I only cheated one time in school. It was 11th grade. I was taking AP Physics, due to a major scheduling misstep. The class was comprised of 25 overachieving brain trusts... and me. In terms of intelligence, I was less of a brain trust and more like Bobo, your pet golden retriever, staring around at everyone else with a big stupid grin on my face: Hey! Hey! Hey! Hi everybody! What's that big shiny thing over there?! Are we inside or outside?!

I was in over my head, and my assignment grades were plummeting. So I cheated on a test by looking onto a fellow student's paper and copying answers. I cheated out of panic. I cheated because I was sure I was too dumb to pass on my own merit or intelligence.

I got caught, of course. The teacher called me in for a meeting afterwards, to confront me. I sat in his office, feeling trapped, miserable and terrified. He gave me the chance to confess, which I did, immediately. Because of that, my teacher showed great leniency; rather than failing me in the class and reporting me to the administration, he had me retake the test. I probably looked so terrified and pathetic sitting in front of him, he realized that the receiving a big fat F would send me into paroxysms of guilt so intense I'd end up having some sort of seizure right there on his Formica floor.

I learned my lesson. I never did it again. Not in high school, not in college.

Now that I teach college writing, I have an absolute zero-tolerance policy when it comes to cheating. It's the quickest way to fail my class in one shot. No bargaining, no mercy, no second chances. I tell my students on the first day of the semester: *Plagiarism is an immediate sledgehammer to the kneecap of your grade. Don't do it.*

So when I read about a Massive Cheating Event (or as we say in academia, a Confluence of Cripweasels) that took place this week at the University of Central Florida, I felt my pirate ire rising. Both by the event, and by some of the student reactions later.

This is being called the biggest cheating scandal this school has ever seen. Here's the lowdown:

Dr. Richard Quinn teaches undergraduate business classes at UCF, and after giving a recent mid-term, he discovered that one-third of the class had cheated by using a stolen answer key. It's a class of 600, so we're talking about 200 students cheating. Soon, Dr. Quinn had a list of the cheaters' names, thanks to some fancy forensics and digital fingerprint work.

This ABC news video sums it up well, and includes sound bytes from a couple students, one of whom I want to smack hard. Watch it and guess which one. *(Update: the original link has changed. Apparently, Yahoo News doesn't keep...)*
After learning what his students had done, Dr. Quinn delivered a lecture to his class the next day where he gave his class a full-on, no-holds-barred beat down. But, y'know -- professionally. He maintained his composure, although you can see how upset he was. He explained to the students that he'd tossed the old test results and that there would soon be a new, cheater-proof exam ready. Everyone would have to take it, whether they'd cheated or not. He then went on to explain that while various entities on campus were gearing up for an even bigger smackdown on the cheaters, he'd decided to approach the Dean with a deal: if the cheaters confessed, individually and privately, they'd be allowed to retake the exam with everyone else and there'd be no penalty beyond that. Stay silent, and risk Big Bad Repercussions that might include expulsion. (The video below is his full 15-minute speech.)

This was a class of seniors, by the way, all expecting to graduate this year. Seniors. About to graduate with a Business degree. Hoping to enter the world of Business. You know, Business? Where ethics should be sort of a big deal? I'm particularly outraged at what the second student says in the ABC video -- this kid is all pouty about the disciplinary actions, calls the investigation a witch hunt, and says it shouldn't be made into a big deal. Why? Because, as he says, "This is college. Everybody cheats. Everyone cheats in life."

Seriously, Kid? That's the big lesson you're talking out of college? Please, depress me more. (SaucyWench pointed out something awesome, though. This guy, with his Everyone-Does-It-Therefore-It's-Not-Wrong theorem, has now been televised, with his name pasted across the screen. Good luck getting a job after graduation, bro.)

I'm sure students have cheated in my classes and gotten away with it. Since my assignments are all papers instead of tests, plagiarism is actually harder to pull off. Typically, I stumble upon accidental plagiarism more than anything else: a student who overquotes a source and puts his citation in the wrong spot, stuff like that. Which is part of my job to teach anyway.

But every once in a while, I do come across a paper from a student that he or she clearly didn't write. It's actually pretty easy to catch when it happens.

When it does, the resulting conversation is never fun. I don't enjoy busting cheaters, despite what some of my past posts might say (heh). There's no pleasure there. True, I don't take it as personally as Dr. Quinn did. When a student cheats, it's never a vendetta against me, an arch-villain's effort to destroy my mission for Truth, Justice, and Proper Source Documentation. And while it's true that some students cheat because they're lazy, arrogant, or just possess inherent weasel-like qualities, others students will cheat because they're panicking, or feeling trapped. Or convinced they can't pass the course on merit and brain power alone. Sort of like me in 11th grade AP Physics.

