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Natural and Normal but ***Unethical and Evitable:***

THE EPIDEMIC OF Academic Dishonesty and How We End It

By Jason M. Stephens

Ep-i-dem-ic . . . affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time… excessively prevalent; contagious.

Epidemic is an apt adjective for describing the problem of academic dishonesty. When asked if they have cheated in the past year, a "disproportionately large number" (i.e., the majority) of secondary and tertiary students in the United States (and in every other country in which it's been studied) report having done so (Murdock, Stephens, & Grotewiel, 2016). The problem of academic dishonesty has been labeled "epidemic" since the 1980s, but research evidence suggests it had been so for many decades (Atkins & Atkins, 1936; Bowers, 1964). In addition to being "excessively prevalent," academic dishonesty is also "contagious"—seeing others cheat significantly increases one's likelihood of doing so (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009).

To these two defining characteristics of an epidemic, common and contagious, I would add a third: corrosive. Academic dishonesty not only undermines students' learning and the validity of its assessment but also their moral development and character. Students who cheat in high school are significantly more likely cheat at university and more likely to be dishonest with their spouses and employers in adulthood (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2009).

With this mind, those of us in education—at all levels and in all roles—might ask ourselves two basic questions: Why do so many students cheat? And what, if anything, can been done to abate the seemingly intractable problem? In this article, I will answer both questions as I argue that academic dishonesty is *natural* and *normal*, while also *unethical* and *evitable*. In doing so, I hope not only to offer faculty, administrators, and policy makers a well-grounded explanation of the nature of cheating but also a clear articulation of why it's wrong and how we might end the epidemic.

Natural . . . Existing in or derived from nature; not made or caused by humankind. … In accordance with the nature of, or circumstances surrounding, someone or something. …

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Deception is a feature of nature, not a flaw in it. The capacity to deceive (to conceal, mislead, cheat, trick, etc.) is a product of natural selection. It is a key mechanism of evolution, whereby random mutations that prove advantageous to survival or reproductive success are passed on to offspring (Darwin, 1859). As I have described elsewhere (Stephens, 2017, p. 111), "from plants posing as inviting insects to snakes wearing a sleeve of colors to masquerade as poisonous," the use of deception has proved advantageous (even essential) to the survival and reproduction of numerous species (flora and fauna alike).

In short, humans did not invent deception, nor are we immune from the selective advantages that it can provide. As with all other species, we do so because it increased the survival and/or reproductive success of our hominin forebears (see Bowlby, 1969, p. 64). We Homo sapiens are born with the same basic hardware and operating systems that helped Homo erectus and habilis to run and replicate.

The myriad ways in which we humans deceive (and our proclivity to do so) is well documented in the literature. Gabor's (1994) *Everybody Does it!* and Callahan's (2004) *The Cheating Culture* offer robust accounts of our tendency to lie, cheat, and betray to get ahead. And it's not just "bad" people. Empirical research dating back to Hartshorne and May's (1928) seminal *Studies in Deceit* has made it clear everyone is susceptible to lying and cheating. Some might

In Short

- Academic dishonesty is *epidemic*: The majority of students, secondary and tertiary, report cheating in the past year, many despite believing it is wrong.
- The use of deception is *natural*: A product of natural selection, adaptive to survival and success.
- Deception is also *normal*: Its use emerges in early childhood and develops in complexity along with other highly adaptive cognitive and social capacities.
- Academic dishonesty is *unethical*: It is morally wrong because it is *dishonest*, *unfair*, and *harmful*, undercutting the achievement and prospects of honest students.
- The epidemic of academic dishonesty is *evitable*: While there may always be a few students who cheat, those of us responsible for their education are capable of creating "cultures of integrity" where the vast majority do not do so.

engage in the latter but not the former, some only in certain situations or circumstances, but almost everyone seems to do one or other (if not both) sometimes.

