

Cheating: Preventing and Dealing with Academic Dishonesty

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Someday it will happen to you. A student will turn in such an excellent, well-written paper that you seriously doubt its authenticity. Or, during a test, you will look up and find a student copying from another student. The sinking feeling that immediately weighs in on you could be overwhelming as you realize you must decide how to deal with a suspected or actual case of cheating.

If it hasn't happened to you yet, either you are new at the game, you have your head in the sand, or you have been incredibly lucky. Or, perhaps you have created a situation in which cheating is unlikely. Studies show that about 40 percent of students cheat in a given term.

An Ounce of Prevention

Communicate Policies on Cheating

My institution requests all instructors to state their policy on cheating in the syllabus. Believe it or not, students have argued that they should not be punished for cheating because they were never told they couldn't do it. State clearly when students may cooperate and when they must work independently. Students who have been encouraged to use programmable calculators in math courses may naturally expect that they can use them in your class. (Many calculators permit considerable amounts of *text* to be stored in their memories. Either design the test so that calculators are not necessary, or insist that they push the erase button to delete text memory.)

Relate With Your Students: Avoid Adversarial Relationships

Students may cheat because they feel alienated from the system. Let your students know that you respect them and expect the best from them. I believe students are less likely to cheat if they feel they know and like the instructor. Learning and using students' names in class may have a beneficial side effect of reducing cheating.

Teach Students What Plagiarism Is So They Can Avoid Doing It

The nature of cheating depends on the assignment. Written assignments run the risk of plagiarism. Some instructors may be surprised to learn that students sometimes plagiarize unintentionally because they do not know enough about what constitutes scholarship. Before giving written assignments, it is a good idea to discuss how to credit other people's work. Some departments promulgate written guidelines on plagiarism.

We will discuss later what to do when you suspect cheating. But one technique that is particularly suited to written assignments is to ask a student whom you suspect of plagiarism to explain something in the paper in other words. More sophisticated techniques include blanking out key words and asking the

student to fill in the spaces.

Structure Writing Assignments So Students Cannot Use Others' Work

Having informed students what plagiarism is, you should structure the timing of the assignment in such a way that plagiarism becomes less likely. Several weeks before the final paper is due ask the students for a statement of their topic. Next ask for a preliminary list of references that they intend to consult. Then have them turn in a tentative outline. Any changes you may suggest at these stages will make it more difficult for them to turn in a paper previously prepared by someone else. The only clear case of plagiarism I have experienced occurred with a student who had missed several weeks of class and skipped these stages. Your guidelines should suggest that they keep all drafts of their work, notes, printouts of computer searches, etc. They should photocopy the first page of every article or book cited in their reference list. This way they can't cite papers they haven't at least laid eyes on. Some faculty also inform students that they keep a record of all papers written, or the papers themselves, for the preceding five years.

Take Control of the Test Situation

Arrange the classroom situation to suit the nature of the test. You may want students to sit in every other seat, take assigned seats to break up groups of would-be cheaters, or leave the front row open for latecomers, etc. Some instructors number all tests and have students leave completed tests face down on the desk. Then they may be picked up in order, and papers of suspected cheaters can be compared for similarities. (Be aware that papers can be similar if students study together. But hearing boards that review suspected cases of cheating can be skeptical of purely statistical evidence.)

I require students to reverse baseball caps because the bill makes it harder for you to monitor their gaze. (I do not ask for their removal: A student may be taking chemotherapy, or just having a bad hair day.)

You should resist their complaints to the contrary and efforts to put you on the defensive. You do not need to explain why they should follow your instructions. You may instruct a student who is behaving suspiciously to sit elsewhere without making an accusation or justifying yourself.

Opinions vary on how faculty members should dress. But) make a point to dress in a businesslike manner on test day because I believe it is important to convey to students that they should take the situation seriously and the professor's appearance can make the point without making them uncomfortable.

How you manage the testing situation depends on factors such as the type of test, class size and whether you reuse the same test for different classes or across semesters. Because I seldom reuse tests, for example, I generally do not need to count the booklets as) pass them out, nor do I need to recover them. But once a student has left the room, I do not permit that student to reenter. In large classes, I use alternate forms of the exam (e.g., same items appear in three different orders) so that a student looking at a classmate's answer sheet is not helped by doing so. Simply changing the order of pages is not nearly as effective as scrambling items within pages.

