff, and administrators understand the nature of cheating and factors associated with the behavior, the more effective they can be in creating environments of integrity both inside and outside of the formal classroom. This paper reviews the literature on understanding, predicting, and preventing cheating in postsecondary environments, discussing the role of individual, interpersonal, and contextual aspects in cheating. The paper then considers a variety of approaches to building environments in community colleges that encourage behaviors in line with academic integrity and discourage academic dishonesty.

At its best, postsecondary education provides opportunities for students to develop as thinkers, individuals, and community members. As first articulated by Bowen (1977), an almost universally identified goal of education beyond high school is “the growth of the whole person through the cultivation not only of the intellect and of practical competence but also of the affective dispositions, including the moral, religious, emotional, social, and esthetic aspects of personality” (p. 33). If community college faculty, staff, and administrators aim to help students attain such goals, then perhaps no activity is more threatening to this outcome than cheating. Described by various scholars on a continuum from too-close-for-comfort paraphrasing to paying another student to take one’s exam, the construct of cheating encompasses a variety of behaviors. Whether exhibited by blatant, premeditated misconduct or a spur of the moment act of copy-and-paste, cheating inhibits both engagement in learning and the development of positive values that community col-
college attendance might otherwise foster, such as fairness and integrity (Boehm, Justice, & Weeks, 2009).

As the Internet and personal communication devices have become a standard part of students’ academic and personal lives, information has become easier to access and to share than it was just a decade ago, both in legitimate and illegitimate ways (Stephens, Young, & Calabrese, 2007). Given the pervasiveness of opportunity, it is not surprising that rates of cheating are on the rise (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Studies typically indicate that the majority of students have cheated at least once during college (Schmelkin et al., 2008). Blaming technology may oversimplify the situation, however. Cheating existed prior to the digital age and, further, not all students who could cheat choose to do so. To cheat or not to cheat—what factors make the difference? This paper will begin by examining factors related to cheating and will then discuss implications for practice in community college environments.

**Academic and motivational aspects related to cheating**

Academic characteristics such as grades and study strategies demonstrate a strong association with cheating. A consistent finding is that students who cheat tend to have lower grades than those who refrain (Miller, Murdock, Anderman, & Poindexter, 2007; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995), which may relate to a concern about grades or a lack of confidence in academic skills. Although grades are not a perfect estimation of academic prowess, they provide some degree of insight into students’ relative abilities. Low academic skills tend to accompany high rates of cheating, which serves as a coping strategy, even if a maladaptive one (Williams et al., 2010). As Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield (1998) explain, “for some students, cheating may be a viable strategy for earning a good grade at any cost; for others, cheating may be a useful strategy for demonstrating, albeit falsely, that the student is competent in a particular domain” (p. 84). For students who are having difficulty in a certain class, the appeal of cheating may stem from the appearance of an alternate route to a desired grade or an easy way to save face.

A lack of effective time management strategies can make cheating appear necessary. In a study in which students ranked the relevance of 16 different reasons for plagiarizing, the two most highly ranked reasons were “a lack of time” and “the habit of doing things at the last minute” (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010, p. 222), consistent with other findings relating procrastination and poor time management to cheating on papers (i.e., plagiarism; Craig, Federici, & Buehler, 2010; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995) and tests (Pino & Smith, 2003). Such a relation may exist because cheating seems to be a procrastinating student’s best remaining option for getting a passing grade, whether such behavior is premeditated (e.g., I don’t feel like doing this now, and I can always find something online if I need to) or a last resort (e.g., I’m out of time, and I have to find a way out of...
this situation). In either case, when students do not allow themselves ample time to prepare for exams or other assignments, the likelihood of cheating is high.