From an evolutionary perspective, academic misconduct is best understood as a contemporary, context-specific expression of a highly developed capacity to deceive in order to survive and succeed. That is, for 21st-century human beings educational attainment has positive health and economic benefits (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017). Understood in this context, it is only "natural" that students might cheat as a means to gain a competitive advantage (e.g., higher scores, grades, and rankings) or preserve resources (e.g., time and energy) in a domain that has direct bearing on their social survival and success.

Nor-mal . . . according with, constituting, or not deviating from a norm, rule, or principle…

There are several ways in which deception, and academic dishonesty specifically, is "normal." In a basic sense, deception is normal because it "occurs naturally" in accord with the principle of natural selection. In humans, the use of deception emerges around age 2 or 3 in conjunction with the emergence of theory of mind capacities such as the ability to attribute mental states—belief/doubt, desire/fear, pride/shame, and the like—to ourselves or others, and recognize the two as potentially different. These capacities are the foundation of selfhood and interpersonal relationships; they enable us to understand ourselves as individuals as well as the perspectives of others and give us the ability to empathize with them.

These capacities, however, can also be readily employed to deceive others. They allow us to realize, for example, that we could do something dishonest, unfair, or even harmful that is "out of sight and out of mind" of others. Additionally, these capacities enable us to lie about our misdeeds to impart a false belief in the mind of others, often furnished with "alternative facts." As summarized in Lee's (2013) *Little Liars*, the telling of lies emerges during the preschool years and develops rapidly (in both use and complexity) with age. Our lies are quite simple at first and not well concealed, but as our brains develop and we are better able to control our minds and read others, we become more skilled in the art of the lie (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007).

The experimental method used by Lee and many others to assess verbal deception among children begins by tempting them to cheat. For example, children were tempted to peek at an answer (to a trivia question) or behind a veil to reveal the identity of a hidden toy when an adult experimenter has temporarily left the room. In one study (Talwar & Lee, 2008), 82 percent of 3- to 8-year-olds peeked when instructed not to do so, and 64 percent of those that peeked lied about doing so. Importantly, there were no significant differences based on gender or age—boys and girls at all ages did so in equivalent numbers. In short, the emergence and use of deception in early childhood is normal—occurring naturally along with other developmental capacities—and not the mark of "mental illness" or incorrigible deviance.

However, just because something *is* does not mean it *ought* to be.

Un-eth-i-cal . . . not conforming to a high moral standard: morally wrong.

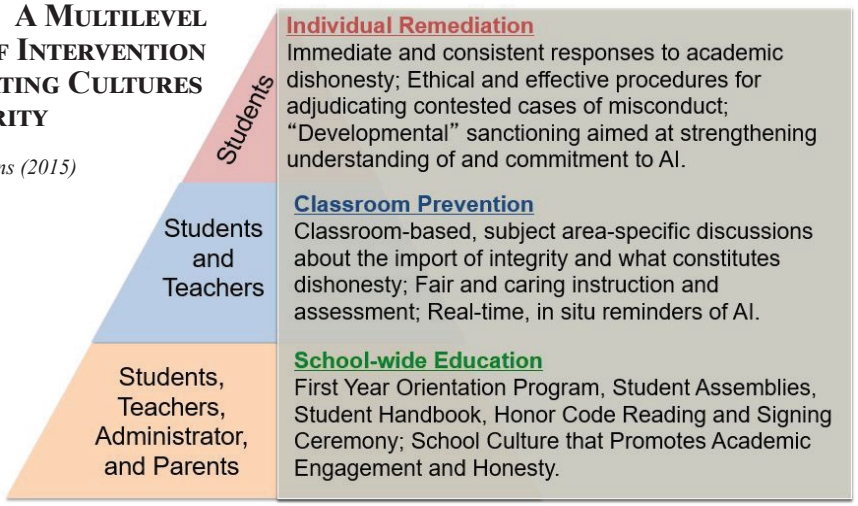
Despite being natural and normal, the use of deception among humans can be (and most often is) unethical. This creates an interesting paradox, whereby two ostensibly "good" attributes (natural and normal) are associated with a putatively "bad" one (unethical).

