

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Cheating in College \*

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With the start of the fall semester of college, students' thoughts turn to doing well in their classes. However, some students resort to cheating to get the grades they desire. In 1995, psychologist Stephen Davis (Emporia State University) completed a national survey of 2,153 undergraduates. Davis found that about half of the students admitted cheating while in college. Of those who cheated, half indicated that they had cheated more than once. Rates of cheating seem to be increasing.

Cheating behavior may involve a wide range of behaviors. Some students **plagiarize** material – they turn in papers in which others' words or ideas are used without giving credit to the original authors. During tests, some students peek at others' papers, look in the textbook (when it is not an "*open book*" test), or even develop elaborate codes with friends to signal multiple-choice answers.

Other students expect faculty members to stop any cheating. However, this often is not the case. Too many faculty members ignore cheating violations for various reasons.

- They are uncomfortable in the role of policing student behavior.
- College regulations are unclear. This confuses faculty members, who avoid dealing with regulations by ignoring the transgressions.
- Faculty members believe it is their word against the student's. They fear complex legal repercussions that could damage their reputations.
- Penalties may be ineffective or too severe. Failing the course does not seem to stop cheating, while expulsion from college seems too severe.

Cheating policies may vary between various departments in the same institution. Without a consistent set of rules, students may be confused about what behavior actually constitutes cheating. Some students think they will fail, if they don't cheat. To them, if they are caught, flunking the course may not be an effective penalty. On the other hand, expulsion may "*brand*" the student for life.

A compromise penalty is being used at some colleges. For example, the University of Maryland at College Park has developed a six-week seminar on ethics and community responsibility. They have developed teaching tools to explore the immorality of various types of cheating. First-time cheaters are given an "*X/F*" grade for the courses in which cheating was involved. The *X* indicates cheating, while the *F* indicates failure. The *F* is

part of their permanent record, while the X can be removed within a year, if students successfully complete the six-week ethics seminar.

At the University of Delaware, they also have an "X/F" system. They have a seven-week values clarification seminar. Besides taking personality tests, students are required to do research and write a paper about Delaware's cheating policy. Students must also write letters to the affected faculty members. In these letters, students must express their feelings related to their cheating.

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## **To eliminate cheating, students must seriously consider the effects of their behavior.**

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If students do not want cheating grades to remain on their permanent records, they must spend an extended period of time seriously considering their behavior. The "X/F" system gives an option that is more likely to change the students' behavior. However, it is not likely to label them permanently as "*cheaters*".

Cheaters are not always underachievers looking for an "*easy*" alternative. Under certain conditions, overachievers may cheat too. In 1994, Stephen Davis and Lonnie Yandell completed a study of 168 undergraduate students. Students were tested to find out if they were Type-A or Type-B personalities.

**Type-A** personalities are "*competitive, achievement-oriented, easily aroused and sometimes aggressive and hostile.*" (This type of personality is more prone to heart attacks.) **Type-B** students are "*more relaxed, less goal-oriented and less likely to believe they control their own destiny.*" Type-A students are typically more learning-oriented and less likely to cheat. In contrast, Type-B students are more grade-oriented, less likely to study, and more likely to cheat.

Davis and Yandell believed that the Type-A students, with high standards of performance, would be more likely to cheat if they were unprepared for the testing situation – if they lose their sense of control over the situation. The researchers devised such a situation. Type-A, Type-B and control students were asked to form as many words as they could from a set of letters within 30 seconds. The Type-A and Type-B students were told that college students average 26.5 words in that period, but the control students were not given any information. (In reality, the average for college students was 13 words. It is impossible to form 26.5 words in that time.) After the 30 seconds, students reported the number of words they had formed.

With their actual performance, Type-A students were under stress. They wanted to achieve the false standard that they had been given, but they could not. In this study, 84% of the stressed-out, Type-A students cheated. The Type-A group said they had completed an average of 20 words, while both the Type-B and control students reported about 13 words.

Over-achievers are less likely to cheat than underachievers. Usually, they don't need to cheat. They are typically more intelligent and/or have better time-management skills. However, if they overload themselves or are unprepared for any reason, they may also cheat.

Cheating is more often viewed as unfair to *other* students. The cheaters – if they are not caught – may achieve grades that others have earned through much effort. However, cheating cheats the cheater too. First, there are feelings of guilt or the anxiety of being discovered. Second, if you cheat, how can you ever know what you are really capable of doing?

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\* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Are professors turning a blind eye to cheating?," and "Beware the 'A' student: Overachievers can be cheaters," [\*APA Monitor\*](#), January, 1996, pages 1, 42.