Students’ inner worlds shape their actions, so it is no surprise that beliefs, values, and priorities influence cheating behavior. Williams et al. (2010) examined the literature for common reasons for cheating and found the predominant themes to be: (1) “unrestrained achievement motivation,” (2) “fear of punishment,” and (3) “moral inhibition” (p. 299, italics in original). Achievement motivation implies striving for accomplishment (Spence & Helmreich, 1983). Seeking to be successful can be a powerful motivator that leads to high academic performance. When achievement motivation is unrestrained, however, it can overshadow ethical considerations, as Johnson (1981) revealed in his study of community college students. In such situations, students may view cheating as a way of ensuring certain grades. Additional studies of community college students (e.g., Genereux & McLeod, 1995) confirm the link between cheating and a desire for outcomes such as high grades and career opportunities. Given such aspirations, cheating can be thought of as a cost-benefit ratio in which students weigh the potential costs of being caught against the anticipated benefits of enhanced performance (Gerdeman, 2000; Hutton, 2006). The presence of strict, well-publicized, and consistently enforced academic misconduct policies may be an effective deterrent for students who fear personal, social, or academic consequences (Jackson, Levine, Furnham, & Burr, 2002). When moral inhibition is salient, decisions related to cheating have more to do with internal motivation and characteristics than with policies (Williams et al., 2010). Community college students who view cheating as ethically wrong or socially unacceptable are less likely to cheat than students who do not have these perceptions (Smyth & Davis, 2003). This relation is supported by research demonstrating that high levels of principled moral reasoning correspond with low levels of cheating (Cummings, Dyas, & Maddux, 2001).

It also appears that a certain motivational profile cultivates conditions under which low levels of cheating occur. Pino and Smith (2003) describe the “academic ethic” (p. 493) as consisting of internal locus of control (i.e., seeing oneself as having responsibility for one’s outcomes; Trice, 1985), regular class attendance, resistance to partying, and a focus on learning rather than grades. In Pino and Smith’s study of nearly 700 postsecondary students, the higher the academic ethic, the lower the likelihood of cheating. This blend of personal responsibility, effort, self-control, and academic engagement demonstrates that a combination of factors is more likely than any one isolated characteristic to influence academic integrity.

**Interpersonal aspects related to cheating**

Beyond intrapersonal factors, relationships with peers play a powerful role in postsecondary students’ cheating behavior. Cheating in order to assist a friend is a common explanation provided by students for their behavior (Newstead,
Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996; Yardley, Rodriguez, Bates, & Nelson, 2009). During examinations, students are more likely to exchange answers with friends than with less well-known classmates (Newstead et al., 1996). Furthermore, technology provides a new twist on social cheating, with cell phones enabling the sending of questions and answers regardless of location (Johnson & Martin, 2005).

Outside the classroom but related to what happens inside it, activities and interactions form a social environment in which students share values and experiences. On the one hand, extracurricular involvement is related to a host of positive outcomes (for a review, see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). On the other hand, the higher one’s extracurricular involvement, the higher the rate of cheating (McCabe & Treviño, 1997; Whitley, 1998). As relationships become more dense, pressure to help friends may be especially high (Pascarella & Terenzini). Because perceiving cheating to be the norm enhances one’s own likelihood of cheating (Gulli, Kohler, & Patriguin, 2007; Yardley et al., 2009), awareness of cheating among members of a significant peer group may be a keen influence. Although the mean level of student engagement is lower in community colleges than in four-year institutions, the influence of peer culture on cheating behaviors is salient in the two-year context (Gerdeman, 2000; Smyth & Davis, 2004). Underscoring the importance of peer networks, community college students who live on-campus are more likely to view cheating as socially acceptable and more willing to help another student cheat than are students who live off-campus (Smyth & Davis, 2003).

The aggregate environment, comprised of the predominant characteristics of students (Strange & Banning, 2001), provides a way of understanding the role of peer relationships when it comes to cheating. A mechanism that may be at work is environmental press, as a number of studies have uncovered that “peer behavior formed a normative context for cheating” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 352). When cheating is common, it can be self-perpetuating. If students perceive that others are cheating, they too may choose to cheat. This act may be a function of peer pressure (e.g., my friends are cheating–I should take part, too), desensitization (e.g., everyone else is doing it–it’s no big deal), or personal justice (e.g., others have an unfair advantage–I have to even the playing field). On the other hand, if the norm is not to cheat, students may think twice about engaging in the socially unacceptable behavior. Indeed, in their study of various contextual influences on cheating, McCabe and Treviño (1997) revealed that the most powerful factor, in either direction, was the perception of peer disapproval of cheating.

