

On Campus: Author Discusses the "Cheating Culture" With College Students

David Callahan

E-mail: dcallahan@demos-usa.org

Abstract

In a recent discussion with college students,¹ David Callahan probed the "dark side of American life", the cheating culture which has taken root in business, sports, academe and other areas of American society. He explains the three great forces driving the cheating culture, and he questions whether people really want to live in a society characterized by a panoply of cheating behaviors. His message to students is that change is on the way. He is optimistic about the potential for a more fair, more honest society based on equal opportunity and rewards for those who work hard, dream big, and push forward. His concrete suggestions for leveling the playing field and resisting the cheating culture are a challenge to college students to "Be the change you want to see in the world".

Introduction

You know, I've written a number of books, but I'll confess: Most of the other ones sank without a trace and nobody paid any attention as seems to happen to so many authors. But this book about *The Cheating Culture* has been different. It's really struck a nerve! I suppose that's because there's quite a bit of cheating these days.

One of the best results of this book has been getting invited to speak to students. While the *Cheating Culture* spotlights many disturbing facts about greed and deceit and cynicism, and about good people doing things they really shouldn't be doing, I'm optimistic that this culture is not here to stay and that we will again see a society that is more honest and more fair than now. But I very much doubt that such change will come

from the older generations that hold power now. That's not the way things work. It is usually the next generation coming up that has the idealism and energy to overturn the status quo. And often these efforts start at universities, with students working for change and also trying to build, on our campuses, a microcosm of the kind of society they would like to see.

A Crisis of Ethics and Fairness

Now, I can say with some certainty that issues such as cheating and academic integrity have rarely been a great student cause. In fact, they are rarely even a great faculty cause . . . But they should be. *They should be*. As I see it, widespread student cheating is connected to a much bigger crisis around ethics and fairness in America. For anyone interested in making this country a better place, these issues of integrity are actually a pretty good place to start. If we can make America's campuses operate more fairly and more honestly, we've taken a big step in the right direction.

Before saying more about this, though, let me say a bit about *The Cheating Culture*. I started writing this book a few years ago when the corporate scandals involving Enron and WorldCom exploded onto the headlines. And, in fact, Ken Lay is on trial right now for his evident complicity in the Enron meltdown. And since these scandals, I've been researching, writing, and speaking about the ethics of Americans. It's been interesting, if disturbing. I've learned a lot of things that I would have preferred not to know.

I learned that the greed and dishonesty in corporate America of recent years has been worse than anything we’ve seen since the Robber Barons of 100 years ago, and that the scandals involved not just a few bad apples in a few rogue companies, but dozens of respected companies, investment banks, and law firms.

I also learned out that there was much more cheating by ordinary Americans than you might expect. I found out that tax evasion has more than doubled in the past decade -- soaring to over \$345 billion a year! I learned that employee theft was the single biggest form of crime in the United States -- \$600 billion a year in employee theft. That’s 6% of our GDP! I learned that ethics of many doctors – the professionals we trust more than any others – are not what they should be, and that pharmaceutical companies often use money and gifts to tempt doctors to prescribe this or that drug, neglecting the interests of their patients.

I learned that many people lie about their credentials and, indeed, that half of all résumés contain lies. I learned that the problem of steroids in major league baseball and other sports is worse now than ever before. And I learned that cutting corners was starting earlier. According to surveys, between two-thirds and three quarters of high school and university students admit to some cheating within the past year.

It is commonly assumed that technology is what’s behind more cheating going on these days. The Internet makes it infinitely easier to plagiarize, and plagiarism is now the biggest form of cheating. It’s so easy, and it’s so tempting in a crunch to jump on the Internet to grab somebody else’s work. Some students may even be confused about what plagiarism is, exactly, and it seems confusion results from teachers not clearly explaining how to properly cite sources after scholarly convention. Schools haven’t done a good enough job in this area. Meanwhile, other technology can also help with cheating. Cell phones can be used for text messaging. Calcula-

tors can be programmed with formulas.

All this is true. In fact, though, research shows that new technology is not what is driving more cheating in our schools. Yes, Internet plagiarism is way up. But many forms of cheating that are not facilitated by new technology are also widespread. Like cheating on tests.

Separate Moral Compasses

As I probed into the dark side of American life, one thing that surprised me most along the way is that so many of those who are cutting corners to get ahead – academically, financially, or professionally – are otherwise honest, ordinary people – people who see themselves as upstanding members of society – people who could never even imagine shoplifting. This is not a “them” problem, but an “us” problem in the US.

