

# **Cheating in Schools: To Take Punitive Actions and/or Implement Proactive, Preventive Strategies?**

## **Part I**

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Cheating among students is not a new issue nor is it uncommon. According to several surveys, many youngsters have cheated at least once or twice in school. For example, Drs. Ali Mattu and Courtney Weiner co-authored a New York University Child Study publication titled “Cheating in School: Why It Happens and How to Prevent It.” They cite the findings of a 2010 study from the Josephson Institute of Ethics that revealed, “Among current high school students, 75 percent admit to cheating on tests, homework, and other assignments. Fifty percent have cheated on exams during the past year, and 34 percent have cheated on more than one test. Research indicates similar trends among college students and even graduate students.” Teachers attending my workshops have shared with me examples of cheating prior to the high school years, including among elementary school students.

These transgressions cover a wide spectrum of behaviors. Most likely, some would be judged more egregious than others. For some students cheating involves glancing at a classmate’s test paper to copy an answer. For others it may involve turning in a term paper that another student had written several years earlier for a similar course with a different teacher or professor. Nowadays, it isn’t difficult for students to access term papers on the internet. In response, there are websites that have been created to check if a paper has been plagiarized. There have even been reported instances of teenagers paying a peer to assume their identity for a day in order to take the SAT exams for them.

### **Cheating: A Common Occurrence in Society**

As we are all aware, cheating is not limited to students. The media is filled with accounts of adults who have not served as paragons of honesty for the younger generation. We read frequently of individuals who fail to report income on their tax returns or conduct Ponzi schemes or engage in insider trading. Numerous professional athletes in different sports have relied on performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) to

improve their chance to excel. This has certainly been highlighted in the past month with the suspension of a number of major league baseball players. In academic circles, researchers at prominent hospitals and universities have been found to distort research findings. In the past few weeks, a principal in the Boston schools resigned after it was discovered that she plagiarized statements that appeared on her job application. Her educational philosophy statement was taken almost verbatim and without any attribution from an Oregon State University's website.

Another example of cheating was highlighted in an article written by Ethan Gilsdorf that appeared in *The Boston Globe Magazine*. Gilsdorf provides examples of individuals who have knowingly misrepresented their resumes, listing universities they never attended, academic degrees they never earned, and positions they never held. The article reports several of these instances, including the president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences honorary society who resigned this past July after it was discovered that the doctorate she claimed to have achieved from New York University never occurred, the Dean of Admissions at MIT who lost her position after acknowledging she had listed degrees she never earned, the vice dean at the University of Pennsylvania who resigned when it became known that his stated Ph.D. was fabricated, and a newly hired head football coach at Notre Dame University who left his position after five days when it was found that he exaggerated his achievements as a football player and listed a master's degree that he didn't have.

There are many other well-known cases, including a CEO at Yahoo who stepped down after it was revealed that he had misrepresented his college credentials and a head football coach at Yale who claimed to have been a Rhodes scholar candidate when he had never even applied for that prestigious award.

### **The Reasons that People Cheat**

The reasons people cheat vary considerably from one individual to the next and one situation to the next. Much has been written about athletes resorting to the use of PEDs to gain an advantage over other athletes, an advantage that leads to increased recognition, accolades and honors, and, not surprisingly, salaries and endorsements worth millions of dollars. Of course, when the use of PEDs is discovered, all of these seeming benefits are apt to disappear rapidly, replaced by suspensions, cancelled product

endorsements, awards being rescinded, and a precipitous fall from grace to a position of disgrace (we must remember, the higher one is placed on a pedestal, the longer the way down when one falls).

For similar reasons, some researchers have manipulated results from their studies to increase the chances of receiving future lucrative grants and of having manuscripts accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. It is easier to receive such grants, garner recognition, and even bring a product to market if test results indicate the product in question is very promising, perhaps a “breakthrough” in that particular field. In such a situation, the pressure to succeed may lead to abandoning one’s moral compass, perhaps rationalizing that good will come from this lie.

Some have observed that during difficult economic times when job opportunities are limited, people are more apt to falsify their resumes out of desperation. A dire financial situation can render one vulnerable to misrepresenting certain accomplishments on a resume in order to gain an advantage in the job market. Some might even delude themselves by interpreting the misrepresentation as a “small white lie” that doesn’t harm anyone. We must recognize that such white lies are not small and they can be very harmful, including to the reputation and future opportunities of the people involved in the lie and/or for the organization for which they work. I once heard someone say, “You can only sell your reputation once. Once it is sold, it is sold.” Although we can all think of reputations that have been rehabilitated, it is frequently a Herculean task to garner trust and respect once these attributes have been sacrificed on the altar of lies and deceptions.

### **A “Radical Proposition” about Cheating**

There is another reason in addition to Gilsdorf’s piece that prompted me to address the theme of cheating in this and next month’s column. I read an article by James Lang that also appeared in *The Boston Globe* with the intriguing title “How College Classes Encourage Cheating.” Lang is the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts and the author of *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. While Lang focuses on the college environment, I believe his views are equally relevant for students of all ages. His perspective is not only thought-provoking but centers on issues about which I have written extensively,

especially related to student ownership, intrinsic motivation, and a positive classroom climate.

Lang reports a cheating scandal that took place at Harvard University last year, leading to the suspension of more than 60 students in a government class. He observes, “Most commentators zeroed in on the students—apparently lazy and dishonest, for all of their talent—or on the hypercompetitive culture of America’s most prestigious university. Still others suggested that cheating has become commonplace in our schools as the result of the increasingly amoral larger society in which they operate.”

