

spotlight on research

Academic Honesty and the Independent School

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The data about academic honesty in schools make for grim reading. Educational Testing Service data indicate that 75 to 98 percent of college students admit to cheating in high school. The Josephson Institute of Ethics' 2010 *Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth*, based on a survey of 40,000 high school students, found that 59.4 percent had cheated that year on a test or quiz and 80.6 percent had copied another student's homework.

The same Josephson study, however, found that among the 994 students surveyed from *non-religious private schools* the rate of cheating fell to 33.4 percent and copying another's work fell to 49.8 percent. While independent schools may take some solace in

knowing that their students cheat less often than public school students, the rate of cheating in independent schools remains disconcerting.

Still, the difference in the rates of cheating is worth exploring. Is there something about private schools that might account for the greater level of integrity? If so, how might schools use that "something" to lower the rate of cheating even further?

Answering these questions is made easier by our access to the results of the *Independent School Health Check* (ISHC), a comprehensive survey of independent school student behaviors and attitudes. The Independent School Health Check is in its fourth year of service, and has now been used to survey 36 independent schools and 15,836 independent school students in grades 9–12. In addition to questions about academic honesty, the ISHC inquires about student motivation, attitudes toward school, pressure, as well as a variety of risk and protective factors. Thus, the questions about academic integrity can be examined in the larger context of student behavior and attitudes. Our findings indicate four general behaviors and attitudes that increase the likelihood that a student will cheat on an exam or engage in other forms of academic dishonesty:

- Extrinsic motivation
- Poor connection to the school
- Negative feelings about self
- Risk-taking behavior

The ISHC questions about academic honesty are, as follows:

During the last 12 months, did you ever...

1. cheat on a test or quiz?
2. do unauthorized copying of another student's work?
3. allow another student to copy your work during a test or a quiz?
4. submit another's material as your own — from another student, a book, or the Internet — without giving credit?
5. have other students ask you to submit your work as their own?
6. work with another student to complete an assignment when your teacher had instructed you to work independently?
7. let your parents or siblings complete part or all of your homework?
8. purchase or use an online essay?
9. browse Internet sources for ideas without giving the source?



Of the 15,836 independent school students in the ISHC sample, 22 percent reported that they had cheated on a test or quiz and 20.9 percent had copied another student's work (see Graph #1 below).

Overall, 59.4 percent of the students in the ISHC database had engaged in one or more of the eight different options offered in the survey. Graph #2 (see page 22) shows the percentage of students engaging in each form of dishonesty, but 39.1 percent of students engage in more than one form.

Based on the demographics, we find that males are more likely than females to report on engaging in all the risk-taking activities. Thus, 60 percent of those who cheat are male and 38.5 percent are female. Risk-taking by grade also follows from what we know about the pressures many feel about college admissions. Thus, expectedly, cheating peaks in the 11th grade.

Central to the mission of most independent schools is an interest in developing and celebrating a love of learning. The ISHC provides a composite score based on a series of questions about motivation for schoolwork. Those primarily interested in education for its own sake, who enjoy learning, are classified as *intrinsic learners*; those primarily looking for rewards, college admissions, or satisfied parents are classified as *extrinsic learners*; a third group that exhibits equal portions of both motivations is referred to as *mixed*. Of the intrinsic learners, 17.7 percent cheat; of the mixed group, 25.2 percent cheat; of the extrinsic learners, 38.3 percent cheat. Those who are intrinsically motivated, and thus most in harmony with the goals and values of the independent school, are consistently the least likely to engage in academic dishonesty (see Graph #3 on page 22). Likewise, those most aligned with values contrary to the school culture, the extrinsically motivated, are consistently the most likely to engage in academic dishonesty.

According to the ISHC data, a very high percentage of independent

school students feel connected to their schools, feel supported by their teachers, and enjoy what they are learning. For instance, 86.7 percent say they feel that they "belong" to the school community; 92.3 percent say "teachers offer help" if needed; 92 percent say "teachers are fair," and 80.9 percent say they "like their subjects." Additionally, 95 percent say they feel that their parents support them. The high level of positive feelings about school and the adults in their lives speaks highly for the culture and values in most independent schools. More important, they suggest that such a culture and values also lead to less academic dishonesty.

