WHO CHEATS—AND HOW MUCH?

In the spring of 1962, a doctoral student at Columbia University set out to create the first large-scale estimate of cheating rates in America's colleges and universities. William J. Bowers did not have much to work with in the way of precedents for this research; some previous scholars had attempted to understand the psychological makeup of student cheaters, and a few others had attempted institution-specific studies to gauge cheating rates or investigate possible methods for reducing or preventing cheating. The goal of his project, Bowers explains in his introduction, was "to combine into a single research effort three objectives of previous research—identifying sources of cheating, evaluating remedies, and estimating rates." He began his project by sending questionnaires to the deans of students and student body presidents at "all regionally accredited colleges and universities across the country." He used the responses he received from these questionnaires—which were returned by more than a thousand deans and student body presidents—to construct a survey instrument that was then mailed out, in the spring of 1963, to students at ninety-nine colleges and universities in the United States. The sample of schools in the survey is extremely diverse, including everything from Ivy League schools (Yale) and large public universities (Eastern Michigan) to religious institutions (Notre Dame) and small private schools (Reed).

In the end he received more than five thousand responses to the survey, which makes it far and away the first comprehensive effort to assess cheating rates in higher education in the United States. In the manuscript which he eventually published about his survey, Bowers uses the detailed demographic data that he collected from the students in order to estimate cheating rates for the general student population, as well as to analyze a wide range of what some cheating researchers call "dispositional factors"—in other words, individual features of your personality or your life situation that might dispossess you to cheat. So in his diligent attempt to ferret out potential dispositional factors, Bowers provides statistical comparisons for just about any aspect of a student's life you can imagine, including the cheating rates of those who dated frequently versus those who didn't, those who spent a lot of time drinking and playing cards versus those who engaged in more wholesome activities, and those who were in college primarily to secure a spouse instead of to learn or improve their job prospects.

Bowers used three different means to try to assess the global rates of cheating among all students in his survey, each of which yielded different results. This fact has made the nutshell conclusion of Bower's work a difficult one to pin down, and explains why contemporary researchers give varying numbers when they refer to the results of his survey. But most frequently you will see academic integrity scholars citing the second of his three questions, which asked students to indicate whether they had engaged in thirteen very specifically defined behaviors that most of us would consider academically dishonest. Some of these behaviors are the worst sorts of cheating activities that we can imagine, such as "Having another student take an exam for you," "Writing a paper for another student," or "Copying answers from a text or other source instead of doing the work independently." Other described behaviors are ones that we would all likely agree are academically dishonest, but less serious than some of the others, such as "Getting questions or answers from
someone who has already taken the exam” or “‘Padding’ a few items on a bibliography.”5 When Bowers gave students these specific descriptions of academically dishonest behavior, 75 percent of them admitted to engaging in at least one of them over the course of their college career.

If all you know about cheating in higher education today comes from the occasional scandal making its way onto the front pages, or from op-ed pieces or blogs on the subject, this number should come as a surprise to you. The most common plotline you will encounter in contemporary stories or essays about cheating is one which suggests that cheating rates are sky-high and rising. Glancing back at the statistical work of William Bowers can help us see very clearly that this picture gets it exactly half wrong: cheating rates may be sky-high—depending on your definition of that unscientific term, of course—but they are not rising. Fifty long years ago, back when our forebears were trading in their bobby socks for bell bottoms and worrying over our entrance into a complicated war in a faraway land, 75 percent of students at America’s colleges and universities had cheated at least once in their college career.

Not much has changed since then, at least in terms of the global cheating numbers that concern us here. This will be easy enough for me to demonstrate because the lineage of prominent cheating researchers in higher education passes directly from William Bowers to Donald McCabe, who has been producing large-scale surveys in this area since the early 1990s, beginning just a few years after he left his job as vice president of marketing and sales at Johnson and Johnson for a faculty position at Rutgers Business School. McCabe’s early publications suggest a researcher still trying to find his way; titles like “The Measurement of Environmental Volatility” and “Making Sense of the Environment: The Role of Perceived Effectiveness,” both published in conference proceedings, give no hint of the long and productive research agenda that McCabe would eventually craft. The first entry in that agenda came in 1991, when he published an essay entitled “Context, Values, and Moral Dilemmas: Comparing the Choices of Business and Law School Students” in the *Journal of Business Ethics* in 1991. Something about analyzing the moral dilemmas of college and university students must have lit an intellectual fire in McCabe, who would proceed, over the course of the next two dozen years, to publish almost fifty articles about student cheating, academic integrity, and honor codes in higher education. In the early 1990s he helped co-found the independent organization the Center for Academic Integrity (now the International Center for Academic Integrity, affiliated with Clemson University) and served as its first president.4 While you can find plenty of published surveys of cheating behaviors in the literature of this particular subdiscipline, you will not find anyone whose name appears so frequently as McCabe’s, or whose work stretches into so many corners of the field.