Lang contends that these supposed reasons for cheating assume that there has been an increase in these kinds of behaviors, but in fact studies do not support this view. In the past 50 years, the rate of students who acknowledge cheating at least on one occasion while in college has remained at 75 percent. Lang reports that “75 percent is a disheartening number” and to address this problem college administrators “have focused on creating first-year orientations or seminars on academic integrity, or on instituting deterrent measures like suspensions or expulsions for students who are caught.” However, Lang argues that the consistency of the rate of cheating during the past 50 years indicates that these measures have not proven successful.

Noting the lack of effectiveness of efforts to decrease cheating, Lang proposes what many might consider a startling view or what he himself terms a “radical proposition.” The proposition, which is predicated on a more recent arena of research in the fields of psychology and education, is that “the very nature of the college education we provide to our students, in both its design and delivery, may turn out to be the deepest cause of cheating on campus. In other words, it may be that cheating rates are so high because too many university curriculums and courses are designed for cheating.”

In hearing this “radical proposition,” one might immediately dismiss it as outrageous, as an illustration of how we coddle kids in today’s world and don’t hold them accountable for their questionable behaviors. Some might shout, “Oh, sure, blame cheating by students on the course or the professor! No wonder we have so many kids today who are narcissistic, who feel the world should cater to them rather than their becoming more responsible, who feel they can bend the rules with impunity whenever it

suits their purpose. It's about time we stopped making excuses for these students when they cheat and instead punish them."

I can certainly understand how someone might come to this conclusion about Lang's view. However, before we hastily reject this view I think it's important to consider not only the basis of his position but also his recommendations for addressing the problem of cheating in our schools. I think it is also important to emphasize that even as Lang strives to identify those variables within course formats and designs that may contribute to cheating, he is not advocating we excuse such behavior on the basis that it is the system at fault. Rather, he emphasizes, "Students who cheat in higher education deserve appropriate punishment; we will not solve the problem by blaming ourselves and letting students off the hook. . . . We should continue to monitor cheating rates in higher education—not simply to measure the moral values of our students, but as a barometer that can help us understand how well we are motivating them to learn, and how we can continue to improve."

While Lang refers to "higher education" and is on the faculty of a college, as I mentioned earlier I believe that his position is equally relevant for the elementary, middle, and high school environments. Let's explore Lang's position further.

A commonly held belief is that people who engage in dishonest behavior have a predisposition for such behavior, that they have some kind of personality flaw or their conscience is not well developed. Lang cites the fascinating research of Dan Ariely, the James Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University, to offer a different perspective. Ariely is author of several bestselling books, including *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions* and his most recent, intriguing work *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*.

As much as we might wish to think differently, Ariely has demonstrated through a number of creative studies that most individuals are willing to engage in dishonest actions under particular circumstances. He contends that how far people are willing to cheat or be dishonest "depends on the structure of their daily environment." Lang elaborates, "The structure of that environment proves more influential than an individual's ethical profile or some general cultural milieu."

### **Reconciling Two Seemingly Contradictory Positions**

These assertions by Ariely and Lang have far-reaching implications in terms of how best to prevent and confront cheating both in and outside of our schools. They also capture two positions I have advanced in my writings and lectures that at first glance may seem contradictory but I believe can be reconciled. In my workshops for educators I have proposed that whether or not students learn and succeed in school may have more to do with the educational climate and our teaching techniques than what students initially bring to the classroom situation. I have especially emphasized this point when discussing students who have been anointed with such labels as “resistant” or “unmotivated” by some teachers but who display a high motivation and eagerness to learn with other teachers. The same student—motivated and receptive in one classroom, disinterested, turned off, and more likely to cheat in another.

In contrast to this view of the significant influence that the learning environment has in determining the level of motivation and the probability of cheating in students, I have also proposed that we are the “authors of our own lives” and that a hallmark of intrinsic motivation and resilience is learning to accept responsibility for our actions. To extend this position, one can argue that even when faced with a teacher who has difficulty engaging and exciting students in the learning process, students must appreciate that they have a choice in deciding whether they will resort to cheating or rather expend the time and energy necessary to meet class requirements with integrity. I believe this position becomes even more valid as the abilities to problem solve, make decisions, and assume responsibility advance from the elementary to the secondary school years.

The seeming contradiction in views may be posed in the following question: If we assert that the school environment and educational structure play an unusually large part in determining how effectively students will learn and whether or not they are likely to engage in cheating, can we also advance the notion that we are the authors of our own lives and that students have more control than they may realize in choosing the ways in which they respond to even less-than-favorable situations?

I think this question can be answered in the affirmative. Extrapolating from Ariely’s research, one can argue that while even seemingly honest children and adults may under certain situations fall prey to cheating, we can create conditions that help to

prevent these questionable behaviors from emerging. Such a step can be accomplished not by applying punitive, reactive measures but rather by initiating proactive strategies that directly address factors that contribute to dishonesty.

**A Question for Next Month**

In next month's article I plan to describe these proactive strategies, including those proposed by Lang. Until then, I would suggest you reflect on what you think these strategies might be. The clarity of your answer might be sharpened if you consider with what teachers and in what classrooms you were not tempted to cheat and with what teachers and in what classrooms you were (even if you did not succumb to this temptation). What were the differences between these two environments?

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