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## EDUCATION

# Harvard Cheating Scandal: Is Academic Dishonesty on the Rise?

In order to better understand what leads students to cheat, colleges and universities need to break the code of silence and apply their own academic methods to the problem

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis | Sept. 04, 2012

Harvard University's announcement last week of an investigation into a case of widespread cheating offered a little thrill of schadenfreude for some: confirmation, perhaps, that a venerable 376-year-old institution — whose motto, "Veritas," means truth in Latin — could be caught up in the same pedestrian crimes and misdemeanors found at less lofty altitudes. According to [reports in the \*Harvard Crimson\*](#), more than 100 students in an undergraduate lecture class are alleged to have lifted material from shared study guides on a final take-home exam.



Brian Snyder / Reuters

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Moral indignation is an understandable response, and can have a role in all sorts of problems. But focusing on individual character flaws or moral failings obscures both the magnitude and the complexity of the problem of our national crisis of academic dishonesty. [Cheating](#) cuts to the very heart of academia, more so than it does other institutions that have faced similar wrongdoing, such as professional sports and the financial industry, because the search for truth is the primary mission of a university. Harvard's [public statement](#) promised appropriate discipline for the wrongdoers and noted that the "vast majority" of its students do their own work. Such circumstances — which are dismayingly common on college and high school

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campuses nationwide — often prompt institutions to reassert community values in this way. But a broader kind of soul searching is required.

Students have cheated for as long as there have been [schools](#), but by any measure, academic dishonesty is [on the rise](#). While detection methods and increased vigilance explain some of this increase, [most experts believe the incidence of the forms of cheating has increased](#) (PDF) too. For one thing, the technological ease of mashup culture can make it hard for students to recognize — or care — that they are appropriating the work of others. In fact, according to [reporting in the New York Times](#), some of the Harvard students involved seemed to think that they didn't really cheat, that there were special circumstances in the class, that the professor changed the rules and so on.

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Our experience at [Harvard](#) College as house masters of one of the 12 undergraduate residential-academic communities gives us a bird's-eye view of the pressures that can drive students to temptation. We've observed two types of students who are especially vulnerable.

The first type is prone to panic and self-doubt. Feeling the weight of family or societal expectations, these students become so worried about failure that they lose perspective and fail to see obvious alternatives to cheating like asking for help before things get out of control, making up a failed class over the summer, taking time off, being honest with their parents or learning to cope with a plan B. Because of their youth and immaturity, these students don't realize that bombing a class isn't a permanent blot on their record as a human being and will not likely affect their long-term capacity to find a job or get into graduate school. The tunnel vision of late adolescence, which can be so energizing in other arenas, takes on a toxicity that inhibits resilience in the face of disappointment.

The second type of student at risk for cheating belongs to one or more social networks like fraternities, "final clubs," athletic teams or cultural-affinity groups, where barriers to cheating (like social opprobrium) are lower and the logistic means to cheat (like sharing study materials) is more common. Membership in these networks often comes with a high degree of loyalty and social pressure to perpetuate cheating or protect cheaters from discovery. In fact, there is [evidence](#) that peer attitudes to cheating help predict who will engage in academic dishonesty.

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But on some level, everyone is at risk for academic dishonesty, no matter who or where they are. Nowadays, we seem to live in a culture of lies. Should we really be surprised that [high schoolers cheat on standardized tests](#) when they grow up among adults — Olympic cyclists, politicians, money managers, high school administrators, journalists, professors and even their own parents — who may be thrifty, at best, with the truth? It doesn't help to whisk away such a widespread phenomenon by dividing the world into good and bad people or insisting that the whole business is simply beyond our control.

The right response to cheating involves not just adjudicating the individual cases but also exploring and

addressing the structural determinants and risk factors for academic dishonesty. For guidance, academic institutions can look within their own community. Many scholars are already at the vanguard of understanding how decent people fall prey to the pressures of groupthink and poor decisionmaking. For example, Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist at Duke University, describes some of the science behind the contagion of cheating norms in his recent book, *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*. We need to learn more about the learning environments that either promote or inhibit academic integrity.

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As with any epidemiological study that addresses risk factors, people may not like the results. But we should embrace, not fear, these kinds of findings. They may shine light on dysfunctional social and academic practices that are in need of change, but educators and students nationwide need to engage in this difficult self-reflection.

It will be a real test of Veritas.

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**Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis**

Erika Christakis, M.P.H, M.Ed., is an early childhood educator at the Yale Child Study Center. Nicholas A. Christakis, M.D., Ph.D., is the co-director of the Institute of Network Science at Yale University. The views expressed are solely their own.