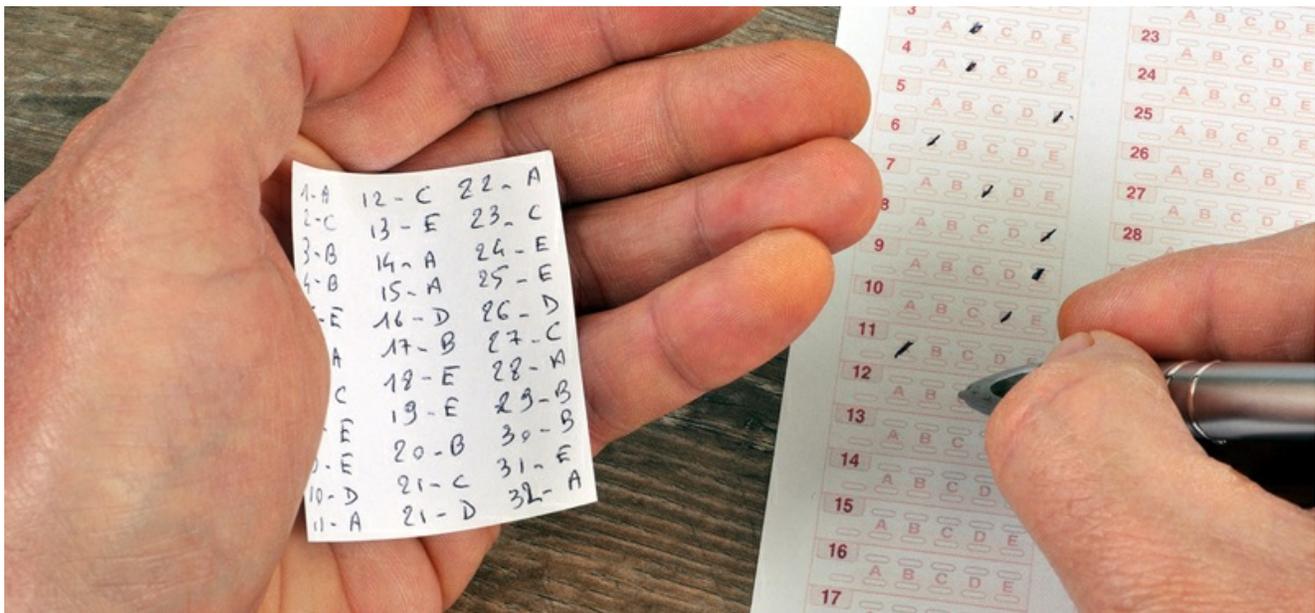


Why We Don't Report All of the Cheating We Detect

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Most students cheat, or so they eventually admit in surveys of college alumni. Weighing the collective evidence, it appears that only about a quarter of undergraduates have *not* cheated. Much of the misconduct goes on below the radar of faculty members, and we can't do much about something we don't see. The real question is: Why aren't we reporting more of the cases that we do detect?

If you've taught in higher education, you no doubt have discovered plagiarism on a written assignment or cheating on an exam. It's also likely that your college or university requires you to report every one of those incidents — or maybe on your campus, that's a request

rather than a mandate.

Regardless, faculty members are drastically underreporting academic-integrity violations. Most of us just deal with these situations on our own, or perhaps by mentioning it to colleagues. At some level, we all realize that underreporting makes the problem seem less severe than it is and reduces an institution's incentive to adopt stronger measures that would promote academic integrity.

I have heard many instructors say they are reluctant to report students who are first-time offenders. But of course, if nobody is reporting *first-time* offenders, then the institution can never identify *repeat* offenders.

A centralized reporting system is a prerequisite for the development of a culture of honest academic work. Decentralized policies on cheating tend to result in inconsistent standards, applied unfairly and without any oversight or training. Colleges and universities, then, have good reasons to adopt a centralized system for reporting and tracking academic misconduct.

