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Speeding is Okay and Cheating is Cool

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Speeding is Okay and Cheating is Cool

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Academic misbehavior occurs among all students—gifted students as well as the general student population. I believe that cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty are supported by a pattern of rationalization similar to that which supports other common but questionable social behaviors. In the following discussion, I will compare academic dishonesty with driving in excess of the speed limit and offer some comments about the pervasiveness of similar behaviors in other aspects of our lives. I wish to make the point that all of us, faculty included, probably perform some actions that violate the highest standards of behavior. Although I believe that academic dishonesty is unacceptable, I want to make a plea that faculty look to the factors underlying its existence and that they deal with student infractions temperately.

Most readers, if they are honest, will admit to driving above the speed limit from time to time. It is not a benign behavior. For one thing, it is illegal. Speeders incur the risk of tickets, fines, and suspension of driving licenses. Speeding puts the lives of the driver, the passengers, and other motorists at risk. In addition, excess gas consumption wastes natural resources. Yet many of us speed, and we feel little remorse for doing so. We incur minimal social sanction. Let us look at some of the rationalizations we make and compare them to explanations that are made by students and others to explain academic dishonesty.

“I DIDN’T MEAN TO DO IT.”

It is not always easy to maintain a constant speed in hilly terrain, and we may be distracted by scenery, passengers, and our own thoughts. We may even be ignorant of specific traffic regulations in a strange city or state.

Likewise, students who are devoting little attention to an assignment may neglect to double check a reference or may omit reference for a paraphrase. Or a student may unintentionally overhear and make use of a correct answer whispered by someone else during an exam.

In high school, students may have perfected the art of “cut and paste,” learning to cobble together a paper that incorporates numerous (often unidentified) internet sources. This practice may continue into college without students being aware, at least initially, that this method of composition is considered plagiarism.

“IT DOESN’T HURT ANYBODY; THERE ARE A LOT WORSE THINGS.”

This response reflects a rather narrow view of one’s responsibility to others, but it is probably the explanation many of us make to ourselves when we speed.

Similarly, it may be the private explanation students make to themselves when they decide to cheat, especially when an assignment is perceived as “busy work” or irrelevant. Does cheating hurt anybody? In my experience, it does. I have only to recall several undergraduate classes in which cheating on exams was widespread and the “grading curve” adversely affected those who were doing acceptable but not outstanding work. I believe that students do know that cheating can harm their classmates and themselves just we all know that driving too fast can cause horrific fatalities; however, it is more comfortable to deny the consequences of these actions.

Unethical acts may be further rationalized by comparing them favorably to even more egregious behaviors. Students may claim that fudging values in a lab assignment is not as bad as breaking into a professor’s computer files just as others of us may assert that driving just a few miles faster than the speed limit is not nearly as bad as driving under the influence of alcohol. The implication is that there is a spectrum of unethical behavior and that acts occurring on the upper end of the spectrum are relatively acceptable.

“I HAVE COMPELLING PERSONAL REASONS.”

We have an important job interview, an appointment with a medical specialist, a dying parent; we must arrive on time at all costs. Our personal priorities supercede the needs of others and negate the rules. We drive 5 or 10 mph faster than the speed limit and feel fully justified.

Scholarship students may feel something of the same sense of internal pressure and entitlement. To maintain scholarship eligibility, students are usually required to keep their grades up. Many students attending my college come from families in which the cost of state college tuition represents a significant financial burden. Without scholarship assistance, college attendance may be perceived as impossible. In addition, pre-professional students may feel compelled to do whatever is necessary to compete for admission to professional schools. They are rewarded for success and penalized for failure if

they are not admitted into the limited spaces available in the state's medical, dental, pharmacy, or nursing schools. They have "compelling personal reasons" to do whatever it takes to maintain a high GPA.

"EVERYONE ELSE WAS GOING SO FAST, AND I HAD TO KEEP UP."

There is nothing quite like the feeling of driving through an unfamiliar metropolitan area and noting that, although the speed limit is 55, the traffic on either side seems to be zipping by at 80 mph. Are we to creep along at 55, dealing with honking horns and hand gestures, or to join the flow of traffic at 70 mph?

