

Finding That Today's Students Are Bright, Eager and Willing to Cheat

By SARA RIMER

As a high school student working in a university professor's neurobiology laboratory, a 17-year-old Manhattan girl endorsed a strong code of scientific values. Honesty was essential, she said.

But she also wanted to be a winner in the fiercely competitive Intel Science Talent Search. She had been told that the judges did not look favorably on experiments involving live mice. So when she presented the findings of her experiment on estrogen and learning, she concealed the fact that she had worked with live mice.

"Maybe it was wrong, lying, in a way," she said. "But I didn't think that it was wrong because I deserved to be rewarded." She was rewarded: she was an Intel semifinalist, won a college scholarship and got into an Ivy League university, where she plans to pursue scientific research.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/02/nyregion/02ETHI.html>

The Manhattan student was one of more than 100 promising young scientists, journalists and stage actors interviewed by Harvard researchers in a study of how young professionals perform and think about their work. The researchers, directed by Howard Gardner, a Harvard professor of cognition and education, asked probing questions about their subjects' goals and aspirations, their strategies for overcoming obstacles and their mentors and values.

One finding was that the Manhattan student was not unusual. A number of the other people 15 to 35 acknowledged a willingness to compromise their values and to cut corners ethically and professionally to advance their careers. They said they knew right from wrong and intended to follow a strict code of values after they gained power and authority.

"We might be tempted to say they've lost their moral compass," Professor Gardner said. "But it's probably better to say that their teachers and mentors and the rest of society never helped them construct and internalize a moral compass in the first place."

The study is part of a project on excellent and socially responsible work that Professor Gardner, a psychologist, has been conducting since 1995. His colleagues on the project are two other psychologists, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, at Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon, at Stanford University. With financing from foundations, researchers have interviewed almost 1,000 veteran professionals in genetics, journalism, higher education, medicine, criminal law, philanthropy and business.

Professor Gardner and his colleagues say they are trying to encourage good work in what they call turbulent times, with unprecedented technological innovation, a vastly faster-paced workplace and extraordinarily powerful market forces.

Young workers are influenced by the money and fame that are possible for many professionals like scientists and journalists in ways they never were before, Professor Gardner said, while traditional countervailing forces like religious, family and community values have become muted in the past 20 years. But Professor Gardner said he could not determine whether young workers were less ethical than those of the past.

One of the study's findings is that young journalists do not have the committed mentors who helped earlier generations learn journalism's ethics and values. This sort of mentoring, Professor Gardner says, is disappearing, a casualty of a faster-paced, more transient workplace.

Most of the young scientists interviewed for the study are working in the lucrative, highly competitive field of genetics. In science, unlike journalism, mentoring is still emphasized, but the quality of the mentoring is sometimes questionable. Some young geneticists talked about mentors who pushed them to publish findings before they were ready or who competed with them for grants.

The young geneticists talked about the importance of honesty, accuracy and objectivity, but some said they had felt compelled to make compromises.

A 31-year-old geneticist, with a doctorate from a top university, said his willingness to cut corners helped him win a faculty position and gain attention for his research. He admitted he did not always follow scientific protocol for experiments. This is acceptable, he said, because it is more efficient and because he has been successful.

"You want to be a young Turk," he said. He added that "the rigor of science should be respected only where it is necessary."

The scientific value of openness can conflict with the need to establish a reputation and secure a job. A 30-year-old graduate student said his goal as a scientist was to help people. In sifting through data on the human genome project, he said, he discovered that a large federal agency had a flawed database, which others were using for their research.

He said he tried to inform the agency about the problem, but got nowhere until he reached "the second guy under the director." To demonstrate that the agency's data was flawed, the student shared his own unpublished data. The older scientist thanked him profusely, the student said, but later posted his data on the agency's Web site — without crediting him or asking for permission. Scooped by the agency, the student lost his chance to make a name for himself with his data.

The young reporters in the study were working in major metropolitan areas for large and medium-size newspapers and broadcast stations (The researchers did not interview any young reporters for The New York Times.)

Like their counterparts in science, the young journalists talked about the importance of values: accuracy, fairness, balance, objectivity, informing the public. But many lacked a sense of responsibility for upholding those values, the study found. The journalists lamented the lack of mentoring and collegiality where they work.

"They feel under the thumb of powerful editors, whose concern to best the

competition all too often seems to dominate traditional journalistic values of fairness, objectivity and serving readers," the authors of the study, Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, Deborah Greenspan and Professor Gardner, wrote. "Nearly all young professional journalists feel pressure to cut corners, sensationalize stories, circumvent the dictates of the editors and those who hire the editors."

Young journalists worry about cutting corners, the study found, but focus on the future, when they believe they will have the authority and status to act properly. At the same time, more than one-third of them said they were thinking seriously about leaving journalism for careers in which they hoped to keep their integrity.

Of the three professions studied, the young actors were the most passionate about their work. They were drawn to the theater for more personal reasons than money and fame. But many actors, too, had decided that they would have to make compromises. One actress was considering plastic surgery to become more conventionally attractive; others had taken roles that exploited racial and ethnic stereotypes so they could have lives in the theater.

Professor Gardner said he hoped his project would help create a new generation of good workers. "Our society excels at producing individuals of high intelligence, expertise and creativity," he said. "Where we need to focus like a laser beam is on the conditions which will help these talented young individuals to become ethically and socially responsible workers."