**Classroom and institutional aspects related to cheating**

Classroom environments present other contextual aspects that can either discourage or encourage acts of cheating. When instructional activities and discourse emphasize demonstrating ability, competing with other students, or
receiving certain grades, cheating is more likely to occur than when such environments place value on learning, developing, or collaborating (Anderman et al., 1998). Particularly when grades are emphasized, publicized, and based on a limited number of objective assignments, students may respond to the pressure by cheating (Jordan, 2001).

Students’ perceptions of the quality of instruction can also influence the decision of whether to cheat. In qualitative interviews, common reasons for cheating were boring assignments and the belief that the instructor did not care about the subject (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010). In introductory or large lecture courses, which are common in the two-year context, students may be particularly apt to find the class boring or infer a lack of instructor interest (McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001). Similarly, if students find an instructor to be unhelpful or difficult to understand, they may resort to cheating as a way of ensuring they attain desired grades (Owunwanne, Rustagi, & Dada, 2010). For community college students, in particular, the perception of instructor apathy toward cheating correlates with high rates of cheating in a given course (Genereux & McLeod, 1995). Such scenarios emphasize that perceptions of classroom contexts factor into choices about academic misconduct.

At the institutional level, honor codes have potential to mold the social and academic environment. Across institutional types, schools with honor codes have lower rates of cheating than schools that lack honor codes, with significant differences in rates of sharing answers, using unauthorized notes, plagiarizing (both minimally and extensively), and working together on assignments when such activities were prohibited (McCabe et al., 2001). As summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), explanations for the low incidence of cheating include: student responsibility for submitting allegations of cheating, institutional integrity standards taught early and unambiguously, concomitant benefits such as taking tests without the presence of an instructor, and an environment comprised of students whose awareness of the honor code may have influenced their initial decisions to enroll. Although Yardley et al. (2009) found no relation between students’ honor code knowledge and cheating behavior, they suggested the association might strengthen with institutions’ further efforts to emphasize the existence and significance of honor codes.

**Implications for practice and policy**

As various academic characteristics and contexts have strong associations with rates of cheating, one can reasonably anticipate that designing and implementing certain practices and policies may serve to reduce the likelihood of cheating among students enrolled in community colleges. With this potential in mind, the paper will now consider implications and applications of the research on cheating.
Implications for academic support

Students with low perceived abilities or a lack of effective learning strategies tend to engage in high amounts of cheating (e.g., Roig & DeTommaso, 1995). Notably, many community college students require developmental coursework and may “experience feelings of inadequacy because they lack confidence” (Gohn & Albin, 2006, p. 10). Although the competition associated with elite four-year institutions may be absent, community college students may resort to cheating as a self-protective mechanism—a way of avoiding poor grades and ensuing shame or disappointment (Williams et al., 2010). In such cases, academic support is particularly salient, and it may prove helpful to reduce the perception that assignments are all-or-nothing opportunities. To encourage legitimate help-seeking behaviors, instructors can make clear how and when they will provide assistance to students (Boehm et al., 2009). By emphasizing the value they place on individual effort and growth rather than ability or flawlessness (Dweck, 2012), instructors can encourage students to put forth their own work, rather than relying on external aids such as cheat sheets or websites. Providing a variety of assessment methods and allowing for consultation and revision (Albright, 1999) may both reduce the tendency to procrastinate and increase students’ confidence in their ability to complete the work without resorting to unsanctioned help methods.

Assisting students with understanding content, developing learning strategies, and building academic self-efficacy may encourage students to believe they can and should submit their own work (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Most community colleges have one or more offices that provide academic assistance, though students are often unaware of how to access these services (Arendale, 2010). Arranging for a staff member to speak to the class can introduce students to the support that is available at the institution and make academic support services less of an abstract, impersonal concept. The syllabus is an appropriate place to describe such services and to list contact information for the departments offering such services. As an incentive, instructors can offer extra points on an exam or writing assignment to students who bring in documentation of having met with a writing consultant or content-area tutor.

