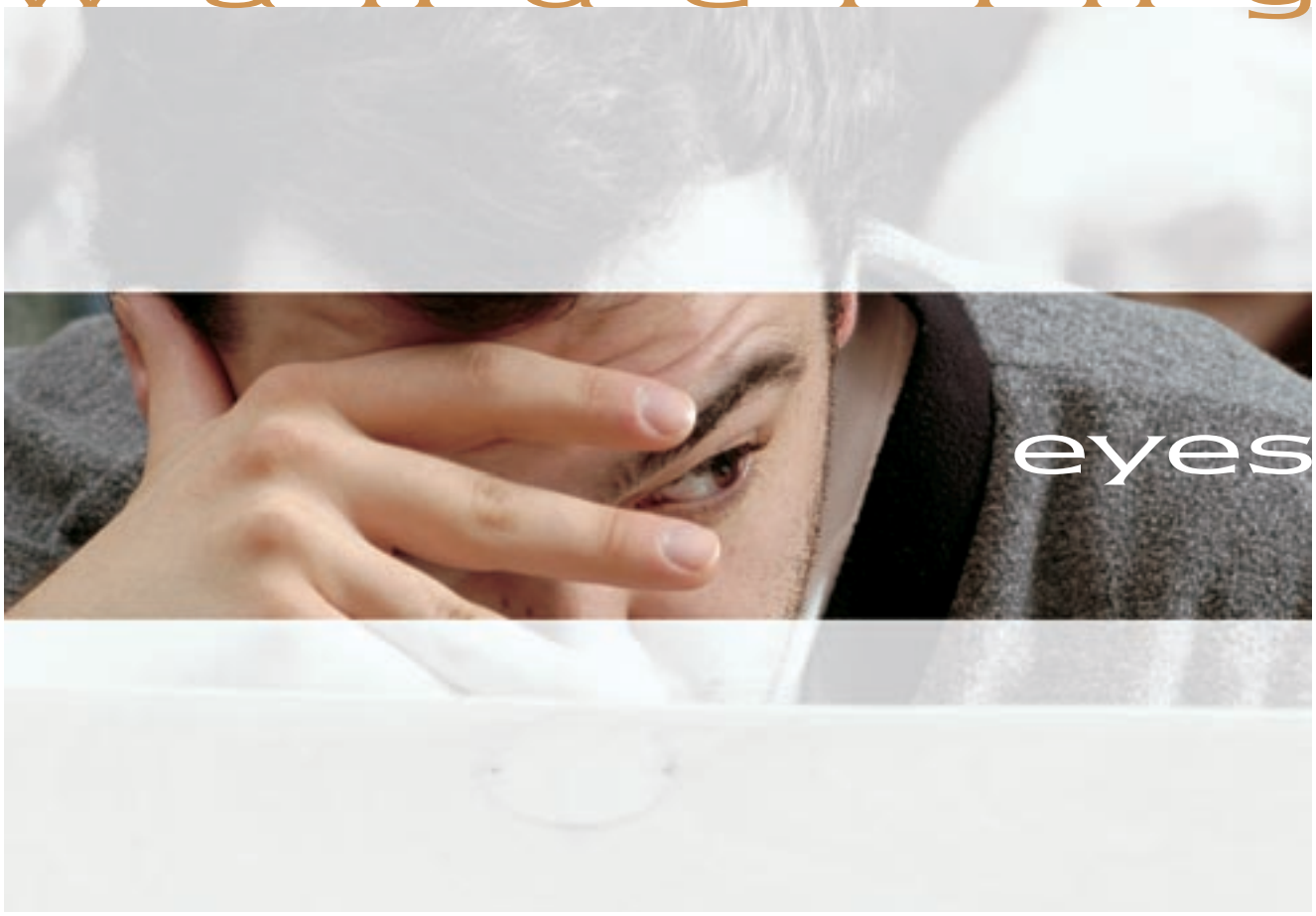
wandering eyes



By Michael Penn MA'97
Photos by Jeff Miller

Professors say cheating is on the rise among college students. But can they do enough to stop it?

