



Why High-Achieving Students Cheat

An alarming article about student cheating in the *New York Times* of September 8, 2012, will probably get as much attention as every other article about the failures of American education: zero! The article states:



Large-scale cheating has been uncovered over the last year at some of the nation's most competitive schools, like Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, the Air Force Academy and, most recently, Harvard. . . .

The Internet has changed attitudes, as a world of instant downloading, searching, cutting and pasting has loosened some ideas of ownership and authorship. An increased emphasis on having students work in teams may also have played a role.

Indeed, team learning has destroyed the whole concept of individuals learning on their own. Team learning is supposed to help students accept a more collectivist view of education, in which everyone on the team shares knowledge and the same average grade. That sort of "sharing knowledge" used to be known as cheating. But now it is accepted as a form of cooperative learning. So why all the fuss over cheating now?

Professor Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has studied the decline of academic integrity and attributes it to an atrophy of ethical muscles. The *Times* article reports:

[Gardner] said the attitude he has found among students at elite colleges is: "We want to be famous and successful, we think our colleagues are cutting corners, we'll be damned if we'll lose out to them, and some day, when we've made it, we'll be role models. But until then, give us a pass."

It's dog-eat-dog competitiveness that justifies cheating in the minds of many students. They know that a one-way ticket to success in any profession is high academic achievement in a costly prestigious university. It opens doors. It gets acceptance.

Meanwhile, the universities are in a quandary. They would like to maintain their high ethical standards that are part of their Christian heritage, but they've become secular institutions with humanist ethics based on moral relativism. Moral relativism teaches a student that it's okay to cut corners if your future success depends on it. The article describes what happened at Harvard:

The case that Harvard revealed in late August involved a take-home final exam in an undergraduate course with 279 students. The university has not yet held hearings on the charges, which may take months to resolve.

Officials said similarities in test papers suggested that nearly half the class had broken the rules against plagiarism and working together; some of the accused students said their behavior was innocent, or fell into gray areas.

In other words some students are having a difficult time telling right from wrong. This is



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understandable considering that they've attended secular schools where moral relativism is the ethical standard of these institutions. It's all a matter of cooperative learning. As for cheating at Stuyvesant High School, the *Times* reported:

A dozen [Stuyvesant High School](#) students have been suspended and more than 50 others are facing suspension because of new evidence that has emerged in a continuing investigation of cheating during final exams in June, school officials said.

Previously, the bulk of the students in the episode, which involved cellphones and embarrassed one of the country's most prestigious public schools, faced only the loss of some class privileges, including the right to leave school for lunch or join the Student Union, an important college résumé-building activity.

But now, in addition to the 12 already suspended, 54 others who officials said were involved are facing possible suspension for up to five days. The 12 received suspensions of up to 10 days, the most severe form of the punishment, and will begin serving their punishments next week after hearings, Connie Pankratz, a spokeswoman for the New York City Education Department, said.

Not much of a punishment for cheating. I attended Stuyvesant High School and graduated in 1944. At that time the institution adhered to ethical standards based on the Ten Commandments, and cheating was unheard of. But today, it's another story. According to the *New York Post* online (Sep. 3, 2012):

Stuyvesant HS students have long had a formula for success — and it's been written on their ankles, bathroom stalls and bottles of Wite-Out.

In the wake of a recent cheating scandal that has rocked the elite TriBeCa school, alumni and ex-staffers revealed to *The Post* ingenious ways that students have used their noodles to game the system.

"They are brilliant at cheating," marveled former English teacher Douglas Goetsch. Long before cellphones became the implement du jour for cheaters, there was Wite-Out, said Goetsch, 49, who taught at the school from 1987 to 2001.

"One kid would write the letter answer [to a multiple-choice question] on a bottle of Wite-Out and pass it back to a friend — who would paint over it and pass it back. It's so simple, but elegant, when you think about it."

Back in 2001, Goetsch wrote an editorial in *The Spectator*, the student newspaper, decrying the culture of cheating at the school — one of many such articles that show school officials were aware of the long-standing practice.

Case in point: Goetsch discovered two students in his and another class who plagiarized passages on their senior thesis. He gave his student an F but was pressured by an assistant principal to give him a passing grade, he said.

"I was told I was being too Draconian," Goetsch recalled.

So now we know that school officials at Stuyvesant were aware of cheating at the school, and simply did nothing about it. Which means that school officials were complicit in the crime. A former student told the *Post*: "Stuy is highly competitive, and the one-point difference between a 99 and a 100 might mean admission to Harvard or Yale."

That explains everything. Those of us who went to Stuyvesant in the 1940s did not see our fellow



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students as competitors but as friends. And we knew that our success was up to our own efforts. We took pride in using our own brains. We did not ride piggyback on the brains of fellow students. But, apparently, that sort of pride no longer exists among students.

As for cheating at the Air Force Academy, there have been a number of scandals. According to *U.S. News* online:

In 2007, 15 cadets were expelled and three resigned for cheating on a test of general knowledge about the Air Force, and 13 others were placed on probation. Cadets had forwarded test answers through an Internet social group and private computer messages, according to the academy.

In 2004, 69 cadets were questioned about cheating on a military etiquette test. Nineteen either acknowledged cheating or were found guilty by an honor board and were expelled or put on probation. Seven other cadets resigned, and 43 were cleared.

As for the latest cheating scandal:

At least 78 Air Force Academy cadets are accused of cheating on an online calculus test by getting help during the exam from a website, academy officials in Colorado said.

Apparently, the cadets, mostly freshmen and a few sophomores, used a website math program meant to be used for homework, not the final exam.

Instructors in the academy's math department grew suspicious after a number of cadets who had passed previous tests failed the final exam, [according to *The Colorado Springs Gazette in Colorado Springs, Colo.*](#)

With American students no longer being educated under Christian moral standards, is there any mystery why students in our most prestigious institutions cheat? Having been poorly educated to begin with in our public schools, they enter institutions where academic demands exceed their ability to excel and thus resort to cheating. These students were for the most part cheated by their public schools that taught reading as a guessing game and crippled students in math, first with the New Math, and then with the New New Math. When the schools cheat you out of a decent education, what's so wrong about cheating the school?

Nor is cheating limited to students only. In Atlanta, teachers were involved in a cheating scandal that boggles the mind. According to Yahoo News (July 5, 2011):

Award-winning gains by Atlanta students were based on widespread cheating by 178 named teachers and principals, said Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal on Tuesday. His office released a report from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that names 178 teachers and principals — 82 of whom confessed — in what's likely the biggest cheating scandal in US history.

This appears to be the largest of dozens of major cheating scandals, unearthed across the country. The allegations point an ongoing problem for US education, which has developed an ever-increasing dependence on standardized tests.

In other words, one can't even trust published test scores as a means of determining how well our children are learning. Teachers cheat because they too have been so badly miseducated by their colleges of education that they don't even know how to teach the basics. The solution? Get the federal government out of education and return control of the public schools to their local communities. That won't solve the problem of militant unionized teachers. But it's a start in returning sanity to American education.



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