wandering

By Michael Penn MA'97
Photos by Jeff Miller
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.
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.
which was levied in fifty-two cases —
wanted to award the student a lower grade
on the work in question.

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 cheat-
ing that result in serious disciplinary
action?” asks Ralph Cagle JD’74, a
professor of legal ethics. “Is it that cheat-
ing isn’t really a problem here, or is it that
we don’t enforce the rules?”

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

Virginia Sapiro, a professor of politi-
cal science and associate vice chancellor
for teaching and learning, says faculty
put a “high priority” on fighting aca-
demic 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 stu-
dent, 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

“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 per-
cent 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 assign-
ments are now done in teams and count
less than 20 percent of the grade.

Moses is frustrated by the compro-
mise, which he says probably hurts
students in the long run because they get
less exposure to hands-on problem solv-
ing. “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 hal-
cyon days of ignorance ended when she
overhauled her Chemistry 108 course to
include more writing assignments. Soon
thereafter, she found herself questioning

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beeps from a neighbor’s cell phone. The
student suspected she was using the
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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.”
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

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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, Mary-

land, 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 Profesor 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 Middelcamp 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.

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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.