

**ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG  
COMMUNICATION STUDENTS AND  
PROFESSIONALS: SOME CONSEQUENCES AND  
WHAT MIGHT BE DONE ABOUT THEM**

by

**William R. Todd-Mancillas**

**Vivi S. McEuen**

**Edwin Sisson**

presented at

**the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association**

in

**November 1987**

**Boston**

## **ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG COMMUNICATION STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONALS: SOME CONSEQUENCES AND WHAT MIGHT BE DONE ABOUT THEM**

Par 1            In recent years, society has become increasingly aware and appreciative of communication disciplines. As our economy continues to shift toward an information-based society, there will be a greater reliance upon communication skills and research (Naisbitt, 1984). This trend is reflected in the record numbers of students graduating from communication programs. Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Baker, C. O. & Wells, A. Q., 1975; Grant, W. V. & Snyder, T. D., 1983), there has been a 154 percent increase in the number of communication degrees earned in 1982 compared to 1971. As these communication students graduate and enter the profession, they will be called upon to make more decisions that will impact society. Recent events, however, cast doubt upon the capability of some communication graduates and professionals to make ethical decisions in their work.

Par 2            There are several recent examples of unethical behavior among some communication professionals and students. Janet Cooke, working for The Washington Post, wrote an account of a child heroin addict which won her a Pulitzer Prize. Only after this prestigious prize was awarded was it determined that Ms. Cooke's story was fabricated (Janet Cooke's Surprise, 1981). Another ethical dilemma is the problem faced by news reporters when they are faced with a life-saving situation. Should they be objective and continue rolling their cameras as cameramen Ronald Simmons and Gary Harris did while a man attempted to set himself on fire three times or should they intervene to save a human life if possible (Marin & Izard, 1986)? Another major ethical problem area, particularly in academe, is the problem of plagiarism. Several reports in recent years have indicated that some doctoral students have submitted dissertation that partially consisted of previously written and/or published articles or other documents. In one instance, though the dissertation was substantially plagiarized, the individual's doctoral degree was not revoked (Van Tassel, 1982). However, in another case involving a major Midwestern university, the degree was revoked and the individual was dismissed from a university teaching position (Scott, M. personal communication, October I, 1986).

Par 3

There are many instances of unethical behavior among undergraduate communication students. Included among these are the problems inherent in assignments given to small groups. In a class studying small group communication principles, students were divided into several small groups for the purpose of completing an assignment. Some members of a particular group contributed little or nothing at all to the completed project, yet they received the same grade as others in the group who made significant contributions. Another example concerns the written reports by students of interpersonal communication exchanges. Students were to plan and execute an interaction dealing with an interpersonal problem. In order to improve their assignment grade, however, some students falsified reports, either by making up the entire interaction experiences or adding untrue elements to their report. A third example of unethical behavior concerns students presenting speeches they themselves have not written. Some students have looked through speech communication textbooks to find a student speech sample and have then presented that sample speech as their own. One last example concerns the ease with which students can obtain already-written term papers. One such paper-writing firm, Authors' Research, advertised the following in their flyer found on a class bulletin board at California State University, Chico: "With nearly 16,000 entries, the 1987 Authors' Research catalog offers more research papers than ever. They are all listed and fully described in the catalog and available through the convenience of mail order" (Authors' Research, 1986). This paper-writing firm will send a catalog for only \$1 which describes the paper and lists the number of pages, footnotes, and sources used to write the paper.

Par 4

Of course, not all communication professors or students engage in such behavior. However, according to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 30 to 50 percent of college students cheat sometimes and 9 percent always cheat (Moody, 1980). Additional findings indicate that cheating is widespread (Baird, 1980 and Barnett & Dalton, 1981), increasing (Wellborn, 1980), and considered by many students to be a perfectly acceptable way to get ahead (Baird, 1980). Unfortunately, if students learn to cheat in the classroom, they may continue to cheat when gainfully employed and therein lies a potential source of major societal problems. For this reason, it is important to consider causes of academic dishonesty and possible solutions.

