

Term Papers for Hire:  
How to Deter

# ACADEMIC DISHONESTY



**S**tudents have been getting other people to do their work for them as long as teachers have been giving assignments. But the mass media has facilitated the creation of an entire cottage industry made up of unscrupulous academics and graduate students, sometimes called “ghostwriters,” who are willing and able to anonymously write term papers and market them to anyone who will pay.

Preventing and detecting academic dishonesty has always been a challenge, but the Internet and computers have made it more difficult. This is a source of great concern in every classroom, but especially in the Christian school, whose goals are to facilitate character development along with preparation for careers.

Cheating is not limited to the West, or to certain levels of education.<sup>1</sup> It occurs throughout the world, in increasingly sophisticated ways, and for varying reasons. However, one reason ghostwriters have gained a secure foothold in academia is excessive emphasis on grades.<sup>2</sup> The need to have a high GPA in order to gain entrance into a prestigious graduate school drives students to do “whatever necessary” to succeed, with little consideration of whether they acquire adequate proficiency in their selected field. Professors contribute to this pressure by implementing grading policies that focus on competition for the highest score rather than ensuring that students master the subject matter of the course. And schools are co-conspirators when they place undue emphasis on grades in evaluating applicants, and give awards and scholarships only to those with the highest grades, rather than more well-rounded students who have, through service and creativity, made more of a contribution to their communities.

Within the world of education, we constantly hear about grading, evaluations, and objective measurements. While higher standards can improve education, they may also increase the levels of student dishonesty. Gerald Graff, a professor of literature at the University of Chicago, claims that “students have become cynical relativists who care less about convictions than about grades and careers.”<sup>3</sup> In a world where gaining wealth and prestige is a major motivation for acquiring a degree, students are tempted to do whatever is necessary to obtain an “A” in each class and thereby acquire a degree or certification that will enable them to earn a high income.<sup>4</sup>

## Who Are Ghostwriters’ Clients?

According to Ed Dante, a self-professed ghostwriter-for-hire, there are three main types of students who seek his services: the English for Speakers of Other Languages student who has not mastered the English language; the scholastically deficient student; and the lazy rich kid.<sup>5</sup> Dante claims colleges are failing the first two types of these students. Those who come to American colleges and universities from other countries quickly discover their efforts to learn a new language are confounded not only by cultural difficulties, but also by the pressures of grading.<sup>6</sup> Educators often focus on papers and examinations, rather than on ensuring that students actually grasp the material taught. Schools that admit foreign students should plan to assist them in acquiring English proficiency if necessary.

Most academically deficient students not only struggle with course content, but also with the mechanics of research and writing term papers. They should be required to enroll in remedial courses or to work with a tutor to strengthen their skills.

The third category of Dante’s clients, lazy rich kids, focuses on the end product rather than on the process of education. Accustomed to purchasing a variety of services, they may regard buying a term paper as no different than hiring a maid or a swimming coach.

Another self-proclaimed ghostwriter, Nick Mamatas, also writes papers for deficient students and those who lack English proficiency, but says he gets contacted by another group of students: those required to write papers outside their area of expertise—for example, a chemistry major enrolled in an English literature course. But Mamatas says he also deals with a lot of foreign-born adults, often from the former Soviet Union, who in their home countries were engineers, medical professionals, and scientists. For the most part, these clients actually send in their own papers and are seeking only an edit by a native English speaker.<sup>7</sup>

## How Do Students Cheat on Term Papers?

Students can go the route of pure plagiarism: Log onto the Internet, and using a browser, search for a few semi-relevant sources (starting with Wikipedia), copy them wholesale into a manuscript, and change a word here and there to make the document sound more like their own work. Many will consider this to be too much work, as they still have to hunt for relevant

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**G**hostwriters are a diverse lot. Some work for large custom-essay companies, some work through agents, while others make a living writing on their own. A few are in some sort of relationship with the student and may not even make any money for their work. Even if ghostwriters write thousands of pages of “scholarly literature,” you won’t find their names listed on a single page.

books, or worse yet, journal articles, and link the pieces together in a style that resembles their own writing. Plagiarism is not a new phenomenon, but given the proliferation of easily accessible electronic resources such as the Web browser, it has become much easier for students to cut and paste slabs of text. Some students even brag on social media about never setting foot in a library.

