Psychologists are providing insight into why students cheat and what faculty, schools and even students can do about it.

BY AMY NOVOTNEY

More than half of teenagers say they have cheated on a test during the last year — and 34 percent have done it more than twice — according to a survey of 40,000 U.S. high school students released in February by the nonprofit Josephson Institute of Ethics. The survey also found that one in three students admitted they used the Internet to plagiarize an assignment.

The statistics don’t get any better once students reach college. In surveys of 14,000 undergraduates conducted over the past four years by Donald McCabe, PhD, a business professor at Rutgers University and co-founder of Clemson University’s International Center for Academic Integrity, about two-thirds of students admit to cheating on tests, homework and assignments. And in a 2009 study in Ethics & Behavior (Vol. 19, No. 1), researchers found that nearly 82 percent of a sample of college alumni admitted to engaging in some form of cheating as undergraduates.

Some research even suggests that academic cheating may be associated with dishonesty later in life. In a 2007 survey of 154 college students, Southern Illinois University researchers found that students who plagiarized in college reported that they viewed themselves as more likely to break rules in the workplace, cheat on spouses and engage in illegal activities (Ethics & Behavior, Vol. 17, No. 3). A 2009 survey, also by the
Josephson Institute of Ethics, reports a further correlation: People who cheat on exams in high school are three times more likely to lie to a customer or inflate an insurance claim compared with those who never cheated. High school cheaters are also twice as likely to lie to or deceive their boss and one-and-a-half times more likely to lie to a significant other or cheat on their taxes.

Academic cheating, therefore, is not just an academic problem, and curing this behavior is something that academic institutions are beginning to tackle head-on, says Stephen F. Davis, PhD, emeritus professor of psychology at Emporia State University and co-author of "Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do" (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). New research by psychologists seems to suggest that the best way to prevent cheating is to create a campus-wide culture of academic integrity.

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DAVID RETTINGER
University of Mary Washington

"Everyone at the institution — from the president of the university and the board of directors right on down to every janitor and cafeteria worker — has to buy into the fact that the school is an academically honest institution and that cheating is a reprehensible behavior," Davis says.

Why students cheat
The increasing amount of pressure on students to succeed academically — in efforts to get into good colleges, graduate schools and eventually to land good jobs — tends to be one of the biggest drivers of cheating's proliferation. Several studies show that students who are more motivated than their peers by performance are more likely to cheat.

"What we show is that as intrinsic motivation for a course drops, and/or as extrinsic motivation rises, cheating goes up," says Middlebury College psychology professor Augustus Jordan, PhD, who led a 2005 study on motivation to cheat (Ethics and Behavior Vol. 15, No. 2). "The less a topic matters to a person, or the more they are participating in it for instrumental reasons, the higher the risk for cheating."

Psychological research has also shown that dishonest behaviors such as cheating actually alter a person's sense of right and wrong, so after cheating once, some students stop viewing the behavior as immoral. In a study published in March in Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin (Vol. 37, No. 3), for example, Harvard University psychology and organizational behavior graduate student Lisa Shu and colleagues conducted a series of experiments, one of which involved having undergraduates read an honor code reminding them that cheating is wrong and then providing them with a series of math problems and an envelope of cash. The more math problems they were able to answer correctly, the more cash they were allowed to take. In one condition, participants reported their own scores, which gave them an opportunity to cheat by misreporting. In the other condition, participants' scores were tallied by a proctor in the room. As might be expected, several students in the first condition inflated their scores to receive more money. These students also reported a greater degree of cheating acceptance after participating in the study than they had prior to the experiment. They also found that, while those who read the honor code were less likely to cheat, the honor code did not eliminate all of the cheating.

"Our findings confirm that the situation can, in fact, impact behavior and that people's beliefs flex to align with their behavior," Shu says.

Another important finding is that while many students understand that cheating is against the rules, most still look to their peers for cues as to what behaviors and attitudes are acceptable, says cognitive psychologist David Rettinger, PhD, of the University of Mary Washington. Perhaps not surprisingly, he says, several studies suggest that seeing others cheat increases one's tendency to cheat.

"Cheating is contagious," says Rettinger. In his 2009 study with 158 undergraduates, published in Research in Higher Education (Vol. 50, No. 3), he found that direct knowledge of others' cheating was the biggest predictor of cheating.

