THEIR CHEATING HEARTS: THE CULTURAL ROOTS
OF STUDENT DISHONESTY

By Susan E. Tifft

A few months ago, The New York Times ran a front page story about student cheating at Staples High School in the affluent suburb of Westport, Ct. Like many readers, I was transfixed by the creative ingenuity of the example with which the reporter began the piece. It seems that in preparation for a chemistry exam, a student had peeled the label off a Crystal Rock water bottle, printed the history of atomic theory on the back, carefully re-applied the label to the bottle, and placed it on his desk. Not only was the critical information visible, it was actually magnified through the water. Trouble was, this made the crib sheet equally visible to the teacher, who promptly nailed the student and gave him a failing grade.

That week, in my media ethics class at Duke University, I asked students about the story. As it turned out, one member of the class was a graduate of Staples High School, and he confirmed that the designer water trick was just one of a host of highly refined cheating mechanisms at the school. “I’m not shocked,” he said. “That’s fairly typical behavior.”

“Fairly typical behavior.” In that one phrase is captured the banality of lying, cheating, and stealing in American education today (I use the phrase with a bow to Hannah Arendt, who in 1964 published Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil; if we expect honesty from our students, we must cite our sources). What was once considered aberrant has become chillingly normal. In the 1960s, a quarter of American college students admitted to cheating once or more on a test during the previous year. By 1993, that figure had doubled. I’m sad to say my home institution (and undergraduate alma mater) isn’t immune. In a multi-institutional study released in 2000 by the Center for Academic Integrity, 45 percent of Duke students said they had engaged in unauthorized collaboration once or more than once since entering college; 37% said they had falsified lab or research data; and 24 percent said they had gotten questions or answers from someone who had already taken the test. There’s ample evidence that this
kind of dishonesty starts early. In a 1998 survey by *Who’s Who Among High School Students*, 80 percent of highly-motivated high school students admitted to having cheated; 83 percent said cheating was common at their schools. As a basis for comparison, consider this: in surveys of college students in the 1940s, only 20 percent admitted to having cheated in high school.

As surprising as these figures are, it is students’ attitudes toward their own and others’ behavior that is the real bucket of cold water. In that same *Who’s Who* report, over half the students surveyed said they didn’t think cheating was a big deal. A recent study of high school students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles found not only a sharp up tick in cheating (from 62 percent in 1992 to 74 percent in 2002), lying to teachers (from 69 percent to 83 percent) and stealing (from 31 percent to 38 percent), but a hard-nosed pragmatism about the “need” to do it. Forty-three percent of the kids agreed “a person has to lie or cheat sometimes to get ahead”; 37 percent said they would be willing to lie to get a good job.

What was once considered unethical, perhaps even criminal, is now perceived by students to be normal—a necessary life-skill, in fact, for building successful academic and professional careers. In high school, students cheat to get grades; in college, students cheat to land a top job or graduate school slot. The late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan gave us a useful way of thinking about this when he wrote in *The American Scholar* of “defining deviancy downward.” In that article, published in 1993, he described the public’s tolerance of what previously had been considered “intolerable” behavior in three areas, crime, single motherhood, and mental illness. These problems—largely afflictions of minorities, the underclass and the homeless—were so huge and intractable, Moynihan posited, that the nation dealt with them by simply redefining them as acceptable. Students today, many of whom are economically advantaged and academically talented (unlike the people described in Moynihan’s article), seem to be engaged in the same sort of redefinition.

Where did they get the message that lying, cheating, and stealing in the service of advancement is OK? Take a look in the mirror. As Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” Hardly a day goes by without an article in the newspaper or a story on television about some lavishly paid or publicly celebrated person who cut
corners, manipulated the truth, took advantage of the system, or even lied, cheated and stole outright. Chicago Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa used a corked bat. L. Dennis Kozlowski, the former chairman of Tyco, allegedly looted his company and investors of $600 million. Former Worldcom C.E.O. Bernard Ebbers, once considered a Horatio Alger success story, resigned in 2002 after a probe revealed his company had lent him nearly $340 million to cover loans he took to buy his own shares.

