

The Cheating Game

'Everyone's doing it,' from grade school to graduate school

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By Carolyn Kleiner; Mary Lord

Umpteen pages to plow through for honors English, anatomy, and U.S. history. . . . Geometry problems galore It was a typical weeknight for high school sophomore Leah Solowsky. Before tackling her first assignment--a Spanish essay on healthy eating--the honor-roll student logged on to her computer to chat with pals. Suddenly, it hit her: Perhaps she could download some of her workload.

Solowsky cruised to the AltaVista search engine, clicked on "Spanish," and typed in "la dieta." Fifteen minutes later, she had everything she needed to know about fruits, vegetables, and grains--all in flawless espanol. She quickly retyped the information and handed in her paper the next day. "I had a ton of homework, I wasn't doing that well in the class, and I felt, hey, this is one way to boost my grade," explains Solowsky, now a junior with a B-plus average at the highly competitive Gulliver Preparatory School in Miami. "I didn't think it was cheating because I didn't even stop to think about it."

Every day across America, millions of students from middle school to medical school face similar ethical quandaries--and research indicates that most choose to cheat. In a recent survey conducted by Who's Who Among American High School Students, 80 percent of high-achieving high schoolers admitted to having cheated at least once; half said they did not believe cheating was necessarily wrong--and 95 percent of the cheaters said they have never been caught. According to the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University, three quarters of college students confess to cheating at least once. And a new U.S. News poll found 90 percent of college kids believe cheaters never pay the price.*

Crib sheets and copying answers are nothing new, of course. What's changed, experts maintain, is the scope of the problem: the technology that opens new avenues to cheat, students' boldness in using it, and the erosion of conscience at every level of education. "I'm scared to death," says Emporia State University psychology Prof. Stephen Davis, who recently expanded his study of cheating to graduate students--including those in medical school. "I hope I never get a brain disease."

Cheating arts. Academic fraud has never been easier. Students can tamper electronically with grade records, transmit quiz answers via pager or cell phone, and lift term papers from hundreds of Web sites. At the same time, an overload of homework combined with intense pressure to excel in school, from hard-driving peers and parents, makes cheating easy to justify--and hard to resist. Valedictorians are as likely to cheat as laggards, and girls have closed the gap with boys. In fact, the only thing that makes Leah Solowsky's case unusual is that she got caught--earning a zero on her Spanish paper and getting barred from the National Honor Society.

Sissela Bok, author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, suspects part of the problem may be that "people are very confused [about] what is meant by cheating." When does taking information off the Internet constitute research, and when is it plagiarism? Where does collaboration end and collusion begin? The rules just aren't that clear, particularly given the growing number of schools that stress teamwork. The result: widespread homework copying among students and a proliferation of sophisticated sixth-grade science projects and exquisitely crafted college applications that bear the distinct stamp of parental "involvement."

Most alarming to researchers is the pervasiveness of cheating among adolescents. What begins as penny-ante dishonesty in elementary school--stealing Pokemon cards or glancing at a neighbor's spelling test--snowballs into more serious cheating in middle and high school, as enrollments swell and students start moving from class to class, teacher to teacher. Professor Davis, who has gathered data on more than 17,000 students, notes that 50 years ago, only about 1 in 5 college students admitted to having

cheated in high school. Today, a range of studies shows that figure has exploded, to anywhere from three quarters of students to an astonishing 98 percent.

Sam, a junior at the University of Alabama, can barely recall the first time he cheated. He thinks it must have started back in middle school, copying the occasional math assignment or printing a key formula on his forearm. (Like other current cheaters quoted in this article, Sam asked that his real name be withheld.) A decade later he is still at it, most recently lifting a paper on post-Civil War racism off the Internet. "I realize that it's wrong, but I don't feel bad about it, either, partly because I know everyone else is doing it," says Sam in a deep Southern drawl. "If I ever stole a test or something to that degree, I'd feel guilty. But just getting a couple of answers here and there doesn't bother me."

