



# ETHICS UNDER ATTACK

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*By Rachel Smydra and Serge Kruk*

## **Introduction**

Cheating on college campuses is nothing new. For decades, research scholars have been gathering information on how students cheat and why they cheat, but few studies have been done to detect how students feel about cheating and what they think should be done to deter it.

Last spring, we, Serge Kruk, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, and Rachel Smydra, Special Instructor in the English Department, conducted a survey over the course of two months to solicit responses from students regarding ethical behavior. The goal of the survey was to gauge whether a deviation from traditional ethical standards regarding cheating and the use of intellectual property could be documented objectively rather than anecdotally. More specially, the survey's intent was to track how students view cheating, how much they are seeing others students cheat, and whether students think something should be done by University officials to minimize the problem of student cheating.

Three major questions surrounded the writing of the survey. First and foremost, we wanted to find out how widespread cheating is on Oakland University's campus. Next, we wanted to know if students understand the concepts of cheating and how their understanding of University language in the academic con-

duct regulations influences their behavior; for example, do students know what the word *plagiarism* means and how to cite secondary resources correctly. Finally, the survey posed some questions about what students feel Oakland University educators can and should do to alleviate cheating at Oakland University.

## **Survey Methodology**

To ensure that the 643 survey participants represented a cross section of the student body, as far as majors and interests, course sections chosen to participate in the study were populated with a mix of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, with the exception of first semester freshmen. The authors administered the survey themselves to ensure a consistent protocol. Students were told that taking the survey was strictly voluntary and that anonymity was guaranteed to encourage students to answer the survey honestly. The number of students deciding not to participate in the survey was negligible. The numerical results presented here have been rounded to the closest percentage point. To obtain a copy of the raw data, please contact the authors.

## **Survey Content**

The survey itself included six scenarios posing ethical situations for students to contemplate: sharing and copying homework, copying someone's report, plagiarizing a term paper, devising a plan to cheat on a test, and cheating on a final exam. Students were given four to five response choices per question. Their responses reflect both behavior and attitude towards the situations described.

## **Homework Scenario**

Both Matt and Lisa have a homework assignment due in a couple of hours. Matt has finished it; Lisa has not. Lisa borrows Matt's completed assignment to finish her homework.

How often have you known students to do this?

Never	16%
Once	8%
A few times	53%
Regularly	24%

How often have you been in Matt's position when someone has asked you to borrow a homework assignment?

Never	20%
Once	12%
A few times	60%
Regularly	7%

How often have you been in Lisa's position when you have asked to borrow someone's homework to complete your own?

Never	35%
Once	21%
A few times	42%
Regularly	1%

Which of the following best describes your response to the situation?

I do not see anything wrong with Lisa's behavior but Matt should not have handed over his work.	9%
I think that Lisa should not have asked, but Matt had no choice but to give her his homework.	11%
Both Matt and Lisa's behavior is perfectly normal.	
They behaved as friends should.	26%
Both Matt and Lisa are wrong.	53%

Even though copying homework could be considered the least serious of the infractions regarding the scenarios, 77% of those students surveyed are copying homework even though 53% of the students indicate that this action is not ethical. Students are also willing to share their homework without issue; 67% of students indicate that they have been approached to lend someone their homework.

## Paper Scenario

After searching the Internet, Steve cuts and pastes a paragraph here and a sentence there from various sources into his essay that is due tomorrow. Steve changes some of the wording and adds some of his own words to connect the ideas he has cut and pasted. Steve uses quotation marks around some of the words and sentences he has borrowed from the web; other material he borrowed does not include quotation marks. Some sources are listed on his reference section, but some are not. Steve turns in his essay.

How often have you known students to write papers this way?

Never	33%
Once	14%
A few times	39%
Regularly	14%

How often have you written papers this way?

Never	68%
Once	16%
A few times	14%
Regularly	2%

Which of the following best describes your response regarding Steve's behavior?

Steve's behavior is perfectly normal. This is how most papers are written.	4%
I think Steve's behavior is questionable but not really wrong.	18%
I think Steve is wrong but he should not be penalized for it.	17%
I think Steve's behavior is wrong and he should face the Academic Conduct Committee.	14%
I think Steve's behavior is wrong and he should get a zero on the paper.	47%

Responses to the paper scenario indicate that students do not have a clear idea of what it means to plagiarize, which indicates that students are unclear of how to cite resources correctly. This was tested further in follow up questions in the Term Paper scenarios, which can be seen below.

## Term Paper Scenario

Nancy has a paper to write. After searching on the Internet, she finds a few articles from different authors that she wants to include in the essay because they correspond to her way of thinking. She includes these ideas in her essay in one the following ways. For each way, circle one of the two choices that best represents your attitude concerning her behavior.

Quotation marks around borrowed material and the exact source of each is separately indicated in a footnote or at the end of the paper.

94%	Acceptable
5%	Not Acceptable

Nancy changes the wording of each excerpt and indicates the exact source (author, work, page number) of each in a footnote or at the end of the paper.

82%	Acceptable
18%	Not Acceptable

Nancy changes the wording. She does not reference each passage with the exact author, title, and page number, but she does add the source (book, article, or internet address) at the end of the paper as a reference that she consulted.

37%	Acceptable
63%	Not Acceptable

Nancy uses the ideas, but she writes in her own words and does not mention the sources in her paper.