Students looking for an easier alternative can engage someone else to do the work or search out a paper from someone who has already taken the course. But perhaps the easiest way to acquire a readymade paper is to click on a term-paper store Website and select from manuscripts on almost any desired topic, ranging from history to biology to mathematics—even ethics!

A quick Web search will produce a number of free sites oriented toward the cost-conscious potential cheater.<sup>8</sup> But there is some truth in the old adage “you get what you pay for.” Some of the material available from these sources appears to have been created by people who lack an adequate command of the English language and/or a good grasp of the topic. Some of the manuscripts are seriously out of date.

For the cheater with some disposable cash, a number of sites sell already-written papers; i.e., AcademicTermPapers.com, which charges \$7 per page; and PaperStore.net, which charges \$10 per page. Other sites charge a scanning fee in addition to a fee for the paper itself. These sites offer probably 10 times as many papers as the free sites. Each site posts clear disclaimers that customers are not to pass these papers off as their own work; a warning that is ignored by the vast majority of buyers.

Finally, the lazy or desperate (and more well-to-do) student can commission a made-to-order term paper. Some of them pay friends, relatives, and fellow classmates to write papers for them,

or purchase papers from people who took the class in previous years or have some expertise in the field. However, many commission custom papers, which are available from a number of sources such as PaperMasters.com (which charges \$17-20 per page), Bookworm Lab.com, TermPaperMonster, TailorMade, and UnemployedProfessors.com.

Some ghostwriting organizations place small ads in campus newspapers and on the backs of music magazines. Others advertise in the *Huffington Post*, the *National Post*, Yahoo.com video sites, television stations, and *Tech Vibes*. Many companies that offer papers for sale, and many ghostwriters, like Nick Mamatas, include a disclaimer that they do not officially compose papers to submit for class credit as the work of the student. Mamatas, for example, writes the words “model paper” on such documents,<sup>9</sup> which allows him to claim that he is simply providing the papers as a prototype that students can use to learn how to write their own papers.<sup>10</sup>

In reality, however, nearly all of these sample papers are not “models” at all, but thinly veiled facilitation of cheating. Neither the student nor the ghostwriter actually views the paper as an exemplar. Both parties know that the only change in the “model” paper will be the addition of the student’s name as the author.<sup>11</sup> In the electronic age, the student who hires a ghostwriter will find it relatively easy to provide him or her with a variety of information to use in writing a term paper, including passwords and user names so the ghostwriter can access key documents and assignment specifications online. Unless electronic access to the class Website is carefully monitored, the student may even be able to get the ghostwriter or someone else to fulfill other class assignments like posting required comments on blogs and uploading answers to quizzes and tests that can be obtained from the site. Professional ghostwriter Ed Dante claims to have participated in discussions in online classes, written countless admissions essays, legal briefs, and even case-management plans for nursing students.<sup>12</sup> While the information is hard to verify, it is alleged that ghostwriters have even written theses and dissertations!

### Where Do Ghostwriters Get Material?

“Amazon is quite generous about free samples,” says Ed Dante.<sup>13</sup> “If I can find a single page from a particular text, I can cobble that into a report, deducing what I don’t know from customer reviews and publisher blurbs.”<sup>14</sup> Another source for material is Google Scholar, which provides the abstract of nearly every journal article. Then, of course, there is Wikipedia, typically the ghostwriter’s first stop when dealing with unfamiliar topics or just seeking a little background.

Ghostwriters often use quotes and distribute them throughout the paper. They generally keep “stock” phrases at their fingertips. Some even “dumb down” the writing so it



appears to have been written by the student.<sup>15</sup>

"I entered this business by accident," says a ghostwriter I'll call G.W. "I've earned a college degree and a Master's degree, but due to the crappy economy, I lost my job. So, I started tutoring at a small community college." Soon students started coming to G.W. complaining about problems with their term papers. After reading their poor grammar, spelling errors, and shoddy research, he began offering his services, not only to the students at the college, but also to a larger market via Craig's List.<sup>16</sup>

"My first client wanted me to write an ethics paper. She simply did not have the time due to her busy weekend party schedule," says G.W. (The irony of hiring a ghostwriter to produce a paper on ethics was lost on the student.) "So, [over time] I wrote about ethics, chemistry, literature, poetry, psychology, sociology, biology, economics and the list goes on. I was even asked once to write a doctoral dissertation."<sup>17</sup>

What is the legal and moral status of ghostwriters who know that their papers will be used in this way? A ghostwriter gets paid to write for another person or organization. Some ghostwriters' work is legitimate—helping employees with poor writ-

ing skills create reports for their employers, or summarizing reams of material for busy people. But in academia, ghostwriting is almost always about creating essays or other assignments that will eventually wind up as class submissions with someone else's byline.