McCabe’s incredibly prolific publication record draws from multiple large-scale surveys he has conducted, frequently in collaboration with other researchers, on cheating among college students. Until 2012, McCabe’s body of research and data interpretations had appeared in a very wide variety of formats and publications, all of them short form, from statistical reports in specialized academic journals to more general summary accounts for popular academic magazines like *Change* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In 2012, though, McCabe and two of his frequent collaborators published a monograph, *Cheating in College: Why Students Do It and What Educators Can Do About It*, which provides a handy overview of his entire body of work, stretching from his first surveys in the early 1990s—conducted through the good old U.S. mail—to his most current series of web surveys. I will begin my analysis of contemporary cheating rates with a survey that McCabe and one co-
Building a Theory of Cheating

While not huge, certainly counts for something. So let’s move forward from that 1993 survey, with its small bump in the overall cheating rate, to the more recent conclusions that McCabe and his colleagues have drawn about cheating rates in higher education, as documented in Cheating in College. The most recent data set that McCabe covers in this book comes from an extensive series of web surveys conducted from 2002–2010. Although these surveys come from an eight-year period and cover a huge number of students—almost 150,000 from the United States and Canada—from a range of institutions, McCabe and his colleagues consider them as a single dataset. And that dataset speaks quite clearly about the direction in which cheating rates have moved in the period since their 1993 replication. As McCabe and his colleagues explain, “self-reported cheating recorded in the 2002–2010 web surveys is lower than in any previous surveys.”7 In the table that McCabe provides to allow readers to see comparative cheating rates in nine different categories, and which concludes with an overall rate of cheating in his most recent surveys, the rates of cheating come only from schools that do not have an honor code (more on this later). When the honor code schools are removed, the Bowers 1963 survey yields an 83 percent rate of overall cheating; the 1993 replication by McCabe and colleagues yields a rate of 87 percent; the cheating rates for 2002–2010 clock in at 65 percent. According to McCabe’s research, then, cheating rates rose somewhat into the 1990s, and then have actually been dropping quite substantially over the course of the past decade.

McCabe and his co-authors, however, are wary of accepting these numbers at face value: “Though we would like to believe that this is an accurate assessment of prevalence,” they explain, “we have several reasons to be skeptical.”8 Those reasons stem, in part, from the fact that all cheating surveys, from Bowers to the present day, are based on student self-reports of their cheat-

author, Linda Klebe Trevino, conducted in the early 1990s which was designed to replicate Bowers’s 1963 surveys. From there, I will move forward to the overview statistics that McCabe provides us in his recent book about his most current survey results; these two sets of studies give us a thirty- and (almost) fifty-year perspective on Bowers’s findings and should help us answer the two pressing questions that most faculty have about cheating rates: How much are students cheating today? And are they cheating now substantially more than they did in the past?

In the fall of 1993, McCabe and Trevino mailed surveys to 500 students at each of nine different institutions, all of which had been included in the Bowers study. They cast a much narrower net than Bowers did, however, in selecting the type of institution from which to draw their survey data: all nine of them were “public institutions of higher education ranging in size from just under 5,000 students to over 35,000 students, with a mean undergraduate enrollment of 12,329 students.” They describe the institutions in their sample as “moderately selective in their admission criteria.” The total number of students responding to the surveys ended up at around 1,800.9 In response to our second question, about whether global rates of cheating had increased since 1963, McCabe and Trevino provide a succinct statement of their findings in a 1996 essay in Change magazine: “The dramatic upsurge in cheating heralded by the media was not found.”10 In a later summary of their findings published in the academic journal Ethics and Behavior, McCabe and Trevino (along with a third researcher, Kenneth D. Butterfield) establish a category of “serious cheating” to cover the thirteen or so cheating behaviors addressed in both studies, and cite a summary rate of 75 percent in Bowers’s 1963 survey versus an overall rate of 82 percent in the 1993 replication.11

You may be thinking to yourself that a 7 percent increase,
ing behavior. As the authors of another book, Cheating in School, point out, "we really know what students claim to be doing, rather than what they are actually doing." And this introduces uncertainty in the numbers in a variety of ways. First of all, it depends upon students trusting that their answers will not be revealed to their teachers—or, as McCabe and his colleagues label it, "concerns about the confidentiality of the electronic data." I suspect that students who put anonymous surveys in the mail to some faraway researcher were more willing to trust the confidentiality of their responses than students who are filling out surveys online, and who are well aware of the many ways we have, in the twenty-first century, to track the identities of anyone with an internet connection. So student self-reporting of cheating behaviors may be lower on the current web surveys for that reason.

