

The Moral and Organizational Implications of Cheating in College

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INTRODUCTION

Cheating by college students is endemic. According to some studies, as many as three-fourths of students resort to academic dishonesty at some point in their college careers.¹ Many higher education scholars attribute this phenomenon to shortcomings in students' character and moral development. Students themselves, not unexpectedly, view the issue in a different light. A number of studies have shown that many either do not regard cheating as morally wrong or believe that circumstances excuse it.²

This essay evaluates these conflicting views of academic dishonesty and attempts to integrate them into a more general account of the responsibilities of students, faculty, and administrators. The analysis begins by examining moral arguments against cheating. These arguments are shown to depend on empirical premises about the importance and validity of academic tasks that are difficult to evaluate. Even conscientious instructors will have difficulty overcoming skepticism about arduous assignments, allowing some students to rationalize shortcuts to maintain high grades with reduced effort.

How are colleges to function when moral arguments against cheating find no purchase? The third section probes organizational science for answers. Student cheating is a classic example of what organizational science terms an agency problem: a case in which the interests of cooperating parties diverge and they do not all share the same information. Under these conditions, the better-informed party is free to maximize its own interests at the expense of the other, and in consequence the pursuit of common objectives is undermined.

One way to address the agency problem described above is to improve the flow of information, in this case the flow of information to faculty. This essay argues that certain types of assignment structures provide for more extensive oversight. These assignment structures both curtail opportunities for dishonesty and clarify the purpose of the assignment, thus eliminating one common excuse for cheating. Unfortunately, though, other agency problems block the use of this approach. Faculty members avoid teaching strategies that significantly increase workload, and administrators lack the incentive to encourage them to do otherwise. Student cheating, in short, is symptomatic of a multilevel agency problem that requires far-reaching organizational change.

To point out structural problems, however, is not to discount the moral dimensions of cheating. This essay argues that colleges create moral hazards, offering students inducements to do what they should not do and in other circumstances would not do. Of the many who contribute to organizational dysfunction,

faculty have the greatest influence, the widest discretion, and the most intimate knowledge of the hazards, and consequently it is they who bear primary responsibility for a state of affairs all too commonly attributed to students' character defects.

WHAT MORAL OBLIGATION DOES CHEATING VIOLATE?

Academic honesty can be summed up as adherence to norms of academic institutions. These norms vary among institutions, cultures, and time periods. For example, in some colleges in the United States, it is currently considered a violation of academic honesty not to report cheating; at others it is not. Further, ordinary literate practices in some non-Western societies are viewed as plagiarism in Western academic culture.³

Academic honesty, in short, is defined by rules operant within a given social context. The rules could be different, and in many social contexts, they are. Why, then, should a college student feel morally obligated to obey the rules of a specific institution? Suppose, for example, that students in an engineering class at one university are required to memorize formulas for an exam; at another, the formulas are provided. A student at the first university writes the formulas on the brim of her cap. Pulling the cap down slightly enables her to read the formulas and pass the exam. What moral requirement, if any, has her action violated?

The most common view is that she misrepresents the extent of her knowledge and consequently receives a grade that she does not deserve. The deception is compounded if an employer is influenced by this grade to hire her for a job for which she is not truly qualified. Call this the "deception argument." The deception argument appears promising on its face, but it raises two possible difficulties. First, if remembering the formula is a trivial exercise compared to the work of conceptualizing and solving the problem, then deception does not significantly misrepresent the student's ability. Second, if scrupulous students who memorize the formulas forget them a week later, then the difference in achievement that academic dishonesty is supposed to have concealed is illusory. In both cases, the result of the supposed deception is actually a more accurate reflection of achievement.

The deception argument fails wherever academic tasks either are trivial or do not accurately reflect students' abilities.⁴ The importance and validity of any academic task, however, are open to question, and so the culpability of an offender cannot be determined without deciding these questions.

A number of other arguments have been offered to demonstrate the immorality of cheating by college students. In one way or another, these are all derived from the deception argument, and most are susceptible to similar difficulties.

