

Researchers say instructors can reduce cheating by being clear

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A new University of Missouri study says that the reasons students give for cheating are rational, and that stricter punishments won't solve the problem. Instead, teachers should communicate clear standards and provide consistent enforcement to reduce instances of cheating.

Edward Brent, associate chair of the Department of Sociology in the MU College of Arts and Science, and Curtis Atkisson, an MU anthropology student, asked [students](#), "What circumstances, if any, could make cheating justified?"

While a majority of the students said that no circumstances can ever justify cheating, 35 percent suggested circumstances such as a "horrible life crisis" or "severe illness" were enough to justify cheating. Excuses such as "too hard to do or too little time," made up the majority of the excuses, and much less common were excuses that argue that the behavior was due to the actions of someone or something else, such as "my computer died."

"Our data indicate that very few students actually consider getting caught when they think about cheating," Brent said. "The logic is closer to 'this isn't fair,' or that 'I really didn't know,' or other reasons that are more likely to influence their decisions other than the thought of getting caught and facing stiff punishments."

Rational reasons for cheating do not necessarily mean cheating is justified. However, Brent believes that the reasons students give for

cheating could help educators develop solutions to reduce cheating. Educators should set clearly defined rules and expectations, which Brent calls the "student-teacher contract," as students typically respond to consistent enforcement of clear standards. If the student-teacher contract is broken – for example, a professor gives a test on material not covered in class –the student rationalizations become more justified.

"If instructors have poorly conceived classes and requirements, students will have plenty of rationalizations for cheating," Brent said. "Well designed classes, with clear expectations about tests and identified materials, would fulfill reasonable student expectations, decrease cheating and increase learning."

The results were published in the article, "Accounting for [Cheating](#): An Evolving Theory and Emergent Themes," in the journal *Research in Higher Education*. The results were also presented at talks given by Brent and Atkisson at the Oxford Internet Institute and the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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