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Challenging Cheating Testing assumptions about academic dishonesty at Harvard

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From the Adam B. Wheeler case to the fraud that led to the stock market crash, dishonesty has been in the recent public consciousness. Yet the cheating that takes place in college can still be surprising. That's what Dr. Donald L. McCabe discovered when, nearly 20 years ago, he began surveying college students on issues of academic integrity and was so alarmed by the responses that he founded the Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) at Duke University. Now, almost two decades later, after being relocated to Clemson University, the center has surveyed 185,000 college students at over 180 schools—changing its name to the International Center for Academic Integrity to address the growing scope of the project. But the mission remains the same. And this week, the Academic Integrity Assessment comes to Harvard.

“The issue of academic integrity has always been on everyone’s mind, so why not now?” says Megan R. Mitrovich, Management Fellow for the Administrative Board of Harvard College. “I think there has been a lot of attention given to it in the media as of late. Not just at Harvard ... the ways in which people perceive dishonesty have been evolving.”

DEPENDING ON PERSPECTIVE

According to the e-mail sent to all undergraduate students by Dean of the College Evelyn M. Hammonds, the survey should take about 10 minutes and is primarily made up of multiple choice questions, with a few short answer ones. It will be sent to undergraduates, teaching fellows, and professors. All responses will be anonymous.

“The survey is designed to find out how students and faculty perceive certain behaviors,” says Dr. Daniel E. Wueste, Director of the Institute for Ethics at Clemson (where McCabe’s CAI is housed). This perception of “what is cheating” tends to vary, Wueste says. One person’s act of dishonesty is another’s collaborative learning. He understands why students may not know where to draw the line. But to him, the definition of cheating is clear: “Any unfair advantage.”

With the data from the assessment, the CAI will then work closely with the university to develop measures to address dishonesty. According to Wueste, “You get a pretty good picture of the current situation. But it often happens that a school decides to do the survey, and they’re quite sure that ‘there’s a problem elsewhere but not a problem here.’ Then they discover that they aren’t that different from other schools.” Public or private, religiously affiliated or otherwise, colleges tend to suffer from the same issues of integrity.

Once the problem has been recognized, the real work begins. The key is not to simply prevent or police cheating more stringently. Instead, the CAI tries to alter cheating culture. “Just preventing students from cheating is not enough,” says Dr. Teddi A. Fishman, Director of the CAI. “If you don’t teach students the reason why its important not to cheat, you haven’t really educated them ... You have to give someone the space to make a choice.” Ultimately, whatever reforms the university undergoes to limit cheating, the changes have to come from the students first. “When the faculty and administration comes up with what they think they should do ... it is almost always less effective than when the students figure out what the appropriate response should be.”

COUNTERING THE CHEATING CULTURE

Harvard College’s decision to participate in the Academic Integrity Assessment coincides with a recent study from the Harvard Business School (co-authored by Francesca Gino, Harvard associate professor of

business administration and Dan Ariely, Duke University professor of behavioral economics) claiming that creative people are more likely to cheat and find justifications for their cheating.

Dr. Teddi A. Fishman, Director for CAI, which was unaffiliated with the HBS study, was not surprised by the results. Creative people, she says, are less likely to simply take a rule at face value. This applies to the college students surveyed as well, and she sees this as a positive thing. "College is testing boundaries, so we want to give students as much information as possible so they can make a decision, not just blindly follow a rule," Fishman adds.

"If students understand that these rules are our rules, we own them, because we chose to be a part of them," Wueste agrees. "That's where I think the most significant work can be done, because it has potential to do two things; one, to diminish the cheating on college campuses, and two, it helps students think of themselves as being part of something larger than oneself."

BEYOND COLLEGE

Even the global financial crisis can be construed as a major educational opportunity, emphasizing that dishonesty has consequences 'larger than oneself.' In the past, Fishman says, students have rationalized cheating by saying that it is widely used in the 'real world,' that it is a 'part of business culture.' When business leaders were recently surveyed, Fisherman notes, "We learned that the reasons they gave for their own ethical breaches are nearly identical to the ones students cite for why they cheat in school: lack of time, pressure to compete, believing that 'everyone else is doing it' or simply because they were otherwise ill-equipped to complete the task, so we speculate that the habits formed in school transfer to later career behavior." Yet now, he says, "One upside to the global financial crisis is that it gives us an opportunity to point to what lack of integrity can do; that it can bring down whole financial systems."

Wueste has high hopes that changes brought through measures like the Academic Integrity Assessment will alter the way students interact with their world. "When they become the leaders of [future] organizations," he says, "they'll make those organizations what they ought to be."