

Stuyvesant Students Describe the How and the Why of Cheating



Michael Appleton for The New York Times

Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. In June, 71 students at the public school were caught exchanging answers on an exam.

By VIVIAN YEE

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The night before one of the “5 to 10” times he has cheated on a test, a senior at [Stuyvesant High School](#) said, he copied a table of chemical reactions onto a scrap of paper he would peek at in his chemistry exam. He had decided that memorizing the table was a waste of time — time he could spend completing other assignments or catching up on sleep.

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“It’s like, ‘I’ll keep my integrity and fail this test’ — no. No one wants to fail a test,” he said, explaining how he and others persuaded themselves to cheat. “You could study for two hours and get an 80, or you could take a risk and get a 90.”

A recent alumnus said that by the time he took his French final exam one year, he, along with his classmates, had lost all respect for the teacher. He framed the decision to cheat as a choice between pursuing the computer science and politics projects he loved or studying for a class he believed was a joke.

“When it came to French class, where the teacher had literally taught me nothing all year, and during the final

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Josina Dunkel, a teacher at Stuyvesant, said the competitive environment was an eye-opener for freshmen.

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Dan Gill for The New York Times

Elias Weinraub, now a freshman at Washington University in St. Louis, said the race for top scores at Stuyvesant was "kind of addictive."

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the students around me were openly discussing the answers, should I not listen?" he said.

These are the sorts of calculations many students at Stuyvesant, New York City's flagship public school, learn to make by the middle of their freshman year: weighing two classes against each other, the possibility of getting an A against the possibility of getting caught, keeping their integrity against making it to a dream college. By the time they graduate, many have internalized a moral and academic math: Copying homework is fine, but cheating on a test is less so; cheating to get by in a required class is more acceptable than cheating on an [Advanced Placement exam](#); anything less than a grade of 85 is "failing"; achieve anything more than a grade-point average of 95, and you might be bound for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Yale.

In interviews this month, more than three dozen students, alumni and teachers said that large-scale cheating, like an episode in June when [71 juniors were caught exchanging answers](#) to state Regents exams through text messages, was rare at Stuyvesant. But lower-level cheating, they said, occurs every day.

Most often, it takes the form of a few math homework answers copied wholesale from a shared note on Facebook, or the form of tip-offs from classmates who took a history exam a few hours earlier. Some go further, hiding formulas in a sleeve or in a bathroom stall, Googling facts on an [iPhone](#) or snapping a photo of test questions to send to a smart friend for help.

Survival at All Costs

At Stuyvesant, the alma mater of four Nobel laureates, students say the social currency is academic achievement.

Although students enter the school knowing they are among the best in the city, they must compete with hundreds just like them. And, they say, the pressures only grow: they are convinced that they are bound for bright futures, yet not all are equipped for the work that entails. They are trained to hand in every assignment without always believing in its value. They described teachers as being relatively sympathetic, discouraging cheating, but not always punishing it as severely as school policy dictates.

All this makes for a culture in which many students band together, sharing homework and test advice in a common understanding that they simply have to survive until they reach their goals: dream colleges and dream jobs.

"I'm sure everybody understood it was wrong to take other people's work, but they had ways of rationalizing it," said Karina Moy, a 2010 graduate of the school. "Everyone took it as a necessary evil to get through."

It is not clear how common academic dishonesty is at Stuyvesant or other large, competitive schools, and several of those interviewed said that they had never cheated. When the school's newspaper, [The Spectator](#), conducted a survey of 2,045 students in March, 80 percent said they had cheated in one way or another.

Michael Josephson, the president of the [Josephson Institute](#), which researches ethics in society, said a 2010 survey of 40,000 high-school students found that 59 percent had cheated on a test during the previous year, with one in three admitting they had used the Internet to plagiarize — and one in four admitting they had lied on the survey itself.

For Stuyvesant freshmen, who are admitted based on a citywide exam, receiving their first

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test score can be a moment of reckoning, said Josina Dunkel, who teaches global studies and Advanced Placement European history. She said she began seeing so many freshmen submit the same answers to homework that she stopped allowing them to type their assignments, reasoning that if they had to write them by hand, they might be less likely to copy answers online.

“It’s a major eye-opener,” Ms. Dunkel said. “Suddenly, they’re in an environment where every single kid is really just as smart as they are. How do you distinguish yourself as being a top student, which is where their identity has always been?”

By the time they reach junior year — when it is not uncommon to have three tests in a week and when May and June bring a cascade of Advanced Placement, Regents and final exams, along with the SAT — many students have become adept at beating the system.

One pair developed a tapping system for multiple-choice tests — once for A, twice for B and so on, recalled Nils Axen, a 2011 graduate now at Cornell. Others wrote formulas on their forearms or on the insides of water bottles.

The New Methods

There are newer methods, too, despite the school’s longstanding ban on using cellphones during the day, students said. (The new interim principal, Jie Zhang, has announced that students will no longer be able to use laptops or iPads during the day, and she has redoubled enforcement of the cellphone ban.)

