A Memo to Students on Cheating

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Cheating among college students remains rampant. Our institutional and/or course policies aren’t stopping much of it. There are lots of reasons why, which we could debate, but the more profitable conversation is how we get students to realize that cheating hurts them. I don’t think they consider the personal consequences, so that’s the goal of this memo, framed like others that have appeared in the blog. You are welcome to revise it, make the language your own, and share it as you see fit with students. Will it stop cheating? Not likely, but it might make some students realize the consequences go well beyond getting caught.

To: My Students  
From: Your Teacher  
Re: Cheating

You know the message on cheating: Don’t do it. Yet despite knowing that it’s wrong, many students still cheat. Why? In response to a survey about cheating a student compared it to speeding. Everybody knows you shouldn’t speed, but most of us do. And when the weather is good and the road is clear, the risk of an accident is small. There is the matter of getting caught, but that risk is also low, so, the student reasoned, cheating is like speeding.

No, it’s not! Here are seven reasons why you shouldn’t cheat, and getting caught isn’t one of them.

1. When you cheat on an exam, it looks like you know the content, which means whenever you’re confronted with that material, you’ve got to fake it. Moreover, it looks to me like you understand, so I move on, assuming you know what you got right on the exam. What you didn’t learn in one course can be required knowledge in the next course. Knowledge in most fields is
cumulative. It builds on previous knowledge. If you don’t understand the prerequisite content, you can’t learn the new stuff—so later you’ll either need to do double-duty learning or what you don’t know widens from a gap to gulf.

2. When you cheat, important skillsets, those things employers assume college graduates possess, remain undeveloped or underdeveloped. You learn problem-solving skills by solving problems, not by copying answers. Your writing improves when you write, not when you recycle someone else’s paper. Your abilities to think critically, analyze arguments, and speak persuasively all develop when you do them, not when you parrot the thinking, arguments, and persuasive ploys of others. Just as standing around exercise equipment does not build muscle mass, borrowing the work of others does not build mental muscle.

3. Don’t kid yourself, a small cheating problem seldom stays that size. Think more along the lines of a malignant tumor that starts tiny and quietly grows into something big and ugly. You may start by peeking for answers in a required course that you don’t want to take. In that first course in the major, you decide to copy homework answers—you’re busy and all that content will be covered again in later courses anyway. You cheat in the special topics course because you won’t use the content in the area where you plan to work. You end up fudging data in your senior research project because it isn’t a “real” study anyway. The research is clear. Students who cheat don’t do it just one time or in just one course.

4. Cheating in college sets you up for cheating in life. Maybe you’re telling yourself you’ll stop when you graduate. The research says otherwise. Those who cheated in college are more likely to cheat their employers or employees, fudge on their taxes, and use unethical business practices. It becomes a lifetime habit right along with the lying that covers it up.

5. Cheating puts your personal integrity at risk. What kind of person do you want to be? The actions taken now are defining who you are and will likely become. How does it make you feel when someone you care about lies or cheats on you? Do you hold those who cheat in high esteem? Your personal
integrity is something you wear every day of your life. You can wear it with pride or you can slink around trying to hide the holes and cover the rips.

6. You can accomplish what you need to without cheating. Some students cheat because it’s easier than working for the grades—the reasons outlined above illustrate why that’s a cavalier, short-sighted rationale with serious consequences. Then there are the students who cheat because they don’t think they have the smarts to get the good grades they need. Success in college is much more a function of your study habits than your brain size. Good study habits are so not rocket science. And don’t say they don’t make a difference unless you’ve tried them. Start with one course and see if short, regular study times alone and with a buddy, regular class attendance, and keeping up with the homework make a difference. Bottom line: most students are way smarter than they think they are.

7. Cheating prevents you from being the person you want to be. Grades that you’ve earned provide a sense of accomplishment. They’re a source of pride. They say you’re a person to be reckoned with. Grades you haven’t earned also make you a person to be reckoned with but not for the reasons you’d wish.