Ghostwriters are a diverse lot. Some work for large custom-essay companies, some work through agents, while others make a living writing on their own. A few are in some sort of relationship with the student and may not even make any money for their work. Even if ghostwriters write thousands of pages of "scholarly literature," you won't find their names listed on a single page. Though their work is "anonymous" and "work for hire," and despite allegations by ghostwriters like Ed Dante that "It's just a job; nobody gets hurt,"<sup>18</sup> they know they are engaging in a nefarious and dishonest endeavor.

To illustrate this point, the Massachusetts Appeals Court placed a senior staff attorney, Damian Bonazzoli, on paid administrative leave after *CommonWealth* reported that the attorney was running a side business writing term papers for students in apparent violation of state law. A Massachusetts criminal law passed in 1972 bars the sale of term papers if those

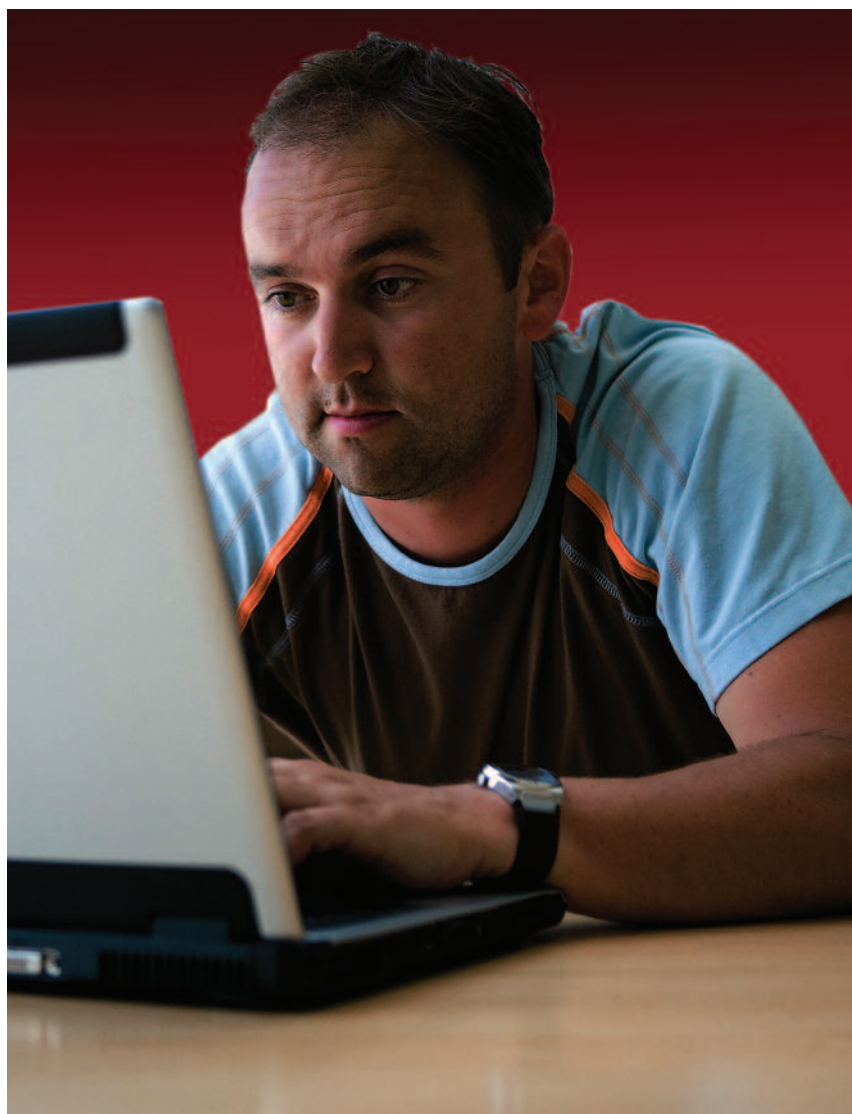
involved know or have reason to know that the material will be submitted for academic credit and represented as original work.<sup>19</sup>