The incongruity has sometimes been resolved by presupposing that human nature at its core is unsavory—selfish and sinful—and in need of restraint. This "top-down" view of morality is the basis of many religious and Enlightenment perspectives, where either God or reason provides a "thin veneer" of morality, "hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature" (de Waal, 2009, p. 6). However, the paradox can also be resolved with a "bottom-up" view of morality that holds a less dim view of human nature, increasingly supported by empirical evidence from primatology (Brosnan & de Waal, 2014) to neuroscience (Marazziti, Baroni, Landi, Ceresoli, & Dell'Osso, 2013).

In this latter view, morality or ethics, like deception, is also natural and normal—a product of evolution, occurring naturally. As Darwin (1871) theorized in *The Descent of Man*, "Any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts…would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscious. …" (p. 71). The idea of an innate moral sense predates Darwin (e.g., Hume, 1751/1777) and has been subject of numerous popular science

Figure 1. A Multilevel Model of Intervention for Creating Cultures of Integrity

Source: Stephens (2015)



books in the past decade (e.g., Ariely, 2012; de Waal, 2013; Greene, 2014; Haidt, 2012; Sapolsky, 2017; Trivers, 2011; Wilson, 2014). For example, in *The Righteous Mind* Jonathan Haidt describes a set of "intuitive ethics" that provide the "foundations" of morality, including notions of *fairness* involving ideas of reciprocity, justice, and rights, as opposed to *cheating*; *care*, concern for others and their well-being versus *harm*; and *loyalty*, standing with your tribe as opposed to *betrayal*.

These intuitive ethics are adaptations that proved useful in solving the challenges faced by our hominid ancestors over millennia of living together in relatively small groups. They help make trust possible and reciprocity obligatory, allowing us to build strong social bonds with others (beyond our kin) and cooperate closely with them to maximize mutual advantage. They serve as a check against self-centred, short-sighted impulses and enable us to play non-zero or positive sum games over the long term.

They are, however, no guarantee of behavior; but rather "little more than flashes of affect … judgments, solutions, and ideas that pop into consciousness without our being aware of the mental processes that led to them" (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, p. 56). Moreover, these "flashes" do not arise in a vacuum. They are activated in contexts where competing goals, opportunities, and/or demands are at play—where, that is, the temptation to be unethical has arisen.

In the case of academic dishonesty, the feeling of fairness—and judgment that it would be wrong to cheat—is pitted against the goal of getting ahead, maximizing personal advantage, saving time, conserving energy, reducing uncertainty, and so on. The result is that students (rightly) believe that cheating is wrong but report doing it anyway (e.g., Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998; Stephens, 2018). They do so not because they are inherently "bad" people, but because cheating is expedient even if unethical.

Ev-i-ta-ble . . . capable of being avoided.

While we will never completely eradicate academic dishonesty, the problem need not be epidemic as it is now and has been for decades. There will always be individuals who will be tempted and attempt to cheat in some form or another. However, it does not follow that the majority will inevitably do so—no more so, anyway, than a few people getting the flu at your school has to turn into a campus-wide epidemic.

This cheating-as-disease analogy may be instructive. We have learned a lot at great cost over the past millennium about treating infectious diseases and controlling their spread (e.g., campaigns to educate, vaccines to inoculate). All of these strategies require professionals and organizations to provide them, guided by sound policies. Preventing epidemics requires a comprehensive, multilevel, systems-based approach; it's not the result of few good doctors and scientists working in isolation.

In the same vein, ending the epidemic of academic dishonesty necessitates a holistic effort. To create "cultures of integrity" (Stephens, 2015), I describe a three-level, systems-based framework for promoting academic honesty (Figure 1).

