On My Honor:
Academic Dishonesty and Honor Codes

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By

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Abstract

This thesis examines several different aspects of the behavior of academic dishonesty. The beginning sections provide a broad overview of this growing dilemma including: factors which constitute the behavior, prevalence, consequences of violation, and prevention techniques. The second portion addresses the impact of the Internet on academic dishonesty, taking into account the increasing use and availability of technology which has made the practice of academic dishonesty a much easier pursuit. The final section addresses the issue of honor codes as a possible deterrent for academic dishonesty. The three sections combined provide a close examination of a growing epidemic which is plaguing college campuses around the world.

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"Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful."

--- Samuel Johnson

College students face numerous concerns over the span of their academic careers. The traditional concerns of money, grades, and social desirability are ones that have affected thousands of students for generations. However, as more and more young adults are attending college every year, the problems they face are changing. Compared to previous generations of college students, the scholars of the new millennium are being confronted by a multitude of problems that did not exist only a few decades ago. The issues of drug and alcohol abuse, violence on campus, and sexual harassment are only a few of the problems that are receiving a significant amount of attention from a number of different groups including the media, researchers, and several student-oriented organizations. Unfortunately, though, there is an even more significant concern that has escaped the attention of many of these groups. This is the issue of academic dishonesty- a problem that has become increasingly more pronounced on college campuses all over the country. Although the problem itself has existed for a number of years, only recently have researchers begun to examine this growing epidemic.

One of the main reasons that the problem of academic dishonesty has gone as unnoticed as it has for so long is that not everyone knows exactly what it is. There is no universally accepted definition of academic dishonesty that both students and faculty can
apply. “Cheating may mean different things for faculty and students” (Academic Dishonesty in our Classrooms, 1990). Often, each separate university has its own guidelines about what constitutes academic dishonesty.

For the purposes of this paper, a generalized definition of academic dishonesty will be used. According to Keith-Spiegel and Whitley (In Press), one of the most cited definitions of academic dishonesty is provided by Gary Pavela who proposed that academic dishonesty includes one or more of the four components of cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, or facilitating academic dishonesty. According to Pavela (1978), cheating is “intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise. The term academic exercise includes all forms of work submitted for credit or hours” (p.78). Some examples of cheating cited by Keith-Spiegel and Whitley include using crib notes, copying during tests, or unauthorized collaboration on out-of class assignments (2-1, 2-2). Pavela’s second component of academic dishonesty is fabrication. This is defined as “intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise” (p. 78). Keith-Spiegel and Whitley list such behaviors as making up sources for a bibliography or faking the results of a laboratory experiment as falling within the category of fabrication (2-2). The third component of academic dishonesty provided by Pavela is that of plagiarism. Plagiarism is “deliberate adoption or reproduction of ideas or words or statements of another person as one’s own without acknowledgement” (p. 78). Behaviors that would constitute plagiarism according to Keith-Spiegel and Whitley would be handing in a paper written by another student or purchasing a paper from a commercial source, and failing to properly attribute quotations within the paper (2-2). Keith-Spiegel and Whitley also list “self-plagiarism” within this category
although this behavior is usually dependent upon the discretion of the individual institutions’ policies. "Self-plagiarism" is “submitting the same paper for credit in more than one course without the instructor’s permission” (2-2). Pavela’s fourth segment of academic dishonesty is facilitating academic dishonesty. This is designated as “intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another” to participate in some form of academic dishonesty (p.78). Although there are several other actions which could be considered academic dishonesty, these are the main four which comprise the behavior.

Having established a definition of academic dishonesty, studies are better able to examine the prevalence of these behaviors. The numbers regarding the frequency of academic dishonesty fluctuate considerably depending on the source of information. Statistics range from a low of forty-five percent of students admitting to some form of academic dishonesty (Mattern, 2000) to a high of eighty percent (The Center for Academic Integrity as cited by Plagiarism org). The numbers tend to fluctuate even more depending on the form of academic dishonesty. The percentages have a tendency to increase when examining the incidents of academic dishonesty on written work compared to those of examinations (New Research on Academic Integrity: The Success of “Modified” Honor Codes).

