

COLLEEN WENKE

COLLEEN WENKE was born in 1979 and grew up in Queens, New York. After graduating from Boston College in 2001 with a degree in psychology, she moved back to New York City and took a job as a project coordinator at a real estate investment and development firm. She was recently promoted to project manager at the same firm and is currently pursuing an MA in real estate at New York University. An avid traveler, Wenke spent a semester at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and she has taken trips to Europe and Southeast Asia. She is also an enthusiast of extreme sports, such as skydiving, rappelling, white-water rafting, and scuba diving.

Too Much Pressure

Why do students cheat in school? In this essay written when she was a college freshman, Wenke explores several reasons, finding one especially compelling. "Too Much Pressure" was published in the 1998 edition of *Fresh Ink*, a collection of work by students in Boston College's first-year writing course.

You hear the clock ticking in your head, and your teacher keeps erasing, 1
in ten-minute decrements, the time you have left to complete the test. You do
not remember anything from the last month of class. You probably should
have studied more, watched less television, and spent less time on the phone.
All the "should haves" are not important now. You need to finish the test and
get out of here. The thought of a big fat F and a "See me" on the top of your
midterm scares you. You remember the small piece of paper you have hidden
in your pocket just in case. For a fleeting moment you think about what will
happen if you are caught; then you slip the paper from your pocket onto the
desktop. You transfer all the required information onto the test in time. You
smile in anticipation of the A you are going to get. You think of how easy it
was to cheat. All that matters is getting the grade.

Cheating is taking work done by somebody else, be it a friend or someone 2
you do not know, and writing your name on it and saying it is your work. Any
time I walked through my high school cafeteria or the hallways, I saw people
cheating. It came in many forms, from copying homework to giving out copies
of the exam. Students even wrote the answers to a Scantron exam down the
sides of number-2 pencils and gave the pencils to their friends. My history
teacher freshman year had a name for these students: "cafeteria scholars."
These were the students who pulled 90s by knowing what the test questions
were before they got to the classroom. Their friends who had taken the exam
earlier in the day would tell them the questions and answers during lunch.

The teachers knew that these things went on, yet nobody seemed to do any
thing about them. I thought this was the way school went. The people who
were cheating were doing the best in all of my classes. I would study for hour
and still pull Bs. They would pull As.

I remember conversations over the dinner table with my parents on the
subject of cheating. My parents were disgusted at the apathetic views my
brothers and I held. We really didn't think it was a big deal to copy homework.
I thought everyone cheated, probably even my parents and teachers when
they were my age. But my parents swore that they had never cheated. Did I
believe them? Not really. I thought that they were giving us the "it was so
much better when we were growing up" speech.

I soon learned differently. In the article "When the Ends Justify the
Means," written by Robin Stansbury, a reporter for the Connecticut newspa-
per *The Courant*, I found that my parents were telling the truth. Stansbury
reports that "cheating in school has probably been around since the first exam
was given." But he goes on to say, "State and national statistics show cheating
among high-school students has risen dramatically during the past fifty
years."¹ Reading this upset me and made me think about what had caused this
increase. I hoped this was not a reflection of moral decline in the people who
would soon be running my country. I blamed our school system for not instill-
ing the proper values in its students. I figured that the dramatic change in the
role of the family over the past generation, from two-parent homes with a
working father and a mother who stayed at home and watched her children to
families which have only a single parent or in which both parents work out-
side the home, meant schools needed to include moral standards in the cur-
riculum. I believed schools were not fulfilling their role and therefore were
producing students who do not know the difference between right and wrong.

An article written by Robert L. Maginnis, a policy analyst in the Cultural
Studies Project at the Family Research Council, indicates my hypothesis had
some truth to it. Maginnis states that "the erosion of values is traceable largely
to changes in institutions which have traditionally been responsible for
imparting them to our youth." He defines "these key institutions [to] include
family, school, church, media and government." I agree with Maginnis, but I
can't accept these factors as the only sources in the increase of cheating in the
classroom. The facts seem contradictory. If my parents' generation had such
high morals and wouldn't cheat, wouldn't they teach their children the same?
My parents had taught me that cheating was wrong, yet I seemed to accept it.

¹ Wenke uses the MLA style of source citation, discussed on pages 56-67. Here and later,
she does not provide parenthetical text citations because she names the authors in the text and
because her sources—two Web documents and a television program—did not have numbered
pages she could cite.—EDS.

