

Survey: Many students say cheating's OK Confessed cheater: 'What's important is getting ahead'¹

By [Kathy Slobogin](#) (2002)
CNN

(CNN) -- "Cheating is a shortcut and it's a pretty efficient one in a lot of cases."

That's not exactly the lesson most people want students to be learning in high school, but it's what 17-year-old Alice Newhall, a senior in a top high school in northern Virginia, says she believes. There's growing evidence she's not alone.

- A national survey by Rutgers' Management Education Center of 4,500 high school students found that 75 percent of them engage in serious cheating.
- More than half have plagiarized work they found on the Internet.
- Perhaps most disturbing, many of them don't see anything wrong with cheating: Some 50 percent of those responding to the survey said they don't think copying questions and answers from a test is even cheating.

Newhall, a B student at George Mason High School, says students have very little sense of moral outrage about cheating. For many, she says, the pressure to do well academically and compete for good colleges has made cheating a way to survive high school.

"What's important is getting ahead," says Newhall. "The better grades you have, the better school you get into, the better you're going to do in life. And if you learn to cut corners to do that, you're going to be saving yourself time and energy. In the real world, that's what's going to be going on. The better you do, that's what shows. It's not how moral you were in getting there."

Access to info

Some say the Internet has exacerbated the problem, making electronic plagiarism as easy as having a modem and a credit card. There are many Web sites like [schoolsucks.com](#) where you can download a paper on nearly any subject for \$9.95 per page.

Schools have begun to fight Internet plagiarism with the students' own weapons.

George Mason High School is one of thousands of schools that have contracted with a company called [turnitin.com](#), which allows teachers to submit student papers. The company then searches the Web for matching prose. Within 48 hours, the teacher gets the paper back, color-coded for plagiarism. Turnitin.com representatives say about a third of the papers they receive have some amount of plagiarism.

Survey comments:

- "I actually think cheating is good. A person who has an entirely honest life can't succeed these days."
- "We students know that the fact is we are almost completely judged on our grades. They are so important that we will sacrifice our own integrity to make a good impression."
- "I believe cheating is not wrong. People expect us to attend 7 classes a day, keep a 4.0 GPA, not go crazy and turn in all of our work the next day. What are we supposed to do, fail?"

Surveying the shifty

"Students today find it so much easier to rationalize their cheating," says Donald McCabe, the Rutgers professor who conducted the nationwide survey on high school cheating.

¹ Slobogin, K. (2002, April 5). Survey: Many students say cheating's OK. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/04/05/highschool.cheating/>

McCabe polled the students in his survey for reasons they cheat. Beside academic pressure, he says he found the most common response was that the adult world sets such poor examples. "I think kids today are looking to adults and society for a moral compass," he says, "and when they see the behavior occurring there, they don't understand why they should be held to a higher standard."

Of course, not all students cheat. Mike Denny, also a senior at George Mason High School, thinks it's simply wrong. But he says a sense of honor that would prevent cheating seems lacking in high school.

"Honor seems like it's a concept of the past," says Denny. "Something like chivalry and knights and maybe a Victorian passe thing that no one really believes in any more." Denny also blames a high school culture where grades and test scores are more important than integrity.

"By now many of us are so jaded we feel like our whole life has just been taught for one test," he says.

"Things such as who you are and standing by your word and what not, that's something that we haven't really been taught."

Companies like turnitin.com may be part of the solution, but Donald McCabe says he thinks such policing action is just a Band-Aid for a moral deficit that schools and parents should address.

"I subscribe to the theory that suggests we'd be much better off promoting integrity among our students rather than trying to police their dishonesty," says McCabe.