

What is the cost of success? The question is at the heart of addressing a morality that, at times, seems mocked by the ethics of the broader culture.

MORAL minority?

BY KIM ODE

Recent headlines have provided a sad commentary on the state of honesty in our society. From Ponzi schemes to Bernie Madoff, the message comes that for some people, cheating works — at least for awhile. For some students, it may work just long enough to get through a class.

We hear that a recent survey found that more than three in four U.S. college students admit to having cheated at some time while in high school, and we shake our heads. Little wonder that honor is not especially valued in what we call, with some dismay, the real world.

Among the many responsibilities assumed by colleges such as St. Olaf is the goal of instilling in students a set of high ethical standards. From the moment first-year students walk on the Northfield campus, they are bound by an honor system that has been in effect since 1911.

Now, in what some in higher education are calling a new honor code movement, schools across the country are adopting policies that bring the issue of cheating to the fore in an effort to stem the tide of dishonesty.



“It’s hard to know if kids are really cheating more than they did before,” says Jim May, provost and dean of St. Olaf College. But the national statistics are disturbing, coupled with a sense that some students consider any competitive edge worth the risk.

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Carolina, showed that only one in four students at colleges with traditional honor codes reported incidents of cheating on exams. That compares with close to half of students reporting in incidents at colleges with no honor codes.

However encouraging those reports are, the reality is that, given the opportunity, some students will take whatever advantage they can, perhaps not grasping the ethical implications of their action.

The college’s honor code is a two-part model of ethical behavior. St. Olaf students not only pledge that they will not cheat during a test, but also that they will not tolerate others’ dishonesty.

“It’s a two-way street,” says Hal Halvorson ’11, who will serve this year as president of the St. Olaf Honor Council, a student-run group that fields all reports of cheating during exams. More to the point, it’s a self-policed policy; professors

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“Yet if any place should have an honor code, it should be a place like St. Olaf,” May says. “We have a moral obligation to our fellow human beings because of the bond we all share through our creation in the image of our Creator.”

Honor codes appear to have an impact on students. A survey by the Center for Academic Integrity in Clemson, South

Greg Kneser, dean of students, says that administrators and professors consider cheating “a burning issue. But I’m not sure the students always get that.”

Although the St. Olaf honor code has been in effect for 100 years, the issues of honor, ethics, and moral responsibility have been at the core of the college’s mission since its founding in 1874.

routinely leave the classroom during exams.

“It holds students accountable and says that honor is virtue,” Halvorson says. While in high school in Spokane, Washington, Halvorson had been involved in a student-faculty “disciplinary” council. That St. Olaf uses the word “honor” to describe a similar group “makes it more personal,” Halvorson says. “It’s more profound.” ▶

“I pledge my honor that I have neither given nor received assistance, and that I have seen no dishonest work.”

This statement, taken from the St. Olaf Honor Code, is on the cover of each blue book exam. Before leaving the classroom, professors routinely pause first to write “Pledge” on the board as a reminder that students need to sign off on the statement before handing in their exams. If a student doesn’t sign the pledge, the professor first determines if the student simply forgot or if the absence of a signature was intentional. If intentional, the matter goes to the Honor Council, which investigates if the student witnessed a violation. If there was an incident of cheating, then the accused student is interviewed.

Halvorson notes that the council doesn’t use the word “guilty;” instead, students are found “responsible for violating the honor code.” As with the case of calling something a matter of “discipline” or “honor,” the phrase is a fine point of language emphasizing that cheating is a choice someone makes.

A common consequence for violating the code is being given a “zero” for

to be a doctor, he said, cheating to get through a course can, for a future patient, “become a life or death issue.”

As more schools across the country are adopting honor codes, many are using what are known as “modified” codes, in which students only pledge that they themselves will not cheat. They need not report others’ behavior, as the St. Olaf pledge asks.

“When we’ve had these philosophical discussions, I think of the people at Enron and in the Petters organization,” says Kneser, noting the Texas corporation whose accounting fraud cost employees and stockholders billions, and Minnesota businessman Tom Petters, recently sentenced to fifty years in prison for overseeing a Ponzi scheme.

“People saw illegal behavior going on and said nothing, which caused real harm to others,” Kneser says. “There’s no shortage of dishonest people who choose to say nothing, that being [the] acceptable behavior within that organization.

“But we’re saying that part of being a person of integrity means you step up and you say that isn’t right. The world would be a better place if we all held each other accountable.”

essential, aspects of life. According to the university Web site, in 1840 the school began reining in the behavior of its students, most of whom came from privileged backgrounds. One student, apparently resentful of such boundaries, shot and killed a popular professor of law. Stunned students agreed to report misbehavior among themselves. The faculty, in turn, agreed to trust students when they pledged they had “neither received nor given assistance” on exams.

Today, more than half of college students surveyed admit to at least one serious incident of cheating within the past year, and two in three acknowledge that their behavior may have entered an ethically gray area, according to the Center for Academic Integrity. But cheating isn’t a tactic that students suddenly decide to employ once they arrive at college.

Writing in *Inside Higher Ed*, educators Donald McCabe and Gary Pavela state, “Unfortunately, it appears many students view high school as simply an annoying obstacle on the way to college, a place where they learn little of value, where teachers are unreasonable or unfair, and where, since “everyone

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the exam or a portion of the exam. Repeated incidents may result in a student being expelled, although Halvorson says he can’t recall such a serious conclusion during his three years on the council.

“But there are big implications that we try to keep sight of,” Halvorson says. What if failing a test means that student will fail the entire course? What if he or she may not be able to afford to take the class again? What if a grade of zero would keep them from getting into medical school?

