Why Students Cheat—and 3 Ways to Stop Them
by David Gooblar

from *Chronicle Vitae*, February 19, 2014
https://chroniclevitae.com/news/341-why-students-cheat-and-3-ways-to-stop-them

We're all familiar with direct approaches to combating academic dishonesty. Automatic failures, disciplinary action from on high, honor codes: Instructors and institutions are working hard to try to weed out cheating, and understandably so.

But threatening severe punishment, or asking students to promise they won't plagiarize, certainly doesn't seem to have eliminated the problem. While it's not clear that cheating is on the rise—that's a controversial topic—I don't think anyone would argue that these direct measures have banished cheating from our classrooms. So today I'll discuss three indirect approaches—new ways to attempt to prevent cheating that come from new ways of thinking about students who cheat.

Create courses in which students have no incentive to cheat.

In his recent book *Cheating Lessons*, James Lang delves into the current scholarship on academic dishonesty. He is particularly interested in finding out which aspects of a student's learning environment will lead to more cheating. Perhaps not surprisingly, the research suggests that students are more likely to cheat when they are less invested in the course material.

When students are motivated intrinsically (by curiosity, or by a genuine desire to master the material), rather than extrinsically (by the desire for a good grade, or to avoid a bad one), they are far less inclined toward dishonest behavior. This makes sense: Cheating won't help the student who actually wants to *learn* what you're trying to teach her. In an interview last year, Lang described cheating as "an inappropriate response to a learning environment that's not working for the student." While we have to work to curtail that inappropriate response—with the threat of discipline, for example—we also should look for ways to alter elements our courses to make cheating less likely.

This is the challenge for instructors: to design courses so that students will be intrinsically motivated. How do we do this? Lang recommends working to connect your course material to issues your students are already interested in; centering courses around challenging and intriguing questions, rather than around mere material to be covered; and providing a variety of forms of assessment to give students a number of opportunities to demonstrate their mastery to you. However you do it, some careful planning before the semester starts can help create a course in which students are motivated to learn, and don't feel the need to cheat.

Teach students how to properly engage with the work of others.

The second indirect approach comes from Sandra Jamieson and Rebecca Moore Howard, the English professors who began the Citation Project, an empirical study of the way students use sources in their writing. The study has so far analyzed 174 student papers from 16 institutions, classifying a total of 1,911 citations. The findings are striking: Only 6 percent of the citations came in the form of summary; the remaining 94 percent were either direct quotations (42 percent), passages copied without quotation marks (4 percent), patchwritten (16 percent), or paraphrased (32 percent).

The low incidence of summarization suggests that students are not fully engaging with the ideas within the sources they cite. This sense is further cemented by the fact that 46 percent of the citations came from the source's first page. (70 percent came from the first two pages.)

For Jamieson and Howard, plagiarism is not the product of unethical student behavior; rather, students plagiarize most often because they have an inadequate understanding of how to use secondary sources in their writing. Instructors have to do a better job of teaching students not only how to properly cite others' work in their own writing, but also how to distinguish good sources from bad. Even more importantly, we need to help students understand the value of proper research, how to read sources critically, and how the best scholarship builds on other people's ideas. Give students the tools necessary to legitimately incorporate other sources into their work—let them know that it's OK to get ideas from other people!—and

incidents of plagiarism should become rare.

Teach students how to plagiarize.

The third strategy, not so much indirect as counterintuitive, comes from Jack Dougherty, an associate professor of educational studies at Trinity College, in Connecticut. He makes use of an unusual assignment: He gives his students a paragraph from a relevant secondary source, and then asks them to plagiarize it.

The assignment requires students to show that they understand the many kinds of plagiarism. He has them improperly work the source into their writing in a variety of different ways, from copying the passage word-for-word, to paraphrasing it too closely, to taking the source's ideas without giving proper credit.

By teaching his students how to plagiarize, he calls attention to the ways, many of them quite innocent, that writers can improperly use other people's ideas, while demonstrating just *why* it's forbidden to plagiarize. It's a great way to start a discussion that can lead to a fuller understanding of the issues that surround academic dishonesty, issues that we shouldn't pretend are so straightforward. This assignment, like the other two indirect strategies, acknowledges that instructors have a role to play in combating cheating that goes beyond law enforcement.

David Gooblar is the author of The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, published by Continuum in 2011. He lives in Iowa City and teaches literature and writing at Mount Mercy University and Augustana.*