The Massachusetts Rules of Professional Conduct for lawyers states in part that it is professional misconduct for a lawyer to "commit a criminal act that reflects adversely on the lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness, or fitness as lawyer" as well as to "engage in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation."<sup>20</sup>

However, not all ghostwriters' work falls under such a criminal statute. For instance, Dr. Rivka Colen, a neuroradiology fellow practicing at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, offered to write admissions essays for medical school. Her fee for four essays was \$800. While unethical, Colen's work was not illegal.<sup>21</sup>

Some online companies generate tens of thousands of dollars per month creating original essays based on specific instructions provided by cheating students.<sup>22</sup> In most cases, term-paper writing is not a lucrative occupation, but it does generate fast money, according to Nick Mamatas, who claims that he can charge desperate students with fast-approaching deadlines about \$100 per page.<sup>23</sup> Ed Dante brags that he can earn about \$66,000 in a year writing papers for others.<sup>24</sup>

Many term-paper companies tout their high quality, university-educated writers for hire,<sup>25</sup> some of whom hold advanced degrees and call themselves "professional academic writers."<sup>26</sup> In many cases, they inflate their résumé to make a dishonest living.



**E**ducators need to spark enthusiasm in students and to utilize appropriate teaching strategies to increase learning. While there is never any justification for immoral behavior, students who are excited about learning will have less motivation to engage in cheating. One of the most rewarding experiences a teacher can have is to see his or her students become truly passionate about learning.

### Culpability in Cheating

Many students regard buying term papers online or negotiating with a friend to ghostwrite a research paper as simply part of the cost of getting an education and as a way to make more economical use of their time. But whether they buy or commission a paper and then turn it in as their own work, it is cheating. *Webster's College Dictionary* defines cheating as the act of deceiving.<sup>27</sup> Even though the word *cheating* does not appear in the Bible, it clearly teaches the principle of honesty. When a person cheats, he or she is lying and bearing false witness.<sup>28</sup> Thus, getting another person or organization to write a term paper or do other required academic work in one's place is an act of deception; an act of cheating.

Students who pass off the work of other people as their own are clearly being deceptive, but educators who are aware that academic dishonesty is occurring and do not confront students about it are also morally culpable. Improperly prepared students can wreak mayhem in their chosen careers. For example, health-care workers must know how to correctly diagnose and treat their patients. Lack of knowledge about illness and injury could be fatal if it results in inappropriate diagnosis and treatment.<sup>29</sup> Poorly prepared architects may design faulty buildings and bridges. Counselors who lack a proper knowledge of appropriate approaches to suicidal patients may exacerbate their depression. Having earned a certificate or degree in a certain field is assumed to prove the bearer's competence, but academic dishonesty can undermine that expectation. Therefore, the penalties for academic dishonesty need to be severe and should be written into the school handbook after consultation with the institution's legal counsel.

Academic dishonesty occurs in all types of schools, but no

one knows the extent of cheating worldwide, much less how to effectively put a stop to it.<sup>30</sup> In 2009, the *New York Times* reported that 61 percent of undergraduates have admitted to cheating on assignments and examinations.<sup>31</sup> Despite this shocking statistic, there has been little research into the ubiquity of custom term papers or effective ways to identify and deter this type of academic dishonesty.<sup>32</sup>

The challenge in preventing the submission of customized (purchased) term papers is actually establishing that such documents are fraudulent. Proving that a student purchased a paper, rather than created it himself or herself, is much more difficult than identifying the plagiarism of quoted material. Allegations that a student has cheated by purchasing a paper and passing it off as his or her own will open the teacher and the university to lawsuits unless adequate documentation of the dishonesty can be provided. To protect themselves, teachers need to keep good records, hold onto student submissions for several years, and make sure to require multiple written submissions other than the

term paper that they can use to compare and contrast the style, grammar, and quality of the various assignments.