Students must also make this kind of decision. They may feel the need to "keep up" with the class, which—correctly or not—they believe to be moving more quickly than they are. In my experience, gifted students who have not been fully challenged in high school are sometimes surprised to realize how much effort is required for college-level work. Cheating may seem necessary in order to stay abreast of the class. In addition, in classes where academic dishonesty is perceived to be blatant and widespread, students may feel they have no other choice but to join in.

"I HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY TO KEEP FROM GETTING CAUGHT."

The availability and use of radar detectors evoke little comment. Now we can speed and hope to evade the consequences. In addition, we can access the Internet to identify well known "speed traps" and modify our driving behavior accordingly.

Students are skilled in the use of technological devices with functions that support various forms of academic dishonesty. Some of the methods are variations of older, low-tech methods. For example, instead of marking the answers to an exam on a shoe, paper, or body part, answers may be loaded into an electronic storage device or transmitted in real time using the Internet or cell phones. Increasingly sophisticated calculators may give students an added advantage in the test taking environment. The push to integrate technology into the classroom has only exacerbated the problem by giving students access to the training and facilities needed to carry out dishonest acts.

"PEOPLE WERE GOING FASTER THAN I WAS, AND THE POLICE DIDN'T DO A THING."

We know that many speeders are not given citations, are not arrested, and never receive any type of censure. We may be tempted to argue that this lack of consequences implies tacit approval of our own speeding.

Some instructors—perhaps through inattention or lack of sophistication—refuse to believe that cheating is occurring in their classes. Other faculty may overlook the infractions of “good” students or students who depend on their scholarships. Such inaction serves to validate the acceptability of academic dishonesty.

“IT’S A THRILL TO GO FAST IN A COOL CAR.”

There is certain glamour to speeding. We like the thrill of fast rides in amusement parks, and some of us like the feel of a powerful engine accelerating on a smooth stretch of road. After all, we may reason, why does the speedometer go higher than 70 mph?

Cheating on exams and assignments is purported by some students to embody the same kind of thrill. It becomes a challenge to see how much one can get away with. Acts of academic dishonesty may represent something of a game to be played against the instructor and the system.

* * * * *

The seven rationalizations discussed above will be familiar to many readers. They play a part in supporting common violations of law and ethical behavior that are tolerated and embedded in our daily lives. It is possible to identify numerous problematic behaviors that are similarly accepted, defended and rationalized: copying and sharing copyrighted videos and software, photocopying musical scores for schools and church choirs, paying household employees “under the table,” underestimating income from tips on tax returns, smoking in no-smoking zones, accepting student discounts (or senior citizen discounts) for which one is not fully eligible, or posting “open” job positions with requirements that can only be filled by one preselected individual.

The problem of academic dishonesty has much in common with the examples noted above. It reflects the pervasive social acceptability of self-gratification, and it also reflects our emphasis on competition and the power we have given to grades as a measure of academic worth. Establishing more rigorous rules and applying stiffer penalties will not make students more honest; it will only make them more creative about cheating and will reinforce the rationalizations they make for their behavior, whether or not they are caught.

I have several comments to make about we how can establish learning environments that promote academic integrity. First, I suggest that we emphasize to students that our goal is to help them grow and learn personally and academically and that by cheating or plagiarizing they are shortchanging their own education and diminishing the value of their credentials.

ALISON SCHELL WITTE

Second, I suggest that we deemphasize competition among our students when possible and remind students that academic competence will prepare them not only to meet their own professional and career goals but also to serve others. I do not think we will ever get away from grades, but we might reconsider pass/fail for upper-level courses. We also might reconsider the weighting of requirements for entry into graduate and professional schools. Finally, I suggest that we remember that students have the potential to learn from their mistakes. Draconian penalties such as expulsion should be only a last resort. Students should be subject to sanctions for academic dishonesty, but in addition they should receive support and guidance to improve their behavior. They, like all of us, must believe that is possible to live by high standards.

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