One implication of Pino and Smith’s (2003) work related to the academic ethic is to instill internal locus of control, value for learning, and resistance to peer pressure. The authors recommend that instructors mention factors related to the academic ethic in lectures and syllabi to encourage students to consider how developing these characteristics can lead to academic success (Boehm et al., 2009). Orientation activities and introductory courses are environments in which faculty and staff can jointly endorse the academic ethic and highlight academic and extracurricular opportunities that facilitate the path toward adaptive patterns of personal responsibility, appreciation of learning, and strong sense of identity. For a more comprehensive approach to developing motivated strategies for learning, community colleges can create and promote courses that relate to self-regulated learning and college success (e.g., Hofer & Yu, 2003).
Implications for student life

Developing interpersonally is a desired outcome of postsecondary education (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), yet research indicates that peer relationships and extracurricular involvement relate positively to the likelihood of cheating (Whitley, 1998). Rather than discouraging students from engaging socially, community college personnel should take steps to implement interventions that encourage personal and collective integrity. Because of the strong peer influences that exist in student organizations, interventions that cultivate an ethos of integrity may have pervasive effects in these environments, particularly if student leaders or faculty/staff advisors of such groups demonstrate a genuine commitment to building communities of integrity. Such individuals can arrange for educational programs and presentations through collaboration with the institution’s academic support units. Inviting a speaker to share information about research skills, citation practices, time management, or study strategies may reduce individual students’ likelihoods of cheating while simultaneously helping to shape norms.

Although culture is pervasive and norms develop over time, changes to physical and virtual environments may impact the academic environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Designating study areas and quiet hours for shared spaces can increase the amount of schoolwork and studying that takes place. The presence of tutors in multiple locations and outside normal business hours, as well as the ease of accessing academic help, can promote academic success. Through the availability of time, space, and resources to study effectively in shared spaces, students may be more effective in their academic preparations, naturally reducing the need to cheat (Owunwanne et al., 2010).

Implications for commuter environments

The students most likely to take advantage of the above opportunities are those who are traditionally aged and living on campus; many community college students, however, are adults who work and commute to campus (Albin & Francis, 2006). To develop academic and student-life initiatives that serve a diverse range of students in a diverse range of campus environments, administrators must consider the unique composition of their given institutions. Alternative opportunities and resources must be considered, for helping commuter students connect with one another and the institution promotes academic success and identification with positive campus values (Mendenhall, 2012).

Just as residence halls provide programming and support for on-campus students, the activities in shared spaces for commuter students (e.g., commuter lounges) can reinforce an academic ethic for off-campus students (Hintz, 2011). Beneficial commuter environments, however, extend beyond the physical presence of the institution. Online resources and materials tend to be preferred by working students because of their accessibility in terms of time and space (Kuh et al., 2006). Well-developed and publicized virtual tutoring and study tools can
provide academic support for commuter students and others whose schedules make it difficult to be on campus physically (Arendale, 2010; Kuh et al.). Staff and administrators can also leverage social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) to provide access to webcasts, videos, and other resources that deliver content similar to that which might be disseminated by activities and speakers on campus (Mendenhall, 2012). Reflection on the content can then be facilitated through both synchronous (e.g., chat, web conferencing) and asynchronous communication (e.g., message boards, online social networks).

**Implications for classroom and institutional policies**

From an instructional standpoint, it may not always be feasible to overhaul teaching and assessment methods. For instance, the instructor of a college algebra class with hundreds of students may have little choice but to administer objective tests. Despite the limitations of certain class environments, even minor changes can be the tipping point in decisions of whether or not to cheat. By reducing the level of risk associated with assignments, instructors can reduce grade-related pressure and encourage effective and ethical completion of assignments. For instance, instructors can break large projects into smaller pieces, administer frequent quizzes, or provide opportunities to gain partial credit by solving incorrect questions (Craig et al., 2010). By emphasizing improvement and providing manageable pacing, such efforts can reduce the likelihood of students feeling overwhelmed (Gulli et al., 2007). As they structure coursework in these ways, instructors can both reduce aspects that motivate cheating and model self-regulatory strategies for students.