As educators at every level, from junior high school through graduate school, seek to address the problem of cheating, they should emphasize three major areas:

1. Ethics
2. Appropriate instruction
3. Creative learning strategies

### Ethics

The need for moral behavior, including academic honesty, must be upheld at all educational levels. Using ghostwriters is committing fraud. When grading, a teacher must hold firm in his or her commitment of holding students accountable for their actions and coursework. Originality and proper citations should be rewarded and academic dishonesty severely penalized. The reputation of the institution is based on academic and personal integrity, but by far the gravest consequence of plagiarism is the harm to the student's intellectual and moral development.<sup>33</sup>

### Appropriate Instructions

The teacher needs to make clear to students his or her expectations regarding ethical behavior. Some students may not be aware of the rules for citing references and statements of fact in a term paper. While it should be obvious that submitting an essay written by someone else is dishonest, the teacher still needs to protect himself or herself against malicious lawsuits by disgruntled students by including in the syllabus the expectation that students must avoid plagiarism by giving appropriate credit for quoted material. "Specific theme assignments—particularly for a research paper—should probably be prepared in writing so that a student cannot claim



that he misunderstood or that the teacher failed to give adequate instructions.”<sup>34</sup> The school’s expectations regarding academic honesty must be clear and explicitly described in the syllabus or student handbook, and the penalties for cheating spelled out in detail. Repeat offenders should receive automatic expulsion from the institution.

The instructions for each class should refer to the rules in the handbook and state in writing that all assignments submitted to the teacher must be the work of the student enrolled in the class.

### **Creative Learning Strategies**

Educators need to spark enthusiasm in students and to utilize appropriate teaching strategies to increase learning. While there is never any justification for immoral behavior, students who are excited about learning will have less motivation to engage in cheating. One of the most rewarding experiences a teacher can have is to see his or her students become truly passionate about learning.

When students are excited about a topic and are committed to acquiring competence in their chosen field, they become more invested in the learning process. The teacher can use a variety of strategies to further this process: allowing students to select their own topics, having groups work together on a writing project, and asking students to peer review their classmates’ papers. If a teacher is excited about the subject and

shows the relevance of the assignments to the real world and to students’ future careers,<sup>35</sup> he or she will be able to convince the students the course content is interesting and relevant, and that the assignments are worthwhile.<sup>36</sup>

One way to get students engaged is to use cooperative learning strategies that transform classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. Its goal has been described as “structuring positive interdependence.”<sup>37</sup> Students must work in groups to complete tasks collectively in order to accomplish designated academic goals. Unlike individual learning, which can be competitive in nature, students who learn cooperatively capitalize on one another’s resources and skills (asking one another for information, evaluating one another’s ideas, monitoring one another’s work, etc.).<sup>38</sup> Teachers must, however, devise strategies to ensure that each student participates in the final product, since unscrupulous and lazy students may see collaborative work as a chance for a “free ride” and try to claim the work of others in the group as their own.

### **How to Detect and Stop Cheating**

When a paper seems to be written in several different styles, when in-class essays bear little resemblance to written submissions, when the quality of a term paper is radically different from the student’s class work and test grades, or when a student can’t seem to explain the topic of the paper he or she just

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submitted, you probably have a cheater on your hands. Despite these suspicions, if you cannot find the source material the student plagiarized, you will be hard pressed to make the accusation stick.

One way to identify plagiarism is to run submitted term papers through Turnitin.com, an Internet-based service. Thousands of essays submitted in the past are stored in a database that the system uses to check for plagiarism in new papers submitted for analysis. This deters resubmission of papers written for previous courses by identifying matching text in the two documents. It also identifies plagiarism by identifying where published materials are quoted without attribution.<sup>39</sup>

Some schools and universities require students to first submit their papers to Turnitin before submitting them in to the teacher, as a deterrent to plagiarism. However, some students refuse to do so, claiming it constitutes a presumption of guilt. When Jesse Rosenfeld, a student at McGill University, refused to submit his academic work to Turnitin, the university ruled that Rosenfeld's papers were to be graded without using Turnitin.<sup>40</sup> On March 6, 2006, the Senate at Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia prohibited the submission of students' academic work to Turnitin or any other software that requires students' work to become part of an external database where other parties might have access to it. This decision was granted after the student union alerted the university community of their legal and privacy concerns associated with the use of Turnitin and other anti-plagiarism devices that profit from students' academic work. This was the first campus-wide ban of its kind in Canada,<sup>41</sup> following similar decisions by Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Stanford in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Critics of Turnitin also have alleged that its use violates educational privacy and intellectual property laws.<sup>43</sup> The United States Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits disclosing confidential information about students who are minors to third parties without their or their families' permission. Critics further argue that sending papers to Turnitin without permission violates students' rights.<sup>44</sup> However, Turnitin claims archiving student papers complies with FERPA because the statute only applies at two points: when a paper is transmitted to Turnitin, and when it is released from the database when a match is found with another submission.<sup>45</sup> In the former case, it is not considered part of the educational record since it has not yet been graded, and in the latter, no personal identifying information is divulged.<sup>46</sup>