Competition for admission to elite colleges has transformed the high school years into a high-stakes race where top students compete for a spot on the sweet end of the curve. It has also spawned a new breed of perpetrator: the smart cheater. In the Who's Who survey, the country's top juniors and seniors talked about copying homework, plagiarizing, or otherwise cheating their way to the head of the class. "Grades are so important to these kids," sighs RevaBeth Russell, an advanced-placement biology teacher at Lehi High School in Utah, who has seen copying incidents skyrocket as collegebound students from prosperous families settle in the rural area.

What's going on. The notion that schools are awash with cheaters doesn't always square with what administrators say goes on in their classrooms and corridors. "My goodness, the students are 12-, 13-, 14-year-old kids, and sometimes they make a bad decision," says Gary McGuigan, principal of the H. E. Huntington Middle School in San Marino, Calif. "But [cheating] isn't rampant." Sunny Hills High School in nearby Fullerton weathered two major cheating scandals in two years involving more than a dozen honor-roll students, yet principal Loring Davies insists these are "isolated" incidents.

But in scores of interviews in a cross section of communities nationwide, students gave U.S. News a strikingly different reading of the situation. "We all know that cheating is cheating, and we shouldn't do it," says Melissa, a student at Duke University. "But there are times that you cheat because there aren't enough hours in the day." Case in point: last month, Melissa found herself with a computer programming assignment due in a few hours--and several hours of driving to do at the same time. So she had a friend copy his program and turn it in for her. "It's not a big deal because it's just a mindless assignment," rationalizes Melissa. "It's not a final or a midterm. I mean, I understood how to do it; I just didn't have the time."

Most distressing to teachers is the way plagiarism, copying, and similar deceits devalue learning. "We're somehow not able to convince them of the importance of the process," laments Connie Eberly, an English teacher at J. I. Case High School in Racine, Wis. "It's the product that counts." For too many students and their parents, getting that diploma--that scholarship, that grant--is more important than acquiring knowledge. "I'm just trying to do everything I can do to get through this school," acknowledges Brad, a junior at an exclusive Northeastern boarding school and a veritable encyclopedia of cheating tips. (Feign illness on test days and get the questions from classmates before taking a makeup exam. Answer multiple-choice questions with 'c'--a letter that can easily be altered and submitted for a regrade.) "If this is the only way to do it, so be it," he says.

The pressure to succeed, particularly on high-stakes tests, can drive students to consider extreme measures. Two months ago, nothing mattered more to Manuel than doing well on the SAT. "If your score is high, then you get into [a good school] and scholarships come to you," explains the high school senior from Houston, who is going to have to cover half of his college expenses himself. "If not, then you go to some community college, make little money, and end up doing nothing important the rest of your life." Desperate for a competitive edge, he started poking around the Net and soon stumbled upon an out-of-the-way message board where students bragged about snagging copies of the test. Manuel posted his own note, begging for help; he says he got a reply offering a faxed copy of the exam for \$150 but ultimately chickened out.

While crib notes and other time-honored techniques have yet to go out of style, advanced technology is giving slackers a new edge. The Internet provides seemingly endless opportunities for cheating, from online term-paper mills (story, Page 63) to chat rooms where students can swap science projects and

math solutions. They also share test questions via E-mail between classes and hack into school mainframes to alter transcripts; they use cell phones to dial multiple-choice answers into alphanumeric pagers (1C2A3D) and store everything from algebra formulas to notes on Jane Eyre in cutting-edge calculators. Some devices even have infrared capabilities, allowing students to zap information across a classroom. "I get the sense there's a thrill to it, that 'my teachers are too dumb to catch me,'" says English teacher Eberly.

Cram artists. As the stakes rise--from acing spelling tests, say, to slam-dunking the SAT--so does the complexity of the scam. "It's a constant race to keep up with what people are doing," says Gregg Colton, a Florida private investigator who serves as a security consultant for a dozen licensure and testing organizations. His biggest concern is "cram schools" that charge test takers hundreds to thousands of dollars for the chance to study a dubiously obtained copy of an exam in advance. In one notorious case, a California man sold answer-encoded pencils to hundreds of students taking graduate school entrance exams for up to \$9,000 a pop; ringers had sat for the test in New York, then phoned the results across the country, aided by a three-hour time difference.