32%	Acceptable
67%	Not Acceptable

The outcome of the Term Paper scenario is worrisome since the responses indicate that more than 50% of those surveyed do not understand what constitutes correct citation. If they misunderstand citation rules, it means that potentially many of our students are plagiarizing when using secondary resources. In addition to not understanding how to cite correctly, the Internet, the sole research source for some classes, provides a great temptation to cut and paste without giving credit to the source. As the survey responses indicate, more than half of those students surveyed do not clearly understand how to cite information.

## Report Scenario

Megan has finished a report that is due for tonight's class, but Jack has not finished his assignment. To help, Megan gives Jack the completed paper to look over before class. Jack copies the paper, changing some results and some of the analysis.

How often have you known students to do this?

Never	41%
Once	17%
A few times	35%
Regularly	7%

How often have you been in Megan's position when someone has borrowed and copied your paper?

Never	59%
Once	18%
A few times	22%
Regularly	1%

How often have you been in Jack's position and borrowed another student's paper?

Never	70%
Once	17%
A few times	12%
Regularly	1%

The Report Scenario confirms, as does the Homework Scenario, that students are willing to share materials regardless of the length of the assignment or weight the assignment may carry as far as grades. Some students might feel that if they slightly alter the material, it effectively makes the work their own.

## Test Scenario

John and Sarah study together for a test and agree on a way to exchange information during the test. During the test, they stealthily exchange the answers to a few questions without being seen by the instructor.

How often have you witnessed such actions?

Never	37%
Once	16%
A few times	35%
Regularly	12%

How often have you engaged in such actions?

Never	68%
Once	14%
A few times	16%
Regularly	2%

Sixty-three percent of the students surveyed have witnessed other students cheating on tests, and 32% of students have participated in some type of pre-planned cheating on tests. This scenario provides troubling information that stu-

dents are planning, outside of class, ways to cheat covertly on tests by using signals or technology such as texts messaging, camera phones, or computers.

## Final Exam Scenario

During a final exam, Mike and Karen are sitting near each other. Karen never intended to cheat ahead of time, but during the exam she glances at Mike's test. Karen notices that Mike has better answers. She changes some of her answers. Mike notices Karen's glances but does nothing to prevent them.

How often have you seen this situation/behavior?

Never	23%
Once	16%
A few times	45%
Regularly	15%

Which of the following best describes your attitude regarding Karen's behavior?

I do not see anything wrong with Karen's behavior	5%
I think Karen's behavior is questionable but not really wrong.	24%
I think Karen is wrong to have looked to have looked at Matt's test.	70%

Which of the following best describes your attitude regarding Mike's behavior?

Mike did what I would have done: nothing.	31%
Mike should have tried to hide his answers.	59%
Mike should have reported Karen to the professor after the exam.	9%

The Final Exam scenario shows that 76% of students have seen students cheat in some form or fashion on final exams. Surprisingly, a third of the students feel this behavior is not problematic, at least not enough to do anything about it. Are they viewing this as proper collaboration?

In addition to the scenarios, the survey also included five questions that allowed students to answer with a *yes* or *no* response. These questions were asked in order to elicit a response from students about their perceptions as to the current state of affairs at Oakland University regarding academic conduct.

## Preventative Measures

### Questions Regarding Preventative Measures

Students should be encouraged to report cheating to the professor of the class.	54% Yes	45% No
Professors should be encouraged to be more alert to cheating and willing to enforce the rules.	80% Yes	19% No
The University should have clearer definitions about what constitutes cheating and what does not.	68% Yes	32% No
The University should have tougher penalties for those who cheat.	33% Yes	65% No
Have you read the Academic Conduct Regulations of Oakland University?	31% Yes	67% No

The first question asked whether the University should have tougher penalties for those who cheat. Thirty-three percent said yes, that we as a community should have more consequences for those who are caught cheating. Next, students were asked whether they should be encouraged to report cheating to the professor teaching the class: 54% said that students should become more accountable in deterring cheating on campus, and 68% thought that the University needs to have

clearer definitions about what constitutes cheating and what does not. The most telling result is that 80% of the students, implicitly or explicitly, think that instructors are remiss and shoulder the blame for the improper conduct of their students.

## **Concluding Observations**

To many, the results of *2005 Student Academic Conduct Survey* administered over the course of two months will not be surprising. The data show a deviation from traditional ethical standards with the respect to cheating and the use of intellectual property. The results show that misconduct is occurring at a high frequency and many of the students witnessing these behaviors do not view it as an ethical problem. Many of us at Oakland University already know that cheating is rampant, but the rising number of cases brought before the Academic Conduct Committee and the students' attitude toward cheating suggests that as a community, we need to be much more active in order to maintain academic integrity and retain the value of a college degree.

Because the results of the survey also provide new insights for faculty and administrators, we see three possible avenues for action. First, most students are unaware of the university code of conduct. Apparently, our code does not provide language and the medium that facilitates student understanding. Therefore, the question arises whether we should reconsider the language we as a community use to communicate appropriate and inappropriate academic conduct. Do students understand the rationale behind academic conduct regulations the way the academic community understands them? If so, what undermines the message?

Second, the misunderstandings about the proper use of citations suggest that students may have learned the rules in their classes, but they understood the reasons behind these rules. Somehow, we need to emphasize that, in the academic world, attribution of one's work is the only currency.

Finally, all instructors at Oakland University should be aware that a fair fraction of students are cheating with little ethical qualms. We need to recognize the ethical chasms: the first between us and our students, the second, between students who cheat and those who obtain their grades honestly. Cheaters are alive, well and plentiful in all classes, and ignoring this fact undermines the degrees we confer.