David Hoferer never knew how to cheat until he became a teaching assistant. As a student, he worried too much about his assignments to think about subverting them. Now, his instruction is getting subverted, and that has piqued his interest considerably.

"I've learned about a lot of cheating technologies that I never knew about before," says Hoferer, who is pursuing a doctorate in environmental studies. "And some of them are really pretty ingenious."

Such as the time a student taped a cheat sheet to the underside of a baseball cap. Or when students programmed equations they were supposed to memorize into sophisticated calculators. Or when one student said that he was looking around for the clock — which apparently he thought was on his neighbor's paper.

All of those things have happened — or allegedly have happened — during examinations in Physiology 335, a five-credit leviathan of a course that Hoferer has assisted for four semesters. With an enrollment that usually exceeds two hundred students and a thorny set of four two-hour examinations, the course is like a semester-long stress test. During midterms, some students become so frazzled that they forget to fill in their names on the answer form.

Occasionally, students also forget their honor, a reality that keeps teaching assistants on patrol during examinations.

"I don't like to watch them. Sometimes I feel like the wolf watching the sheep," says Hoferer. "But all it takes is one person cheating to make the test unfair for everyone."

This is the new terrain of academic integrity. In an age when cheating has evolved to be faster, easier, and often nearly undetectable — when Internet sites sell pre-written papers, when computers come with cut-and-paste functions, when fifty bucks buys you a programmable calculator, and when even the most timid student can use a handheld digital device and sneak onto the Internet in the middle of an exam — no one can afford to look the other way. Universities, which strive to uphold the high virtue of fair play, are being challenged as never before to instill a spirit of honor among their students.

And it's not easy.

In Physiology 335, instructors take extra measures to derail academic misconduct. Exams are scheduled during evenings, so that they can be held in larger auditoriums where there is room to put empty seats between students. They've even outlawed hats. But there always seems to be a new fault for some determined cheater to discover. During an examination this spring, for example, one test-taker reported hearing repeated beeps from a neighbor's cell phone and suspected she was using the phone's text messaging function to get answers from friends. "We'd never thought of that," says Andrew Lokuta, a lecturer who coordinates the course.

"I think we can catch a lot of it," he says. "But how much we miss, we'll never know."

That's what scares many professors. As they grow wise to their students' ways, they're making discoveries that seem to suggest that there is a lot more cheating going on than anyone imagined — and worse, nearly everyone is getting away with it. After hearing reports that his students were reusing papers for his introductory physics course, for example, University of Virginia professor Louis Bloomfield ran 1,500 assignments through a computer program he designed to look for possible plagiarism. In spring 2001, he accused 122 students of copying others' work, initiating one of the highest-profile cheating scandals in modern academia. Eventually, forty-five students were kicked out of school, and three more had their degrees revoked.

The Virginia case may be the most prominent weed growing through the ivy, but it's far from the only one. Scandals have surfaced at universities throughout the United States and in places like China and Australia. And UW-Madison has certainly not been immune. From 1996 to 2002, 490 cases of academic misconduct were formally reported to the dean of students office, resulting in sanctions ranging from lowered grades to suspension from the university.

Not included in that total are twenty-seven accounting students who were accused this April of improperly collaborating on a take-home exam. According to accounting department chair John Eichenseher, the students were allowed to complete the exam outside of class so that they would be free to attend a business school guest lecture. The speaker? Sherron Watkins, the Enron whistleblower who brought to light the company's shady accounting practices.

These students are, of course, merely the ones who got caught. It's hard to know how much cheating really goes on: the goal of all cheats, after all, is to go undetected, and it's probably safe to assume that the vast majority of them succeed. About the only way to assess how many students really are cheating is to ask them to fess up.