Two features of this model are especially worth noting. First, it advocates a positive developmental approach, creating a culture of academic integrity and providing students with the knowledge, values, and skills needed to achieve with integrity. Second, its central premise is, if we want to change individual behavior, we need to change environments. By environments, I mean both culture and context, real and perceived; this includes both the prevailing customs, traditions, and practices of people and the more immediate constraints and affordances of the situations in which they find themselves.

The notion that the environment is critical to understanding (and changing) behavior has its roots in social psychology (Lewin, 1936), which has surged in popularity over the past decade in the intersection of several fields, including social and cognitive psychology as well as behavioral economics. For example, in the book *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) advocated designing environments ("choice architecture") that "nudge" people to make better (i.e., safer, healthier, more ethical, etc.) choices. Thaler has since won a Nobel Prize for his work, and practically anyone carrying a smartphone, wearing an Apple watch, or surfing online often is "nudged" to do something (e.g., stand, breathe, move, click, buy).

What is the environment and "choice architecture" in which many/most students find themselves as they make decisions about cheating? They are typically on a campus where:

1. academic integrity as a value is largely invisible, and "rational ignorance" of its meaning and importance is the status quo;
2. personal commitment to academic integrity is mostly left latent, and responsibility for academic dishonesty easily and typically externalized;
3. most students cheat, and peer disapproval for doing so is low;
4. teachers fail to adequately monitor for misconduct, and they often respond with "benign neglect" in the face of it;
5. and thus, relatively few students who cheat (less than 1 in a 100, conservatively estimated) are caught and held to account for their academic dishonesty.

The foregoing involves several generalizations, but the picture they provide is not an exaggeration. With few notable exceptions, this is the de facto environment on secondary and tertiary campuses across America and around the world.

More to the point, it's an environment with a "choice architecture" that makes the decision to cheat natural and normal. This results, as it has for decades, in a "culture of cheating" where academic dishonesty is epidemic and continues unabated. The situation itself, not just students' behavior in it, is both unethical and evitable, and we, the "choice architects" of the educational environments in which our students find themselves, are obliged to change it.

Change: Creating a Choice Architecture for Achieving With Integrity

Apropos the title of this magazine, I want to provide descriptions of what needs to *change* if we are to transform the current culture of cheating into one of integrity (see Table 1).

The changes focus on the "choice architecture" of our educational institutions and the "nudges" that might be used to promote academic integrity. The following does not exhaust the potential changes suggested by nudge theory but focuses on a few of the more prominent types of nudges that research indicates may be most productive in creating a choice architecture for achieving with integrity.

Make it Salient: Toward a Visible Valuing of Academic Integrity

Relatively few institutions are known for their honor code or concern for academic integrity. Most students will attend a school or university where there is no code, and academic integrity is largely invisible, relegated to a rarely visited page or two on the Web or in the student handbook.

This needs to change, and an institution does not need to have an honor code to change it. Imagine the following sequence of "nudges" aimed at increasing the salience, prominence, and importance of academic integrity for prospective students:

1. While doing some research to learn about your campus, they notice that academic integrity is highlighted on the homepage. They may not click on the link to investigate further, but they see it, and it's always there, ready to be clicked. It provides a link to all they need know about academic integrity, what it means, why it's important, how it's governed, and with resources related to it.
2. Then, when they click on the link for prospective students, a message about academic integrity pops up—a short video message, for example, with clips of students and teachers from the school talking about why integrity is important to them. Again, not every watches the video that moment, but some return when...
3. Next, while completing their application, writing about integrity (e.g., its meaning and importance in their lives) is one of the essay choices. Once again, not everyone exercises the option, but everyone sees it.
4. Finally, when the highly anticipated acceptance letter arrives, they notice that academic integrity is mentioned again, along with a link for more information about the course in which they will be enrolled during their first semester.