“We understand that students make mistakes, and we tend to be forgiving,” he says. “We’re all learning, and we try to be a safety net for students before they enter the real world.”

Having said that, though, Halvorson notes that cheating is more than an issue of being able to sleep well at night. In the case of someone training

Honor codes have been part of American higher education almost as long as there’s been a United States. Thomas Jefferson, serving as governor of Virginia in 1779, oversaw the establishment of an honor code policed by the students at his alma mater, the College of William & Mary.

Honor codes spread throughout colleges and universities along the Eastern seaboard, and most were rooted in the precepts of intellectual honesty. Some codes, though, delved into other aspects of human behavior, such as pledging not to smoke, cheat at cards, or insult ladies, according to a history of codes published in the *University of Virginia Magazine*.

The story of how Virginia got its honor code speaks to how such codes, while most often played out in the classroom, apply to broader, even

else” is cheating, they have no choice but to do the same to remain competitive. And there is growing evidence many students take these habits with them to college.”

Competitive pressures are one thing, but professors and administrators note another equally powerful influence: technology. This poses a new wrinkle in the fabric of ethical behavior because it is rarely an issue on exams, but rather with term papers and group work, which, technically, are not covered by St. Olaf’s 100-year-old honor code.

“The advent of the Internet has made plagiarism wildly easy,” Kneser says. “Students may come in with almost no appreciation of what’s appropriate and what’s not. It becomes a question of informational literacy: How do you evaluate the information you get? What is honest work?”

A particularly notorious incident in 2001 involved, of all places, the University of Virginia. A physics professor realized that students in his introductory class had, over the course of almost two and a half years, been turning in the same 1,500-word paper. Because of the class's huge enrollment — between 300 and 500 students each semester — he hadn't stumbled on the scheme.

Using a computer program that tracks similarities, he found that more than 150 students appeared to have plagiarized their papers. Each of the students had, of course, agreed to follow the school's honor code. Eventually, forty-five students were expelled, and three graduates had their degrees

Provost Jim May makes a similar point. "Some students don't have a clear understanding of what it means to do things illegally," he says, whether it's downloading songs or other materials. "It's so easy, and the temptations are great."

Halvorson, a senior with a double major in biology and chemistry, said cell phones also can be game-changers. "Texting each other during exams isn't as prominent at St. Olaf as I've heard it is at other schools. But I'm getting the sense that over the years, cheating has become acceptable because it's infiltrated the public sphere."

He knows some students who treat cheating almost like "a macho thing," challenging themselves to get by with

are morally required to report those who violate the honor code, even among friends: "Friendship should not trump honor, and you agree to do that when you become a student at St. Olaf." That said, Langerak says some students have admitted they didn't report on friends even when they knew they should.

Educational experts will be looking closely at the current generation on college campuses, according to McCabe and Pavela. Dubbed "millennials," these students are the beneficiaries of, for good or ill, "intense parental attention," they write, "with results that appear to justify the effort." This particular closeness with parents is coupled with a great involvement in

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revoked. More than half of the colleges in the United States now use services that check to see if students cut and paste others' work from the Internet and claim it as their own research, according to the *New York Times*.

Ed Langerak is a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf who teaches other professors how to develop classes about ethics within their curriculums. He says that in his forty years of teaching, he's never detected a case of cheating on his essay exams; he has found plagiarism in papers, and he's growing increasingly concerned with what he calls "a willingness to be sloppier with documentation. There's a looseness that is not a character defect, but a change in the notion of borrowing, as though what's on the Internet is everyone's property." Langerak says this is why the *St. Olaf Handbook's* "Academic Integrity" policy now includes a statement about plagiarism.

The issue has led to some interesting discussions. Langerak says he tries to convey to students that their borrowing of an idea "doesn't undermine my respect for the idea, as long as you note that it's borrowed. Actually, arranging borrowed ideas in a logical and reasonable fashion may be about as original as many of us can get."

as much as they can. He added that some students quite innocently see any behavior or tool not explicitly identified as forbidden as then allowable, even if it gives them an advantage. That issue led to a recent addendum to the honor code stating that students can't use materials not explicitly approved by the professor.

Any discussion of honor codes eventually comes around to a more philosophical question of why we, as human beings, need to be told that there are right and wrong ways to behave.

Are we intrinsically dishonest? Is ethical behavior something that must be taught? What does it mean to listen to our gut?

"In a way, that's an empirical question: What is human nature like?" Langerak says. "My experience is that it's a mixed bag. Some people will never cheat because that's how they were raised. It would be a violation of character. A more realistic view is that there always will be some cheating that goes on.

"Yet if for no other reason than fairness to the non-cheaters, it must be clear that cheating will be discouraged and will be punished."

Langerak says he has found that the vast majority of students believe they

community service, political activities, and academic opportunities. They are, despite the projections of the depressed job market, "more optimistic about the future."

Does this translate into their being more honorable and ethical? Or will the importance they place on peer relationships prove troubling if asked to monitor their friends' ethics?

When it comes to bemoaning the Madoffs and Petters of the world, it's worth remembering that actions make headlines when they go against the norm. Thousands of students, credit by credit, will never cheat. Millions of employees, day in and day out, play by the rules.

For Jim May, honor codes are a means for talking about how to live the rest of your life, long after the blue books are turned in. The realization that success at any cost can carry an unforeseen price is something that often comes too late.

May's goal is to teach that lesson now: "What we try to instill in students is that life is more than a livelihood." 🦁

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