

Google searches for “Free Term Paper” expose cheating in income inequality states

April 18, 2012

KALW Public Radio:

A new study published in the journal *Psychological Science* shows a correlation between college students that come from states with high income inequality and students that cheat. The researcher, Lukas Neville, is a Ph.D. candidate in organizational behavior at Queen’s School of Business in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. He said he became interested in academic dishonesty and plagiarism because of his teaching experience. Turnstyle spoke with Neville about his research.

Turnstyle: What inspired you to do this study?

Neville: I wanted to look at situational factors that contributed to cheating. My sense is that there are some incorrigible students who will always cheat and some saints who won’t cheat no matter what, but there are also a substantial number of students whose decision to cheat is shaped, at least partially, by the environment they’re in.

Turnstyle: Who did you survey in this study?

Neville: I actually didn’t talk to students directly – I let their Google searches speak for them. I took a dataset that broke down a huge pile of search traffic, and showed which states were more likely to be the origin of particular searches. So, for instance, if you look at ‘frozen car door’ as a search term, you’ll find that that search tends to originate in cold Northern states like Wisconsin and Minnesota, rather than Sun Belt states like Florida.

I was wondering if I’d see any pattern to which states were more likely to go hunting for things like “free term paper”, or search for the names of common essay term mills.

Turnstyle: Why do you think your study showed a correlation between income and cheating in college?

Neville: Actually, what I found was that it wasn’t so much about income; it wasn’t rich states versus poor states. It was about inequality in income: States that had a really big gap between the rich and the poor were more likely to be the sources of these searches than states with a smaller gap.

The reason I think income inequality correlates with cheating (as measured with these sneaky searches for essays to crib) is that income inequality tends to lower trust. Previous research has shown that a huge gulf between the rich and poor weakens social ties and make us more suspicious of each other.

Read the whole interview: [KALW Public Radio](#)