Another thing that surprised me is that all this cheating is occurring at the same time that Americans are exercising more personal responsibility in many areas. After all, consider all the good news from recent times:

- Crime declined sharply through the 1990s, reaching some of the lowest levels ever recorded in 2004.
- Drunk driving deaths dropped by 40 percent during the 1980s and 1990s.
- Teenage pregnancy rates fell by 30 percent during the 1990s, and now are at the lowest levels since 1946.

The same surveys that find that young people are more willing to cheat in school or lie to get a job, also show that they are more cautious and prudent in other areas of their life (sex, drugs, drunk driving).

Many people, young and old alike, seem to go through life with two separate moral compasses: one shapes their decisions when it comes to sex,

drunk driving or violence. A second, and utterly different compass governs people’s lives when it comes to academic advancement, money, and career success. Getting ahead these days means doing well in school, keeping up that GPA to land a good job.

Honesty vs. Compromise

Now, if you look at polls, you’ll find that most people value honesty. Nearly all of us want to live a life of integrity. One recent survey of high school students found that over 90 percent said that they considered themselves honest and said being honest was important. In fact, high school students said on average that it was more important to them to be honest than it was to be attractive or popular. Integrity matters to us.

But when the heat is on, or the price is right, many of us will make compromises. And the reason for such compromises, I believe, is that it’s gotten harder not to compromise these days. Things have changed in America over the past few decades. We’ve become more of a cut-throat society where it’s every man for himself. At the same time, we’ve seen less worship of God and more worship of the Almighty Dollar, less focus on others and more focus on self. I don’t think these changes are permanent. I know we can do better, and I’ll explain how.

But let me begin first by discussing in more depth why we are doing so poorly – and what all this cheating tells us about changes in American life.

Three Great Forces Driving the Cheating Culture

A Focus On Money and Winning

There are three great forces in our society driving the cheating culture. The first is a growing focus in America on money and winning. Surveys of high school students find that they are

more likely to dream about being rich than to dream about being a great athlete or about being smart. Back in 1969, a poll of college freshman found that their top goal was develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Now the top goal is to make a lot of money. In fact, the money chase permeates every corner of our society, and in the quest to do well financially, everyone has become more competitive. Maybe that is why “Survivor” is such a popular show on television. It’s a mirror of an America where winning is not just everything, it’s become the only thing.

And, boy, consider what the winners at the top get these days in terms of financial rewards. Top athletes make more money in a year than Mickey Mantle or Joe Namath made in a lifetime. Successful CEOs make fortunes that executives of a generation ago could never have dreamed of. In 1980, the average CEO made 40 times more than the average worker. Now it’s 300 times more! Top lawyers, doctors, journalists – you name it – the stars in every profession get paid more than ever, even as wages for most Americans have stagnated or declined since 1973. Today, in what economists call a “winner take all society,” the top 1 percent of households earn more money than the bottom 100 million Americans combined.

And it’s not just financial rewards that we lavish on winners. We also give winners much more attention and praise. We’re obsessed with celebrities. Look at somebody like Paris Hilton. As far as I can see, she’s never done anything useful in her entire life – and that includes her video – but there she is, in our face wherever we turn. I mean, give me a break already! But there she is, this ubiquitous icon. It doesn’t seem to matter if they’ve done anything useful—they are still held up as role models by the media.

Given the huge rewards for being a winner, it’s not so surprising that more people will cut corners to be a winner. Take Barry Bonds as an example, who makes up to \$18 million a year! If that’s not an incentive, I don’t know what is.

And it's not surprising that Barry Bonds – along with so many other ball players -- would break the rules of baseball and use steroids. It's not surprising that the executives at Enron would lie about company earnings to keep the stock high. It's not surprising that young journalists would make up stories to help their careers.

It's also not surprising that winner-take-all competition would breed cheating in another area -- in the classrooms of elite high schools and colleges. These days, even the smart kids who already have everything going for them often cheat to guarantee their success. When I was writing my book, I spent some time looking into the cheating problem at Horace Mann, which is one of the top prep schools in New York City. Students there are from extremely well off families. In the grand scheme of things, if you're a student at Horace Mann, you've already won the game of life. Paying \$20,000 per year for their children to attend, parents of these kids are loaded. And yet cheating is common at the school. Why are the most privileged kids cheating?

