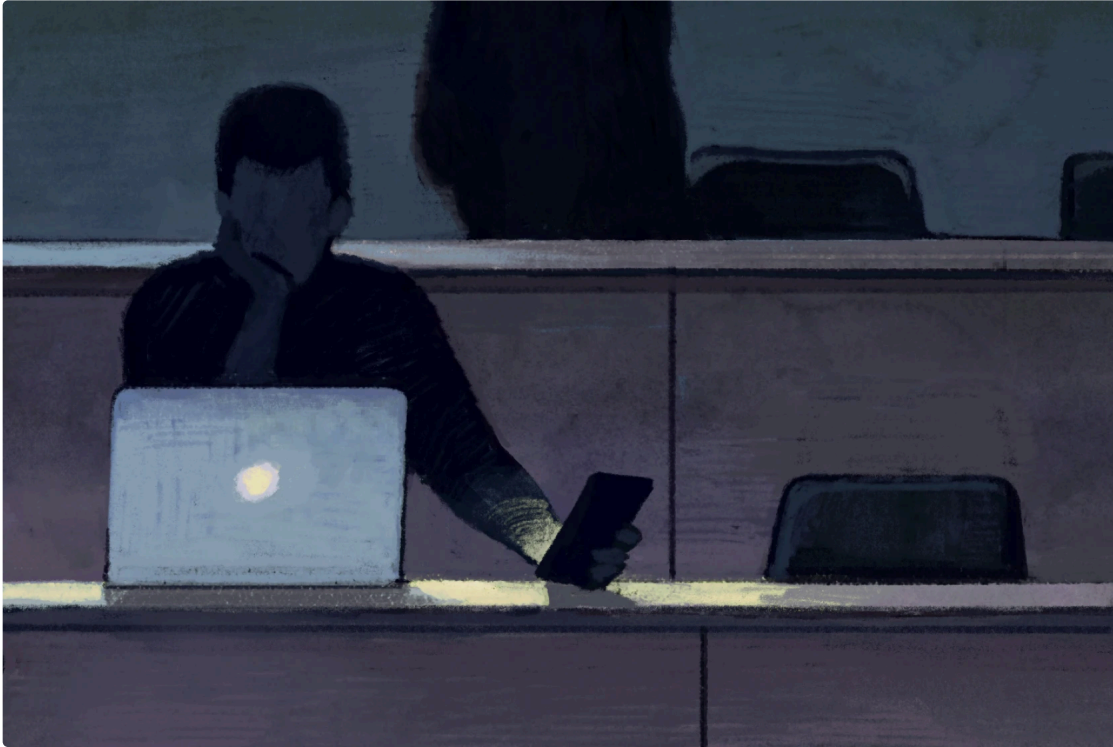


## Cheaters Usually Do Win in the Classroom

A professor offers two proposals to reduce widespread academic misconduct by college students.

By [Arik Levinson](#) December 2, 2024

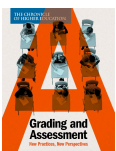


HOKYOUNG KIM FOR THE CHRONICLE

A week before he expected to graduate from Georgetown University, a student of mine submitted — as his senior honors thesis — a word-for-word copy of somebody else’s published paper. As cheating goes, the incident was extreme but not extraordinary.

I’ve had students use cell phones to access course material during exams, either surreptitiously under their desks or by excusing themselves to use the restroom. They have cheated on tests administered by sports teams while traveling for games and on tests taken at the campus disability-services office. One student forged a medical note to get access to that office. Another smuggled a stack of 20 three-by-five notecards into an exam. In my own classroom, lots of students have copied answers from the people seated next to them, even though I hand out different versions of tests that are clearly labeled as such, are printed on different colored paper, and have different questions. (And of course, different answers.)

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According to a [recent Chronicle story](#), generative AI has made cheating more pervasive than ever before, and “the solutions aren’t clear.” In fact, cheating was normal long before AI and I am proposing two potential solutions here. One is straightforward and already being implemented at some universities, while the other will be controversial:

- **Publish statistics about student academic misconduct.** Students should know their classmates engage in this type of behavior and occasionally get caught. On [surveys](#) run by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), more than three-fifths of college students admit to having cheated on assignments. Publishing annual statistics about a college's academic-misconduct cases and their outcomes — unpleasant but not career-ending for most students — might deter some of that misbehavior and could alleviate the lonely panic felt by those who are caught and face discipline.
- **Publish statistics about how often professors report misconduct.** A 2012 book, [Cheating in College](#), found that 45 percent of surveyed faculty members in the early 2000s claimed to have never observed cheating by students. If three-fifths of students cheat and 45 percent of professors never see misconduct, clearly some faculty members are missing a thing or two. Even some who do see infractions often turn a blind eye. Between 30 and 40 percent of college professors surveyed by ICAI said they knowingly ignored at least one case of potential cheating in the previous year. In a [2019 Chronicle essay](#), Terry McGlynn, a professor of biology, wrote that “underreporting” makes the cheating problem “seem less severe than it is and reduces an institution's incentive to adopt stronger measures that would promote academic integrity.” My proposal — to publish statistics about which professors report cases — would inform students of the risks of cheating and might shame some faculty members into paying more attention to cheating in their classrooms.

I'll explain both suggestions in more detail, but first we need to understand the problem.

**Cheating by the numbers.** The transgressors I encounter are men and women, American and international, and in every cohort from first-year undergrads to Ph.D. students. Some come from privileged backgrounds, others are first-generation college students. Statistics posted by institutions such as the Universities of [Illinois](#) and [Wisconsin](#) describe similar diversity.

The cheaters' common trait is making this one bad choice, and getting caught.