## Reasons for Cheating

Par 5

Instructor complacency, pressure to win, and student ignorance appear to be the main reasons why cheating is widespread and increasing (Barnett & Dalton, 1981). Also, some interesting research has been done helping us to better understand how cheaters justify their behavior (Dienstbier 1978; Dienstbier, 1971; Dienstbier, Kahle, Willis, & Tunnel, 1980; Dienstbier, Hillman, Lehnhoff, Hillman, & Valkenaar, 1975; Dienstbier & Munter, 1971). Dienstbier's findings lead him to conclude, as have Barnett and Dalton (Barnett & Dalton, 1981) that students are most likely to cheat when they feel subjected to intense and unjustified pressure. Dienstbier further concludes that eventually cheaters learn to perceive their academic dishonesty not as morally unjustified or even as questionable but rather as a necessary and rational way of coping with the pressure to get good grades. Having developed a perspective justifying and promoting academic dishonesty, it is probable that the cheater goes on to apply this self-serving perspective to a variety of other circumstances, which, like stressful academic environments, pose no assurance of success yet great pressure to succeed. Yankelovich (1982) supported this thesis. Citing examples of widespread abuse of income tax cheating, deception as a tool for investigative reporting, and the FBI's use of subterfuge in the ABSCAM cases, Yankelovich (1982) concluded that public lying is becoming increasingly acceptable in today's society as a way of dealing with such problems,

Par 6

Thus, upon graduation and finding oneself in the midst of a highly competitive work environment, a communication professional (one who formerly developed the ability to rationalize academically dishonest behaviors) may behave unethically on the job as well. Janet Cooke, for instance, lied about the extent of her academic training merely to obtain employment in the first place (Janet Cooke's Surprise, 1981). Thus, just as students cheat in school as a means of coping with academic pressure, communication professionals may cheat as means of coping with the stressful demands of the market place. When caught, they will have to suffer the long-term psychic and financial cost of their involvement in the fraud, including difficulty in finding employment. But what is the impact of their unethical behaviors on others?

## Effects on Other Students

Par 7           The non-cheating student suffers at least as much as the cheating student does. Statistically, even a small percentage of cheating students will create distorted grades, putting an honest student at a severe disadvantage. Furthermore, this distortion is exacerbated in communication courses where small group projects and curving are common grading procedures. For instance, a dishonest student who contributes little to a small group project has more time to spend studying for a test or completing other homework than does the conscientious student who spends extra hours completing the group project.

Par 8           Academic dishonesty is, of course, not limited to cheating on exams or small group projects. Some students cheat on written homework assignments by collaborating or copying, even after receiving prior and explicit instructions not to do so (Sisson & Todd-Mancillas, 1984; Todd-Mancillas & Sisson, 1986). Students collaborating despite instructions forbidding it and the grading emphasis placed on individual written assignments contribute to a potentially unfair scenario as follows: As a result of cheating, a student receives excellent grades on written assignments yet receives poor test grades. However, when the final grade is computed, this student receives the same grade as all other students, indicating the same overall competence as the student who may have passed the tests but who received less satisfactory (but honest) written homework grades.

Par 9           Consider another less obvious consequence of cheating. Grades are often a function of the amount of time spent studying the material. A student with access to a previous semester's written assignments or test questions, who knows the questions that, will be on the exam, or who has a friend who will help during the test significantly decreases the amount of study time required to receive a good grade. This affords the dishonest student more time to study for other courses. The honest student, however, is not allowed additional study time and is, therefore, put at a disadvantage in the other courses as well

Par 10          Thus, it is clear that dishonesty in the classroom puts honest students at a disadvantage, at least insofar as achieving high grades is concerned. But this is not the only damage done to honest students. Two other consequences are even more serious. First, the dishonest student has an unfair advantage when applying for scholarships and admission to graduate school. Second, dishonest students may obtain an unfair advantage when seeking employment, as many employers prefer to hire applicants

with better academic records. In the later instance, the consequences to the larger communication community may be far more serious than is an inequitable allotment of scholarship money or admission to graduate school