Various reasons, to sure. There is no single reason why students cheat. But in this case, certainly one reason is the intense desire to be a winner, to get the rewards at the top. The Horace Mann kids are remarkably worldly. They know what partners at big name investment firms make. They understand just how just big the rewards are if you're a winner and make it to the very top of American society. Many feel entitled to those rewards. And these students come to believe from early on that a key to being a winner – perhaps *the* key – is a degree from a prestigious university, the ivy leagues. And some of them will cut whatever corners are necessary to attain that goal.

George Washington once said: “Few men have virtue enough to withstand the highest bidder.” All too true. Many people say, “Oh it doesn't matter if the winners get so much more money than everyone else or if we live in a society that

worships celebrities.” I beg to differ. I think these inequities bring out the worst in us, morally speaking.

Now, of course, the obsession with winning is not the only reason people cheat. A lot of people aren't out to strike it rich or become a big shot. They just want to lead a comfortable and secure life. But increasingly, that is not something one can take for granted, and more people are afraid of falling behind, and not being able to lead that comfortable, secure life. This brings me to a second reason people cheat, which is fear.

Fear and Insecurity

Things are tough out there. Jobs are less secure, and even the best white collar jobs are now getting outsourced to China or India, disappearing just like that. 45 million Americans lack health insurance, which makes us unique among advanced nations. We just don't look out for our fellow citizens like we once did.

And a lot of middle class Americans who should be feeling secure are instead feeling anxious. And their kids are growing up around this anxiety. I think there are a lot of young people who go through life, thinking “I better not screw things up. One lost scholarship, one flunked exam, if I take one wrong step, get one blot on my permanent record, I'll end up living at home for the rest of my life.” And in fact a record number of young people do live at home today.

Starting early on, in high school, lots of students are feeling extreme anxiety about getting into a good college and being able to pay for it. Given the increased competition, it's not enough just to have good grades to get into a good college. Now you have to have great grades to get into a good school. And once you get into college, you often have to worry about keeping your grades up to hold on to scholarships and to get into a good graduate school—this in addition to working one or two jobs, keeping involved in

extra-curricular activities. I don't need to tell you guys this.

And there's no question about it, these pressures are rationales for cheating. As one college student said in explaining her cheating, “good grades make the difference between going to medical school and being a janitor.” That's how a lot of people see the stakes. People see a choice, starting early on in life. It is a choice, on the one hand, between holding onto the hope of a secure future – or, on the other, of holding onto their integrity. And when faced with this choice, many people will go for security.

I understand this choice. But I don't think it's the right one. I believe it's crucial to hold onto your honor even when the heat is on. I believe we should fight the corruption around us, not succumb to it. I'll say more about this in a moment. I think we should fight it. The dynamic is there.

Sleeping Watchdogs

A third great force driving the cheating culture is the decline of watchdogs who enforce a level playing field in society. In nearly every area where you find increased cheating today, you'll also find sleeping watchdogs – and in some cases watchdogs that have been put to sleep. In our universities, surveys have found that 44 percent of faculty did not take formal disciplinary action against students they knew were cheating. Did nothing! That's almost half of our faculty! The IRS, which enforces the tax laws, fails to go after legions of tax cheats because it just doesn't have enough investigators—they lost half of them in the 1990s. The Securities and Exchange Commission, which oversees Wall Street, had neither the authority nor resources during the '90s to stop the worst corporate abuses since the Robber Era. Steroid use is rampant in Major League Baseball because it is virtually impossible to be caught using steroids.

When cheaters go unpunished, it sends a terrible message to those who are honest. At high schools and universities that turn a blind eye to cheating, the students who play by the rules can actually find themselves at a disadvantage. And some cheaters explain their actions by saying, “Hey, I didn't want to cheat, but the students I'm competing against are cheating, the faculty's not doing anything to stop them, and I have to keep up.” Again, I don't think that this is a permissible excuse.

Sleeping watchdogs reinforce the message that life is unfair in another way, too. These days it is often the cheaters at the top of the food chain who get the least punishment. A lot of young people explain their cheating in school by pointing to corporate leaders or to pro athletes or Martha Stewart. If the most successful people in America are getting *ahead* by cheating – and getting *away* with cheating – students wonder, “Hey, why should I be the saint? Why should I be the chump who dots every *I* and crosses every *T* in life?” A lot of young people believe that cutting corners is the only way to get ahead. In that survey of high school students I mentioned earlier, 43 percent agreed with the statement that “a person has to lie and cheat sometimes in order to succeed.” This is pretty scary stuff.