Reasonably priced surveillance equipment, including hidden cameras and tape recorders, is taking cheating to a whole new level. Colton cites numerous cases in which video cameras roughly the size of a quarter were hidden in a test taker's tie (or watch or jacket) and used to send information to an outside expert, who quickly compiled answers and called them back into a silent pager. "If [students] spent as much time on their studies as they do on cheating, we'd be graduating rocket scientists all over the place," says Larry McCandless, a science teacher at Hardee Junior High in Wauchula, Fla., who recently caught his students using sign language to signal test answers to each other.

If students do spend homeroom copying assignments from one another, it may be because schools send such mixed messages about what, exactly, constitutes crossing the line. Mark, a senior at a Northeastern boarding school, doesn't believe that doing homework with a friend--or a family member--is ever dishonest and blames the people at the head of the classroom for any confusion over collaboration. "I mean, some of my teachers say you can't do it, some say two minds are greater than one," he explains, breaking into a laugh. "I obviously agree with the latter."

He isn't the only one. In a new study of 500 middle and high school students, Rutgers University management Prof. Donald McCabe, a leading authority on academic dishonesty, found that only one third said doing work with classmates was cheating, and just half thought it was wrong for parents to do their homework. So where, exactly, does teamwork end and cheating begin? It's not always that clear, even for grown-ups. According to the U.S. News poll, 20 percent of adults thought that doing homework for a child was fair. It's no wonder that teachers see students of every age handing in essays that contain words they can't pronounce, much less define.

Sue Bigg, a college consultant outside Chicago, often sees the hand of pushy parents. "I am beginning to think of myself in the role of 'integrity police'," she says, relating countless stories of college application essays that have been "edited" by Mom or Dad--and often for the worse, as big words replace any shred of youthful personality. "I'm afraid a lot of this cheating comes from home, where the parents' modus operandi is success at any cost." Edit-happy adults are part of the reason why schools across the country are having students do much of their writing in class nowadays. (It also prevents them from pulling papers off the Web.)

Parents who complete the bulk of their children's work often frustrate those with a more hands-off approach. "It all begins with the Pinewood Derby," grumbles Christopher Hardwick, a father of four from Philadelphia, who confesses to doing his "fair share of putting toothpicks into Styrofoam" for soap-box derbies and science projects. But Margaret Sagarese understands why parents are tempted to meddle. "You do feel caught between a rock and a hard place," says Sagarese, who lives in Islip, N.Y. "You're trying to do the right thing, and yet you know your child is going to lose, because [other classmates'] parents are doing the work."

The U.S. News poll found that 1 in 4 adults believes he has to lie and cheat to get ahead, and it seems this mentality is communicated to children. "Students see adults--parents, businessmen, lawyers--violating ethical standards and receiving a slap on the wrist, if anything, and quickly conclude that if that's

acceptable behavior in the larger society, what's wrong with a little cheating in high school or college?" says Rutgers Professor McCabe. "Too often the messages from parents and teachers come off as, 'You need to do everything you can, at all costs, to get to the top.' You never see any gratification for being a good person anymore," says Audrey James, a senior at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Durham. "Once you get to high school, it's all about who has the grades and who's going to get the most scholarships."

Teaching cheating? Some blame schools, not parents or students, for the cheating epidemic. "We should look at the way we run our institutions and the way those institutions tolerate, or at the very least, make cheating easy," says TheodoreSizer, a longtime educator and coauthor of *The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract*, citing teachers with too large classes and too little time to get to know students or to create new assignments that cannot be pulled off the Internet.

Sometimes the schools are directly responsible. In the midst of March Madness last spring, a former tutor for the University of Minnesota revealed that she had written 400 papers for 20 basketball players between 1993 and 1998; four athletes were suspended, and the team was upset in the first round of the NCAA tournament. "You can talk to any academic adviser [for a sports program], and they will tell you that there have been times when coaches have put pressure on them to do anything it takes to keep an athlete eligible," says Richard Lapchick, director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. He claims that in the past year alone, he has counseled tutors and former players at six different schools to report cheating, only to have every athletic director--and one college president--investigate and deny there was a problem.