Even students at several U.S. military academies — where student honor codes are widely publicized and strictly enforced — aren't immune from cheating's contagion. A longitudinal study led by University of California, Davis, economist Scott
Carrell, PhD, examined survey data gathered from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, U.S. Naval Academy and U.S. Air Force Academy from 1959 through 2002. Carrell found that, thanks to peer effects, one new college cheater is "created" through social contagion for every two to three additional high school cheaters admitted to a service academy.

"This behavior is most likely transmitted through the knowledge that other students are cheating," says Carrell, who conducted the study with James West, PhD, and Frederick Malmstrom, PhD, both of the Air Force Academy. "This knowledge causes students — particularly those who would not have otherwise — to cheat because they feel like they need to stay competitive and because it creates a social norm of cheating."

Dishonesty prevention

Peer effects, however, cut both ways, and getting students involved in creating a culture of academic honesty can be a great way to curb cheating.

"The key is to create this community feeling of disgust at the cheating behavior," says Rettinger. "And the best way to do that is at the student level."

At the University of California, San Diego, for example, the student-led group Academic Integrity Matters! (AIM!) is circulating a student petition that calls on faculty to provide more education on academic integrity, state more explicitly the rules for academic integrity in the classroom and report all cheating when they see it. The petition spawned from a recent survey AIM! developed asking professors for their opinions on the current state of academic integrity at UCSD, says Nick Graham, the UCSD student who led the development of the petition.

"One of the conclusions we reached from this survey was that professors think students don't care about the promotion of integrity at UCSD," Graham says. "We saw that as a huge problem and so we developed the petition. The signatures we have accrued so far are a testament to the fact that students want UCSD to be a place of integrity and that they both need and want professors' help."

Teachers can also help diminish students' impulse to cheat by explaining the purpose and relevance of every academic lesson and course assignment, says University of Connecticut educational psychologist Jason Stephens, PhD. According to research presented in 2003 by Stephens and later published in the "The Psychology of Academic Cheating" (Elsevier, 2006), high school students cheat more when they see the teacher as less fair and caring and when their motivation in the course is more focused on grades and less on learning and understanding. In addition, in a 1998 study of cheating with 285 middle school students, Ohio State University educational psychologist Eric Andeman, PhD, co-editor with Tamara Murdock, PhD, of "The Psychology of Academic Cheating," found that how teachers present the goals of learning in class is key to reducing cheating. Andeman showed that students who reported the most cheating perceive their classrooms as being more focused on extrinsic goals, such as getting good grades, than on mastery goals associated with learning for its own sake and continuing improvement (Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 90, No. 1).

"When students feel like assignments are arbitrary, it's really easy for them to talk themselves into not doing it by cheating," Rettinger says. "You want to make it hard for them to neutralize by saying, 'This is what you'll learn and how it's useful to you.'"

At the college level in particular, it's also important for institutional leaders to make fairness a priority by having an office of academic integrity to communicate to students and faculty that the university takes the issue of academic dishonesty seriously, says Tricia Bertram Gallant, PhD, academic integrity coordinator at the University of California, San Diego, and co-author with Davis of "Cheating in School." Such university-wide initiatives must first include an integrity assessment to get a baseline measure of student and faculty attitudes and current behavior, Bertram Gallant says, adding that a good one is available through the International Center for Academic Integrity (www.academicintegrity.org), a consortium of 360 high schools, colleges and universities where information about academic integrity and successful policies, procedures, research and curricular materials on the topic are shared. It's also important to clearly communicate to students what is and isn't appropriate, and to create a sense of moral community on campus through campus-wide activities promoting ethics and professional integrity.

At UCSD, for example, all freshmen must complete an online tutorial on academic integrity before they can register for their second-semester classes. Professors are also encouraged to explain the importance of academic integrity in their syllabi and to take time during the first week of class to talk about the behaviors that constitute cheating in their courses, as well as the consequences for engaging in those behaviors.

There's also evidence that focusing on honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility and promoting practices such as effective honor codes can make a significant difference in student behaviors, attitudes and beliefs, according to a 1999 study by the Center for Academic Integrity. Honor codes seem to be particularly salient when they engage students, however. In Shu's study on the morality of cheating, for example, she found that participants who passively read a generic honor code before taking a test were less likely to cheat on the math problems, though this step did not completely curb cheating. Among those who signed their names attesting that they'd read and understood the honor code, however, no cheating occurred.

"It was impressive to us how exposing participants to an honor code and really making morality salient in that situation basically eliminated cheating altogether," she says. ⌒

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