

Seeking answers: Cheating incidents prompt investigation into motives, academic pressures

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Last semester, a series of cheating scandals disrupted the normal flow of final exams. Specifically, teachers of Advanced Placement United States History and Introduction to Analysis and Calculus discovered forms of academic dishonesty, forcing them to implement safeguards to preserve test integrity.

On Tuesday, Dec. 17, APUSH teachers became aware of a leaked multiple-choice final exam answer key, and APUSH teacher Christopher Johnson quickly released a Schoology statement to students who had already taken the first part of the exam in his 5th, 6th and 7th period classes that they would have to “take a new test during the first hour of (the) final exam period.”

“If somebody is willing to go to those lengths to try to somehow gain an advantage, what they have lost — and what many of my students have lost, even those who are innocent — is my trust. It’s one individual making a decision, but that decision ends up affecting a number of people, and I think one of the biggest casualties of that is the loss of trust of an educator.

— APUSH teacher Christopher Johnson

This decision was made in accordance with CollegeBoard AP test security procedures which state that an entire test center has to retake the AP test in the summer if a single student at that test center cheats. These safety measures prompted teachers to create a new version of the exams and have the students restudy.

Similar measures were taken later in the week when IAC teachers discovered the circulation of images of tests via Discord. On Friday, Dec. 20, the IAC teachers announced in a Schoology message that “the security of the first semester final exam was compromised.” All scores from the original test were nullified, and a replacement final was given to all students post-winter break.

The scope of these incidents led to a significant burden on those within the Gunn community and disrupted the rhythm of finals week. According to Johnson, the act of cheating by just one or a few students in a class dramatically affected all others taking that class. In addition, teacher-student relationships were strained due to a lack of trust.

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asking classmates of earlier periods about the exam content. However, he noted that the recent scandal’s magnitude was unprecedented.

“It has never been such an overt thing to me as the seizure of an actual test document,” he said. “There’s different ways that it could happen, but never as blatant as what has happened recently.”

THE CULTURE OF CHEATING

According to a 2017 Challenge Success survey conducted by Stanford University researchers of 1,561 Gunn students, 62% reported being “often or always stressed about schoolwork.” In that same survey, 84% of participants reported instances of cheating that same year. These statistics shed light on a concerning pattern at Gunn: The pressure to succeed academically is correlated to unethical behaviors among students. In Assistant Principal Harvey Newland’s experience, this pressure causes many students to prioritize their grade point average over their principles.

“You might have someone who did study, and they’re just nervous about getting a C or a B,” he said. “If there’s a way to get a guaranteed A, and there’s something available that allows them to get some type of badge, students will take that route.”

At the same time, the prevalence of cheating reveals a broader trend that the fear of failure encourages students to justify their dishonesty. When faced with mounting stress, some rationalize their actions as necessary to stay afloat in a high-pressure environment or perceive the sacrifice of their ethics for their grades as a positive trade-off. According to Johnson, people who are usually ethical may choose to take this shortcut to alleviate some of that stress.

“Part of me doesn’t want to believe that that’s part of the culture, but I also understand here it’s part of reality. We know that students strive for a certain type of grade or certain perfection, and that might be the driving point for cheating.

— Assistant Principal Harvey Newland

“I’m one of those who believes that human beings are inherently good, but it’s very easy to be led astray and take the easy way out,” Johnson said. Additionally, the cultural push to take multiple AP courses exacerbates this issue. According to Johnson, overloading on these advanced classes limits students’ ability to prepare adequately for all of their commitments, further incentivizing shortcuts.

“Students who think that it is necessary to take more advanced courses don’t realize that it cuts in on their preparation time for all of their courses, so they’re trying to find an easy way out,” he said. “As students keep piling on AP classes, or even taking AP classes that they don’t have an interest in, they may be more inclined to cheat.

It’s disheartening to me to see that happen, because one’s integrity and having a strong level of integrity and honesty is at the foundation of this country.”

The competitive student culture in Palo Alto is deeply ingrained in the city’s history. As a town that is extremely close to Stanford University and influenced by stories of success, students are pressured to succeed at all costs. Over time, this culture for teens has evolved to focus on college applications as a measurement for intelligence and success. According to Newland, this win-at-all-costs mentality could further encourage cheating.