The ISHC provides composite scores on important factors such as motivation, school connectedness, parental engagement, drinking, and academic pressure. Using a composite score that assesses a student's level of connection to the school, we find that 19.4 percent of those who have a *high* connection score cheat, 28 percent of those with a *moderate* connection score cheat, and 42.3 percent of those with a *low* connection score cheat.

Nevertheless, even among students with very positive attitudes toward, and experiences with, learning, there are still those who cheat. For example, among the students who cheat are 15 percent of those students studying three to five hours per night; 16.6 percent of those getting A's; 15 percent who say they "enjoy testing their limits"; 14.6 percent who say they are "generally interested in learning"; and

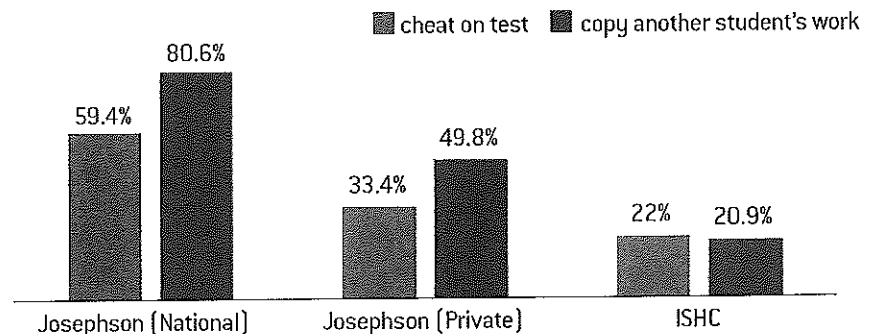
16.6 percent who say they are "on top of their schoolwork." In other words, it appears that a certain amount of cheating (roughly 15 percent) exists in spite of positive school attitudes.

Pressure on students is often blamed for a variety of social ills, including cheating. The data, however, do not support this assumption. The composite scores of pressure from parents, teachers, and the students themselves show that there is no appreciable difference in pressure between those who cheated and those who did not. Even the students who described the cumulative pressure they felt from parents, teachers, and themselves as "extreme" had a rate of cheating of 21.4 percent, slightly less than the overall rate. The highest rates of cheating were recorded for students who said they felt little or no internal pressure to succeed.

For the 10 to 15 percent of students with negative views of their school and education in general, the rate of academic dishonesty is much higher than the average. Of those whose homework time is in the one-half-hour to one-hour range, 34 percent cheat; for those who get C's and D's, 55.6 percent cheat. Additionally, the cheaters include 37.6 percent of those who feel no internal pressure to succeed, 39 percent of those who think school rules are not fair, 35.1 percent of those who feel that they don't belong, 44.6 percent of those who say teachers do not offer help, 46.6 percent of those who think teachers are not fair, and 30.2 percent of those who

GRAPH 1

National and Private School Rates of Cheating Compared



Sources: Josephson Institute of Ethics and Independent School Health Check

think teachers do not treat them with respect. Similar levels are shown for those who are not interested in good grades, not interested in testing their limits, not interested in the subjects, and not interested in doing their best. Students with negative attitudes are more likely to commit multiple forms of academic dishonesty.

The third group consists of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties that put them out of step with the majority of independent school students. This very mixed group includes those who feel lonely, don't like themselves very much, are unhappy, or feel discouraged. For them, the rates of cheating are in the high 20-percent and low 30-percent range.

The fourth group of students includes those who are taking other risks — tobacco users, heavy drinkers, marijuana users, the sexually active. While only 15.3 percent of nondrinkers cheat, 29 percent of moderate drinkers cheat, and 50.6 percent of binge drinkers cheat.

Looking at the overall behavior of many students in many independent schools should not obscure the reality that individual schools have very different rates of reported cheating. Among the 36 schools of the ISHC database, the rate of cheating on tests and quizzes ranges from 7 percent to 50 percent, with a mean of 22 percent. Nevertheless, independent schools as a whole have much lower cheating rates than public schools.