Consider, for example, the trust argument, which contends that even if smuggling in formulas that one is supposed to memorize does not meaningfully distort the student's true level of academic achievement, it nevertheless violates the trust between instructor and student. A compliant student will memorize the formulas and be rewarded with a high grade. The instructor trusts her, and through her compliance she supposedly proves herself worthy of trust. Despite her apparent fidelity, however, it turns out that in cases like this, the instructor's trust is misplaced because

the information generated is unreliable. The student has not, in fact, achieved at a higher level than classmates who did not remember the formulas. Moreover, if the student is aware that the task is invalid but still accepts undeserved credit, then she reinforces the instructor's erroneous estimate of her ability. Compliance should not be mistaken for trustworthiness.⁵

Two other arguments are also affected by the problems of importance and validity: the self-harm argument (that is, cheating deprives the student of opportunities for learning)⁶ and the free-rider argument (that is, cheaters enjoy the reputation of an alma mater without contributing to its maintenance). The self-harm, argument fails because, if memorizing formulas for a test does not contribute to a student's real abilities, then she does not deprive herself of real learning by taking a short cut. The free-riding argument fails because, if taking the short cut does not compromise students' abilities, then they contribute as much to the maintenance of the college's reputation as compliant students and the difficulty is avoided.

There is, however, one argument that does not appear to be affected by problems of importance or validity. Even if individual acts of deception are innocent, a pattern of such acts diverts effort from more productive activities and inhibits the development of cooperative skills and dispositions. Think of this as an extended version of the self-harm argument. One is not harmed by individual acts of academic dishonesty, but the cumulative effect of many such acts is detrimental. Persistent cheating is wrong, even if the academic tasks are in themselves meaningless, because this pattern of behavior blocks development of valuable skills and dispositions, and may foster the development of harmful ones.

The moral implications of academic dishonesty, in short, are highly dependent on context. For important and valid academic tasks, cheating is wrong for all the reasons listed previously. For unimportant or invalid tasks, the student who cheats occasionally does not appear to be morally culpable, and persistent cheating is blameworthy only to the extent that it inhibits the growth of valuable capacities.

How, though, does one establish the validity and importance of academic tasks? Ordinarily an instructor is in a better position to judge this than students. But conscientious instructors may know their assignments are worthwhile and yet have great difficulty convincing their students of this. If students do not see that academic tasks are important or valid, moral arguments will not be persuasive. How, then, is the university to proceed?

The three most common answers to this question are that (1) policies regarding academic honesty should be stated more clearly and forcefully; (2) surveillance should be increased and punishments meted out more consistently and frequently; and (3) measures should be taken to encourage social disapproval of cheating, for example, through an honor code. Proponents argue that these measures reduce the incidence of cheating, clarify its moral implications, and thus contribute to students' moral growth.⁷

These measures have indeed been shown to discourage cheating. Whether they clarify moral issues and enhance moral growth, however, is open to question.

Stating policies more clearly and forcefully will not solve the problem that students do not believe that cheating is wrong; increased surveillance is unlikely to affect students' evaluation of academic tasks; and punishment is clearly not justified in cases where cheating is not wrong. Where students erroneously believe that cheating is not wrong, punishment may be justified, but it cannot be expected to generate moral insight.

Many researchers consider encouragement of social disapproval to be the most effective strategy for discouraging cheating, but it too is problematic. Encouraging students to pressure one another not to cheat is legitimate in cases where cheating is morally wrong, but not in cases where academic tasks are trivial and invalid. Neither honor codes nor other social-pressure strategies acknowledge this distinction. Even worse, some honor codes require students to turn in a classmate who cheats, regardless of circumstances, thus demanding complicity in potentially illegitimate punishment.

The basic problem is that these strategies assume the culpability of students who cheat. As we have seen, in some cases cheating is not wrong. Even if students believe mistakenly that cheating is not wrong, their error may not be blameworthy. Given their inexperience, how could students know what the instructor knows and see what she sees?

Appeals to morality, in short, are misleading and end up confusing the issue in students' eyes. How, though, are colleges to address cheating? The next section reframes this issue as an agency problem, which is a set of circumstances familiar in the field of organizational science.

CHEATING AS AN AGENCY PROBLEM

Research in organizational behavior demonstrates that wherever human agents pursue collective aims, participants look for opportunities to advance their individual interests at the same time. Ordinarily the threat of sanctions provides a check on divergent pursuits. Where cooperating parties lack information about one another's behavior, however, sanctions are ineffective, and the cooperative undertaking may be compromised.⁸

Organizational researchers call this an agency problem, since employees of large organizations are considered agents of the organization, and the difficulty arises when they fail to act as such. Typically, agency problems involve not just lack of information but also information asymmetry: the agent knows something about her own actions and circumstances that other parties do not know and hence is able to pursue her own aims undetected.