Researchers began doing that in the 1940s, arriving on college campuses with armfuls of anonymous surveys that pried from students information about their past transgressions. The measures obviously aren't perfect, relying as they do on people being honest about their dishonesty. But the results have shown a definite trend over time. Most surveys done in the forties observed that less

One 1994 study reported that 89.9 percent of undergraduate students said that they had cheated at least once in college.

"It's getting to be more and more of a problem, and we know less and less what to do about it," says James WollackMA'93, PhD'96, an associate scientist in the School of Education's Testing and Evaluation Services office, which, among other things, tries to help professors design cheat-resistant tests and testing environments (see sidebar, page 39).

In 1996, Wollack set out to discover the extent of UW-Madison's cheating problem. Instead of asking students if they'd cheated at any point in the past, which he considered vague and inconclusive, he visited a dozen undergraduate classes immediately after an exam and administered an anonymous survey about that one test. About 5 percent of the respondents said they had copied answers from someone else during the exam.

That number — which doesn't even attempt to quantify plagiarism or other forms of cheating that go on outside exam rooms — adds up fast. Based on that ratio, if someone were to give the whole campus an examination, you could bet that more than two thousand students would have a case of wandering eyes.

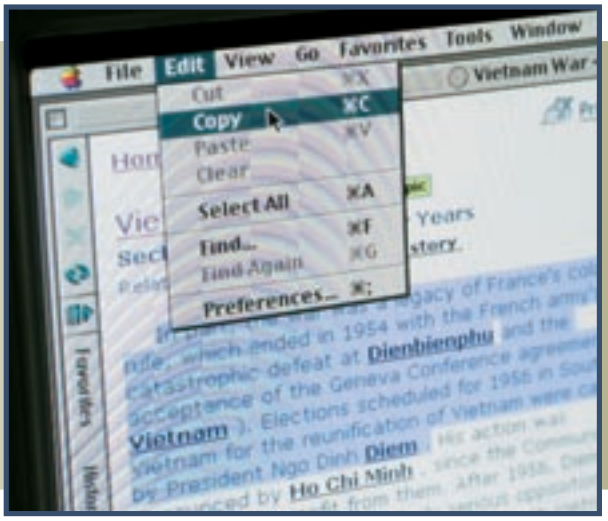
Chapter 14 of the UW System

administrative code defines six types of academic misconduct, ranging from plagiarizing parts or all of a paper, to giving a friend a test answer, to forging academic documents. Students who commit or even assist someone else in any of these transgressions "must be confronted and must accept the consequences of their actions," the code states.

It would be hard to find anyone among the faculty or administration who disagrees. Professors usually put stern warnings about cheating in course syllabi, and many discuss their expectations openly in class. The UW Writing Center, a popular resource where students go for help with term papers and other assignments, offers classes in the dangers of plagiarism, and its online guide to citing sources states bluntly that the university "takes very seriously this act of intellectual burglary, and the penalties are severe."

Delivering on those promises, however, is more challenging than making them. In 2001–02, seventy-five students were charged with acts of academic misconduct, according to the dean of students — less than two-tenths of 1 percent of the university's enrollment. Only two students found guilty of cheat-

None of the students who agreed to talk says that he or she has cheated. Yet all have seen it happen. Most of it, they say, stems not from premeditated deception, but from momentary desperation



than one-quarter of students admitted to cheating on an assignment at any point during college. Now, using the same methods, researchers find that 50 to 80 percent of students own up to the deed.

"The data show it's happening every time a test goes on," he says. "Over four or five years of college, that's a lot of opportunities to cheat. I think it's very serious news."

ing were suspended during that year. Six were put on probation. Five failed the course in which they cheated, and three more were removed from the course. By far the most common punishment —

which was levied in fifty-two cases — was to award the student a lower grade on the work in question.

During an examination this spring, one test-taker reported hearing repeated beeps from a neighbor's cell phone. The student suspected she was using the text messaging function to get answers from friends.