To obtain the most accurate information regarding incidents of academic dishonesty, most publications and academics rely on one source. While there are many researchers who have begun to study the phenomenon of academic dishonesty, the most cited and highly regarded source on the subject is Donald L. McCabe, Professor of Organization Management at Rutgers University. McCabe, the country’s leading researcher on academic integrity, has surveyed over fourteen thousand students at sixty
colleges and universities over the past ten years (New Research on Academic Integrity: The Success of "Modified" Honor Codes). His findings are the most documented sources of information regarding academic dishonesty in the country today.

According to McCabe (1993), two-thirds of college students surveyed admit to one or more forms of academic dishonesty. Specifically, McCabe’s research has shown that at those institutions with no honor code, forty-five percent of students admit to cheating on examinations while fifty-six percent admit to cheating on written work. McCabe’s research has also revealed that incidents of academic dishonesty are on the rise in both institutions with and without honor codes. At those universities with honor codes, the prevalence of overall cheating has increased by almost ten percent, with the number of students admitting to some form of academic dishonesty hovering around sixty percent. At those institutions without honor codes, overall cheating has increased by about five percent, with the figures holding at about eighty-three percent. There are many other statistics regarding the prevalence of academic dishonesty on college campuses. Each statistic fluctuates somewhat in either direction around McCabe’s figures. However, regardless of the actual numbers, each statistic reveals that academic dishonesty is a growing epidemic, and that it has become a serious problem in today’s academic world.

It is undisputed that an increasingly larger percentage of today’s college students are guilty of one form or another of academic dishonesty. What is not as clear are the reasons why there has been such an increase in this dishonest behavior. Researchers have begun to investigate the factors that influence academic dishonesty, identifying several which may have had an impact on students’ attitudes towards cheating. These factors include competition for grades and job opportunities, pressure from self and parents for
good grades, unfair or excessively demanding instructional situations, uncaring or indifferent faculty, laidback attitudes on the part of faculty towards academic dishonesty, peer pressure to support a friend, and a decreasing sense of academic integrity and ethical values among students (Aiken, 1991; Barnett and Dalton, 1981; Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor, 1992; Roberts and Rabinowitz, 1992 as cited by Davis, 1999).

Andrea L. Rittman (1996) includes a number of these reasons among those factors that have influenced the increasing incidents of academic dishonesty. Rittman cites competition and pressure for grades as one of the main factors influencing academic dishonesty. In a survey by Keller (1976) reported by Barnett and Dalton (1981), sixty-nine percent of students at Miami University stated that “pressure for good grades from parents, relatives, and the university” (p.545) was the main reason for cheating. Other research by Singhal (1982) revealed that sixty-eight percent of students believe that competition for grades is the main reason for academic dishonesty. “A diminishing sense of academic integrity” is also cited as one of the main reasons for the growing increase in academic dishonesty (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992). “Today, education is not valued for knowledge. It’s valued as the ticket to get a good job” (Rittman, 1996). Students these days are more likely to cheat to get good grades because they believe the grades will help them obtain a good job. There is no longer a sense of learning for the sake of knowledge alone, and this has led to increasing incidents of academic dishonesty. According to Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, and Armstead (1996), behavior that involves high striving for achievement correlates positively with both observed and reported cheating. Additionally, Weiss, et al.(1996) found that those who study to learn are less likely to cheat than those who study to get good grades (as cited by Rittman, 1996). A third factor, mentioned by
Rittman as being influential on academic dishonesty, is social approval. A study conducted by Crowne and Marlow (1964) showed that students with a high need for approval cheated more often than those with a low need because the high need students were concerned about negative evaluations if they did not succeed (as cited by Rittman, 1996). Other similar findings were reported in a Bowers (1964) study where a relationship was found between cheating and both peer group attitudes and the "college climate" for cheating (Rittman, 1996). Further evidence has shown that self-esteem is an important factor in academic dishonesty (Rittman, 1996). Jacobson, Berger, & Millham (1970) found that, due to their need for social approval, students with high self-esteem are more likely to cheat than students with low self-esteem. Finally, the behavior of other students is fairly influential on the practice of academic dishonesty. Many students justify the practice of academic dishonesty by stating that they only do it as a defense against other students cheating (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, In Press). Consider the following statements from respondents in a study on academic dishonesty: "[Academic dishonesty] is rampant at... so much so that the attitude seems to be everybody does it - I'll be at a disadvantage if I don't"; "If others do it, you're being left behind by not participating"; "When most of the class is cheating on a difficult exam and they will ruin the curve, it influences you to cheat so your grade won't be affected." (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). Academic dishonesty has become so common that many students believe that they must cheat just to stay competitive with their fellow classmates. Why should they receive bad grades when other students are receiving higher marks by cheating? Therefore, many students cheat in order to stay on an even keel with the rest of the class.