Though much of the organizational literature deals with corporate contexts, agency problems can arise in any cooperative endeavor.⁹ Its basic features are clearly discernible in the phenomenon of college-student cheating. Student learning is the official organizational goal of college. Students, however, have a variety of other interests that compete with and sometimes displace learning: social life, work, family, romance, recreation, and the advantage of an academic credential even if it

is not earned. When students cheat, they take advantage of information asymmetry between themselves and the instructor to pursue these other ends undetected. The instructor is not aware of the short cuts taken to produce an acceptable paper, assignment, or test response, and hence gives the student a grade that does not accurately reflect her contribution to the common enterprise.

Some might object that this account is overly generous to college students who cheat. It assigns no blame to those who care about academic credentials but do not care about learning. This objection, however, overstates the generosity of the account. Agency theory envisions not that participants are entirely indifferent to organizational goals, but that they care about other things as well. Hence our proposed account does not say that students do not value learning, but rather that they weigh its value against other priorities.¹⁰

Cheating in college, in short, does appear to exhibit the basic features of the agency problem. But how is the problem to be addressed?

Organizational theorists recommend a twofold strategy: reduce information asymmetry, and apply incentives to make the pursuit of divergent individual aims less advantageous. Both of these strategies are extensively documented in the literature on the prevention of college student cheating.¹¹ Research in this field shows that incentives such as harsher penalties can indeed have a modest impact. Strategies that reduce information asymmetry, however, are somewhat more effective. Services like Turnitin, which compares student papers to texts on the web, help to curb plagiarism. Proctoring, prohibitions of cell phones, and other restrictions reduce the incidence of cheating on tests.

From the standpoint of agency theory, however, these strategies are far from optimal. Cheating continues, albeit at somewhat reduced levels. Surveillance and punishment help reduce cheating, but they are not decisive. The underlying problem seems to be that although these techniques sometimes help instructors see what students are doing, they do not help them see what they are thinking. The fundamental information asymmetry remains, and students soon invent new subterfuges. More important, surveillance strategies do not reduce the disconnect that makes it difficult for students to see the importance and validity of tasks they are assigned. While these strategies may discourage cheating by increasing its likely costs, they contribute nothing to the benefits of upholding academic integrity.

Instructors' basic isolation from students' intellectual processes cannot be addressed by surveillance, punishment, or exhortation; it requires the use of certain pedagogical strategies. What instructors need are techniques that help them understand students' thinking and follow its development over time. This can be accomplished in a number of different ways, just one of which will be discussed here. Constructivist learning theory characterizes learning as a process through which the subject constructs knowledge by linking new information to what is already known. This process can be made visible to instructors through a fairly simple task structure that can be applied in a variety of different fields and activities: Assignments are designed in stages. The instructor provides specific instructions that require that one

stage build on another. All the stages are documented, and the instructor may provide input, correction, or direction at any point in the process.

This task structure makes students' thought processes visible and enables instructors to track how these processes are changed by instruction. In effect, they present the instructor not just with a product, which could have been copied or downloaded, but with a sequential record of the activities involved in creating the product. Since both the sequence of steps and the starting points of assignments can be varied, instructors can make it practically impossible for the student to complete the assignment simply by buying something online or copying it from a classmate. Furthermore, since the steps are laid out in considerable detail and the instructor provides strategic feedback, the student is much more likely to grasp the purpose of the task and hence to understand why the instructor considers it important and valid. This approach not only makes it much more difficult to cheat without being detected, but strengthens the moral case for academic integrity by removing one of the most important excuses for cheating.¹²

The verdict of agency theory, then, is that honor codes, surveillance, and punishment are not adequate responses to student cheating. The underlying problem is a deep information asymmetry that is associated with traditional teaching methods, and what is needed to overcome this condition is pedagogical change. Constructivist learning theory suggests one suitable structure that both makes cheating all but impossible and is conducive to high levels of student learning.

FACULTY MEMBERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE AGENCY PROBLEM

Given the advantages of the staged-assignment approach and other strategies that make students' thinking visible to instructors, why are they not more widely employed? How does organizational science analyze a situation in which the solution to an agency problem is known but not utilized?

The first step in the analysis is to note that participants' actions, in this case faculty teaching methods, are not aligned with organizational goals. Next, we look for individual aims that would explain the divergent behavior. Faculty members clearly do have priorities that compete with teaching — scholarship and leisure activities, for example. The staged task structure described in the preceding section is highly labor intensive. Those who avoid it thus can pursue divergent individual aims more effectively, and a lack of monitoring enables them to do so with impunity. Reliance on teaching methods conducive to cheating thus can be considered another manifestation of the agency problem.

As in the case of students, this analysis does not tell us whether and to what extent faculty members are culpable. In their own defense, faculty members can easily point out that they would not be rewarded for using more arduous teaching methods. On the contrary, they would likely be penalized for decreased effort in other areas. Rather than allocating blame, agency theory merely describes a condition in which misalignment of individual and collective goals prevents an institution from functioning effectively.