“We still understand that it’s Palo Alto,” he said. “Our students are striving for difficult colleges and things like that. Part of me doesn’t want to believe that that’s part of the culture, but I also understand that here, it’s part of reality.

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THE PATH FORWARD

The recent series of cheating scandals have sparked important conversations about the role of integrity in education. While the incidents disrupted finals week and strained relationships, they also served an important purpose of highlighting the need for systemic change. After all, fostering a culture of honesty requires a collective effort and commitment to addressing the root causes of academic dishonesty.

While it is difficult to completely disincentivize academic dishonesty, teachers can work to minimize the opportunities for cheating, helping students better gauge their own proficiency in the class. According to

Newland, an anti-cheating measure that he took while he was a teacher was using more qualitative methods for evaluating students.

“We can think about how we do assessments, and it really depends on the classroom and what the content is,” he said. “I taught engineering and math, and a lot of what I did was project-based. It’s hard to cheat on because it’s not some cumulative exam in a really precise amount of time.”

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In the affected classes, anti-cheating systems are being put into place to prevent similar incidents from occurring again. In IAC, Congress noted that proactive measures, such as seating arrangements and multiple test versions, are already being made to reduce cheating and academic dishonesty.

“We’re just going to have to be more careful,” she said. “But, we’re doing all the same things for both classes that I teach — no technology, desks in rows and multiple versions.”

Additionally, Congress emphasizes that cheating itself is not the only way to improve one’s grades: Studying hard or asking for help can improve academic performance. Contrary to academic dishonesty, it carries no risk, as getting caught cheating could lead to permanent marks on one’s academic record.

The ultimate goal of the education system is to prepare students for the challenges they will face beyond high school. Cheating is counterproductive because it lowers the bar of proficiency students feel obligated to reach, leading to them lacking skills and discipline. Moving forward, Congress hopes that her students recognize this extreme risk and distance themselves from it.

“If you have to steal a test in order to feel like you could do well on that test, that concerns me a lot,” she said. “How are students going to be successful in the future? You could potentially be expelled from college.”

Additionally, Johnson warns that these students erode their ability to learn, which is a critical life skill. He also thinks that the impacts of rampant cheating are quite far-reaching, perhaps into the nation as a whole.

“At the entrance gate of a university in South Africa, they have this message that’s posted for contemplation: ‘Destroying any nation does not require the use of long range missiles, it only requires lowering the quality of education and allowing cheating in the examinations by the students,’” he said. “So, I think that the collapse of education, even the collapse of integrity in education, is the collapse of the nation.”

56.1%
OF STUDENTS BELIEVE THAT
GUNN STRESSORS INCREASE
THEIR TENDENCY TO CHEAT

Source: Self-selected survey sent to Gunn students by The Oracle from Jan. 22 to Jan. 29 with 82 responses.

“It’s a disappointing way to pass, but that’s just how it is.”
— An anonymous junior

“(cheating has) become so normalized that people are more surprised if you don’t use ChatGPT than if you do.”
— An anonymous junior

“Students are sometimes pressured to share their experiences with a test to reassure others who haven’t taken it yet.”
— An anonymous senior

Source: Self-selected survey sent to Gunn students by The Oracle from Jan. 22 to Jan. 29 with 28 responses.

making a decision, but that decision ends up affecting a number of people, and I think one of the biggest casualties of that is the loss of trust of an educator.”

IAC teacher Rachel Congress echoed Johnson’s sentiment that the negative actions of just a few affect many. Notably, Congress emphasized that forcing students to study over winter break for another final was unnecessary.

“With IAC, students ended up having to do more work. In the first place, if people would have studied, then nobody would be having to do extra work,” she said. “It’s really disappointing, and we have seven periods of IAC, so it’s an extremely large number of students who are affected, not to mention all of the other classes, like in APUSH.”

Unfortunately, cheating incidents are not new to Gunn. Johnson recalls a similar situation in 2007, when students in later APUSH periods gained unfair advantages by