Table 1. Contrasting Cultures of Cheating and Integrity

Contrasting cultures of cheating and integrity: Discrepant descriptors across different dimensions		
Dimension	**Culture of Cheating**	**Culture of Integriy**
Valuing of AI	Invisible	Salient
Understanding of AI	Rational Ignorance	Learning by Default
Commitment to AI	Latent	Activated
Responsibility for AD	Externalized	Internalized
Social Norms related to AD	Low Disapproval, High Engagement	High Disapproval, Low Engagemnet
"Errors" (i.e., AD)	Neglected	Expected
Sanctions for AD	Behavioral	Developmental

Note. AI = Academic Integrity; AD = Academic Dishonesty

Learning by Default: Opting-In an Understanding of Academic Integrity

When our hypothetical students arrive on campus to begin their first semester, they are automatically enrolled in an orientation, course, or seminar on academic integrity. In other words, learning about academic integrity (what it means, why it's important, etc.) is the default option—the pre-set course of action that takes effect automatically (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). A parallel "default" has been shown to be capable of saving lives in the case of organ donor registration (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003).

At present, the default option for learning about and understanding academic integrity at most schools and

universities is self-selected, independent instruction (i.e., consulting the relevant code of conduct on your own time and in your own way). In short, one has to "opt-in," and relatively few choose to do so, choosing instead to remain in a state of "rational ignorance" where they are more likely to be dishonest (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

This idea is not new—it's been commonplace among honor code institutions for decades (e.g., Davidson, Vanderbilt, and Stanford)—but one that has been increasingly adopted by universities in the United States and elsewhere. Students at the University of Auckland, for example, are automatically opted-in to the online "Academic Integrity Course" during their first semester.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the course consists of five modules that introduce students to the meaning of academic integrity at the university, providing the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to avoid some of the more prevalent types of academic dishonesty.

Most universities do not offer such a course, but they could and should. Doing so is relatively easy, from creating an in-house course to adopting the use of an external one. The latter include Massive Open Online Courses, such as the one I helped to develop with colleagues at the University of Auckland in collaboration with FutureLearn: Academic Integrity: Values, Skills, Action (see https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/academic-integrity).

Prompt Commitment and Personal Responsibility

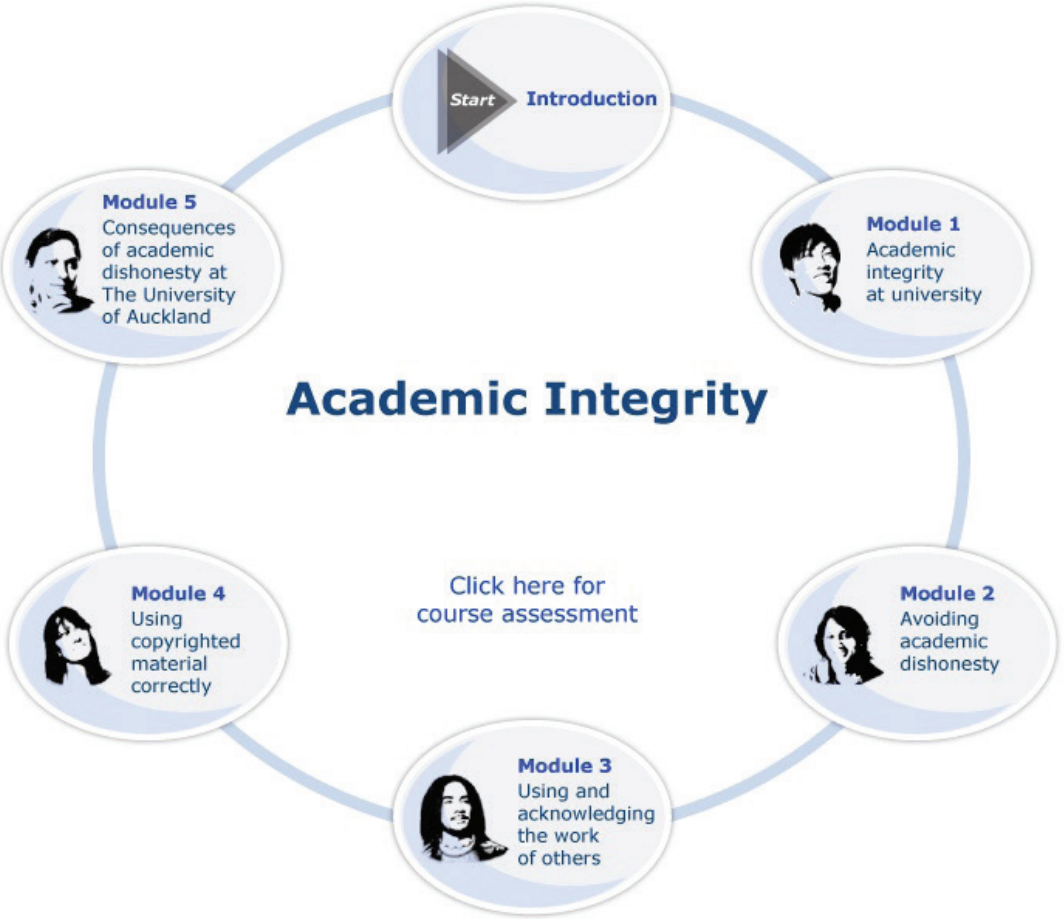
Contrary to Socratic wisdom, knowledge of the good offers no guarantee of doing the good. As noted above, many students cheat despite believing it is wrong. Such judgment—action gaps are not unique to students. Many or most of us often fail to do something we feel we can and ought to do.