How, then, could the institution be made more effective? What strategies are available to bring faculty members' efforts into alignment with official organizational goals?

One obvious first step is to correct the incentive structure: make teaching methods that discourage cheating a top priority in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions, and commensurately reduce the emphasis on other factors.

For this to work, however, information asymmetry must also be reduced to ensure that rewards are correctly reallocated. This is not an easy undertaking, as surveillance would be intrusive and cumbersome. There are, however, several other approaches that could be considered. The faculty review process could be broadened to include sample assignments and student work products. Co-teaching and other collaborative efforts could be encouraged, since these tend to make colleagues' teaching practices visible to one another. Exit portfolios in a student's major, available for review by departmental faculty, would also contribute to the visibility of teaching practices. Yet another approach would be to ignore task structure altogether and measure student learning directly. The dearth of accurate information about student learning outcomes has been amply documented in higher education scholarship.¹³ Focusing directly on learning rather than on cheating through the evaluation of valid assessment data would simultaneously solve the two information problems related to faculty performance and student honesty.

It is not surprising that these strategies are not widely utilized. All of the strategies present considerable administrative challenges. College administrators' interests in financial stability, institutional harmony, and job security pull in different directions. The strategies outlined here all have substantial costs. In many cases they may be at odds with institutional culture. Faculty are likely to resist. It is difficult to predict a payoff in institutional prestige or enrollment. In many respects, administrators are in the same position as students and faculty, as they are not likely to be rewarded for doing the right thing. Not only is it easier not to, but, very likely, no one will know. Similar factors come into play at the trustee level.

Organizational science views these issues not as evidence of bad character on the part of participants, but as problems of institutional design. In principle, they are soluble. But a stable solution must address all levels of the organization. It must correct incentives and provide adequate information. Until this happens, moral exhortation, whether directed at students, faculty, or administration, will be ineffective. All three groups of participants will continue to regard colleges as a morally free zone in which each is free to pursue individual interests even at the expense of the common goal.¹⁴

COLLEGE AS A SOURCE OF MORAL HAZARD

Organizational science diagnoses agency problems as faults in institutional design, not individual character. Yet within the organizational structure, participants retain agency. College students, faculty members, and administrators make moral choices. How are we to integrate these two features — design and individual choice — in a comprehensive account of student cheating?

The concept of moral hazard serves this purpose well. A moral hazard is created when institutions tempt participants to engage in morally questionable behavior that they would otherwise tend to avoid. The term originated in the field of insurance. It refers to the increased willingness of policyholders to take the risks or incur the costs against which they have purchased insurance.¹⁵ Insurance payouts, in effect, are incentives for such immoral or morally questionable activities as arson, the faking of injuries or accidents, or unhealthy lifestyle choices.

The role of incentives highlights the close relationship between moral hazards and agency problems. Both also involve information asymmetry, because beneficiaries depend on deception. Both undermine a common aim — in the case of insurance, the benefit of low-cost immunization against unavoidable injury, illness, and loss of property. The only clear-cut conceptual difference is that moral hazard must involve conduct that is morally objectionable. The agency problem, a more inclusive category, may involve wrong behavior but need not do so.

Though moral hazard has been studied most extensively in the field of insurance, the concept is relevant in other areas as well. Ronald Dworkin, for example, applies it to the familiar problem of how to design a generous program of social benefits without encouraging self-destructive behaviors.¹⁶ Student cheating, a clear-cut case of an agency problem involving morally objectionable conduct, provides a particularly striking illustration of the phenomenon. The benefits of college (academic credentials) and the ease of obtaining them free of cost in some professors' classrooms offer powerful inducement.

College faculty, it might be argued, are also subjected to moral hazard. They ought to teach in a way that discourages cheating. Institutions that employ them, however, do not reward this behavior, and may even penalize it if effort is diverted from activities the institution values more highly. The same reasoning would suggest that administrators and trustees, too, are subject to moral hazard.

What does the concept of moral hazard tell us about the relationship between organizational structure and the responsibility of college administrators, faculty members, and students?

First, though individuals retain moral agency, academic institutions that reward morally dubious conduct contribute to that conduct and hence should be regarded as complicit. To varying degrees, all voluntary participants in such an institution share its complicity. Students support the enterprise with their tuition payments. Faculty members create the conditions that tempt students to cheat. Administrators make decisions that encourage faculty to teach in a manner conducive to cheating. Trustees set institutional priorities that foster this conduct at lower levels. To this list one might add employers, state legislatures, donors, voters, parents, and others whose expectations of universities shape trustees' and administrators' views of their institutions' missions.

