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As exams approach, strive for honor

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Right on schedule with the end of the semester, the press is full of reports about how much cheating occurs on college campuses. For your professors, these articles are as gripping as those about Kim Kardashian's new boyfriend, who will play in what bowl game and Chilean miners all rolled into one.

We who teach read with horror about how our students are fooling us into thinking they are honestly, and individually, completing the assignments we so carefully prepare and laboriously grade. Are we laughingstocks? Is everyone in on the joke but us?

We are told that this generation has a "culture of cheating" and the exception is the student who hands in his or her own written work and takes tests without outside help. I don't believe it.

Students, not just at Texas Tech, but all over the country, strive for excellence and follow strong moral compasses. We see examples of the honor and dignity of young people every day— young people (many of them Texas Tech alumni) are, as you read these words, risking their lives defending our country in Iraq and Afghanistan. A large number of students at Texas Tech are the first in their family to have graduated from college or graduate school. Students here and all over the country are engaged in service learning projects and donate thousands of hours to community service.

So, what is going on? For one thing, technology has made access to information easy in a way we could not have imagined 20 years ago. While student organizations have always kept files of old exams and term papers donated by their members, today we can find millions of words on every conceivable subject on our phones and computers.

Every day, we send each other newspaper articles, YouTube videos and blog postings with a push of a button.

We can download source material in seconds and just as quickly put someone else's words in our own essays, articles and research papers so that they become indistinguishable from words we wrote ourselves. Time is short, and the temptation is high to just "put it in and fill in the citation later."

Ease of access does not, of course, excuse passing off someone else's work as our own. But it does explain how that can happen if you are not unyielding in your commitment to immediately visually distinguish words and ideas that are not your own from the rest of the paper by highlighting, adding quotation marks and putting in a link to the source — even if you will have to go back and reformat.

What of other cheating? The scare articles often point to the practice of buying or borrowing someone else's prescription medication before an important test. This isn't new either. Stimulants have always been available on college campuses, and exhausted students have often used them — with exactly the same results achieved by the students today: feelings of euphoria and invincibility and a work product far below the quality the same person could produce un-medicated.

Just as you wouldn't expect to see "better" with someone else's glasses, you're not going to perform better on a test with someone else's medication. Get a good night's sleep and eat breakfast before an exam — that pill you bought is at best a placebo and is much more likely to diminish your performance than enhance it.

School is hard. All of us have found ourselves at one time or another overwhelmed by a class, a test or a paper. If you feel that way, get help. Talk to someone you trust who has been through this — whether it is a family member, an older friend, a clergyman, a coach or a counselor.

The therapists at the counseling center know what you're going through and they can help. Call them. Getting help when you need it is a sign of strength and evidence of a commitment to honor and excellence.

Just as I do not spend a lot of time worrying about killer bees or collisions with asteroids, I do not worry that my students or anyone else's lack ethical principles or are treating their education casually — let alone with contempt. As we all enter this extremely busy and pressured time at the end of the semester, consider whether, perhaps, you are taking short-cuts that you would not want your loved ones to know about. Check your sources, get the help you need if you're struggling and strive for honor.

These scare headlines may increase the hits on a publication's website, but they do not reflect the culture of the students I know. Good luck on your exams — your professors are, with very good reason, very proud of you.