So those are the three great forces driving the cheating culture. The carrots for winners are getting bigger, the sticks of economic life are hitting harder for everyone else, and the watchdogs are asleep. Meanwhile, there have been other changes, too. Religious faith is down, and whether they are religious or not, too many parents don't teach their children to value integrity over money, status or instant gratification. More people go out into life without the moral backbone they need to do the right thing. This “me first” philosophy is, unfortunately, something people learn at home.

That's the bad news of my book.

Building a More Fair and More Honest Society

The good news is that the cheating culture does not have to be a permanent feature of our lives. I’m optimistic that we can build a more fair and more honest society. We can change the dynamic we’re in. There are several ways to do this. One is to change the way our schools and our professions operate. A second is to try to change how society writ large operates. And the third is to change how we operate and make personal choices. All three are important, and they are connected to each other.

So, I propose the following concrete recommendations for reducing cheating in different professions. To keep lawyers and doctors honest, we need to enforce the code of ethics in law and medicine. To keep athletes from using steroids, we need tougher drug testing in sports. To keep business leaders honest, we need tougher government watchdogs and more ethics rules, particularly a focus on corporate ethics.

And to keep students honest, we need a much bigger push on academic integrity, as well as strong rules around college sports to create an ethos around learning as an end in itself. I’ve been heartened to hear that this school and others are making a major push for academic integrity today. Let me say a bit about this. I know a lot of students think of cheating as no big deal. I know a lot of faculty don’t bother to go after cheaters because it’s not worth the hassle. I know a lot of administrators choose not to make this issue a priority. At some schools, the collective attitude is “whatever.”

Equal Opportunity and Meritocracy

I see things differently. The big idea of America is that of equal opportunity. Meritocracy. The notion that we all should have a fair shot at success, no matter where we came from or what color we are, or who our parents are. And that the people who get rewarded in America are the people who deserve those rewards – because

they worked hard, and dreamed big, and pushed forward. America hasn’t always lived up to this ideal. We probably never will. But we all believe in it.

And cheating... well, cheating is the opposite of this idea. When some students cheat, and when schools let them cheat, fairness goes out the window. Success becomes less about hard work and self-discipline and more about how well you can lie and deceive, and whether you can pull the right strings should you get caught. And the outcomes of cheating are real. This not a victimless crime. Cheaters get rewards they don’t deserve. Scholarships, admissions to college or grad school, internships, jobs. I have stories in my book of kids caught cheating on the SAT and yet still getting into Harvard, taking somebody else’s place who deserved it more, all because their parents gave a lot of money to the school. That’s not right. So cheating is not “whatever.” In fact, it strikes at the very foundation of a fair and just society.

Fighting for Academic Integrity

This is why academic integrity is a good cause to fight for on campus. And there is a lot that can be done by any student or any faculty member. There is a whole movement out there of people who are working to reduce cheating. And in many cases, students are spearheading these efforts. They are taking ownership of the problem, and taking leadership. And guess what? When students take the lead on this problem, other students will follow. A lot of people may cheat these days, but even more people believe in a level playing field for everyone.

As for changing how society operates, writ large, this too is crucial if we want to take down the cheating culture. Ultimately, we can’t police everybody all the time. We can’t have a watchdog looking over everyone’s shoulder. There will never be enough watchdogs. People must want to follow the rules – because they think the rules are fair and just. They need to subscribe to

the social contract that governs society. And right now, a lot of people don't think that. A big reason there is so much dishonesty, is that our social contract is broken. People don't think the rules are fair, so they make up their own rules. So we need to create a new social contract. In broad terms, this means ensuring that:

- (A) *First, anyone who works hard and plays by the rules should be able to feel secure.* What does this mean in practice? It means that we need to invest more in higher education so four years of college doesn't leave students with four decades of debt. We need a system of universal health insurance so that millions of people aren't one illness away from personal bankruptcy. We need to make sure that people who work full time make enough money to provide for their family and put a roof over their head. Simple stuff, really.
- (B) *Second, anyone who breaks the rules, rich or poor, should be held to the same standard of justice.* There are too many cheaters at the top – the people who are our role models often get away with a slap on the wrist. And that makes everyone else cynical. We need to change this by waking up the watchdogs that police corporate America and giving them some real teeth. Agencies like the SEC and IRS and Justice Department still need more resources to do their job of policing white collar crime.
- (C) *Third, everyone must have a say in how the rules are made.* Right now, a lot of ordinary people don't feel they have any power over the rules that govern their lives. And such cynicism, an incredible cynicism about our democracy, is particularly intense among young people. So we need major reforms to open up the democratic system. Simply put, to get big money out of the system – all those special interests -- and to get ordinary voters in.