Some who look at those numbers wonder if they belie the university's tough talk about cracking down on cheaters. "Why are there so few instances of cheating that result in serious disciplinary action?" asks Ralph Cagle JD'74, a professor of legal ethics. "Is it that cheating isn't really a problem here, or is it that we don't enforce the rules?"

But other professors say those numbers indicate the difficulty of enforcing — not disdain for — the rules.

Virginia Sapiro, a professor of political science and associate vice chancellor for teaching and learning, says faculty put a "high priority" on fighting academic misconduct. But they lack the time and support to do it especially well. "We try to find various ways to prevent it, and to catch and deal with it when it happens," she says. "But it is part of a growing pile of responsibilities that have fallen on faculty since the Internet."

Proving cheating is labor intensive, and most of the labor rests with the faculty who suspect it. If a professor believes a student is cheating, he or she must gather evidence, confront the student, and then prepare a report detailing findings and sanctions. Depending on the sanctions, the report may be filed with the dean of students office, which facilitates the process and offers students an opportunity to appeal the professor's decision. Appeals are heard either by an examiner appointed by the dean of students office or a standing review board. In either case, the burden of proof lies with the accuser.

"You need the evidence," says Sapiro. "Often, professors will find themselves in situations where they suspect students of having copied something, but that's not going to be good enough in a judicial process."

Many faculty say that those proceedings chew up time that they do not have to give. "Most of us barely have enough time to do a decent job teaching classes, let alone have the time to prosecute a single student," says Gregory Moses, a professor of engineering.

But time is not the only problem. Accusing a student of academic misconduct inevitably becomes a contentious matter that takes an emotional toll. "You take it personally," says Susan Smith, an associate professor of nutritional sciences. "It eats away at you."

When Smith suspected one of her students had plagiarized large sections of a final paper, she spent a week deliberating whether to press the issue. Finally, she did, calling the student in for a private meeting. The student burst into tears, saying she didn't know she'd done anything wrong. "I had no basis to judge the veracity of her statement," she says. "What was I supposed to do — put her on a lie detector?"

That sense of frustration echoes not just at UW-Madison, but at universities across the nation. In one survey of faculty attitudes, Donald McCabe, a Rutgers University professor, found that 55 percent of professors "would not be willing to devote any real effort to documenting suspected incidents of student cheating."

Instead, they seek alternative routes to the formal channels, such as handling cases privately, focusing on prevention, or even changing their teaching. Moses has radically de-emphasized homework in computer science classes, for example, because students frequently copied each other's answers. Out-of-class assignments are now done in teams and count less than 20 percent of the grade.

Moses is frustrated by the compromise, which he says probably hurts students in the long run because they get less exposure to hands-on problem solving. "But we gave up," he says. "We were fighting against an overwhelming force."

IT WOULD BE EASIER NOT TO KNOW.

For Cathy Middlecamp PhD'76, MS'89, a distinguished faculty associate in the chemistry department, those halcyon days of ignorance ended when she overhauled her Chemistry 108 course to include more writing assignments. Soon thereafter, she found herself questioning

her students' work. There was one paper in particular — a book review from a student who just oozed enthusiasm about the insights he'd gained by reading it. "This made no sense," says Middlecamp, "because the book was incredibly boring." She grabbed her personal copy and found its conclusion copied word-for-word into the paper, with no attribution.

A few semesters later, a teaching assistant who suspected a handful of students of plagiarizing sent around an e-mail to all 180 students in the course, asking anyone who may have forgotten to cite sources to come reclaim their paper and make the changes. It seemed like an innocent way to deal with an isolated, and perhaps inadvertent, problem. But then came seventy responses, most from students who wanted to revise their papers.

"This is not why I entered the teaching profession," Middlecamp says. "I don't want to be the cop in my classroom."