The Family Compliance Policy Office (FCPO), which is responsible for enforcing FERPA, originally stated that institutions may submit student papers to Turnitin only if it removes all personally identifiable information from them.<sup>47</sup> However, FCPO later reversed this position, saying that it "was based on Turnitin's incorrect assertion that student papers are not considered 'educational records' under FERPA" and that a student assignment constitutes an educational record under FERPA "once it has been collected and maintained by a teacher or other school official."<sup>48</sup>

Since Turnitin archives all papers it receives and sells its services, including its database, for profit, the company has also been charged with violating copyright laws. However, Turnitin

co-founder John Barrie claims the company is merely making fair use of student work since, despite the fact that the company profits from use or sale of the software, it is ultimately for educational purposes.

Dan Burk, a law professor at the University of Minnesota, claims that Turnitin's use of the papers may not meet the fair-use test.<sup>49</sup> For example, Turnitin copies the entire paper, the students' work, which is often original and creative rather than simply a compilation of facts, and Turnitin is a commercial enterprise. However, when a group of students filed suit against Turnitin on that basis, in *Vanderhye, et al. v. iParadigms LLC*, the district court found that the practice fell within fair-use guidelines.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the usefulness of Turnitin in detecting plagiarism, it is much less likely to successfully identify academic dishonesty in ghostwritten submissions, as these documents may include proper citations and consist of wholly original material—just not original material created by the student whose name is attached to it!

### **Detering Submission of Ghostwritten Papers**

Teachers have a number of ways to deter student cheating and submission of ghostwritten papers:

- Obtain a baseline of each student's writing by requiring several in-class essays early in the term. This will help to establish the capabilities and writing style of each student.
- Require students to submit an outline and sources for their term papers a few weeks after the assignment is given, then schedule follow-up consultations during which the students report on their progress and show their work.
- Require at least part of the research and/or writing of the paper to be completed in class or at the library under the supervision of the teacher or graduate assistant.
- Have students submit one or more drafts of the paper, then schedule consultations when you review the draft and ask them to describe their research.
- Assign students to write in pairs so that each one is responsible for a portion of the paper. When both students have prepared their parts, the sections are combined and the students collaborate on the introduction and conclusion. In order to ensure that the end result is a coherent collaborative paper that flows well, ask the students to work together in class on the assignment. Require interim reports on the progress of the project, as described above. While the students are working together in class, circulate through the groups to supervise and assist, as many students may not have any experience collaborating on writing projects.
- Announce and enforce strict penalties for submission of ghostwritten papers and other forms of academic dishonesty.

### **Conclusion**

Cheating is an immense and complex problem that damages both the integrity of the perpetrator and assumptions about the quality of education. To deter students' temptation to cheat, teachers need to stress the actual process of learning and doing, not simply its outcome in terms of grades and degrees, and get students excited about education through their

own passion and competence.

As Christians, we hold a high standard of integrity and seek to prepare our students for moral lives here on earth and in the heavenly kingdom. We strive to uphold the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Scripture, including “thou shalt not steal” and “thou shall not bear false witness.”<sup>51</sup> By submitting another’s work as his or her own, the student has broken both of those commandments, and not only turned his or her back on the morals and ethics our religion embraces, but also on God. Cheating is a symptom of a soul that is in great need of attention and repair.

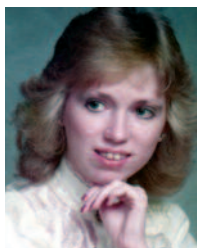
Teachers should stress to students that when they behave dishonestly, they are cheating themselves as well as others. They are damaging their relationship with God and setting up a dangerous precedent that may lead to additional dishonesty in later life, as well as cause great harm to people who assume that they are fully competent to fulfill the demands of their professions.

While the actions described in this article will help the teacher to prevent and detect academic dishonesty, ultimately the only remedy is a change of heart, which occurs through the power of God to effect conversion. ☞

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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