It's clear that when students really care about learning, they're much less likely to cheat. Take Bob Corbett, for example. Though he details his years of making cheat sheets and paying people to take his AP exams in *The Cheater's Handbook: The Naughty Student's Bible*, Corbett insists that he never cheated in any subject he really cared about or in classes with inspiring instructors. In fact, he dedicated his book to the 11th-grade teacher who "did such a wonderfully engaging job that he destroyed any shred of desire I may ever have had to cheat in English thereafter. . . ."

Still, the temptation is great. Prof. Gregory Cizek was inspired to write *Cheating on Tests: How to Do It, Detect It, and Prevent It*, after he caught three of his education graduate students in a clear-cut case of academic fraud a few years back; the would-be teachers apparently broke into his office, stole a copy of a final exam, collaborated, and then subbed pages of prewritten work into their tests.

The same standardized exams that drive students to do whatever it takes to gain an edge also push teachers--whose job security or salary can be linked to student performance--to do the unthinkable. This summer, for example, the Houston Independent School District demanded the resignations of a principal and three teachers after a nine-month probe turned up evidence of instructors giving oral prompting during the state achievement test and then using answer keys to correct students' responses, among other offenses.

Most cheaters don't get caught. In fact, perhaps the major reason students cheat is that they get away with it, time and time again. Numerous studies say that students almost never squeal on a classmate who cheats. And most instructors just don't want to play cop. "I'm not here to prevent students from cheating," says Robert Corless, an applied mathematics professor at the University of Western Ontario who eliminated take-home exams a few years ago after he caught students collaborating on them. "I'm here to help the genuine learners catch fire." He'll close off the easy routes, but that's about it. "Spending my time listening to appeals or accusations of cheating is not my idea of spending it well."

Procedures are the least of the hassles encountered by those who pursue cheating cases. It can be complicated, time consuming, futile, and--in the worst-case scenario--litigious. Science teacher McCandless says he feared a lawsuit when one mother berated him for damaging her daughter's self-esteem; she felt he should have waited until after a test to chastise the girl for cheating. And although legal action is rare, teachers at both the K-12 and higher-education levels say it makes them wary about pursuing cheaters. John Hill, a professor of law at St. Thomas University in Florida, actually landed in court. His house was egged and his students hissed at him. And all because he charged a student whose brilliant report for a course on legal ethics was practically identical to a Stanford Law Review article. (She

contends she mistakenly turned in an early draft.) The university honor society narrowly convicted her and meted out a token punishment. Now graduated, she is suing Hill and the university for "loss of ability to obtain a job as an attorney," among other complaints.

It's early on November 6, SAT day, and Ray Nicosia is on the prowl. The director of test security for the Educational Testing Service, Nicosia is making the rounds at a high school test center that has had a string of recent security problems, to guarantee things go smoothly this time--or take steps to shut the site down. He cruises the corridors, a vision of calm amid the throngs of edgy students, and runs through a mental checklist: He verifies that test booklets are kept in a secure storage area, far away from the probing eyes--and fingers--of students, until the very last minute. He glances in classrooms, making sure that proctors follow the rules, checking and double-checking valid forms of identification, randomly assigning students to desks at least 4 feet apart, filling out a seating chart (a permanent record of who sat next to whom), and then strolling about the room during the exam, searching out wandering eyes and other suspicious activity.

To combat a scourge some deem as pernicious as underage drinking, educators are implementing such countermeasures as character education programs, honor codes, and strict academic integrity policies. "I'm not saying it's impossible to cheat, but we're taking a lot of steps to secure our tests," says Nicosia. In recent years, ETS, which administers some 11 million standardized tests a year and questions less than 1 percent of scores, has boosted prevention efforts, aiming to thwart impersonators, thieves, and copycats either before or during the act. Even the simplest precautions, from better training for proctors to a free hotline for reporting shady activity, can make a huge difference. In 1996, for example, ETS began shrink-wrapping the essay section of Advanced Placement exams, to stop students from sneaking a look during the first part of the test; peeking is now virtually nonexistent.