Ironically, the same technology that makes cheating easier has allowed Middlecamp to catch more of its perpetrators. She reads papers at her desk, with a Google search engine open on her computer screen. Sometimes it takes only minutes to find that paragraphs have been heisted from Internet sources. For the past three years, Middlecamp has snared two to four students per semester in the net of this rudimentary detective work. She knows there are others. "I only catch the dumb ones," she says. (One student who didn't get away with his deceit had lifted entire paragraphs from a textbook written by Middlecamp herself.)

As punishment, those students usually have their grades docked. But they also get a conversation with Middlecamp, who says she would rather explore why students cheat than dwell on how they're penalized. "Plagiarism raises more questions in my mind than it answers," she says. "I'm much more interested in trying to figure out what's going on with my students than I am in the sanctions."

Although professors say they sense cheating is on the rise, most are at a loss to explain why. Technology obviously enables it. So, too, may a general malaise of societal ethics, where fact-fudging accountants, drug-doping athletes, truth-dodging politicians, and plagiarizing journalists and book authors set less-than-inspiring examples. Students are traditionally great rationalists, and, in a world where cheaters seem to flourish more often than perish, some of their rationalizations can seem almost rational.

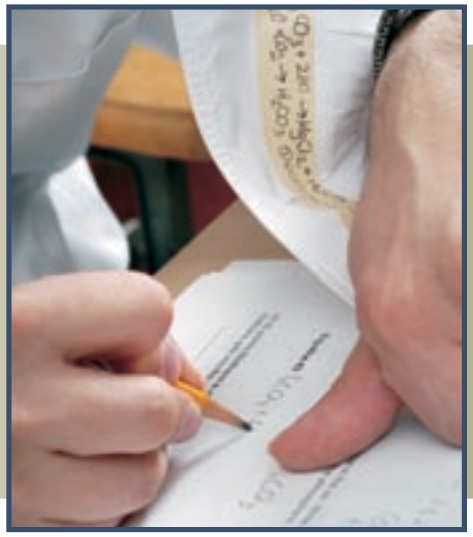
Yet the students who get caught defy simple categorization. Some are defiant, but many are complicit. Some seem to be habitual offenders, while others insist they've made a one-time-only misstep. Many are struggling students, trying for an edge. But many others are at the top of their class, and determined to stay there. "I look at their GPAs and think, 'Why do you need to cheat?' " says Lori Berquam, associate dean of students, who coordinates academic misconduct cases. The answer, she learns, is often fear.

"A lot of students come here used to getting good grades, and when they don't, that's when they feel that they must resort to something else," says Micaela O'Neil, a sophomore.

"You're so scared of not doing what you want to do because of one class," adds junior Heather Lilla.

None of the students who agreed to talk about cheating for this story says that he or she has cheated. Yet all have seen it happen. Most of it, they say, falls not into the class of coldly premeditated deception, but stems from momentary desperation. Students fall behind on assignments, and then make Faustian bargains to their computer screens in the middle of the night. They cut corners — by cutting and pasting — because that's the deal that allows them to get some sleep.

"A lot of academic misconduct cases involve situations where the student didn't think that [he or she] was doing something wrong. There's a lot of education that needs to go on."



"I don't think anyone is proud of cheating," says Chris Miller, a junior biology major. "People realize that there is no honor in it. I've been tempted to cheat before, and I think most people have. It comes at three in the morning, when I don't have time to do this, and I know that tomorrow morning I can just get these answers from someone else."

Still, Miller and other students say they are frustrated by the complacent attitude many of their peers — and even some of their instructors — take toward academic dishonesty. "I don't think cheaters are particularly scorned here, certainly not the cheaters [for whom] it's an occasional thing," says Miller. "I think that's pretty accepted."

Few students resist cheating out of fear that they'll be caught or severely punished. From their perspective, that hardly ever happens.