One can perhaps explain this as “business as usual” in business, but in public life, too, the line from the Ziggy comic—“Honesty is the best image”—has become the norm. Nearly a year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it’s increasingly apparent that the Bush Administration selectively used and even consciously skewed American intelligence to make the case for war. The mission was declared “accomplished” in a Top Gun photo op last May as though saying it made it so. Even Pfc. Jessica Lynch, in an interview with ABC’s Diane Sawyer, wondered why the military filmed her rescue from an Iraqi hospital, and used her “as a way to symbolize all this stuff.” She didn’t use the word “propaganda,” but then, she didn’t have to. As the late President Kennedy said in a Yale commencement address: “The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie…but the myth.”

My own profession of journalism is hardly a shining example of playing by the rules. Ousted New York Times reporter Jayson Blair lied to his editors about his background, his whereabouts, and his sources, and plagiarized material written by others. Former New Republic associate editor Stephen Glass didn’t bother with such halfway measures; he simply made his articles up. (It’s worth noting that both Blair and Glass have been directly and indirectly rewarded for their transgressions—Blair with a substantial book contract and Glass with the attention given “Shattered Glass,” a well-received movie about his misdeeds.)

Higher education has had its own share of bad boy behavior. Last year, John Shumaker abruptly resigned as president of the University of Tennessee after an audit showed he had spent more than $165,000 on football tailgate parties and approved nearly $500,000 worth of improvements to U.T.’s presidential residence, including a $4,800 gas grill (the $169 one at the president’s house was apparently unacceptable). His
predecessor, J. Wade Gilley, left with similar dispatch in 2001 after becoming romantically involved with a subordinate.

It’s impossible to prove that Americans are more dishonest now than in previous eras. But as if on cue, a new book about the phenomenon has just been published suggesting that they are. In *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, political scientist David Callahan says that whenever Americans have focused on money and success—during the Robber Baron era, for example, or the 1920s-- “there’s more license to do whatever it takes to achieve those things.” This makes intuitive sense. Students who came of age during the dot-com boom of the 1990s didn’t have to look to members of their parents’ generation for examples of quick wealth and celebrity. They could point to men and women only a few years their senior who became overnight millionaires with expensive home, fancy cars, and private jets. Getting the same for themselves became the goal. The means, ethical or otherwise, faded in importance.

Wealth has always been a cultural totem, of course. What’s different now is that the ethic of consumption has seeped into nearly every pore of American life. Ads are so ubiquitous—one billboards, T-shirts, fast-food placemats, baggage claim belts in airports, coffee mugs, website pop-ups—that we have become passively numb to being treated as potential buyers every minute of every day. Indeed, several scholarly books have suggested that we are now less a nation of citizens and more a nation of consumers. Today, candidates and policies are “marketed” using the same techniques Madison Avenue uses to sell Staples office supplies or the latest Hollywood movie. Selling is fine; we depend on it as one of the pistons of our economy. But few people expect sellers to be completely honest about their products or services. They may tell the truth; they just may not tell the whole truth. Yet advertising and consumerism and the pursuit of wealth are the ecosystem in which our students have grown up. This is the air they breathe, the water they drink. Is it any wonder, then, that they are a bit fuzzy about what constitutes truth-telling?

Hollywood hasn’t helped, and by that I mean a value system in which appearance trumps substance. If some California voters are to be believed, for example, they voted for Arnold Schwarzenegger for governor because he seemed “strong.” But were they
responding to his “strong” beliefs, policies, and experience, or merely to his fictional movie persona as the Terminator? At the same time, TV “reality shows,” which attract large audiences of young people, are in fact as far from reality as it’s possible to get. So much so that Showtime is set to launch one this summer in which contestants go through a mock presidential campaign with the winner free in September to make a real run for the White House if he or she so chooses. Got that? A show about a phony presidential campaign, shown during a real election year in which the stakes couldn’t be higher, may get better Nielson ratings than the actual presidential race. In this culture of funhouse mirrors, it’s easy to see why a student might feel it’s more important to make A’s than to actually deserve them.