The ISHC data do suggest, however, that teachers, who assume that the culture of the school and an emphasis on academic integrity will prevent students from cheating and, therefore, decide to leave students without proctors during tests and quizzes, are being unduly optimistic. The fact that 15 percent of the students report that they cheat despite their good feelings about education and their school provides cautionary evidence that one can be too trusting.

While the level of cheating in independent schools is certainly much

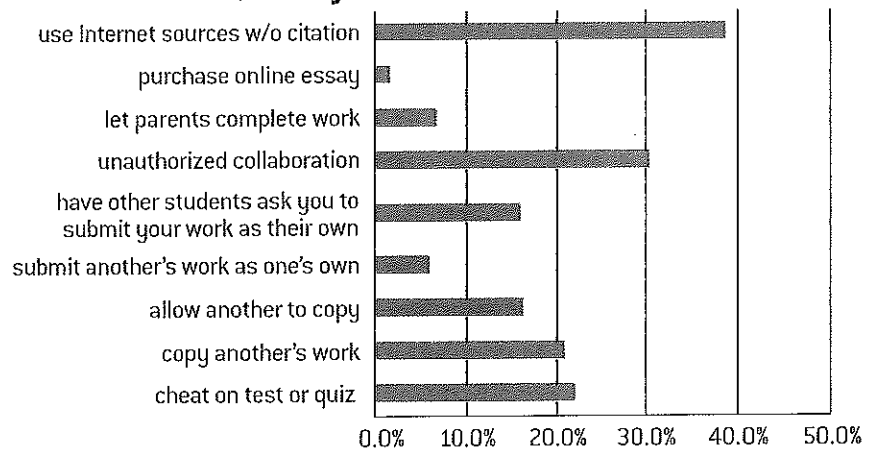
higher than schools would like, overall, this analysis of the ISHC data indicates that students who have intrinsic motivation, a good connection to their school, a good mental state, or low risk-taking tendencies are less likely than others to cheat on tests or commit another form of academic dishonesty. These findings also support the hypothesis that independent schools offer an environment that inhibits academic dishonesty and/or encourages

academic honesty. Toward the goal of strengthening academic honesty, this initial descriptive analysis encourages future research to identify those protective factors.

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GRAPH 2

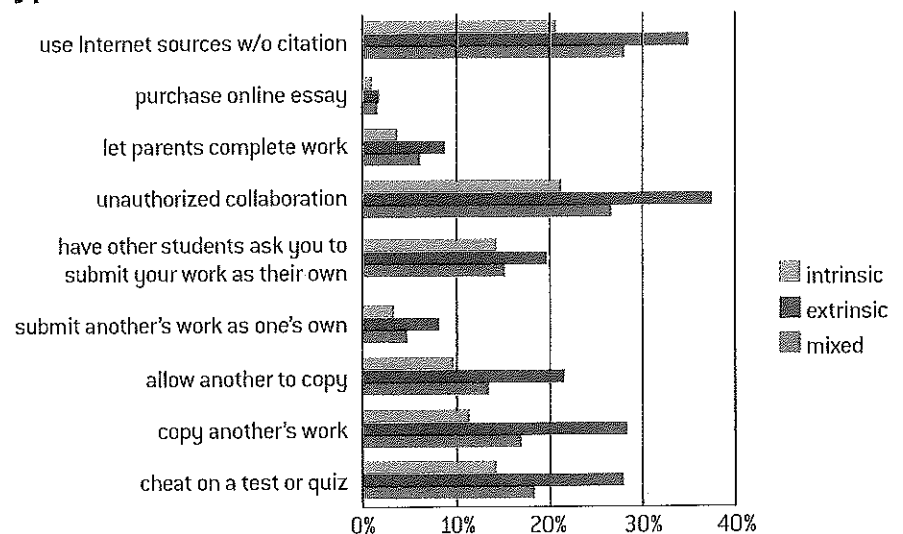
Percentage of Students Engaged in Various Acts of Academic Dishonesty



Source: Independent School Health Check

GRAPH 3

Type of Motivation and Academic Dishonesty



Source: Independent School Health Check