Although these parties share responsibility, they do not do so equally. Responsibility is commonly thought to depend on control, choice, and knowledge. Students have knowledge and the choice whether or not to cheat, but they have very little

control over the institutional factors that encourage cheating. Trustees have some control over administrators but none over faculty, and they have little knowledge of what happens in classrooms. Administrators have knowledge and some degree of choice, by virtue of being qualified for other occupations, but because of tenure and other procedural faculty rights they have little control over teaching practices. Faculty, in contrast, have knowledge, choice, and (after tenure is awarded) full control over teaching methods. They do not determine incentives, such as salary or workload, but they exercise indirect control over them through their capacity to block change. Further, through tenure and informal social influence, they shape norms and expectations related to teaching.

Most scholars in the field of higher education would agree that cheating by college students is evidence of intellectual dishonesty. That claim is beyond dispute. But whose intellectual dishonesty does college-student cheating demonstrate? Bill Puka appears to have this question in mind when he castigates the academic integrity movement, “which somehow sees the ethical splinters in students’ eyes without seeing the beam in its own.”¹⁷ An intellectually honest answer must assess responsibility in light of the knowledge, choice, and control of the parties involved, and must not ignore contributions by faculty, administrators, and trustees to the moral hazard of college.

1. Bernard Whitley and Patricia Keith-Spiegel, *Academic Dishonesty: An Educator’s Guide* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 9.

2. See, for example, Donald L. McCabe, “The Influence of Situational Ethics on Cheating Among College Students,” *Sociological Inquiry* 62, no. 3 (1992): 365–374; and George M. Diekhoff et al., “College Student Cheating: Ten Years Later,” *Research in Higher Education* 37, no. 4 (1996): 487–502.

3. Rebecca Howard, *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators* (Stamford, Conn.: Ablex, 1999).

4. This rationale is echoed in student surveys reported in George E. Stevens and Faith W. Stevens, “Ethical Inclinations of Tomorrow’s Managers Revisited,” *Journal of Education for Business* 63, no. 1 (1987): 24–29. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel characterize the assessment problem as one of unfairness in *Academic Dishonesty*, 50–51.

5. Bill Puka suggests that in situations of unfair testing and grading, cheating is not only justified but also obligatory. See Bill Puka, “Student Cheating,” *Liberal Education* 91, no. 3 (2005): 32.

6. For a version of the self-harm argument, see Stephen F. Davis and H. Wayne Ludvigson, “Additional Data on Academic Dishonesty and a Proposal for Remediation,” *Teaching of Psychology* 22, no. 2 (1995): 119–121.

7. See, for example, the position statement of the Center for Academic Integrity, *The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity* (2004), http://www.academicintegrity.org/fundamental_values_project/pdf/FVProject.pdf.

8. Michael Jensen and William Meckling, “Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs, and Ownership Structure,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 3, no. 4 (1976): 305–360.

9. For a comparative analysis, see Edgar Kiser, “Comparing Varieties of Agency Theory in Economics, Political Science, and Sociology: An Illustration from State Policy Implementation,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 2 (1999): 146–170. Andreas Ortmann and Richard C. Squire apply this model to higher education in *The Internal Organization of Colleges and Universities: A Game-Theoretic Approach*, Program on Nonprofit Organizations Working Paper #232 (New Haven, Conn.: Institute for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University, 1996).

10. This analysis is consistent with research on cost-benefit analysis in students' decisions about cheating. See Douglas N. Bunn, Steven B. Caudill, and Daniel M. Gropper, "Crime in the Classroom: An Economic Analysis of Undergraduate Student Cheating Behavior," *Research in Economic Education* 23, no. 3 (1992): 197–207.
11. The most extensive review is found in Bernard Whitley, "Factors Associated with Cheating Among College Students: A Review," *Research in Higher Education* 39, no. 3 (1998): 235–274.
12. Similar recommendations are presented in J'Anne Ellsworth, "The Graded Journey," *College Student Journal* 36, no. 4 (2002): 626–30. See Puka, "Student Cheating," 34, for a discussion of why these are not used more widely.
13. Robert Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change* 27, no. 6 (1995): 13–25.
14. On the concept of a morally free zone, see David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 13.
15. See, for example, Edwin J. Faulkner, *Health Insurance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960); and *Drennen & Others v. London Assurance Co.*, 113 U.S. 51 (1885).
16. Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part II: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (1981): 325.
17. Puka, "Student Cheating," 34.