

Income Inequality and Distrust Foster Academic Dishonesty

April 04, 2012

College professors and students are in an arms race over cheating. Students find new sources for pre-written term papers; professors find new ways to check the texts they get for plagiarized material. But why are all these young people cheating? A new study published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests one reason: income inequality, which decreases the general trust people have toward each other.

Lukas Neville, a doctoral student at Queen's University in Ontario, was inspired to do the study by his own teaching experience. "I ran into the question of academic dishonesty firsthand," he says. Like other instructors at universities across North America, he considered using services that automatically check students' papers for plagiarized material. "But it got me thinking about the actual underlying mechanism that promotes or inhibits academic dishonesty." He thought the answer might be trust; if students don't trust each other, some of them might think they have to cheat to keep up with their unscrupulous classmates. And other research has shown that this kind of distrust is more likely to be found in places with high income inequality.

To look at the connection between trust, income inequality, and academic dishonesty, Neville took advantage of data from Google that breaks down search terms by state. Neville found data on searches on phrases like "free term paper," "buy term paper," and the names of cheating websites. He compared these to survey data on how trusting people are in each state and a measure of income inequality from the U.S. Census Bureau. He controlled for several other factors that could influence the number of searches, including how many students are in each state, how large the colleges in each state are, and average household income.

Indeed, the data showed that people who live in states with more income inequality were less trusting in general, and those states had more evidence of academic dishonesty. The next step, Neville says, will be to duplicate this finding using laboratory experiments, using pay structure to alter income inequality, then observing the effects on students' trust and dishonest behavior.

If one of the root causes of cheating is distrust, this could explain why measures like honor codes work, Neville says: when students trust that other people aren't cheating, they are less likely to cheat themselves. "As educators, there's not much you can do about the level of inequality in society, but we do have the ability to help foster trust in our colleges and classrooms," he says.