This case in UCF is different. Remember, we're talking about 200 students in this case, who seemed to feel totally comfortable in their cheating weaselhood. Frankly, I think Dr. Quinn was way too lenient on them, allowing them a retake. These people knew exactly what they were doing, and felt totally fine with it. Some of them were bragging to non-cheating friends about it later.

When I watch this footage of Dr. Quinn delivering his High Noon lecture, I feel bad for him. What's he supposed to do, now that he feels surrounded by Cheating Weasels? This has permanently changed the way he's going to view students from now on.

What will I do the next time I discover a Cheating Weasel? Propose a do-over, like Dr. Quinn did? Offer redemption, like my 11th grade science teacher? Or will I go with a sledgehammer to the academic kneecap?

At the moment, I'm sticking with sledgehammer. Why? Because if I don't, I'm perpetuating what that second kid said in the video:

"Everybody cheats."
And I just can't live with that.

You might also like:

| Why We Blog (or: No One Likes a Whiny Pirate) | Honesty. | Cruelty, Thy Name Is Woman |

Honesty.
Cruelty, Thy Name Is Woman

Why We Blog (or: No One Likes a Whiny Pirate)
Honesty.
Cruelty, Thy Name Is Woman

24 comments:

**Sabrina** November 11, 2010 at 12:05 PM

Wow...

I'm all against cheating, but digital fingerprints to track cheaters? That's kinda drastic. And taking a student's chance for a job after graduation because he inconveniently vented his opinion in the wrong place on the wrong time? ...Man that's harsh.

Reply

**Linda** November 11, 2010 at 12:17 PM

I was flabbergasted by your post today, and can't believe that the students are upset about repercussions of their cheating.

I also feel that I have to comment on your first commenter- No one took that student's chance for a job from him- he did it all himself.

Reply

**Scuba Nurse** November 11, 2010 at 12:33 PM

There are three types of people in this world. Those who will cheat, those who won't, and those who let cheaters get away with it. I don't know what upsets menmore... People who cheat or those who let them do it. Good on him for facing it and giving clear repercussions and she on those students. What goes around comes around.

Reply

**Kage** November 11, 2010 at 12:36 PM

ah, when sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions.

i just made that up! it's good, isn't it?

jk, please don't smash out my (metaphorical) kneecaps. cheating is bad, boo hiss.

pis.s. these kids are so dumb. don't they know you sleep your way to a passing grade? duh.

Reply

**Deidra** November 11, 2010 at 1:04 PM

I'm really surprised that he offered this kind of deal. I thought college professors were always known for being so
strict about things like cheating and plagiarism. Those students are truly lucky to have such a nice guy teaching their course.

I feel really bad for him. That speech would have had me feeling absolutely sick if I were one of the cheaters.

Reply

Burk Braun  November 11, 2010 at 1:24 PM

You may have not been paying attention through our recent financial crisis. Business? This is where cheaters go to make a living. Not English, and not other respectable fields. As Keynes said... Regarded as a means, (the businessman) is tolerable; as an end, he is not so satisfactory.

Reply

Shorty  November 11, 2010 at 1:54 PM

Bravo, Dr. Quinn! I think he is very lenient for the students who cheated. However, I do feel badly for those who didn't cheat. I hope they give all kinds of hell to the bad students.

I think I've only cheated once in my life in elementary school. Well I started to cheat off someone next to me when I noticed one of his answers was wrong. That's when I realized I was smarter than I gave myself credit for. And so far, I've never failed. *pats self on back*

Reply

Nari  November 11, 2010 at 2:34 PM

Everybody does NOT cheat. People cheat out of laziness, a lack of self-confidence, fear of failure or just plain stupidity. I have a feeling the second student in the video may have to check off all of the above.

College costs money. Why would you pay to NOT learn? Better to fail but actually learn something than to pass and still be as ignorant as you were before you shelled out the tuition.

Reply

Didactic Pirate  November 11, 2010 at 3:05 PM

@Sabrina: I say digital fingerprinting, but I'm not quite sure what that actually means. If you check out the video, maybe it'll make more sense. (There are a couple other articles that describe how the professor's department tracked down the cheaters, and it's not quite as Big Brother-ish as the phrase implies. And in terms of that venting students -- who knows... my wife's observation was just about how interesting it was that the kid himself seemed so comfortable saying, "Hey, everyone cheats," which implies that he has no ethical problem with cheating himself. Just seems an odd thing to say on the record, know what I mean?