Classroom management can make a difference. In a national survey, chief academic officers (CAOs) of community colleges identified “promoting effective classroom management strategies (e.g., using multiple exams, maintaining small class sizes, and prohibiting electronic devices” as a recommended approach to reducing academic misconduct (Boehm et al., 2009, p. 51). Other best practices reported in the survey included placing the policy on academic misconduct in a variety of publications alongside instructive examples, training instructors on related issues, and using special software to identify instances of cheating and plagiarism. In the interest of education rather than punishment, Craig et al. (2010) suggest that instructors allow students to upload their papers into the plagiarism software and to revise flagged passages prior to the final submission. If instructors choose to use such software, it is only fair to both inform students of this practice and teach them how to properly attribute facts and ideas. Teaching—and reminding—students how to properly cite resources is a preventative measure for plagiarism, and information about citation standards can be conveyed during lectures, in syllabi, on top of assignments, or through librarian-guided tutorials (Craig et al.). Such efforts demonstrate the value instructors place on integrity, as well as their support of students’ learning appropriate behaviors.

Honor codes have the potential to make a significant difference in institutional culture and student behavior. In Boehm et al.’s (2009) national survey,
community college CAOs endorsed the use of honor codes as a best practice. Given that honor codes are participatory in nature whereas the structure of community colleges is often bureaucratic (Cohen & Brawer, 1996), success is likely to hinge on the inclusion of faculty, staff, and students in the development and implementation of the code. For community colleges that currently lack an honor code, it is advisable to investigate the creation of a system appropriate to the mission of the institution. If an existing honor code seems ineffectual, the situation may call for reinvigorating the code (Yardley et al., 2009). Honor codes that are visible tend to be more effective than latent honor codes (Boehm et al., 2009). One way to increase visibility is to require students to write out the code by hand on each assignment. Presenting the honor code as liberating rather than restrictive may also increase the degree to which students accept it. For instance, instructors can emphasize the benefits of the honor code by trusting students with take-home or unproctored examinations.

Inconsistency in how instructors describe and apply academic misconduct policies, whether across an institution or in the behavior of a given instructor, detracts from an institutional culture of academic integrity (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). Conversely, consistency in instructor implementation, and institutional support conveyed by administrators, can instill such a culture. In terms of reducing the appeal of cheating at a fundamental level, alignment between policies and actions can bolster students’ perceptions that there is a real likelihood of getting caught and facing meaningful consequences. Strong disciplinary measures provide a disincentive that increases the level of perceived risk associated with cheating, reducing the appeal (Pino & Smith, 2003). If disciplinary measures are to be strong, then it is the institution’s responsibility to ensure that students understand the policies and, perhaps more importantly, the reasons behind them. Furthermore, it is important that instructors receive administrative support and training regarding how to create educational environments that promote academic integrity. As previously discussed, there are a variety of ways to attain such a goal, ranging from enhancing access to academic support services to structuring assignments to promote gradual learning.

In regard to such actions, a distinguishing feature of the two-year environment is the high proportion of adjunct faculty. Often, “these instructors have little time, resources, or incentive to pursue professional development, modify the curriculum, and change pedagogical style” (Arendale, 2010, p. 99). When their autonomy and input are supported by the institution, however, adjunct faculty can play an important role in course development and departmental decision making (McIntyre & Munson, 2008). By tying compensation and recognition to instructors’ efforts to improve teaching and learning, CAOs can further reinforce an institutional culture that promotes integrity.
Conclusion

A variety of factors can provide the support necessary to develop both motivation for learning and academic integrity. As articulated by Craig et al. (2000), consistently describing “policies, procedures, and penalties regarding academic dishonesty in course syllabi and classes sends the message that integrity is a core value to be embraced and carried forward” (p. 54). While this statement addresses specific aspects of the classroom environment, its basic approach can be broadly applicable to education-related policies and practices. “Integrity,” “value,” “embraced,” “carried forward”—the positive connotations of such words should be the core of any institutional approach to reducing cheating. Is it important to remember that the benefits of not cheating will resonate more deeply with students if individuals affiliated with the institution express that they value such behavior not so much as a matter of policy but for what it means for the intellectual and social culture of the community college and the students’ own educational and personal development. Faculty, staff, and administrators can play an important role in the development of quality teaching experiences, educational programming, and institutional policies that encourage integrity and, ultimately, reduce rates of academic cheating.

References


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