If your class is large enough that you don't know all students, require them to show picture ID and sign

their test (as well as print their name on the test). Be sure to have additional proctors in large classes. I try to have help in classes larger than 75, about one for every additional 100 students.

Be Prepared

After teaching for 30 years I thought I knew all the tricks students used. Then one term I was confronted by two new ones. So I sat down and compiled a list of over 40 different ways to cheat, and about the same number of ways to prevent cheating. I am sure there are more. My point is that we need to keep a very large number of variables and contingencies in mind on test day.

For example, what would you do if you entered your classroom and saw “Professor X’s test has been canceled” written on the blackboard and many of the students had left? Suppose the fire alarm goes off in the middle of the test. Suppose students go to leave the test and find the doors locked by computer. Then, when you use the emergency phone to call campus security you are advised that the only way to unlock them is to pull the fire alarm. Imagine running out of test booklets because the secretary miscounted. All of these have happened in my experience.

During the test, the student can cheat in two basic ways: refer to contraband materials or get help from another person. I have already mentioned the use of programmable calculators. Students occasionally wear earphone tape recorders to tests. I require them to give me the cassette. Less technologically sophisticated but effective is hiding written material under clothing, which is awkward to prove for obvious reasons.

A student receiving help from neighbors is probably harder to detect. Folklore tells of the “power wedge,” whereby a group of students arranges itself in the pattern of geese in flight with the one who knows the material in the lead position. Signaling methods can be ingenious; the “M&M” method indicates the correct alternative by the color of the candy. A simpler method is to point to the question with the pencil as if studying it and touching left ear for “a,” knee for “b,” etc. Be on the lookout for students who appear to be doing an impression of a third base coach.

One of the most clever methods includes a student bringing a friend who is not in the course to sit next to him or her. The friend takes an exam and works on it as if a registered student. The actual student copies the answers from the ringer. When they are done, the ringer can either walk away and leave the test at the seat or turn it in with a fake name. Alternatively, the ringer can walk out with the test, which could also wind up in a fraternity file.

When a Student Cheats

Know and Follow Your Institution’s Procedures

My institution has a written set of guidelines on dealing with cheating. Be familiar with your institution’s policies and know what steps are available to you before an incident arises. Have the student(s) read the guidelines so they become familiar with the alternatives and processes set forth.

Settling Matters Informally

Generally, you should first try to settle the matter informally. But you and the student need to know how to proceed if the student denies the charge, or refuses to accept your proposed penalty. If you are lucky enough to settle the matter informally, be sure to get the student to sign a statement admitting the offense and accepting the penalty. You should file this statement for possible future use and send a copy to the department chair or the dean. This student may be a repeat offender requiring more serious action.

Settling Matters Formally

Some cheating incidents will require resolution through formal institutional processes. Be aware of deadlines and what information must be submitted. Write memos to your file on incidents of cheating that you witness. Write down details of the case such as who sat next to the student. Have TAs or proctors write statements on what they witnessed. Get signed statements from all parties, including the student, if he or she confesses. In brief, keep a paper trail.

The Legal System and Cheating

We live in a litigious society and many situations that were once dealt with informally now wind up in court. The best way to avoid lawsuit is to know and abide by your institution's policies and procedures. Many faculty look the other way when they see cheating because they believe that it is necessary to have evidence that would stand up in a court of law, or they believe the procedures are too bureaucratic and they do not want to deal with them.

Courts will generally not get involved in a case if the student has been accorded due process, which is a less stringent criterion than having to follow legal rules of evidence and procedure. Due process has been accorded when the student has had an adequate opportunity to be heard, established institutional rules and procedures have been followed, the student has been assumed innocent until proven guilty, and the burden of proof has been placed on the institution.

Keep a Sense of Humor

Finally, do not take yourself too seriously. One instructor was trying to get the last stragglers to turn in their final exams. He announced that he would not accept any more papers after a certain time. Still, one student kept on working. When she ignored his final ultimatum, he refused to accept her paper. She walked up to the desk, looked him in the eye, and said, "Do you know who I am?" Thinking that she might be the daughter of a trustee, he warily said, "No." Whereupon, she slipped her paper into the middle of the pile, squared it up, and strolled out. Sometimes there is nothing we can do.