What happens to them? The process at my university is typical. If I suspect misconduct, I am obliged to file a report with Georgetown's [Honor Council](#). It assigns a faculty investigator who interviews me and the student. If the student admits wrongdoing, that triggers an expedited sanctions process. If the student contests the allegation and the investigator finds evidence of a violation, the matter moves to a hearing. If the hearing board finds a violation, it may recommend sanctions ranging from a letter of reprimand filed temporarily with the student's college records to a permanent (and exceedingly rare) dismissal from the university.

How frequent is this behavior? According to the academic-integrity center surveys, 32 percent of undergraduates admit to cheating on an exam, 28 percent to collaborating on assignments they're supposed to be doing on their own, and 15 percent to plagiarizing written work. More than 60 percent of surveyed students report having cheated in some form.

But the number of students who get caught and sanctioned is an entirely different matter. Commendably, some institutions share online data from their academic-integrity systems. The University of Illinois posts some of the most [detailed data](#), showing official cases of academic misconduct rising steadily from about 0.5 percent of undergraduates in 2006-7, to about 3 percent in 2023-24. Ohio State University [reports](#) smaller increases, from less than 1 percent of undergraduates in 2012-13 to 1.4 percent in 2022-23. Comparable numbers shared by [Harvard](#) and the Universities of [Vermont](#) and [Georgia](#), among others, range from 1.5 to 2.5 percent of students. At [my own](#) university last year, 1.6 percent of undergraduates were officially accused of academic misconduct.

If 1 to 2 percent of students on a campus get caught and reported each year (and none are repeat offenders), then over the course of a four-year degree, about 4 to 8 percent of each graduating class will be accused of academic misconduct. In any gathering of 25 students, one or two will face an academic-misconduct accusation as part of their collegiate experience.

Those numbers don't seem so bad if they accurately represent the amount of academic misconduct that occurs — but they represent a big problem if the surveys are correct and more than half of students cheat. The mismatch would mean most misconduct goes unpunished, academically honest students feel cheated by their classmates, and the few students sanctioned each year feel unfairly scapegoated for activity everyone else gets away with.

**Who gets hurt when students cheat?** I know, I know, cheaters only cheat themselves. Nobody really believes that. Academic dishonesty is not a victimless crime. In the real world, or what passes for it in college, cheating has three groups of victims:

- The principal ones are the students who don't cheat. They look around and see their classmates using phones during tests and plagiarizing essays. If coursework is graded on a curve, any advantage gained by cheaters counts against honest students, who might understandably feel aggrieved.
- The second group of victims is the faculty members who care enough to follow their college's academic-integrity guidelines, remove temptations to cheat, and advertise and enforce academic honor codes. Professors who fail to report cases create an expectation of nonenforcement and an

atmosphere conducive to cheating. It's not so much a case of "good cop, bad cop" as "bad cop, sleeping cop." Enforcement takes work: writing different versions of exams, ensuring that proctors are vigilant, checking citations. And reporting cases is no fun. Students react emotionally, often tearfully, and occasionally threateningly. Parents sometimes try to get involved. If more professors took academic misconduct seriously, students might learn their lesson before they appear in my class creating enforcement work for me.

- There's also a third injured party here — the rare students who cheat and get reported. We might not feel sorry for them, but they are the victims of an arbitrary system that picks on them while plenty of their classmates cheat without consequence. By unknowingly enrolling in a course taught by a professor who cares to pay attention, they suffer an arbitrary penalty avoided by schoolmates who engage in similar behavior.

## Two Proposals

First, advertise all of this to students. When colleges do post data, it's typically buried in obscure governance documents, or deep in the academic-integrity websites that students only visit after they've been accused of cheating. Make a bigger deal of it, starting in the first year of college.

Because the academic-disciplinary process is secret at most colleges, students know little about it until they are ensnared. Whenever I've had to report students for misconduct, they are shocked. Nobody they know has ever faced discipline for cheating.

Ignorance about the prevalence of disciplinary cases has two consequences. First, students believe they can get away with cheating and are more likely to do so. And second, if they do get caught, they panic, believing it will be ruinous for their futures rather than just one hard-earned lesson on the way to a productive and rewarding life as a college graduate.

Both beliefs are wrong. While enforcement is lax, it's not zero. Students who are caught don't know it, but they have friends and classmates who have been through the system. And students *should* know that there's life after being sanctioned for academic misconduct. The system's objective is to deter misbehavior and teach important lessons, not ruin promising lives.

A glance at LinkedIn finds that, after being caught and sanctioned, my former students went on to graduate schools in law, business, social work, and other disciplines. Some work at nonprofit organizations, others on Wall Street, others for government agencies. They're talented and impressive people, and I hope their brush with academic discipline was one unpleasant, character-building chapter in an otherwise fruitful four-year college education.

Advertising that people do get caught could have two benefits: deterring some misbehavior and assuaging the alarm of those who get caught cheating.

My second proposal is for colleges to publish aggregate data on every professor's individual history of reporting academic misconduct. Publicity might shame negligent faculty members into enforcing the campus honor code, thus reducing the arbitrariness of outcomes.

If colleges publicized which professors enforce the campus honor code — and how often — students might choose courses on that basis. And that might not be all bad. Alert professors would enjoy courses full of students who don't cheat, either because they wouldn't anyway or because they know they might be caught. Sleeping-cop professors would reap what they sow.

Academic dishonesty undermines the campus intellectual environment and demoralizes students and faculty members alike. Reducing academic misconduct will take work, but maybe less work than perpetuating the status quo in which lots of students cheat, few are caught, and most of us feel bad about it.

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