

Under Pressure: Why U.S. Colleges Are Facing a Cheating Epidemic

By: Topher Bordeau

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At first glance, Dartmouth College, the tiny Ivy League institution nestled in remote Hanover, New Hampshire, doesn't seem to share much in common with University of North Carolina, an enormous college bursting with school spirit. But students at both universities have come under scrutiny in recent cheating scandals.

The UNC scandal was as widespread as it is widely known: professors and academic administrators set up sham courses that required no attendance, no exam, and basic papers often written by tutors for athletes needing to boost their GPAs to remain eligible to compete. Students, many of them varsity athletes, took advantage of these courses.

The Dartmouth scandal, by comparison, seems minor: a professor factored classroom attendance into students' final grades for his *ethics* course. To track attendance in the 272-person class, he assigned each student a wifi clicker for use in answering questions asked during class. Almost fifty students, many of them varsity athletes, figured out that if they all gave their clickers to a co-conspirator, he could click in for them during class and they would not need to show up. Everything went well until the professor suspected that the number of answers counted by the clickers' tracking software was higher than the number of faces he saw in class. It didn't help when one student dropped about a dozen clickers from beneath his coat, either.

Everyone involved in the scandals at both institutions made mistakes, but they didn't do so for the fun of it. Those students didn't wake up and decide to cheat. Cheating didn't fulfill an aspiration. They cheated in response to some of the pressures in the environment that surrounded them. The students at North Carolina cheated for the same reason the Dartmouth students did: to boost their GPAs.

The Dartmouth students cheated to maintain the attendance portion of their grade without going to class. The UNC students cheated so that they could play sports. If Dartmouth and UNC stepped back for just a moment to reflect on the reality of the situation, they'd see that both scandals share a common root: pressure.

Those enrolled in the sham classes at North Carolina signed up for the classes to preserve their athletic eligibility and scholarships worth thousands of dollars. Some of them will play professional sports after their time at Chapel Hill ended. It's likely that all of them have dreamt of doing so since long before they matriculated. In order for these athletes to realistically meet their goals—as well as meet the expectations of everyone watching—, the majority of their time must be devoted to athletics.



Dartmouth, UNC, and other universities could avoid the inevitable repetition of this embarrassment by following the lead of professional schools at Stanford and Johns Hopkins, and peer institutions like Brown: Assign no grades beyond pass or fail, and keep grades private. Problematic? Sure. But if a student is passing a course and it doesn't matter to him whether he gets a D or an A, should it matter to anyone else? If a student's GPA is a matter of pass and fail, and students must pass all courses they complete—a reasonable expectation—, then there's no need for classes that exist to boost GPA.

If institutions free students to explore their curiosities without the pressure of external judgment or public evaluation, perhaps they would collaborate in ways that would make everyone proud.