A multitude of studies have examined the many reasons for students engaging in
academic dishonesty. Remarkably, researchers have spent very little time examining the reasons why students do not engage in academic dishonesty even when presented with the opportunity. What little research there is on the subject lists ethical objections, confidence in own abilities, probability of being caught, family and peers’ disapproval, and unfairness to other students as reasons for not engaging in academic dishonesty (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, In Press). Clearly there are a number of students who believe that academic dishonesty is unethical and not justifiable in any circumstances. Additionally, in contrast to those students who cheat because of their desire for higher grades, there are many who are confident enough in their own abilities that they feel no need to cheat. Several students have never engaged in academic dishonesty simply because they felt they would not be able to get away with it. Other students have avoided academic dishonesty because of disapproval from family and friends. Finally, many students have not engaged in academic dishonesty because they see it as being unfair to the other students who do not cheat.

Regardless of the reasons why students do or do not engage in academic dishonesty, research clearly shows that this behavior is a dilemma on our college campuses. Logically, one must wonder what is being done not only to punish the perpetrators of this behavior, but also to prevent and reverse the spread of this epidemic. Researchers who have examined the issue of punishment have encountered a number of disturbing conclusions. For example, McCabe found that while almost ninety percent of the faculty surveyed report being aware of some type of academic dishonesty in their classroom, thirty-two percent comment that they do nothing in response (Campus News). Explanations for their lack of response range from fear of legal liability to lack of support from administration to the frustration of having to deal with a lot of paperwork and
committees (Weiss, 2001). Many faculty members simple decide to look the other way in matters of academic dishonesty. If any form of punishment is undertaken, it is often fairly light in its severity.

In McCabe's survey, eleven percent of the faculty who had observed cheating reported that they had never done more than reprimand the cheater for the behavior. McCabe suggests that many students view this lack of response as an opportunity to cheat without any serious consequences, an opportunity they take advantage of wholeheartedly (Campus News).

Research examining the problem of faculty reluctance offers many suggestions for how to successfully punish those students engaging in dishonest behavior. One crucial step for many universities is to make the process of reporting incidents of academic dishonesty easier for the faculty. By simply erasing a lot of the little hassles that must be endured in order to report a dishonest student, many more faculty members become willing to turn in the perpetrators they observe cheating in their classrooms (Weiss, 2001). Additionally, instead of automatic expulsion, which is the traditional punishment for students who are found guilty of cheating, universities can incorporate several new, innovative methods of punishment into their policies. Examples include employing the use of counseling sessions for students who own up to their mistakes, probation combined with chores such as writing a paper on why students should not cheat, or community service (Weiss, 2001).

Reversing the spread of academic dishonesty is a problem that many researchers and educators alike have been struggling with for a number of years. Many universities and institutions have begun a new movement dedicated to altering an academic culture which for the most part has done little to discourage academically dishonest behavior. Gary
Pavela, University of Maryland's director of judicial programs and student ethical conduct, believes that “Students cheat in high school in part because they think everyone else does. But students can change their ways if colleges clearly demand honesty, engage students in ethical issues, and put them in charge of enforcement” (Weiss, 2001). Simply by taking a stand against academic dishonesty, enforcing high standards of honesty and ethics, and implementing sufficient punishments, universities have the opportunity to reverse students’ beliefs and attitudes towards academic dishonesty. In fact, one survey reported that on campuses that “simply make a big fuss” about academic dishonesty, self-reported incidents of academic dishonesty were ten percent lower when compared to other campuses (Weiss, 2001). Rates were even lower for those campuses which employ a formal honor code. (The issue of honor codes will be discussed more fully later in the paper.) Involving students in the process and enforcement of ethical issues also appears to make a difference in the prevalence of academic dishonesty. Studies have shown that students who believe that their peers disapprove of academic dishonesty are less likely to cheat than those who perceive a campus climate of indifference or approval (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, In Press). Several campuses engage older students in initiating incoming freshmen to the repercussions of academic misconduct through the use of skits and lectures (Weiss, 2001). Many other campuses put the students in charge of inspiring their peers not to cheat, and for those who do not get the message, a student-run judicial board is employed to enforce disciplinary action (Weiss, 2001).