Fighting back. Low-tech tactics work in the classroom, too. In a 1998 study conducted at two public colleges, Oregon State University economics Prof. Joe Kerkvliet found that students were 31 percent more likely to cheat in courses taught by teaching assistants--graduate students or adjunct professors--than those taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty. (Typically, 1 in 8 students will cheat on at least one exam in any given class.) By offering multiple versions of the same test, so students can't share answers with friends in different sections, adding extra proctors, and giving verbal warnings that cheaters will be punished, Kerkvliet has reduced cheating in his classes to practically zero.

Just talking about the problem can be enough to stop it. Sohair Ahmadi used to regularly cut corners back in the ninth and 10th grades--trading test answers in biology, copying homework like mad--and no one seemed to care. In her junior year, she switched schools, to the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, where teachers discuss academic integrity from the outset, outlining why it's important and detailing a laundry list of unacceptable behaviors. "They make it clear that cheating will not be tolerated," says Ahmadi, 18, who not only shed her habit but now heads a committee dedicated to starting a school honor code.

High-tech countermeasures are also on the rise. From the moment a student walks into ETS's computer-based testing center at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., for example, it's clear that Big Brother is watching. A digital camera stands in one corner, ready to snap a test-day photo for posterity; five video cameras record each student's every move; the 15 computers run customized exams, with the order and type of questions determined by a test taker's previous answers. At the moment, ETS is working toward adding a biometric scan (using, say, thumbprints to identify students) to the check-in process.

Make 'em pay. The biggest stumbling block, however, may be that when cheaters do get busted the penalties are rarely harsh. Last year, for instance, the valedictorian at Brea Olinda High School in Southern California was caught electronically altering a course grade. His punishment: being banned from the graduation ceremony. Cheat on the SAT and your score will be canceled; but you can take a retest. It's often true that getting caught cheating "doesn't have the terrifically terrible college ramifications you might think," says Don Firke, academic dean at Choate Rosemary Hall, a boarding school in Wallingford, Conn. "If a college really wants a kid, they're going to find a way to take him." Once on campus, a cheater is apt to find similarly lax discipline. With the exception of a handful of schools like the University of Virginia, which have one-strike-and-you're-out honor-code policies, the vast majority simply dole out zeros for an assignment or course in which a student has been found cheating.

Still, a growing number of institutions are trying to turn discipline into a teachable moment. At the University of Maryland-College Park, for example, students caught cheating must attend a seven-week ethics seminar. "We're not trying to mar someone's life, but we are saying, 'You're going to have to think about this behavior and what danger it poses to you and the larger society,'" says Gary Pavela, director of judicial programs and--a recent addendum--student ethical development.

Do the cheaters actually mend their ways? Leah Solowsky isn't glad she was caught plagiarizing last year, but she acknowledges that the experience did teach her a thing or two. "I learned that teachers aren't as stupid as some people think they are," she says with just a hint of humor. Pausing to think for a moment, she adds: "I mean, cheating should affect your conscience, because you are doing something wrong." Solowsky vows she's sworn off cheating for good--no matter how much loathsome Spanish homework piles up every night. Buena suerte.

According to an exclusive U.S. News poll, 84% of college students believe they need to cheat to get ahead in the world today.

90% of college students say cheaters never pay the price;

90% say when people see someone cheating, they don't turn him in.

63% of college students say it's fair for parents to help with their kids' homework;

20% of adults think it's fair to do it.

Students say parental pressure (40%), peer pressure (40%), and the availability of new technology (31%) make them cheat.

Over 90% of college students say politicians cheat often.

Who else do 90% think are cheaters? The media--and high schoolers.

* U.S. News poll of 1,000 adults (including an oversample of 200 college students) conducted by Celinda Lake of Lake Snell Perry & Associates and Ed Goetas of the Tarrance Group, Oct. 18-23, 1999. Margin of error: plus or minus 3.5 percent.