@Linda: I share your flabbergastery. I don't actually know how most of the cheating students responded to Quinn's solution -- I'm hoping the majority of them recognized the retake as a total gift, which he didn't have to give.

@ScubaNurse: I'm with you... hoping there's some sort of Cheater's Karma out there.

@Kage: Now THAT'S a motto that should be stitched onto a pillow. :)

@Deidra: I will say that most of my colleagues are like me: zero tolerance. But I think we all have had at least one student who cheated out of sheer panic and desperation, and realized that in that case, the sledgehammer might not be the best solution. Still... 200 students in that guy's class. I feel bad for him too.

@Burk: Yea... I was afraid someone would bring that up. (sigh)

@Shorty: Heh. You learned a valuable lesson very early -- if you ARE going to cheat, make sure you cheat off someone smarter than you. And it sounds like you then learned the next lesson too: trust your smarts, and you won't have to cheat at all.

@Nari: Yup. I do firmly believe that the majority of students are on the side of good, not evil. Then again, when I see how many students cheated on this guy's test, it shakes my faith.

Reply
Ah yes, maybe it would have made more sense if I had seen the vid. Soundcard's been broken for a while, so...

Denny P 3 November 11, 2010 at 3:22 PM
I hate the act of academic cheating! I will admit I did look at another student's paper on a test once. I got called out in front of the whole class, and it was enough to scare the living bejesus right out of me. I never did it again. I guess my thoughts are, if you cheat and get an A, did you really get that A?

Didactic Pirate November 11, 2010 at 3:31 PM
@Sabrina: I just checked the video link, and it's been changed to a different news story, dang it. I'm going to try and find the original again.

@Denny: I bet most people have cheated once, or at least been sorely tempted. Sounds like fear and guilt did its job on both of us, yes?

Vinny C November 11, 2010 at 3:51 PM
When I first watched him make his speech I could see that this shook him to the core. After investing so many years this must feel like a huge slap to the face. Still, he gives them a second chance. I don't know if I could in his place.

As for what that kid said, things like that have me seriously worried for the future.

Homemaker Man November 11, 2010 at 3:52 PM
I copy all my blog posts off of old Chico and The Man scripts. And you can't prove a thing, Narc.

Also, plagiarism sucks and should in all but the most extenuating of circumstances be met with iron discipline. And I kind of feel that prof. is going too easily on the cheaters in part because he's having trouble dealing with the reality of his situation. But seriously, business students and ethics? Come now. I agree with @Burk there. They have to many lousy role models.

And when i first read this, I thought it said "UFC," and I was like "awww sh*t. We're heading in to the Octagon."

mckelmccoy15 November 11, 2010 at 4:23 PM
I don't think that cheating is acceptable in any case. It makes me angry to see these people who cheat, whether it be in the academic area or the workplace or wherever else, because they just slide by. The rest of us are working hard and doing what is necessary for us to pass these tests, get promotions, do what we need to do the right way.

It's unfair, and it just shows the world how dishonest and freakin' lazy people are today.

It's disgusting.

andy koopmans November 11, 2010 at 4:33 PM
I also only cheated once--on a spelling test in 1st grade because I was having trouble wrapping my brain around what seemed to be the entirely unnecessary, silent, and unreasonable "u" in would, could, should, etc. I wrote all the words on a piece of paper and stuck it into my book--so slyly since it was a 1:1 test with the teacher and she was sitting right in front of me and, of course, saw the cheat sheet. She grabbed my arm and shook me a little and looked straight in my eyes and said "Shame on you!"

That's what all these dilweed students need. A little freakin' shame.
I couldn't see the video you linked to (obviously) but I did see one from Fox Orlando where they had a kid on there saying that he didn't know it was the actual test and that he thought he had a study guide.

That made me remember one time I was in university and I used a classmate's exam from the previous year (he failed the first time, but for whatever reason that prof let the students take their exam papers home) only to walk in and discover that the prof hadn't changed the exam, save for a few of the numbers in the word problems. I felt sick to my stomach, and to this day I genuinely don't feel like it was cheating since I didn't expect the same exam (I was using the old exam as a new set of questions to solve as I'd already worked through the homework twice), but I still feel weird about it.

I started to write a response, then decided I should get my own blog. This topic upsets me so much I could write for years. Cheating is, in fact, shameful. Your students are lucky you only aim for the kneecaps.

