



School Cheating as Social Corrosion

Tito Morales

Published September 5, 2000

With students across the country wrapping up their summer vacations and heading back to the classroom, I can't stop thinking about a news report that emerged earlier this year revealing that 68 percent of college students have engaged in one form or another of serious cheating.

In the survey, conducted by the Center for Academic Integrity, the category of "serious cheating" included such offenses as plagiarizing passages, turning in someone else's work as your own, or using a cheat sheet on exams.

It's been a while since I attended school, and I can fully appreciate the fact that it's probably harder than ever to earn good grades and get into post-graduate programs such as medicine, engineering, and law, but come on—68 percent?

The statistic, of course, makes one wonder if these are really the types of future adults we want reviewing our medical charts, building our bridges, or giving advice on our legal affairs.

The problem, unfortunately, isn't just limited to higher education.

Another survey taken in 1998 by Who's Who Among American High School Students revealed that 80 percent of seniors admitted to cheating.

Flipped the other way, that means only 2 out of 10 high-schoolers haven't cheated.

If I were a late-night comedian, I'd ruefully joke that all the students polled probably also resorted to copying each other's surveys, but I don't find moral and ethical lapses of such epidemic proportions particularly funny.

It's one thing to read about politicians lying under oath and millionaire athletes taking banned, performance-enhancing drugs.

It's something else altogether, though, to realize that the majority of our young people also apparently see nothing wrong with lying and cheating.

Perhaps the most depressing numbers reported in the collegiate study showed that while nearly 88 percent of faculty members admitted they observed some form of cheating in their classrooms, 32 percent never did anything about it because of administrative hassles and fear of being sued by an accused student.

In other words, not only are school instructors and administrators aware of the problem, they're more than willing to tolerate it.

Where does that leave those students with integrity who do follow the rules and adhere to a code of ethics that not too long ago was commonplace? What are they to think when they discover that not only have they been competing on an uneven playing field, but there's little or nothing in place to penalize the offenders?

My biggest concern, of course, is that they'll simply throw up their hands in frustration and hop right across the line.

I'm sure theories abound as to how cheating has become so widespread - our society's drift from traditional religious foundations, the breakdown of the family unit, a corrosion of our communities, the poor examples set by public figures, etc.

I've got another hypothesis.

Maybe in our haste to keep up with technology and our willingness to live in an increasingly depersonalized world dictated by the pace of high-speed modems, we've become too preoccupied and shortsighted to pass along such fundamental values as honesty, hard work, and self-accountability.

In our eagerness to embrace the future, we're overlooking principles that used to be handed down from generation to generation during far less frenetic times.

It's a sad commentary on the climate of our society that the television hit of the summer was "Survivor," a program that rewarded deceit, backstabbing, and selfishness.

Clearly the moral of this series, viewed by millions of Americans, was that not only is doing anything and everything in your power to get ahead acceptable, it's the surest way to fame and fortune.

How's that for a lasting impression to tuck away in our kids' lunchboxes? Make no mistake about it, this type of lax morality affects us all.

Am I the only one, for example, who sees a disturbing parallel between the reports on student cheating, the underlying message of "Survivor," and the unscrupulous revelations about Firestone's defective tires?

And what about the similarities to the Alaska Airlines tragedy, in which allegations persist to this day that falsified maintenance records may have contributed to the accident?

Given the number of our young people apparently involved in such unethical behavior, the cheating problem isn't something that popped up overnight and it won't be one we can anticipate seeing cleaned up in the near future.

Perhaps with the start of a brand new school year, however, we should all take a good, hard look at the direction our society is moving and try to implement changes that will ultimately benefit everyone - today and, more importantly, in the future.