Second, and perhaps more substantively, cheating self-reports rely upon the students having a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating—and an understanding that correlates with the survey administrator's understanding. Susan Blum, like many other researchers in the area of plagiarism, has pointed out the extent to which today's students have difficulty in distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable citations from the work of others, in part because of the rise of intertextuality in their lives: "student citation norms differ considerably from academic citation norms. Students accept that in everyday conversation, quotation is fun and playful, though certainly not obligatory; they provide citation only when necessary to direct their peers to rare or unfamiliar sources; they regard the cutting and pasting of pastiche as evidence of originality and creativity; they embrace the notion of collaboration in writing; and they question the possibility of originality in ideas." So it may be the case that when students in today's surveys are asked whether they have ever "plagiarized from public material on papers," they are less clear on what that means, and less likely to respond affirmatively even if they have done so. Another group of researchers confirmed this problem by giving a survey to students on their cheating behaviors, then providing the students with clear definitions of cheating and surveying them again on their cheating behaviors. The self-reported rates of cheating rose after the students had received the definitions. Finally, it may also be the case that students view behaviors that we might count as minor incidents of cheating—such as unauthorized collaboration on homework—as not really cheating at all, and that they only consider really blatant acts of dishonesty as "cheating.

I certainly agree with McCabe and his colleagues that we should not simply trust the raw numbers and accept the story they tell about cheating rates dropping over the past fifty years (after a slight rise in the anything-goes 1990s). I also think it would be imprudent to draw any conclusions in the opposite direction and decide that cheating rates are rising. The data certainly do not seem to support that claim, in spite of what you may read in the news media or hear from your grumpy colleague at the copy machine. But I suspect we can all agree on one point: the rates of cheating are much higher than we want them to be. "No matter how one looks at the data," McCabe and his colleagues conclude, "the prevalence of self-reported cheating is high enough for all of us—students, faculty, and administrators—to be seriously concerned. When more than two-thirds of college students are reporting that they have cheated, we need to pay attention." We do, although we should keep in mind one final caveat about these numbers: they document the number of students who have cheated at least one time in their college careers. We should take seriously all instances of cheating, of course, but the numbers of students who are engaged in frequent cheating is much, much lower. In Bowers's survey, 19 percent of respondents had engaged in at least three cheating
incidents; McCabe and Trevino’s 1995 survey had that number at 38 percent; a different set of researchers reported in another survey from around the same time that 21 percent were three-time offenders. Not as eye-catching as the global numbers, but still, of course, much too high for comfort.

Indeed it might seem strange to you that, as the author of a practical guidebook on addressing cheating, I just spent several pages trying to convince you that the problem is not nearly as bad as the popular or even academic press might lead you to suspect—that students may actually be cheating less than they did in the past, or at least do not seem to be cheating more than they did in the past. At the very least, we have to acknowledge, as Tricia Bertram Gallant does in the wake of her wide-ranging analysis of cheating surveys back into the past century, that “whether the average twenty-first-century student cheats more or is less honorable than the average twentieth-century student cannot be said with certainty.” I see this acknowledgment as crucial because I have come to believe that alarmist arguments about the state of cheating in higher education today lead to alarmist responses, some of which require lots of activity to achieve little effect. In order to address this problem successfully, we have to understand it first.

The particular understanding I want to advocate for in what follows involves turning our attention away from the dispositional factors that influence cheating—such as the student’s gender, or membership in a fraternity or sorority, and so on—and shifting them to the contextual factors that influence cheating. Those contextual factors have been studied and analyzed by cheating researchers now for decades, beginning with Bowers and running through the work of McCabe and his colleagues. But, for the most part, researchers have looked at contextual factors through a wide lens, considering the environment of the campus as a whole, or the living situation of students, or the composition of their peer groups. Much less attention has been paid to what I see as the most relevant contextual factor of all: the classroom environment in which students engage in a cheating behavior. Dispositional factors and campus or peer-group contextual factors certainly are essential to understand and address in our efforts to reduce cheating on campus. If we know that first-year students cheat more than seniors, for example, we can make a smarter decision about the target audiences for our academic honesty initiatives and about where best to expend resources for such programs. But more essential to address, in my mind, is the contextual environment of the classroom itself. When we turn our attention there, the question becomes clear: are there classroom structures and practices that tend to induce (or reduce) cheating? The payoff for asking this question is an obvious one: if we can discover that specific features of a learning environment will reduce or induce cheating, then we have put power in the hands of individual faculty members to address this problem. A faculty member can’t make a first-year student into a senior or tell the students whom they should be partying with on the weekends, but faculty members can shape their courses in ways that might reduce both the incentive and the opportunity to cheat.

In order to understand what cheating-relevant contextual factors operate in our courses, I want to step briefly away from the specific context of the higher education classroom and consider more broadly what features of a learning (or performing) environment, in any context, seem to nudge human beings toward or away from the decision to cheat. Once we have considered those features in these more general environments, we will then consider how well they translate back into a college or university classroom—and hence understand more clearly just how much power individual faculty members do have to reduce cheating on campus.