Perhaps an issue even more important than reversing the course of academic dishonesty is preventing the behavior from occurring in the first place. There are a number of steps that instructors and administrators can employ in order to prevent academic
dishonesty. Perhaps the most important step for instructors is to spend time at the beginning of each term discussing and defining the standards of academic conduct and dishonesty (Davis, 1999). Cheating often has different meanings for different people. A faculty member might consider a behavior to be academically dishonest while a student considers the same behavior to be perfectly acceptable. By informing students from the beginning of the term about the university’s policies, procedures, and penalties on academic dishonesty as well as the instructor’s own definition of academic dishonesty, unintentional incidents of academic dishonesty can be easily prevented. Keith-Spiegel and Whitley suggest that a complete syllabus is one of the best tools for conveying what is and what is not permissible in a certain classroom. They recommend that each syllabus contain the following elements: a brief, general statement about the importance of academic integrity in higher education, a personal statement declaring the instructor’s commitment to upholding academic honesty in the classroom, procedures for dealing with any incidents of academic dishonesty, a brief list of the types of academic dishonesty in the university’s policy, a brief list of any types of academic dishonesty that could occur in the classroom that could benefit from more detail, a brief list of campus resources that may help reduce the risk factors associated with cheating, an invitation to come directly to the instructor to discuss anything that is unclear or confusing, and an invitation to report incidents of academic dishonesty (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, In Press).

Instructors cannot assume that every student understands what constitutes academic dishonesty. An explanation needs to be plainly written and discussed with the students so there cannot be any misinterpretation. Unfortunately, classroom discussions of academic dishonesty appear to be fairly uncommon. In a survey conducted
by Nuss (1984), only about half the faculty members reported making a mention of academic integrity issues in their classrooms. Additionally, while Kibler (1994) did discover that almost all the colleges and universities included information about academic integrity in their handbooks, only sixty-nine percent included it as part of a new student’s orientation, and only sixty-two percent included information in their catalogs. Surveys indicate, however, that fifty-five percent of students believed that discussing the problem of academic dishonesty in the classroom would be an effective means of preventing dishonesty (Aiken, 1991). Keith-Spiegel and Whitley suggest that instructors inform students of a number of items including: the fact that the instructor is aware that cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty take place, that the instructor understands the various techniques that cheaters use, that the instructor intends to institute preventative measures, that cheaters who are detected will be punished, and that the instructor desires to create a climate of trust and mutual respect. Keith-Spiegel and Whitley (In Press) also suggest informing students that any incidents of academic dishonesty will be discussed privately with the student concerned. Therefore, if other students do not see immediate action being taken against the offender, they will not assume that the professor does not care about academic integrity.

Another excellent suggestion for preventing academic dishonesty is to “appeal to the students’ sense of honor and personal integrity” (Pavela & McCabe 1993). David Summergard notes that “Connecting cheating with lying unmasks the ‘sleight of mind’ that allows students to think of cheating as a justifiable way to act” (as cited by Weiss, 2000). Often, students will think twice about cheating if they regard it as a morally wrong behavior or action. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this appeal usually depends on the individual
student and his/her views. Research conducted by Aiken (1991) revealed that sixty-eight percent of his sample of students who attended a private, church-related university believed that moral appeals would be effective in preventing academic dishonesty, compared to only thirty-eight percent from a public university (Keith-Spiegel & Whitley, In Press).