THE RELATIVELY LOW NUMBERS of academic misconduct cases may contribute to that perception. When professors don't report cases to the dean of students office, they may inadvertently play into the hands of habitual cheaters, who can skate by on pleas that they'll "never do it again." That is one reason Berquam advises faculty to involve her office, even when the offense seems minor and the sanctions are light.

"Faculty are very forgiving, and the process of accusing a student and actually proving that misconduct took place takes time," Berquam allows. "[But] this is a learning institution, and these cases are part of the learning process. We need to be engaging students in a dialogue about this, because the discussion is itself a tool for instruction."

National surveys show a considerable gap between what professors and students define as the boundaries of acceptable behavior. A study conducted in 2001–02 by Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity found that 55 percent of students said it wasn't "serious cheating" to ask peers for answers to tests they'd taken in the past — something nearly all professors say clearly crosses the line. Neither did half of those surveyed say that falsifying lab data constituted serious cheating. Only about one in four students responded that cutting and pasting without attribution constituted a serious breach.

"A lot of academic misconduct cases involve situations where the student didn't think that [he or she] was doing something wrong," says Wollack. "There's a lot of education that needs to go on."

It does not help matters that even professors can disagree about the definitions. Some faculty allow students to collaborate on assignments, while others consider that no better than copying answers on a test. Is it okay to use an exam the professor gave in last year's class as a study aid? Many professors think not, and decry the fraternities and sororities that maintain old test files. But others encourage the practice and even

Continued on page 57

copy guy

Despite all the gadgetry available to cheaters, some of the most problematic forms of pilfering are the oldest. Copying answers from a neighbor's paper may lack high-tech wizardry, but it's still one of the most common problems professors see.

James Wollack, an associate scientist with the Office of Testing and Evaluation Services, has been studying answer-copying for years — trying to see eye-to-wandering-eye with those who cheat so that he might design testing environments that make it harder for them to do it.

In 1996, he conducted a survey of UW-Madison undergraduates to assess not only how many students cheat, but how they do so. He asked enough probing questions to define a geography of answer-copying — information that is helping some professors set up exam rooms where cheaters don't find it so easy to operate.

Wollack's study found, for example, that most students copy not from students to their left or right, but from those in front of them. They also tend to copy from friends, usually by pre-arranged agreement, which means that a professor might disrupt plans by randomly assigning seats before an exam.

"A lot of the copying that is going on could be reduced — I don't think we can ever say eliminated — by some pretty easy, non-invasive measures," Wollack says.

The testing office, part of the School of Education, can help professors who suspect answer-copying to determine if students may have cheated. Analysts feed student answer sheets through a statistical index developed by Wollack to evaluate how similar students' answers should look, given their scores and characteristics of the test, and red-flag any that are unusually alike. Organizations that do standardized testing have used the index to sniff out potential cheaters, but it's still relatively untapped on campus. Only a handful of professors have sought the service, which Wollack admits isn't widely advertised.

Another trick Wollack encourages is to create multiple versions of a single multiple-choice test by shuffling the order of questions. That cuts down on most answer-copying, Wollack says — or at least makes it pretty ineffective, since a neighbor's answers won't match your questions. Wollack's office can facilitate this by scoring the scrambled forms.

Like car alarms and bike locks, the goal of the technology is to increase the effort or danger involved, not necessarily to beat it entirely. "Nothing is cheat-proof," Wollack says. "There is always a way."

— *M.P.*

Cheating
Continued from page 39

hand out answers in class. "This is why professors need to clarify in their course syllabi what they expect," says Berquam.

But an ad hoc approach to academic integrity may be making it harder for the university to deliver a cohesive, community-wide message about cheating. Classroom discussions often focus on mechanics rather than ethics, students say. "It seems like appealing to your character might affect more people," Lilla says. "I think that if we started talking about how Madison is a school of academic integrity, that would have a little more impact."

Classroom ethics do often take a back seat to other pressing matters when students arrive at UW-Madison. During summer orientation, there is so much to cover about social life, integrating into a large school, respecting others, and behaving responsibly that probing discussions about honesty in academic work can get left behind.