Finally, our culture tacitly endorses the notion that when something bad happens, it isn’t the individual’s responsibility. We have become a nation of aggrieved and blameless victims. Do you have multiple chins and is your waist the circumference of a hoola hoop? It’s not your fault! The Big Mac mavens at McDonald’s lured you into their den of obesity and force fed you French Fries and a super-size Coke. Students—and their parents—sometimes use the same argument. If a student gets a bad grade, it must be the fault of the instructor. It couldn’t possibly be because the kid didn’t do the work, failed a test, or turned in work that was sub-standard.

That said, there are other factors that make cheating, and the tolerance of cheating, more prevalent today. Chief among them is technology. With sites like www.essay.org, Cheathouse, and Term Papers On File, students are able to access ready-made research papers with the click of a mouse. While it’s true that the same techno-wizardry that aids and abets plagiarism allows its detection—a few keywords typed into Google can often nab the offender—the Web has given students the equivalent of a skeleton key. In a recent study of 16,000 undergraduates at 23 colleges and universities, Donald L. McCabe, a management professor at Rutgers, found that 38 percent admitted to taking material from the Internet and passing it off as their own; 44 percent didn’t think they had done much wrong. “[Cheating] is not new,” Theodore Glasser, a professor in the Communications Department at Stanford University, told a reporter for TechWeb News in 1999. “What’s new is how easy it is.”
The Internet also permits students to download music and videos. Entertainment companies and artists generally consider this to be stealing, but most young people are either unaware of that fact, or don’t care. Enforcing this kind of copyright infringement is about as realistic as enforcing the 21 year-old drinking age on campus. Laws that are perceived to be unjust or impractical inevitably make law-breakers out of the otherwise law-abiding, as Prohibition amply demonstrated. While unenforceable laws have been on the books in every era of American history, the omnipresence of the Internet in higher education means that students today are probably “stealing” in great numbers, and not feeling the least bit guilty about it. This blasé attitude doesn’t help instill guilt about other, more worrisome forms of dishonesty in the classroom.

In addition to technology, another critical factor is our threadbare sense of community—of being responsible to and for each other, and working together in an atmosphere of trust. Students today came of age during the advent of “shout TV.” Their idea of debate is not evidentiary, with facts and arguments made and rebutted. Instead, they see Bill O’Reilly telling his guests to “shut up” and talking heads yelling at each other in a television studio. Civic life has been reduced to hearing a president call the leader of North Korea “a pygmy,” label whole countries “evil,” and dismiss powerful European allies as hopelessly out-of-it. Moral behavior doesn’t have much of a chance in such an atmosphere, because it is inter-dependence, trust, and mutual respect that give human beings an incentive to “be good.” Consider the self-policing effect of living in a small town, where you can’t escape being accountable to your neighbor, and can’t easily get away with calling him names. Contrast that with the lawless anonymity of the Web, the Wild West of what passes for public affairs programming on TV, and the voyeurism and orchestrated humiliation that is at the core of nearly every reality TV show. As Jedediah Purdy wrote in his article, “Suspicious Minds,” in the January/February 2003 issue of The Atlantic Monthly:

“Suspicious people are less likely to join associations, follow public events, get to know their neighbors, or make contact with their congressperson. In fact, they are less likely to do just about anything except watch TV and flip off drivers on the highway. That means
they are not the kinds of citizens who are likely to hold government accountable, intelligently and regularly, and thus keep it trustworthy."