Par 11           Presume, for Instance, that a company hires a communication graduate of University X who had dishonestly obtained a high G.P.A. Subsequently, the company discovers that the communication professional's job performance is far below what they had anticipated, given the person's impressive undergraduate record. In the future, that company may be less likely to rely on the academic records of other students graduating from University X. Perhaps the company's experience with this particular graduate will be so disappointing that they will recruit from other universities in the future. A similar predicament may occur when a student is admitted to graduate school on the basis of a dishonestly obtained (inflated) G.P.A. Conceivably, the student might be unable to perform at the level of competence expected of them, resulting in failure to complete the program. Disappointment in this student's performance may cause this graduate program to exercise greater caution when selecting future applicants from University X. This would be unfair to future applicants whose competencies may be very real but whose grade point averages are lower than the ones dishonestly obtained by the previously admitted student

#### Effects on Instructors

Par 12           Despite the serious nature of the above possible consequences of academic dishonesty, too few instructors implement measures for preventing, controlling, or detecting the problem. Reasons for this may be attributed to a lack of departmental or university support in prosecuting offenders (Sisson, 1983), the attitude that teachers ought not act as police officers (Evet, 1980; Peterson, 1980) and unawareness of either the high frequency of cheating or its serious short- and long-term consequences (Barnett & Dalton, 1981). In addition, all of us have heard, perhaps even internalized, the old adage, "Cheaters only hurt themselves." We have already discussed several harms of cheating which affect the cheaters' peers at least as much as the cheaters themselves. It is also the case that cheaters hurt their instructors as well. Two examples follow.

Par 13 First, a communication professional's unsatisfactory performance in the field reflects poorly on his or her former instructors. An instructor may be unable to leave one university for another because of the negative reputation associated with that instructor's graduates. Second, when students graduate, they become peers of their instructors. If instructors allow cheating, they degrade their own profession by admitting colleagues whose credentials were dishonestly obtained.

### Recommendations and Conclusions

Par 14 From the above discussion we can conclude that cheating adversely affects all members of the academic community, including the cheaters themselves, other students, instructors, the university, the communication profession, and society-at-large. Cheating must be curbed, and it is the instructor who is in the best position to do so. Many steps can be taken to combat cheating. Prevention is preferable. The following are among some of the more commonly offered suggestions for combating cheating (Evet, 1980; Peterson, 1980; Singhal & Johnson, 1983; Sisson, 1983; Sisson & Todd-Mancillas, 1984; Todd-Mancillas Sisson, 1986):

Par 14.1 1. Cheating must be discussed in the classroom. What constitutes cheating and subsequent penalties must be explained during the first class meeting. This information should appear in the syllabus as well. It must be made clear that cheating, for whatever reason, is wrong. This also provides an opportunity to teach professional ethics by discussing the similarity of the communication community's ethical standards to the code of academic ethics operative in the classroom.

Par 14.2 2. Test and quiz integrity must be maintained. Ideally, tests should be changed from section to section and year to year. Whenever the tests are duplicated for distribution, the strongest security must be maintained.

Par 14.3 3. Ideally, when a small group project is assigned, an individual assignment should also be given. This individual assignment could address the student's perceptions of their and others' contribution to the group assignment. Under this system students would be required to judge the extent of their own and others' participation. **If** little evidence of participation exists, individual grades would be negatively impacted.

Par 14.4        4. Policy enforcement is imperative. Every time a student is caught cheating, appropriate actions must be taken against the offender. Enforcement increases the probability of students learning that they will be held accountable for unethical behavior.

Par 14.5        5. As much as possible but without violating a student's rights to confidentiality, the manner and results or adjudication should be made public (Barnett & Dalton, 1981). Doing this will increase awareness of the consequences one faces when behaving unethically. One way of publicizing this information would be to place brief descriptions of the proceedings (without identifying the violators) on bulletin boards. Another would be to publish brief descriptions in student publications (e.g . campus newspapers and magazines).