“Writing on your hand, that’s kiddie stuff,” said Melissa, a senior who, like some current and former students, spoke only on the condition that her full name not be used for fear of repercussions. “The way we do it is to take a picture, and then it’s the domino effect. One person has it, then the whole class has it.”

By junior year, almost everyone has seen the statistics posted on the college office’s Web site listing the grade-point averages and SAT scores of those who were rejected or accepted to dozens of colleges. “It becomes kind of a number game,” said Elias Weinraub, 18, who is now a freshman at Washington University in St. Louis. “It was kind of addictive, in a bad way, in a sick way. People will assume, well, I have a 92, most kids who got into that school got a 94, so there’s no way I can get in.”

Although Stuyvesant has a reputation for being cutthroat, students say collaboration, not competition, is the norm. Several framed the collaboration as banding together against a system designed to grind them down. Many classes have private Facebook groups that students use to exchange advice or, sometimes, to post full sets of answers for classmates to copy. Take-home exams are seen as an invitation to work together.

A recent graduate now at Williams College described the year she spent giving out her physics homework for classmates to copy — first, one or two students; then, much of the class — because she wanted to be helpful. At one point, a girl who regularly borrowed her homework arranged an exchange the day before an assignment was due, and at that point, she realized her classmates were simply relying on her to do their work.

Still, she said of her classmates, “I respect them and think they have integrity.”

“They’re proud of their achievements in college,” she added, “and sometimes the only way you could’ve gotten there is to kind of botch your ethics for a couple things.”

Most common of all, those who take exams in earlier class periods are expected to help their friends who take the same tests in later periods, several students said. And though most appear to understand that they are violating the rules, some students seem unsure about where helping ends and cheating begins.

“The lines did get a little blurry,” Alison Reed, 17, a senior, said.

“It’s seen as helping your friend out,” Daniel Kanovich, 17, a senior, said. “If you ask

people, they'd say it's not cheating. I have your back, you have mine.”

The Regents cheating ring was exposed when the principal, Stanley Teitel, was tipped off about a student who had used his phone to share answers with other students. The student, Nayeem Ahsan, told New York magazine that for the physics Regents exam, one of his strongest subjects, he had finished early and had sent answers to several dozen classmates; in exchange, he got help on the American history Regents exam and a city Spanish exam, two of his weaker subjects.

Nayeem and 11 other students were given 10-day suspensions, and more than 50 others are facing suspension of up to five days, according to the Education Department. Connie Pankratz, a department spokeswoman, said privacy laws prevented the city from disclosing Nayeem’s status at Stuyvesant, but she said that “no student was involuntarily transferred from the school.”

Light Punishment

Yet in general, students said that harsh discipline was not the norm and that many teachers were so understanding of the pressure students faced that they would hand out lighter punishments for cheating. Anticheating measures, like running essays through the antiplagiarism Web site [turnitin.com](#) and checking for cellphones, were common, students said. But so were steps like telling students who were copying homework simply to put it away and allowing those cheats to retake tests, despite policies that prescribe a range of punishments, from giving a zero on the assignment up to suspending the student.

A recent graduate said that near the end of her senior year, a teacher caught one of the student’s friends taking a math test with a sheet of formulas held in her lap. But knowing that the girl had been accepted into an Ivy League school, the teacher let the student off with a warning because he did not want to jeopardize her enrollment.

“Everyone is aligned that Stuy is a difficult place, but people are much more forgiving than people think they are,” the alumna said.

Mr. Teitel retired over the summer; like Ms. Zhang, he declined to be interviewed. But Ms. Zhang has promised to alter Stuyvesant’s culture. She announced that all students would have to review and sign an honor policy that promises punishment for those who fail to turn in cheats, as well as for the cheats themselves, students said. Teachers were directed to talk about the policy on academic honesty at the beginning of every class on the first day of school. English teachers were instructed to discuss the policy in depth, emphasizing that students should work to reclaim Stuyvesant’s formerly sterling reputation.

“We all want to prove that Stuy is one of the top schools in the city,” said Rachel Makombo, a freshman. “We don’t want to be looked at as a cheating school.”

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Susan Brooklyn, NY
It sounds like the competitive atmosphere at this school places so much importance on scores and colleges that the students forget about the importance of learning. That's a real shame. i wonder how much the students would feel pressured to cheat if their scores and college acceptances were not published in a school office.

Sept. 26, 2012 at 7:41 a.m. RECOMMENDED 5



furious usa

I cannot express how badly I want these kids severely punished. It ALL starts here. The more kids think they can get away with rationalizing away ethics in school, the more likely they are to do this their whole life.

Funny how no part of their equation was what I or other people or people who work in admissions offices or recruiting for companies would forever think of these kids and every other one who now comes from that school. Such is the egotistical mindset of our individualist culture.

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Yasmin Khakoo

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