A final suggestion for preventing academic dishonesty is to increase the risk of detection for individuals who partake of the behavior. Several studies have shown that cheating is inhibited by the risk of detection (Houston, 1983; Michaels & Miethe, 1989; Tittle & Rowe, 1973). According to Michaels and Miethe (1989) "students who contemplate cheating tend to weigh the risk of detection and punishment against the benefits they expect to derive from dishonesty and will cheat if they perceive the expected benefits to outweigh the potential costs." If students believe that the risk of detection is greater than the potential benefits of academic dishonesty, then they will not partake in the behavior.

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The second portion of this paper examines the impact of technology on the behavior of academic dishonesty. The emergence of the Internet and other technological innovations has extended the problem of academic dishonesty into unexplored areas. Research indicates that there are over two hundred sites on the Web that exist solely for students to copy and share each other's work (Plagiarism.org, 1998). According to University of Iowa professor Tom Rocklin, "There are so many Web sites out there that any college kid with a credit card can buy any paper" (Avila, 1999). These sites, which boast such names as
“School Sucks” and “Evil House of Cheat”, claim to have had well over one million visitors already. It is fairly simple for any individual to log onto a web site and purchase a term paper. As a case study for this paper, I logged onto the world wide web, and typed the words term paper into the search engine. In response to the search, the Internet provided me with over one hundred sites which provide term papers. I selected the site entitled Cheaters.com. I typed in the words Jane Eyre following the search prompt, and the site linked me to ten term papers regarding this literary work. For only seven dollars a page, I could purchase my own copy of any one of these papers. Reference papers, headers, and footers were provided at no extra cost. Other sites provided similar offers, with costs ranging from a low of seven dollars per page to a high of twenty dollars per page.

The emergence of the computer and the Internet as tools of everyday use has greatly increased the opportunities for cheating among college students. Journalist Victoria Benning states that “Teachers and administrators at several Washington area colleges agree that cheating is on the rise—not because today’s students are less honest, but because the computer has made cheating so easy....the computer has made cheaters out of students who otherwise would never have considered such trickery....”(1998). The computer is not the only technological advancement available to young people these days. Cutting-edge tools including tiny spy cameras hidden in beepers, watches and baseball caps are turning academic dishonesty into a high tech event (Avila, 1999). Statistics on the prevalence of Internet use to facilitate academic dishonesty are limited. According to Professor Donald McCabe, it appears that using the Internet to purchase, download, or plagiarize papers is not a major problem. Of the schools surveyed, less than five percent indicated that they had turned in a paper obtained from the Internet, and only ten percent reported using the
Internet as a source to plagiarize a paper (Campus News). However, since there are no clear definitions as to what exactly would qualify as Internet plagiarism in the minds of both students and faculty, and since most schools have yet to develop a policy regarding the use of the Internet, these numbers could be misleading.

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The third portion of this paper addresses the use of honor codes as a deterrent for academic dishonesty. Many institutions have begun to make use of academic honor codes as a means of reducing incidents of academic dishonesty. As noted earlier, research has indicated that incidents of academic dishonesty are lower at institutions which employ honor codes (McCabe and Drinan, 1999). Honor codes typically require students to sign a pledge that they have not cheated, give students a prominent role in the judicial process that hears allegations of cheating, and often allow students to take their exams with no faculty or proctors present (Campus News). “While many might think,” according to Donald McCabe, “unproctored exams would lead to greater levels of cheating, this is not the case.” McCabe’s research has shown that while almost forty-five percent of the students at schools without honor codes reported one or more instances of serious cheating on a exam, only twenty-three percent of students at schools with honor codes reported similar instances of cheating. Additionally, on campuses without honor codes, sixty-eight percent of students admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating on written work compared to only fifty-three percent of students on campuses with honor codes (New Research on Academic Integrity: The Success of “Modified” Honor Codes).
Perhaps the greatest impact of honor codes can be seen by examining the students who engage in repeated incidents of cheating defined by McCabe as more than three reported incidents. This research shows that on non-code campuses, seventeen percent of students reported levels of repeated cheating compared to only six percent on campuses with honor codes (New Research on Academic Integrity: The Success of “Modified” Honor Codes). Other encouraging findings reported by McCabe indicate that, contrary to prior research, large universities that have adopted honor codes are experiencing relatively low rates of cheating. McCabe’s study found that only thirty-three percent of students on large campuses reported cheating on exams and only fifty-eight percent reported cheating on exams and written work combined (Campus News).