But what are the incentives for faculty members to get on board with a centralized system? Clearly we want to support students and ensure the integrity of their work. Unfortunately, it's not enough to simply expect us to comply with a centralized mandate, because there are a lot of good reasons why we wouldn't.

Among the disincentives that make it more difficult for instructors to report misconduct at the institutional level:

- We are anxious about the reporting process because it's often difficult and time-consuming to prepare the appropriate evidence and document the cheating. Once you consider all the time, paperwork, and bureaucracy involved, it's a tempting shortcut to handle a case on your own.
- Some faculty members have little confidence that the process will treat students fairly.
- Others worry that a centralized adjudication system would take authority out of faculty members' hands. Those of us in favor of robust sanctions for a student's cheating fear that the administration would not support our decision, while those of us who prefer light sanctions worry that the institution will impose greater penalties than we think a particular undergraduate may deserve.
- And what about when students claim they are falsely accused? Such cases can cause a lot of complications for the faculty member who reported the misconduct — especially if you happen to be untenured and/or contingent. Besides hours of campus meetings and hearings, you might be on the receiving end of a lawsuit, and very few academics carry professional liability insurance.

The procedures for reporting a cheating incident are highly variable across academe. At one end of the spectrum is a simple web form that requires minimal documentation, and can be filled out in a few minutes. At the other end is a lengthy paper form that may take an instructor an hour or more to complete. Then there's the documentation required to substantiate the misconduct — in a plagiarism case, that might be a comparative analysis of source material versus the student's assignment.

In short, at some institutions, reporting a single incident involves *a lot* of faculty labor.

How institutions handle the cases that do get reported varies as well. In some places, a first offense merely gets recorded, and the only consequences come at the full discretion of the faculty member. At other institutions, every report results in an investigation, with a panel convened (typically including professors and students) to decide how the matter should be handled. Again, if every reported incident commits a faculty member to lots of paperwork and meetings, then clearly that will make it harder to ensure every incident gets reported.

Our academic culture generally rewards students who cheat. So what are we to do?

If faculty members are going to be expected to report every incident of misconduct, then we need a simple and easy mechanism of reporting, and access to clear procedures that are demonstrably fair to all parties involved. We also need the academic freedom to determine how grades are assigned in our own courses, and that includes how grades are assigned when academic misconduct takes place.

As instructors, it's our job to create a classroom environment that supports student learning, and that means acknowledging the high frequency of cheating as we design our courses. Academic misconduct emerges out of an adversarial atmosphere, in which students feel compelled to circumvent the rules to boost their grades.

While we cannot unilaterally change the extrinsic pressures for high grades (such as admissions criteria of professional schools), we should recognize that many courses are designed to exacerbate the rewards for cheating as well as the perceived need for it. Students are more likely to cheat when they feel cornered and don't have other options, and when an exam or a written assignment constitutes a large fraction of the total grade, then the perceived reward might trump the low risk of getting caught and reported.

Fortunately, it turns out that some highly effective teaching methods are also less conducive to cheating:

- Create scaffolded writing assignments — that is, break down a big project into smaller, sequential steps. That way, you not only reduce the probability and rewards of plagiarism, you also teach more effectively.

- De-emphasize a big, high-stakes exam in favor of more frequent, lower-stakes forms of evaluation. That reduces students' focus on memorization and cramming, provides more frequent learning opportunities, and lessens the anxiety that a single grade on a big test will "ruin" their course grade.

All students — including the ones who never cheat — benefit from those kinds of course-design changes. Instead of investing heavily in vigilance, you can spend your time on teaching and provide more structure so that students with all levels of investment in the course have an opportunity to learn.

I suspect another reason a lot of us don't report academic misconduct is that we are focused on student success: We want to spend our time on learning, not legerdemain. However, if we help our campuses in their efforts to detect more of the students who are engaged in skulduggery throughout their academic careers, that can contribute to a healthier academic climate for all.

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