I also think that he was a little too lenient. Retaking the test? I can see that. But giving them a way out? I wouldn't have done that.

Rotten kids! When I taught high school, cheating was so commonplace that I think some of the students genuinely did not realize that there was a problem with what they were doing. The majority of the cheaters, though, knew, and figured it was okay as long as they didn't get caught. I even had students bragging openly about how good they were at shoplifting. I attributed it to a culture devoid of shame. You know how I feel about that.

Ugh... as a UCF grad, this makes me sick to my stomach! (Side note: one of your other recommended bloggers, Peanut Butter Fingers, is also a UCF grad and I am sure she would agree, but she's busy enjoying her honeymoon!) I am embarrassed for my school but take comfort in the fact that I know it is not commonplace there, and I hope other people understand that as well. Surprising to some, UCF has recently passed Ohio State to become the 2nd largest school in the nation (behind ASU) and although it's no excuse, you're bound to have some weasels in a student body of 56,000+. The professor's decision to allow those weasels off the hook? That is a whole 'nother story.

@Vinny C: I know - I hate to see this guy feel like his time and efforts have been wasted. Who knows whether he's a great teacher or not, but he definitely puts his heart into it. For some reason, I don't take it as personally when I discover a cheating student of my own... then again, I've never had 200 cheaters in one class before.

@Homemaker Man: Maybe a little time in the Octagon is just what the cheating weasels need. I'm picturing a whole new plagiarism policy in my classes now...

@mckelmccoy15: Yep. It's hard to main the overall "People Err on the Side of Good" perspective when you hear about stuff like this.

@andykoopmans: The young Master Andy, caught! I'm picturing the whole scene right now.
@SciFi Dad: You still feel weird about it because you have a CONSCIENCE, sir.

@Sara: Who knows -- give me a few more years, and I may go for something worse.

@Sarita: I know. I can imagine making them take the test again... for half-credit at best. (Nah, screw it. No mercy!)

@Beta: Damn right. A little shame would not be unwelcome in this particular case. Or fear. I'll take fear.

@Liza: Glad to have a UCF grad chime in! I didn't know PB Fingers was an alumna from there too. I have no
doubt that many other current students down there are outraged about the whole thing too. I've heard that the
school itself has grown a lot. One thing I didn't get into in this post was the fact that, when you have classes of 600
students, it can sometimes breed a culture of cheating. It's easier to do, it's less likely you'll get caught, and there's
actually some pressure to cheat when you see how many other peers are doing it, especially if you're competing
for the high grades. Not that that makes it remotely ok, of course.

Reply

justaskrod November 12, 2010 at 8:25 AM

I'm amazed that the prof was able to maintain his composure the way he did. I'm not so sure I would be able to not
take such a blatant disregard for the rules personally.

If it was me, the cheaters would fail and that would be it.

Reply

PJ Mullen November 27, 2010 at 6:33 PM

In other news all 200 of these students received job offers from Goldman Sachs - yes, I suck I'm about a year
behind on my blog reader.

Reply

Enter your comment...

Comment as:  [Google Account]

Publish  Preview

@SciFi Dad: You still feel weird about it because you have a CONSCIENCE, sir.

@Sara: Who knows -- give me a few more years, and I may go for something worse.

@Sarita: I know. I can imagine making them take the test again... for half-credit at best. (Nah, screw it. No mercy!)

@Beta: Damn right. A little shame would not be unwelcome in this particular case. Or fear. I'll take fear.

@Liza: Glad to have a UCF grad chime in! I didn't know PB Fingers was an alumna from there too. I have no
doubt that many other current students down there are outraged about the whole thing too. I've heard that the
school itself has grown a lot. One thing I didn't get into in this post was the fact that, when you have classes of 600
students, it can sometimes breed a culture of cheating. It's easier to do, it's less likely you'll get caught, and there's
actually some pressure to cheat when you see how many other peers are doing it, especially if you're competing
for the high grades. Not that that makes it remotely ok, of course.

Reply

justaskrod November 12, 2010 at 8:25 AM

I'm amazed that the prof was able to maintain his composure the way he did. I'm not so sure I would be able to not
take such a blatant disregard for the rules personally.

If it was me, the cheaters would fail and that would be it.

Reply

PJ Mullen November 27, 2010 at 6:33 PM

In other news all 200 of these students received job offers from Goldman Sachs - yes, I suck I'm about a year
behind on my blog reader.

Reply

Enter your comment...

Comment as:  [Google Account]

Publish  Preview