Students today, I would submit, live in a very suspicious and uncivil world. Not only are they fudging the rules more than previous generations, they know that many of their classmates are as well. And of course, they look at the country’s business, political, and professional leaders, and see more of the same. If the traditional pillars of society can’t be trusted to set standards or act honestly, students get the message that everything is negotiable. A nation numb to cheating is a nation rife with distrust. Here’s a small example: In the wake of the Jayson Blair scandal, The New York Times hired a new staff person whose primary duty is to fact-check the resumes of employment seekers. Why? Because the paper no longer trusts prospective reporters to tell the truth about their backgrounds. Sad to say, this kind of job—working as the truth squad in a personnel department—is probably destined to be a growth area in American business.

If things are this bleak, what’s the solution? Honor codes are one answer, provided that are clearly defined, broadly communicated, and fairly administered. Indeed, studies show that at schools without honor codes twice as many students say they cheat as do those whose schools have honor codes. Faculty have an important role to play in this process, not only in making sure they understand and help enforce their school’s honor code, but in highlighting their personal fealty to the rules of academic integrity. This can be as simple as explaining the conventions of citation so that students have a clear sense of what must be footnoted, and how, in research papers. In the physical and social sciences, it can take the form of laying out the steps one must follow to get accurate data and report them honestly. In my own field of journalism, it could mean engaging students in the art of ethical interviewing, as well as in the how’s and when’s of protecting sources through the use of anonymous quotes.

Faculty can also help by making clear to students what cheating is and what it isn’t. Last semester, for example, I felt compelled for the first time to announce at the introductory session of each of my courses that I do not consider it O.K. for students to email written work to their parents for comments, corrections, and proofreading before turning it in to me. This came as something as shock to several of them; they had no idea
such actions might be considered unauthorized collaboration. It only reinforced my suspicion that there are probably as many “know nothings” among student cheaters as there are conscious rule-breakers. (Someone should probably also pass the word along to parents that it’s not Kosher to act as their child’s editor.) Making it more difficult to cheat, of course, is another way to attack the problem. This can be as simple as having students write in class, or creating assignments that are sufficiently specific and complex that no term paper mill can help them.

The other remedy is an offshoot of what is commonly called “Character Education.” When I first began teaching undergraduates at Duke in 1998, I thought I was imparting certain subject matter—media ethics, for instance, or the techniques of investigative reporting. What I quickly discovered was that I was teaching myself, meaning my own standards and values and take on the world. I’m not endorsing proselytizing or preaching, and I certainly don’t think professors should make political declarations in the classroom. What I mean is that we should not shy away from opportunities to teach virtue, for lack of a better term, and that inevitably starts with ourselves—as role models, and as tour guides in the adventure of ethical inquiry. If we encourage debate about ethical questions when they arise in the classroom, students--it’s my experience--are eager to engage. Young people, especially undergraduates, actually want to talk about the struggle to develop an inner life.

To end on an upbeat note, let me tell you about my media ethics class. Every semester that I teach it, I ask students as their first writing assignment to explain their ethical code, and to give me one example of when they upheld it, and one example of when they broke it. Most of them have never articulated their own ethical rules before, and invariably one of two later tell me that being forced to sit down and think about the question was one of the most useful exercises of their college life. Naturally, the answers vary. Some students are more conventionally religious than others, and their codes reflect that. Others sound like a Hallmark card. But over the years, two things have been fairly consistent. The first is that students say that they aspire to live by the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have done unto you. “ That is their prevailing ethic. The other is that the most frequently cited example of breaking their own personal ethical code involved an instance of cheating—either cheating themselves, or not turning in or
confronting a classmate they saw cheating. Usually, the example took place in high
school, but sometimes I wonder if that is simply to put me off the scent of more
contemporary dishonesty closer to home.

Still, the sentiments expressed in these essays are often poignantly sweet. They
give me hope that “the right” still appeals, despite the larger culture’s implicit demand
that young people should do whatever it takes to get ahead, even if that means shaving
the truth or bending the rules. As one of my students wrote in his essay last semester:
“My personal ethical code is simple: I will conduct myself and all my actions in a way
that earns me the respect of myself and those around me. I play the game of life to win,
but unless I can respect myself for what I have done, I will have lost.”