"As a university, we probably haven't done a good enough job of getting across the message that theft of intangibles is every bit as important as theft of tangibles," says Sapiro.

That could change. There have been recent efforts to build more discussion of cheating into so-called Comm A courses, the writing-intensive classes that 75 percent of all UW-Madison students take. Residence halls such as the Bradley Learning Community have organized extracurricular discussions around the topic. And communities within the university, such as the Biocore series of biology classes, as well as many individual professors, are adopting honor codes that pledge students and professors to act ethically.

There is even talk among some faculty about pushing for a campuswide honor code, which would entail some kind of promise from students that they would abide by standards set by the university community. Popular at military and private schools, honor codes are cropping up at larger universities, including Duke, Georgia Tech, Maryland, and Kansas State. Experts question how much real effect they have on student behavior; they point, for example, to the problems at the University of Virginia, whose 160-year-old honor code offers one punishment — expulsion — to those caught. But, UW engineering prof Gregory Moses notes, it couldn't make things worse. "And I think it could help change the general psychology and attitude people have," he maintains. "You don't hear much talk about academic integrity. It would really help if that message came from the institutional community, so that it wasn't just Professor X saying, 'I have a code of ethics.' "

BUT PROFESSORS ARE NOT alone. They have a significant ally in the large community of honest students, who often suffer tangibly from unchecked deceit. When cheaters claim good grades that they don't deserve, it's the students who have done the work who get pushed down the curve.

Andrew Lokuta says much of the street knowledge that he and his teaching assistants bring into the exam room in Physiology 335 comes directly from those students who know how to cheat, but don't. If the instructors let dishonest students slip by, they hear about it. Lokuta's department has fielded angry e-mails from students who have seen cheating during exams and want it stopped.

And he understands completely. "This is a very hard class," he says. "Students who do well really deserve credit for that. They don't deserve to be put in the same category as someone who got there by artificial means. We owe it to the students who are trying hard."

It was an honest student, as well, who convinced Middlecamp to persist with the often thankless work of tracking down plagiarists. She was close to giving up, when Heather Lilla, who served on one of her student leadership boards, reminded her, "You're doing it for us."

To professors such as Ralph Cagle, that makes the extraordinary effort not merely worthwhile, but imperative. "If students are getting the sense that we're not taking cheating seriously, it affects a whole different level of student [than just those who cheat]," he says. "I do worry about the student who comes to us with high standards, believing that if they play by the rules they will be rewarded. If we detract from that student's experience by allowing cheating to go on, we have failed our responsibility in a big way."

Cagle may have been thinking about a student such as Woodie Mogaka, whom he encountered a few days earlier at a meeting of the Teaching Academy, a faculty group that strives to improve instruction and address classroom issues.

Mogaka, an affable and talented sophomore, was there as part of a student panel on academic integrity, whose members urged faculty to keep battling against the cheating problem and offered insights from their perspective on how it might be curtailed. He had personal motivation for being on the panel. During the fall semester, he had gotten a B+ in a class — missing an A by just a few points, so close he almost could have grabbed it. But the thing that stuck with him was knowing that other students in the class falsified lab reports. Not only did they get away with turning in those bogus reports, he says, but they got good grades on them. Since the class was graded on a curve, that may have been all it took to rob Mogaka of his A.

Now, Mogaka can't help feeling resentful about how effective that strategy was, about how he got knocked down a grade by others who were half as bright and nowhere near as ethical as he.

When something like that happens, he says, "it softens the will of those who don't cheat." He has learned a lesson. It just may not be the right one.

Michael Penn MA'97 is senior editor of *On Wisconsin*. To illustrate this story, photographer Jeff Miller enlisted the help of several student volunteers to recreate various forms of cheating that take place on college campuses. We're pretty sure the students pictured in this story don't actually do the things we made them do.