
Today's News

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

Survey Finds Widespread Cheating in M.B.A. Programs

By [KATHERINE MANGAN](#)

More than half of the graduate business students surveyed recently admitted to cheating at least once during the last academic year, according to a report released on Monday.

The report, "Academic Dishonesty in Graduate Business Programs: Prevalence, Causes, and Proposed Action," is based on survey responses from 5,331 students at 32 graduate schools in the United States and Canada, and is scheduled for publication this month in *Academy of Management Learning & Education*. The survey found that 56 percent of graduate business students -- most of whom are pursuing M.B.A.'s -- had cheated, compared with 47 percent of graduate students in nonbusiness programs.

"Graduate business students are cheating at an alarming rate," the report says. "If business schools fail to do anything, they are sending their graduates into the business world believing that high levels of cheating are commonplace and acceptable. But, in today's post-Sarbanes-Oxley environment, businesses are being expected to create strong ethical cultures and select employees who will fit into those cultures." (The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which was passed by Congress after a wave of corporate accounting scandals, mandated stricter governance and financial-reporting rules for public companies.)

The September issue of the journal, a quarterly publication of the Academy of Management, is dedicated to ethics in business education. Its editor, James R. Bailey, says the articles in the issue will examine possible explanations for the higher prevalence of cheating among business students.

It grapples with questions like: "Are the people who apply to business schools get-it-done, action-oriented people" who are more likely to bend rules to get ahead, or "is it something about the education or the culture of business schools that is to blame?" said Mr. Bailey, who also directs the executive-development program at George Washington University School of Business.

The academic-dishonesty report tackles those questions and suggests strategies for business schools to follow to keep students honest.

The report's authors -- Donald L. McCabe, a professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School; Kenneth D. Butterfield, an associate professor of management and operations at Washington State University College of Business; and Linda K. Treviño, a fellow in business ethics at Pennsylvania State University's Smeal College of Business -- suggest a number of possible reasons for why business students might be more likely to cheat.

Some educators have blamed business schools' focus on shareholder value for cultivating a "culture of greed" in M.B.A. programs ([The Chronicle](#), June 23), and that point is also raised in the report.

"Many graduate business students have work experience where they have been exposed to the 'get it

done at all costs' culture still found in many corporate workplaces," the report says. It also mentions a 2003 study by the Aspen Institute that found that over the course of their M.B.A. education, students' priorities shift from meeting the needs of customers to protecting shareholders' profits ([The Chronicle](#), September 20, 2002).

Business schools are notoriously competitive, which might encourage students to adopt a me-first attitude, the report says. In addition, many students have jobs, so the pressures of work and study can add to the temptation to cheat.

"Graduate business students are also more mature, and their attitudes are probably more entrenched than are those of undergraduate students," the report says. "Therefore, graduate students who have 'successfully' cheated as undergraduates and who have been exposed to questionable behavior in the workplace may be less responsive to exhortations to be ethical."

Ms. Treviño added in an interview that among M.B.A. students, "there's also a perception that their peers cheat more in a business-school environment and that they'll be disadvantaged if they don't."

Business schools can counteract that perception by involving students in creating and enforcing honor codes, she says.

They can also reduce opportunities for cheating by creating multiple versions of exams so students from one class can't make copies for students in another.

The report suggests that faculty members ban cellphones from testing sites and set clear rules about when, and how, students are permitted to work in teams and when such "collaboration" crosses the line into cheating.

In some respects, the findings that M.B.A. students cheat more than other graduate students isn't surprising, since earlier studies have concluded that undergraduate business students are also more likely to cheat than are their nonbusiness classmates, Ms. Treviño says.

If business schools stress the importance of integrity from the time they recruit students until the time they graduate them, students' expectations about how business-school students are expected to behave will change, the authors say.

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