These three principles are pretty much common sense. And if we really want to see a more honest society, they need to have more meaning. If the rules were fairer, and seen as fair, people would cheat less. I deeply believe that. But, of course, changing direction and creating a new social contract isn't going to happen overnight. And in the meantime, even as we work for positive change, all of us will still face choices about how we live our lives. I'm sorry, but just because the system is screwed up, doesn't mean that we have a blank ethical check to do as we please.

Taking Responsibility and Avoiding Shortcuts

We need to police ourselves and take responsibility. At every step in life there are always short cuts--when you write a term paper or do your resume or file your taxes. And there will often be people around us who take those short cuts. And here is something I can guarantee you: some of those people will get rewards that they don't deserve, which is infuriating. That is unfortunate, but true.

Why should we resist these shortcuts? There are a few good reasons. First, I think that being true to ourselves and our values is a key to happiness. You know, everyone wonders about the formula for happiness, and recent research by researchers in the field of “happiness studies” sheds some light on this question. These “happiness” researchers find that money doesn't make people happy beyond a point, which is around \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year. One psychologist interviewed a handful of the richest people in America, many of whom said that they weren't happy. Rather, people are most happy when we use what one psychologist has called our “signature strengths.” That is, when we do what we are best at, and what we are meant to do.

If this is true, if money doesn't make us that happy, then it doesn't make sense to be so obsessed with “getting ahead” and being rich and coming out on top that you'll compromise your values and your integrity to achieve goals. In-

On Campus: Author Discusses the “Cheating Culture”—Callahan

stead, happiness will come by developing the best and strongest parts of yourself.

A second reason to forget the short cuts is that we all have to live with ourselves. Abraham Lincoln once said that “When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion.” Sounds simple enough, but of course we may not feel bad at the moment we do bad. Regret has a way of sneaking up on us, and it may only be later that we feel bad – because maybe we took a short cut we didn't really need to take, and got something that we didn't deserve. It's something to watch out for. A life of integrity equals a life with fewer regrets.

A third powerful reason for why integrity should be important in our lives is that each of us plays a role in shaping the society we live in, and that our children will live in. It may not feel that way at the time, of course. We may feel that we're just a pinball getting knocked around by the powers that be.

Conclusion: “Be the Change . . .”

But actually, I do think we all have a say in how our society ought to be, even if just in our own little corner. And I believe we all have a responsibility to make personal choices that line up with our views of how things ought to be. Mahatma Gandhi said “Be the Change you want to see in the world.” A very powerful piece of advice.

And I think everybody would agree that it's better to live in a fair, less corrupt society than a corrupt one, for all the reasons I've mentioned. And so we all have a responsibility to make choices that line up with this view, even when those choices are difficult ones to make. We should live an honest life. Even if means occasionally losing out to dishonest competitors. Even if means taking hits in a dishonest system. Even if means that we don't get everything we want. Remember, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

The choices about how to honor your values as you go through life aren't easy, and you don't just figure this out when you're twenty one. It's an ongoing thing. The Roman philosopher Seneca once said that “Nature does not bestow virtue; to be good is an art.” How true this is.

REFERENCES

Callahan, D. (2004). *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt.

NOTES

1. On February 22, 2006, the author of *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong To Get Ahead* visited Saginaw Valley State University to meet with students and discuss the “cheating culture” (by invitation of the SVSU Student Association). This paper is an edited version of David Callahan's 4 P.M. lecture in the Rhea Miller Recital Hall. This lecture was based on *The Cheating Culture*, and full citations of the information used by Callahan are available in his book.

David Callahan is a popular speaker and author. He is also a co-founder of Demos, a think tank and public policy center dedicated to strengthening democracy and expanding economic opportunity within the United States. Visit his website at <<http://www.cheatingculture.com>>