**How We Teach Students to Cheat**

**By**

**[MICHELLE BLAKE](http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/author/michelle-blake/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Posts%20by%20Michelle%20Blake)**

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[**Back to School**](http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/how-we-teach-students-to-cheat/URL)

When I was in high school, I saw a dear friend unroll a slip of paper and copy answers onto an exam we were taking. I was floored. After a lot of time trying to decide if it was better to feel like an accomplice or a prig, I opted for prig.

I told her I had seen her. She cried. She admitted it. She said she had always felt dumb at our school and hated it. She said her family wanted her to go to an exceptionally difficult college, and she didn’t think she could get in.

I was an idealist back then (my yearbook quote was from Dag Hammarskjold), but not heartless. And I loved my friend a lot. I made her promise me she wouldn’t do it again. I didn’t tell anyone.

Years later she told me that getting caught had changed her. I don’t remember her exact words, but it had to do with appreciating the difference between seeming to be successful and actually being successful. According to her, the latter includes feeling proud of your own accomplishments because you come by them honestly. (Clearly, she was plenty smart enough to attend and excel in a difficult college, which she did.)

A few days ago, another dear friend sent me a link to a story on boston.com about a[big cheating scandal](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/2012/08/31/harvard-cheating-scandal-raises-concerns-and-eyebrows/DZDKEG90lfHRXAVkOwrtFP/story.html) that might have occurred at Harvard University last spring. (An extensive investigation is under way.) At least 125 students in the same lecture class are suspected of collaborating in groups or on e-mail to come up with answers to exam questions, “violating a no-collaboration policy that was printed on the exam itself.” The article also reported that some of the submitted answers were similar or “identical” to answers by other students.

One of Harvard’s responses includes a possible plan to require courses for incoming students about what constitutes cheating and plagiarism. The plan raises a number of questions, a few being: Are we meant to assume that students who are smart enough to get into Harvard don’t know that? Will the school later offer a course in why it is a bad idea to pour gasoline on a flaming toaster oven?

I taught university classes for many years, and in my experience students don’t decide to cheat because they don’t know better. They cheat, as my high school buddy said, because they’ve imbibed the message — from parents, from peers, from schools — that looking successful is more important than being honest. They cheat because they have been taught, however unwittingly, that it is worth it.

One would like to believe that an academic institution would counter that message with a louder and clearer message that being honest is more important than making an A. I’m not convinced that’s the message Harvard gives its students — or any Ivy League college gives its students.

In fact, I’m not convinced it’s the message that most institutions in this country give any of our citizens. After I sent the story to my daughter, Katharine, a graduate of a top-tier law school, she wrote back and linked the Harvard fiasco to the recent flurry of news stories about deceptive political candidates and campaign ads.

“It’s the same thing,” she wrote. “TRUTH is a second-class citizen in the glittering world of WINNING.” I have to agree. We seem to have created a culture in which getting what we want is more important than doing what we should.

Of course, there are many contributing causes. But I immediately thought of another recent flurry of stories — about the demands we privileged parents make on our children these days, demands to appear successful (at any cost?) and thus, let’s face it, make us appear successful. As a result, we seem to be raising unhappy children.

We also seem to be raising confused children who can’t tell the difference, as my high-school friend put it, between appearance and reality. When we “edit” (or co-author) their college application essays, we deprive them of faith in their own abilities. When we allow them to lie on their résumés, we tell them it is more important that they get into the right college than that they do the right thing. Without meaning to, we send the message that lying and cheating are acceptable ways to make good grades and get ahead in life.

And here’s the problem: That simply isn’t true.

[Michelle Blake,](http://michelleblakewriter.com/)a novelist, is working on a book of essays called “Grown Children.”