The Honest Truth Behind Dishonesty

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According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, integrity is defined as a “firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values”. Academic integrity is a set of beliefs that prevents one from engaging in any fraudulent activities in their academics. It implies honesty and fairness in all intellectual or research based pursuits. What holds more of the limelight and is more emphasized is the infraction of academic integrity. This includes cheating, plagiarism, academic misconduct, or research misconduct.

The notion of academic integrity is highly stressed in every educational institution and in every major university in the United States. It is included in most universities’ Code of Conduct or Code of Ethics. It is also included in mostly every syllabus a class will have. Academic integrity is taught to students since the age of 5, the beginning of their academic venture. It plays a huge role in the development of education. Yet, with all of this, academic misconduct is still very much prevalent in today’s multiple education systems. According to the Open Education Database, 60.8% of polled college students admitted to cheating, on assignments and tests. The Open Education Database also revealed that “16.5% of [those cheaters] did not regret it, [cheating].” These people felt no guilt whatsoever in breaking that code of academic integrity each student is obligated to. This presents a major problem in the future of American education. With such a high percentage of dishonest students, it is impossible to imagine having an education untainted with dishonesty. Academic dishonesty creates numerous consequences for not only the student, but also the educator, the educational institution, and the society as a whole.
In any education system, certain assignments, tasks, or tests are given out to assess a student’s knowledge and accountability of the information at hand. An essay written by a student can be used by an educator as a tool to gauge a student’s attentiveness in class, analysis of a text or document, or their ability to communicate a relevant point across. When students cheat on any essay assignment by plagiarizing, they not only have reduced their ability to communicate a pertinent point through the written word, but they have also hindered the teacher’s ability to correctly evaluate the students. Academic misconduct is also a barrier to students’ academic development, in that when they do not complete the necessary tasks such as putting in the hours and mental work to study for a test, they miss out in the most vital component of the learning process. By doing this, they become less knowledgeable, untrustworthy students. When cheaters rely on others for answers, this prevents themselves from attaining mastery in the material. When these students grow up, graduate and are forced into the real world, it is unlikely that their long-standing habit of cheating and cutting corners will magically disappear in the face of reality. If a society is built on people who are not honest in their work, this society will most definitely become corrupt and will fail. This implication of dishonesty permeating through the depths of society may very well be the future with more and more students cheating.

A student is largely influenced by a number of external and internal factors on whether to cheat or not. A study regarding academic dishonesty concluded that academic dishonesty is learned through observation of a student’s peers, an external factor; witnessing others engage in academic misconduct creates an accepting environment that mitigates and even normalizes “cheating” (McGave and Trevino, 1993). This is very
similar to how people have a tendency to follow others, to do what others do, and to isolate themselves into specific groups to feel secure about the actions the members of that group engage in. Another aspect of what influences a student may be that students may see it as a disadvantage to not cheat; “If others do it, [a student will be] … left behind by not participating” (McGave and Trevino, 1993). By having such an accepting and underhanded student community that condones cheating and sees cheating as a necessity for school creates a fallacy that cheating is okay. This type of mutual understanding is not only pertinent to the world of academics but also in the world of professional sports, where high-level athletes must dope to even remain competitive against one another. While doping is an integral part of a team’s racing tactics, which Lance Armstrong pointed out, in certain groups of students, cheating has also infiltrated and become integrated in their view of academics. As Pulvers and Diekhoff noted, cheaters usually hold a perception that “dishonesty is not wrong, [but] an acceptable activity, under certain circumstances.”

In terms of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, there are 3 main levels: preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality. Under each level there are 2 stages. The first stage is obedience and punishment. As moral development continues further, one may start from stage 1, obedience and punishment to progress on to stage 4, maintaining social order, and possibly on to stage 6, universal principles. In regards to their academic pursuits, cheaters usually exhibit a stage 1 or stage 2 level of moral development (Cherry, 2013). Basically, in stage one, a person may avoid cheating and instead follow the rules in place because of his or her fear of punishment, not because of guilt or because that person wholeheartedly believes it is wrong. The main deterrent is
their fear of the consequences. This type of thinking does not allow for an effective prevention against cheating. An underdeveloped self-view of morality allows for people to cheat without guilt.