Little theoretical research has been conducted on the reasons why the rates of academic dishonesty are lower at institutions which employ honor codes. Research conducted by McCabe and Trevino (1993) lists three plausible explanations for this inverse relationship between honor codes and academic dishonesty. First, honor systems require students to pledge to abide by a code that clearly states expectations regarding both appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Therefore, under an honor system, wrongdoing is more clearly defined. A clear and concise definition of academic dishonesty makes it more difficult for students to rationalize and justify dishonest behavior, therefore reducing the rates of academic dishonesty. Second, under the honor code system, responsibility for control of academic dishonesty is placed in the hands of the students instead of the faculty and administrators. In most honor code systems, students are not only given responsibility for the detection of violators, but for the judicial aspects of the system as well, including determination of guilt and assignment of penalties. Research conducted by Schwartz
suggests that "individuals must ascribe responsibility to the self if moral norms are to be activated and to influence behavior" (as cited by McCabe and Trevino, 1993). Therefore, academic dishonesty is thought to be lower under an honor code system because it requires students to take responsibility for their behaviors. Finally, honor code systems frequently give students privileges that other systems do not such as unproctored exams. Incidents of academic dishonesty may be lower on campuses that employ honor codes because students want to protect the privileges that honor systems afford them.

Honor codes are not in and of themselves the only means of preventing academic dishonesty on college campuses. The establishment of an honor code is not sufficient enough to reduce academic dishonesty. Rather, according to Keith-Spiegel and Whitley (In Press), the honor code itself reflects the presence of a climate that frowns upon any form of academic dishonesty. Experts report that the success of honor codes appears to be rooted in a campus tradition of mutual trust and respect among students and between students and faculty members (McCabe and Drinan, 1999). Donald McCabe, perhaps the greatest advocate of honor codes, believes that the successes of honor codes are due at least in part to successfully building a sense of community responsibility for academic integrity on campuses (New Research on Academic Integrity: The Success of "Modified" Honor Codes). Honor codes not only provide the opportunity for institutions to communicate to students their commitment to academic integrity, but to encourage students to take responsibility for their own behaviors as well. Therefore, although they can in no way be considered an automatic cure for academic dishonesty, the implementation of honor codes can help to foster a climate on college campuses which supports responsibility, mutual trust between students and faculty, and a sense of academic honesty.
Academic dishonesty has been a concern of educators and administrators alike for a number of years. As competition among students for grades and jobs continues to grow, and technology makes information more easily available, the trend of growing rates of academic dishonesty is likely to persist. The case study presented here illustrates how easy it is for any individual to obtain a term paper or essay from the Internet. I visited the site entitled “Evil House of Cheat,” and typed in the words academic dishonesty at the search prompt. The site actually provided me with over one hundred and forty papers related to the topic of academic dishonesty. For only eight dollars and ninety-five cents a page, I could have purchased my entire thesis regarding academic dishonesty off the Internet.

While honor codes have been advocated as a means of reducing academic dishonesty, most experts agree that honor code systems alone are not sufficient to deter cheating on college campuses. Instead, administrators, educators, faculty, and students must all work together to foster a sense of academic integrity on their campuses, one that actively disapproves of all forms of academic dishonesty and acknowledges a sense of mutual trust and responsibility among its faculty and students.

The opportunity to obtain knowledge is a privilege that many have been granted, but few truly appreciate. For many, the pursuit of higher education is the means to an end, a chance to further their schooling to the ultimate conclusion of a more successful career. Today’s college students do not pursue knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge. They pursue knowledge in order to obtain a better job. Additionally, compared to previous generations, the terms integrity and honesty are not as valued by today’s youth. Taken together, this makes for a dangerous combination. Knowledge is a powerful tool, perhaps one of the most powerful tools that an individual has. If an individual does not possess the
character or integrity to use this tool correctly, serious repercussions can result. As Samuel Johnson stated “Knowledge without integrity is a dangerous and dreadful thing.” The rising rates of academic dishonesty showcase the truth in this statement. A decisive lack of integrity combined with the power of knowledge has almost obliterated any sense of academic honesty among college students today.
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