Arizona survey examines student cheating, faculty responses

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PHOENIX -- Eighty-four percent of students at a public research university believe students who cheat should be punished, yet two of every three admit to having cheated themselves. Most of the cheating students admit to involves homework, not tests, and they see academic misconduct applying differently to those two kinds of work.

These findings were part of a study presented here this week at the annual convention of NASPA: Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education. Depending on how much you buy into the "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" theory – the idea, for which this session was named, that faculty believe students are "just a bunch of cheaters" – the findings may or may not come as a surprise. But either way, those results, coupled with the fact that many instructors devote little if any time to discussing academic integrity, led the researchers to an obvious conclusion: setting clear expectations, and repeating them early and often, is crucial.

“It’s about communicating clearly in the classroom and spending time on the topic,” said Angela Baldasare, divisional manager of assessment and data analysis at the University of Arizona, about clarifying expectations and increasing the intrinsic values of assignments, “so that there’s something more to it than just a grade.”

The study into the frequency and type of offenses, and the faculty policies and responses, surveyed more than 2,000 students and 600 instructors on the Arizona campus.

It found the highest rates of cheating among fraternity and sorority members and international students, the latter of whom were most likely to use technology to cheat. Fewer than 10 percent of Arizona students said they’ve used technology to get answers during an exam, but more international than American students admitted to obtaining test answers online (21 versus 11 percent), having copied material from the Internet for a writing assignment without citing the source (23 versus 13 percent), and sending or receiving text messages during an exam (12 versus 3 percent). Cheating was reported least among students receiving need-based aid, and non-degree seeking and first-generation students. (The more education a student’s parents had, the more likely he or she was to have cheated.)

Freshmen were least likely to have cheated, and the likelihood that students had cheated rose from year to year at an almost linear, small but significant rate. (Interestingly, under most circumstances, the opposite was true when students were asked how likely they think they would be to cheat in the future.)

“I really think this was about a maturation effect,” Baldasare said. “The likelihood of ‘Have you ever cheated’ increases as you spend more time in the college environment.”

Sixty percent of students indicated they’d cheated on homework, and 19 percent had cheated on an exam (30 percent cheated on both).

“Homework seems to be the issue where it’s just, in students’ minds, less of a big deal. That this is not a high-stakes evaluation of their performance,” Baldasare said. “That sometimes classroom guidelines are less clear on homework, or what’s permissible with homework, than it is for exams or papers.” For instance, students don’t blink an eye at rushing to copy homework or compare answers right before class.

While 97 percent of faculty reported including statements about academic integrity their syllabuses, only 83 percent of students said all their instructors did so. Nearly three-quarters of faculty said their syllabuses defined specific behaviors that constitute violations, and half of students said all their instructors did. Sixty-seven percent of faculty said their syllabus explained the consequences of cheating; 52 percent said all their instructors did.

It was “concerning” that a full 16 percent of instructors don’t discuss academic integrity even once in class, said Kendal Washington White, senior associate dean of students at Arizona.

In a rather surprising finding, and to the dismay of the presenters, 41 percent of instructors said they “ensured” the class knew when a cheater was caught.

“We don’t want them to do this,” Washington White said. She described one case where a professor believed a student was cheating on an exam and instead of pulling him aside, tore up his exam in front of the entire class. It’s clear expectations are key, she said, and humiliating students does not achieve that end.

Four in five faculty have reported at least one violation, and of those who have, 60 percent said they typically do so at least once a semester. Yet, most faculty don’t consider cheating a “rampant” problem, Baldasare said, and don’t think most students do it.
It appears that students are more likely to cheat out of perceived necessity than simply because they can get away with it.

The most dire circumstances were the ones under which students said they would be most likely to cheat: facing disqualification from the university or program of study (about 35 percent on average), when a scholarship was at risk (about 38 percent), when they ran out of time on an assignment (30 percent), or to maintain a grade point average (28 percent). Students are less inclined to cheat just because other students are doing it (15 percent) or the professor ignores it (20 percent).

“There is a high-pressure environment that’s acting upon the students, and that seems to be, in their minds, what matters more even than the normative expectations of their peers,” Baldasare said.

In something of a paradox, only 28 percent of students reported paraphrasing text without citing it, but plagiarism is the most common conduct violation – Arizona students are up to four times more likely to be caught plagiarizing than cheating in other ways, Baldasare said. Most of the time, Washington White said, students who plagiarize simply haven’t been taught how to cite properly.

(That’s part of the reason why she worries about professors relying too much on software, like TurnItIn, that detects likely plagiarism. “There’s an automatic assumption that the student has plagiarized,” Washington White said. “I always caution instructors to not just say, ‘A equals B,’ that you really need to take a look at that work.”)

Given that students at the start of their collegiate careers are both less likely to have cheated yet more likely to think they eventually will, it’s important to reach them at the outset, Washington White said. Arizona is now including academic integrity workshops during new-student orientation, where students hear specific examples of violations so students know exactly what’s permissible and what’s not. At convocation, freshmen get another reminder of these standards. Officials have sharpened their marketing materials to make them more accessible and appealing to students, using a humorous rather than threatening tone.

On the faculty side, in addition to encouraging them to discuss standards, violations and consequences in class, officials are trying to ease the reporting burden. At Arizona, where instructors are responsible for reporting violations and determining the penalty, many are reluctant to formally document a breach because of the time investment it requires. So this summer, the administration is moving the reporting process online. (In another finding, men and tenure-track faculty were less likely to report violations than were women and non-tenure track faculty.)

And as the session wound down just days after the National Collegiate Athletic Association slapped the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with scholarship reductions and a post-season ban for violations including academic fraud, one audience member asked whether the survey found any significant differences in the behavior of athletes. It didn’t, but the presenters were unsure what to make of that.

“I’m not going to say that’s the end of the story,” Baldasare said. But Washington White speculated that athletes aren’t necessarily cheating more, they just get more backlash when they do.

“I’m not sure that that is being handled equitably,” she said. “There’s not more of the athletes doing it, but they’re higher profile so you’re going to pay more attention to it.”


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