From my experience as a student, to break academic integrity is to cheat, whether by means of looking over to another person’s paper during a test or by copying someone else’s essay and calling it your own. In academics, there is nothing worse than to lie and cheat. Nothing will get you fastest to failing except admitting the wrongdoing of academic dishonesty. But even with the threat of being expelled looming over our heads, we, the students, still take the risk to cheat. Cheating at TAMS is a big deal. Cheating in the environment present at TAMS raises the stakes compared to other normal high schools. For one, the students and those associated with TAMS hold great pride in its academic excellence and its reputable program to push already very talented students to the best of their abilities. However, the higher these TAMS students are placed on this pedestal of intellectual greatness and ingenuity, the harder they will fall when they commit a wrong doing. Not only does cheating at TAMS result in a zero or a failing grade for that assignment, but also for that class, which leads to being basically expelled from TAMS for failing and also for being academically dishonest. Being kicked out also leads to a number of complications accompanied with the return to the former high school and causes such a big mess of things that most would rather avoid. Despite all of this, it is impossible to say that cheating does not exist at TAMS. It occurs more than one would think. It occurs when I am not even aware, because many of the cheaters have developed a sense of cheating that only comes with time and experience.
Now, reasons for cheating come often. The student is lazy and does not want to do the work. There is always times when a person may feel too tired or may feel completely unmotivated to do anything – laziness. This feeling, though, should not come often. However, a portion of cheaters seem to be perpetually trapped in their own laziness. Now if this is because of the situation at hand, or because of their own ill-suited development of the concept of motivation and work, it is hard to say.

The student is not prepared for the class/test and can’t get a good grade without the additional assistance of another peer’s answers. Reasons for under preparation may be a lack of studying, a lack of studying habits/skills, or an underestimation at the difficulty of the test. This could afflict even the most motivated students when he or she is at wits end, trying to grasp a concept that is just out of reach.

The student is faced with an expectation to do well in this super high school and must resort to even the lowest of the low to fulfill that expectation. These expectations come from the prestige of the school itself, but more importantly probably from the social dynamics back at home – their parents. Filial obligation can force a student into a MUST DO mentality, in which they must get good grades, or face dire consequences.

The student has lived life cutting corners, asking people for answers, and taking the easy way out of things. Students who cheat will probably cheat again. Students who have developed a habit of cheating early on in their life will probably do so again.

The student fakes success through copying others. The student sees cheating as an excellent opportunity to do better, to do at least passable, and is not afraid to do so. The student’s view of cheating may be eschewed by his/her cheating peers. But the bottom line is that, TAMS students are different from normal students. Normal students may not
feel any shame or regret from getting a C in the class, however a TAMS student does. It seems as if TAMS students see cheating as an avenue to a GPA of good standing. Some will engage in cheating readily, because of that incentive of getting better grades, to put on their transcripts to go to a good school, to make their parents happy and to ensure a good future for themselves. Students may want to succeed in life, but some may lack the hard-work ethics and the determination to get there by themselves.

In the moment when cheating happens, all the thoughts of consequences are placed on the back burner. The only thing that is present is the temptation to cheat. When you have a 5-page essay rough draft due tomorrow and you haven’t even started yet, why not just borrow someone else’s and just hope for the best, hope that your teacher doesn’t actually read it? This temptation preys on the lack of self-restraint that is present in everyone in various degrees. What I feel causes people to cheat is specifically that lack of self-restraint and also an indifference to academic integrity.

At the end of the day, there is no doubt that cheating is still a problem. However, what is a greater issue is deciding what actions can be taken to prevent this. Already, codes have been put into place, rules have been written up, but it may not be enough. What McCabe and Trevino proposed in their 1993 study is that in order to eradicate a large portion of academic dishonesty, an academic institution must be able to foster a “community” within the students, in which students fully grasp the notion that by not cheating, they prevent themselves from devaluing any part of their education or the education of their peers and that they may let it be known to each other the “importance of basic moral obligations” (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). A school must have an environment that views academic dishonesty as “socially unacceptable” (McCabe and
Trevino) and allows each student to grasp a full understanding of his or her role as a student. Not only can such an environment reduce the amount of cheating going on, but it can also allow the students to realize the full value of their education.

In TAMS, cheating is an issue, but is not applicable to everyone. I am very proud and happy to know that the majority of my peers acknowledge the fact that cheating lacks moral integrity and is just plain wrong. Most students at TAMS do not cheat, but for the small, miniscule minority that do, they do so without judgment, without restraint and without realization of the potential impact of their wrong doing.

What really spurs me on in my honest academic pursuits, and what is probably a well-known cliché, is that: If I had to choose between a surgeon who cheated his or her way through medical school or a surgeon who didn’t, I would always choose the latter.
Works Cited


