

Case 15

“TO ‘D’ OR NOT TO ‘D’”

Academic dishonesty has reached epidemic proportions on college campuses. Myriad studies find—at large and small, private and public, institutions—that as high as 76% of students report having cheated at least once on a paper or examination. As one response to this behavior, Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, is considering a notation on the transcript of a student caught cheating: “FD” to indicate that the failing grade (F) resulted from academic dishonesty (D).

The motivations for cheating are many and various: fear of failure, planning a post-baccalaureate education in a competitive field, competing obligations for one’s time, and a belief that an assignment is needlessly difficult or meaningless, to name a few. In the current technological environment, cheating has become much easier, as students download entire papers from the web, use web sources without citation, transfer photographs of exams via cell phones to friends who will take the exam later, and program phones with complex formulas or exercises that may be retrieved during an exam.

The implications of cheating extend beyond the campus. Cheating can diminish an institution’s reputation and the value of its diplomas. Robert Mittelstaedt, Dean of the W.P. Carey School of Business, notes on the school’s website, Knowledge@ W. P. Carey, widespread cheating risks the integrity of universities: “If a school becomes known as a place where you can cheat and get away with it and get a degree without working very hard, eventually that is the kind of students the school will attract.”

Gwena Lovett-Hooper and her colleagues report in *Ethics & Behavior* (2007) that students’ dishonesty does not end with their university careers. Students who cheat in college are much more likely to engage in dishonest behavior in their post-educational venues: breaking rules in the workplace, cheating on spouses, engaging in illegal actions. Cheaters are also more likely to engage in academic dishonesty in post-baccalaureate programs (medicine, law, engineering, for example), where failure to master the content of the discipline can have dire consequences for future clients.

Some educators suggest that a notation on cheaters’ transcripts will alert prospective post-graduate programs or employers of the applicants’ undesirable characteristic.