

How to Talk to Students About Cheating

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To: Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

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Academic dishonesty is pervasive on college and university campuses. Survey research finds that between two-thirds and three-quarters of students admit to some form of cheating. However, research also indicates wide variation across campuses in levels of cheating.

Over recent years, a strong movement has emerged to reduce cheating - led by the Center for Academic Integrity and by committed faculty, administrators, and students across the country. Increasingly, anti-cheating *efforts* can draw on a wide range of best practices about how to formulate honor codes, develop judicial systems, raise awareness about integrity issues, and much more. Yet despite all this progress, a key question remains unanswered: What messages about cheating are most likely to change student attitudes and behavior?

To date, there has been little market research and message development aimed at reducing cheating. Absent such work, those concerned about academic integrity should share their insights about what messages seem to work with students and why. In that spirit, I offer the following reflections from conversations students about cheating at dozens of college campuses.

Ten Tips for Talking About Cheating

- 1. Don't Sugarcoat Reality.** Many students hold a cynical and jaded view of the state of ethics in America. They see the news stories about Barry Bonds or Martha Stewart and conclude that cheating is common in the "real world" and successful people often cut corners to get ahead. In talking to students, it is critical to acknowledge that there is some truth to these perceptions and avoid seeming out of touch with the "way things really work."
- 2. Acknowledge the Stresses on Students.** Many students see the system as stacked against them. They confront soaring tuitions, heavy debt burdens, and often work one or two jobs to help pay for school. High GPAs are required to hold onto grants and scholarships. Competition for jobs and professional school admissions is stiff. All these pressures can provide a rationale for cheating. Anti-cheating messages should acknowledge these pressures and empathize with students - but firmly rebut their rationales for cheating.
- 3. Emphasize Fairness Over Honor.** Honor can seem like an intangible value and may be no match for the anxiety and cynicism of today's college students. Fairness may be a more effective appeal, since young people tend to have a strong sense of justice. Fairness is tangible, in that it conjures the image of somebody being mistreated or not getting something they deserve. Students must be reminded that just because the world is an unfair place, doesn't mean they can be unfair to others.
- 4. Say Why Cheating Hurts Others.** Cheating is not a victimless act; it is a deeply unfair behavior that hurts other students. Cheaters get rewards they don't deserve, like scholarships, grants, admissions to professional schools, internships, and jobs. The direct and tangible costs of cheating should be strongly emphasized to counter one of the most common excuses for cheating, which is that it's a private behavior that doesn't hurt anyone.
- 5. Treat Students as Stakeholders.** People are most likely to follow rules when they have a say in how those rules are made and view the rules as working in their interest. Anti-cheating messages should stress the ownership that students have in their academic communities and why they should work to ensure that everyone operates on the same level playing field. These messages will be most persuasive if they reflect genuine efforts to empower students to shape academic integrity processes on campus and police each other.

6. Equate Punishment with Fairness. Tough sanctions on cheaters should be depicted as essential for maintaining fairness and a level playing field. While a punitive approach carries the risk of infantilizing students, this needn't be the case. On the contrary, it should be clearly explained why an adult community of equal stakeholders requires that there be consequences for violating community norms.

7. Cast Cheating in a Larger Context. Academic integrity should be positioned as a valid student "cause". Students should come to see campus cheating as an indicator of a larger pattern of corruption, injustice, and inequality in the world, and understand that fighting cheating on their own campus can help address these larger problems.

8. Remind Students of their Historic Role in Social Progress. Students need to remember that young people have repeatedly been on the vanguard of efforts to foster social change. Student activists have sought to turn university campuses into microcosms of the kind of society they believe in. Creating a level playing field on campus can help model the fairness that is desirable in the real world.

9. Explain How Individuals Can Make Change. Many young people lack efficacy and think they are powerless to shape social conditions or large institutions. They should be reminded that everyone has *some* influence, if only on their friends and over their own actions. Gandhi's maxim to "be the change you want to see in the world" well conveys the case for individual action.

10. Share Alternative Visions of Happiness. Many students believe that making a lot of money is crucial to happiness. But an emerging body of happiness research suggests that this not true. Rather, we are happiest when we do what we are really good at and when we give back to other. Students should be exposed to these ideas.

This is an initial draft of this memo. I welcome feedback and the sharing of any messages that have proven effective.

For more information about *The Cheating Culture*, visit <http://www.cheatingculture.com/>. The first chapter of the book can be downloaded online.

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