The social, psychological, and situational factors that can give rise to such sins of commission and omission are many. Among the most powerful is our capacity to neutralize or disengage our sense of personal responsibility. These "neutralization techniques" (Sykes & Matza, 1957) or "mechanisms of moral disengagement" (Bandura, 1986) include displacement, diffusion, denial of responsibility, and many more. They all serve the same purpose: to mitigate self-recriminations and protect our sense of self as a good, morally decent person. In short, we can be guilty but not feel responsible (e.g., Stephens, 2017, 2018).

In a choice architecture for achieving with integrity, students' commitment to academic integrity and personal responsibility for academic dishonesty would be unambiguous. At present, the former is often left latent and the latter easily externalized with one or more of the aforementioned mechanisms.

The nudges needed to overcome these problems include the use of pre-commitment strategies and follow-up reminders. For example, upon completion of the course or seminar

Figure 2. University of Auckland's Academic Integrity Course



on academic integrity in which they were automatically enrolled, students should be prompted to make a personal commitment to uphold the values they just learned about. Alternatively, or better yet additionally, such pledges could happen at the program and/or course level. These pledges or signings may even happen publicly, in full view of (and along with) one's teachers and peers, as is done at Vanderbilt University and several other institutions.

While such ceremonies might easily be dismissed as symbolic gestures, experimental research has shown that students were significantly less likely to cheat and attempt to justify dishonesty through moral disengagement after signing or even just reading an honor code statement (Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011). This experiment highlights not only the importance statements themselves have as touchstones but also the importance of making them salient in the context in which the opportunity to cheat may arise.

In short, pre-commitments are most powerful when they are followed up by reminders that make clear students' responsibility not to cheat. These reminders may be accompanied by *warnings* that have also proven effective in reducing academic dishonesty (Bilic-Zulle, Azman, Frkovic, & Petrovecki, 2008). As a nudge, warnings do not change the incentives or penalties involved, but rather "put them at eye level" so they are clearly seen and understood. For example, informing students that pattern-matching software (such as Turnitin) will be used to screen for potential plagiarism serves as a kind of warning. In my classes, this warning is accompanied by an *incentive*, yet another type of nudge—points for submitting a draft of their paper into the system a week or two before the due date.

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In this digital age, where every institution has adopted a robust learning management system (e.g., Canvas, Moodle, Blackboard), it has never been easier to embed all of the foregoing nudges into the choice architecture of our learning environments. The question is not one of capacity but merely will.