There is a new "class" of cheaters today. In the past, as one would expect, the students who cheated were the ones who could not pass or did not do the work. They were the lazy students. But today the majority of the students who admit to cheating are college-bound overachievers. The students who are trying to juggle too many activities are resorting to compromising their integrity for a good grade. There is too much competition between students, which leads to increased pressure to do well. Cheating becomes a way to get the edge over the other students in the class. In addition, penalties for getting caught are mild. If you were caught cheating at my high school, you received a zero for the test. Your parents were not called, and you were not suspended. True, a zero would hurt your grade severely if all grades for each quarter counted. But there was a loophole in the system: Each quarter the lowest grade was dropped. If the zero grade was dropped, it made no difference; the average was not affected. Students who cheated on all the tests but only got caught once still received good grades.

A main difference between school today and school when my parents were enrolled is that we are now very goal-oriented and will compromise our values to achieve these goals. Stansbury sees this compromise of values and reports in his article that "cheating is a daily occurrence in high school. . . . What this says is that many of our students today do not have much internal integrity." Stansbury argues that students "want a goal, and how to get the goal is somewhat irrelevant." Today there is more pressure placed on students to do well. They are expected to receive good grades, play a sport, and volunteer if they are to be looked at by a good college. With a B tainting your transcript, a college might not look at you. This new pressure is what is causing the increase in cheating. Maginnis agrees with Stansbury and goes further, reporting, "A national survey found a shift in motivation away from altruism and toward concern with making money and getting power and status." Like Stansbury, Maginnis says that "students are finding it easier to rationalize lying or cheating in pursuit of their goals." And what goals are these students pursuing? They want the best grades so that they can get into the best schools and get the highest-paying jobs. Starting in the classroom, we are sending the message that it is acceptable to cheat as long as you do not get caught and you do the best.

Dean Morton, a broadcaster for *Good Morning America*, reported that according to a national survey conducted in 1997 by *Who's Who in American High School Students*, as many as 98 percent of students who participated in the survey admitted to cheating. The segment of the show was even entitled "Guess What? Cheaters Do Prosper." Like Stansbury and Maginnis, this survey also concluded that it is now the common belief among students that cheaters are getting ahead in life. Stansbury interviewed several high-school

students in his article and discovered that many of them feel cheaters do get ahead in the classroom: "In high school, the cheaters always win. They do get caught and they are the ones getting 100 on the exams when the noncheaters are getting 80s and 90s. Cheaters do win." We are sending a message to our youth that it is acceptable to cheat as long as you don't get caught and you are getting As. In this kind of society, morals take a back seat to how much you earn and how prosperous you are.

Students who would not usually cheat get sucked into believing it is the only way to get ahead in school: If the cheaters are doing better than they are and not getting caught, then they had better try it. Stansbury proposes that there is such an enormous increase in cheating because more students are joining in: "They see others cheating and they think they are being unfairly disadvantaged." He adds that the "only way many of them feel they can keep in the game, to get into the right schools, is to cheat." In high school I always felt at a disadvantage, because everybody else was cheating and doing better than I was, even if only by a few points. My friends felt the same way, that copying work or cheating was the only way to keep up with the rest of the class. It frustrated me, because the cheaters were not earning their grades. But there were plenty of times when I was in a jam and copied homework from friends. Thinking about this now, I wonder what allowed me to push aside my conviction that cheating was wrong. I wasn't bringing in cheat sheets and didn't know the questions to tests before I got there, but I was cheating nonetheless.

How should we respond to the huge increase in cheating over the past generation? We need to step back and look at the broader picture. We are creating a society in which people feel it is acceptable to cheat. This attitude will not stop in the classroom, but will carry on into the business world. The ones who are cheating are the ones getting the grades and getting into the best schools. They are the "smart" ones. They in turn are the ones who will be running our country. They will become the heads of businesses and presidents of big corporations. Are these the people we want to have the power? In all likelihood they will not stop cheating once they get to the top. They become the people we idolize and aspire to be like. Because they are powerful, we consider them clever, highly respectable people. I do not hold any respect for a dishonest cheater. The phrase "honest businessman" will truly be an oxymoron. I am scared to think of the consequences of having cheaters rule our country. Is our society teaching that this is the only way to get ahead in life? Does obtaining status and power make you good? Schools are drifting away from emphasizing learning and are emphasizing the grade instead. When the thirst for knowledge is replenished in a student's mind, the desire for the grade without the work will dissolve. Only then will cheating decline.