Par 14.6        6. Due process must be assured. An incorrectly adjudicated cheating violation can have ill consequences for all involved parties. Most universities and colleges have Divisions of Student Affairs which not only aid instructors in assuring due process but also maintain records of student conduct. All incidents must be reported to this agency. Usage of a central record-keeping agency increases the probability of discovering repeat offenders.

Par 15                With society's increased dependency on information and communication services, the communication field has received a shot in the arm. Unfortunately there is ample evidence that some communication students are achieving their degrees in academically dishonest ways. Academic dishonesty harms not only the cheaters themselves but also other students, professors, the University, communication professions and the larger society as well. Certainly we do not have all the solutions to this problem but perhaps we have some of them, and their implementation may better serve the needs of us all.



## References

- Authors' Research. (1986). Research Papers. (advertisement). Chicago: Authors' Research.
- Baird, J. S. (1980). Current trends in college cheating. Psychology in the Schools, 17, 517.
- Baker, C. O. & Wells, A. Q. (1975). Earned degrees conferred: 1971-72. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Barnett, D. C. & Dalton, J. C. (1981). Why college students cheat. Journal of College Student Personnel, 549.
- Dienstbier, R. A. (1971). The role of anxiety and arousal in cheating. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 168- 179.
- Dienstbier, R. A. (1978). In J. H. Harvey, W. Ickes, & R. F. Kidd (Eds), New Directions in Attribution Research. Vol. 2 (pp. 181-206). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dienstbier, R. A., Hillman, D., Lehnhoff, J., Hillman, J. & Valkenaar, M. C. (1975). An emotion-attribution approach to moral behavior: interfacing cognitive and avoidance theories of moral development. Psychological Review, 82, 299-315.
- Dienstbier, R. A., Kahle, Lynn R., Willis, K. A., & Tunnel, G. B. (1980). Impact of moral theories on cheating. Motivation & Emotion, 4 193-216.
- Dienstbier, R. A. & Munter, P. O. (1971). Cheating as a function of labeling of natural arousal. Journal of personality and Social Psychology 17(2),208-213
- Evetts, J. B. (1980, February). Cozenage: A challenge to engineering instruction. Engineering Education. p. 434.
- Grant, W. V. & Snyder, T. D. (1983). Digest of education statistics 1983-84. National Center for Education Statistics.
- Janet Cooke's surprise. (1981, April 27). U. S. News & World Report. p. 11.
- Marion, G. and Izard, R. (1986). The journalist in life-saving situations: detached observer or good samaritan? Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 1(2),61-67.
- Moody, S. (1980, November/December). Cheating: a national pastime? Today's Education, pp. 44GS.
- Naisbitt, J. (1984). Megatrends. New York: Warner Books.
- Peterson, G. R. (1980, November). Further comments on cozenage. Engineering Education, p. 182.

Singhal, A. C. & Johnson, P. (1983). How to halt student dishonesty. College Student Journal, 17( 1), 13-19.

Sisson, E. A. (1983). Cheating: it affects us all. Nebraska Blueprint, (4), 5.

Sisson, E. A. & Todd-Mancaillas, W. R. (1984). Cheating in engineering courses: short and long-term consequences. Proceedings of the Annual Midwest Section of the American Society for Engineering Education, March 21-23, IC p. 4.

Todd-Mancillas, W. R. & Sisson, E. A. (1986, May). Cheating among engineering students: some suggested solutions. Engineering. Education, pp. 757-758.

VanTassel, P. (1982, July 11). Plagiarism charges confront university. New York Times, Section 11, pp. 1, 19.

Wellborn, S. N. (1980, October 20), Cheating in college becomes an epidemic. U.S. News and World Report. p. 39.

Yankelovich, D. (1982, August). Lying well is the best revenge. Psychology Today pp. 31-32, 71.