Transform the Norm

Social norms—the informal (often implicit) rules that govern behavior—are a defining feature of culture and a powerful source of motivation for individual behavior. As noted above, many students believe that most of their peers cheat (a *descriptive norm*) and would not disapprove if they did so (an *injunctive norm*). The former describe what is and the latter what ought to be or ought not to be (e.g., Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Despite these norms, the majority privately think cheating is wrong but erroneously believe that the majority of others think it's acceptable. This "pluralistic ignorance" (Prentice & Miller, 1993) offers a potential starting point for transforming the social norms now governing students' academic behavior. Previous research (e.g., M. P. Haines, 1996) suggests social influence campaigns might offer the best "nudge" in changing norms.

In brief, social influence campaigns involve the use of models—typically those deemed credible, popular, or like us—to demonstrate desired attitudes and actions. Regardless of the specific means employed—brochures, posters, contests, speeches, videos, public service announcements, articles in the campus newspaper, social media messaging, and so on—research from successful interventions suggests four rules for message development: Keep it simple, tell the truth, be consistent, and highlight the (desired) norm (M. P. Haines, 1996). Figure 3 offers an example of a poster from a student-designed campaign to promote "achieving with integrity" (Stephens & Wangaard, 2013; Wangaard & Stephens, 2011).

Finally, the most robust campaigns involve several steps—from collecting baseline data to inform message creation to assessing the effectiveness of the message (see http://socialnorms.org).

Expect Errors and Respond With Developmental Sanctions

Even with all foregoing nudges in place we need to expect errors and respond appropriately. No teacher or professor wants to imagine their students cheating (at least not in their classes!), and far too many fail to properly monitor their assessments for breaches of academic integrity. More troubling still are those among us who countenance misconduct, turning a blind eye under the guise of benign neglect.

Figure 3. One of the Winning Posters From a Social Influence Campaign Created by High School Students to "Nudge" Others Toward "Achieving With Integrity."

Ignoring the problem is not in the best interest of anyone in the long run. Any pain and inconvenience that might be spared student and teacher in the short term is offset by many pernicious effects. Not least among the latter is the injustice done to honest students and the cynicism that witnessing bad deeds going unpunished can breed. These are the seeds that spawn a culture of cheating, where one is faced with a morally repugnant choice: cheat or be cheated.

Moreover, neglecting the misconduct of someone who cheated is to miss a teachable moment. What could have been an opportunity to learn from a mistake becomes reinforcement for further dishonesty. In such a case we have not only done a disservice to this student's future self but also to those with whom they will work and live as an adult (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2009). However difficult or inconvenient, we are obliged to respond.

The response should not only involve behavioral sanctions (e.g., grade reductions and suspensions) but also developmental sanctions. For example, upon returning from their suspension, students at University of California at San Diego are enrolled in a seminar that helps them "learn about and develop skills in professional integrity and ethical decision making" (Bertram Gallant & McCreary, 2013, p. 2). The program also includes individual meetings with peer mentors and professional staff as well as writing exercises that provide an opportunity for reflection and prospective thinking. In short, the program provides a range of developmentally appropriate responses consistent the aims of an *educational* institution.

In conclusion, even as the use of deception is natural and normal, academic dishonesty is neither ethical nor inevitable. It is not only morally wrong for students to cheat, it is also wrong for teachers and administrators to ignore the problem. But, with far too few exceptions, that is what we have done, and an epidemic of academic dishonesty has flourished.

The problem is not merely that cheating is common and contagious, but that it is corrosive. It undermines students' learning (and the validity of its assessment) as well as their social and moral development—the core concerns of our profession, which we ought to care most about.

This needs to change, and we—the "choice architects"—must take responsibility for creating cultures of integrity where fundamental values (fairness, truth, honesty, fairness, respect, and responsibility) are not only highly salient and widely understood, but also deeply valued and broadly respected. I hope the suggestions offered here provide a nudge toward that end and an end to the epidemic. C

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