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What is Cheating? Student and Faculty Perception of what they Believe is Academically Dishonest Behavior

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Abstract

The study of ethics and moral development of college students is an important issue. Knowing and understanding the ethical behavior of college students can lead to changing and increasing appropriate behavior among graduate and undergraduate students. Such changes in ethical behavior and moral development during the college experience can strengthen the foundation for appropriate adjustments and foster a greater awareness for positive ethical behavior throughout a lifetime. This research study examined the perception of what students and faculty believe is academically dishonest behavior by identifying different types of scenarios. Given the cheating behavior by students, it is important to know what students and faculty actually believe is academically dishonest behavior. The research question was "What do students and faculty perceive as cheating?" Students and faculty were surveyed and the findings indicate a clear discord between perceptions of cheating and actual cheating as determined by students and faculty.

The issue of cheating in academic situations has been studied regarding what students believe but faculty beliefs in this area are more limited. Graham (1994) reviewed both faculty and student beliefs about cheating. 480 students and 48 faculty completed a survey and 89% admitted to cheating (Graham, 1994). Graham (1994) noted that "attitudinal variables were better at predicting cheating than were background variables" (p. 255). Roig and Ballew (1992) also completed a study that reviewed faculty and student attitudes about cheating. It was found that student perceptions of faculty beliefs about cheating were similar to what faculty actually believed but the same was not true regarding the perceptions that faculty had about student cheating. Faculty believed that students were more liberal in their understanding of cheating but the students did not have this same belief about their cheating behavior. Business related majors were the most tolerant of cheating behaviors. When 364 engineering students and 80 faculty were surveyed, 62% of students admitted to copying homework but only 51% of faculty thought this was cheating and 56% of students admitted to cheating (Singhal, 1982). When faculty syllabi were reviewed, Volpe, Davidson, and Bell (2008) found no relationship between the number of integrity related statements in the syllabus and attitudes about student cheating

behaviors. The amount of cheating was underestimated by faculty and the amount of cheating that occurs does not correspond with written guidelines (Volpe, Davidson, & Bell, 2008).

Cheating, or academic dishonesty, has been found to be common in studies over several decades and has raised concerns on college and university campuses more than ever before (Bowers, 1964; Covey, 2008; Gulli, Kohler, & Patriquin, 2007; Kleiner & Lord, 1999; McCabe, 1992 and 1997; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001; Rimer, 2003). In a nationwide research study of 23 public and private colleges and universities, McCabe (2001-02) found that 38% of the undergraduate student surveyed indicated that they had engaged in Internet plagiarism (cited in Rimer, 2003). A survey of 5300 U.S. graduate students at the Academy of Management Learning and Education found business students, at 56%, were the worst offenders, followed by engineering students, at 54%, in the engagement of unethical behaviors from plagiarism to using unauthorized notes in exams (Gulli et al., 2007). According to *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, in November 2010, more than 200 of the 600 students in a University of Central Florida business class admitted that they benefited from accessing online test questions prior to taking their midterm exam (The Ticker, 2010). Brown, Weible, and Olmosk (2010) observed that 100% of the students in an undergraduate management class in 2008 admitted to cheating versus 49% of students in undergraduate marketing classes. Academic cheating has also involved alumni. “Two students and an alumnus from Florida International University were arrested on felony charges for stealing a test by hacking into a professor’s computer, reports the Sun Sentinel” (Wiley Periodicals, 2014, p. 2).

Influences upon Cheating Behavior

Many factors can influence cheating behavior. An individual’s traits and characteristics can affect his or her morality (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; McCabe, 1997; Shipley, 2009). Machiavellianism, for example, is “an individual difference characteristic that focuses on the extent to which individual hold cynical views of human nature, behave manipulatively in their interactions with others, and generally have a low regard for traditional or conventional standards of morality” (Christie & Geis, 1970, cited in Bloodgood, Turnley, & Mudrack, 2010, p. 26) and it has been found to be negatively related to ethical awareness and behavior (Bloodgood et al 2010; Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Granitz, 2003; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tang & Chen, 2008). Studies of ethical conduct also found gender related differences. Females, in general, demonstrate higher ethical standards than males (e.g., Borkowski & Ugras, 1992; Humbarger & DeVaney, 2005; Shepard & Hartenian, 1991). Stevenson (1999), for example, found that females reported significantly higher cognitive moral judgment scores than males. Nevertheless, Lester and Diekoff (2002) noted that the majority of traditional cheaters are women whereas a majority of on-line cheaters are men. Age also plays a role in a student’s ethic decision-making process. A student’s ethical values increase with his or her age (Humbarger & DeVaney, 2005; Ruegger & King, 1992). Contradictorily, researchers studying babies and young toddlers at the Yale Infant Cognition Center and other institutions such as Harvard suggest that morality is a trait endowed with us at birth, and this “infant morality” turns more selective as we grow – in other words, we are losing some positive social inclination as we are socialized by the culture(s) we live in (Tucker, 2013). Whether the student is extrinsically or intrinsically motivated also plays a role in students’ engagement in academic dishonesty. Rettinger and Kramer (2009) found that students engaging in unethical behavior were extrinsically motivated.

Different from the individual differences approach, the other camp of scholars focuses on the contextual factors that influence students' decisions to cheat (or correlates of cheating). Scholars of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (TPB) suggested that students' cheating behavior is influenced by (1) attitude toward cheating, (2) perceived social pressures to engage or not engage in cheating; and (3) the perceived ease of performing cheating (Ajzen, 1991, 2002; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Passow, Mayhew, Finelli, Harding, & Carpenter, 2006; Whitley, 1998). Graham (1994) noted that compared with other background variables, a student's attitude toward cheating is better at explaining his or her cheating behavior. Students with favorable attitudes toward cheating are more likely to cheat than those who have unfavorable attitudes (Nonis & Swift, 2001; Whitley, 1998). Neutralizing attitudes – “beliefs that an individual holds to justify cheating behavior” (Hsiao & Yang, 2011, p. 304) is essential to understanding cheating because any blame or guilt resulting from conducts of cheating can be counteracted or neutralized (Covey, 2008; Diekhoff et al., 1996; McCabe, 1992). Neutralized attitudes toward cheating cultivate a culture of cheating and explains why knowing it is wrong to cheat does not necessarily stop students from engaging in cheating behaviors (Baird, 1980; Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). For example, students in a study conducted by Haines and her colleagues (1986) believed that cheating is a personal behavior and will not hurt anyone and thus it is acceptable. Furthermore, students' attitudes toward cheating vary along a number of dimensions, namely, the assessment type (e.g., exams or papers or homework), the intention (whether the misconduct is planned in advance or spontaneous), and the role (whether a student is providing or receiving assistance) (Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006; Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006; Murdock, Beauchamp, & Hinton, 2008; Passow et al., 2006; Vitell & Muncy, 1992).

These distinctions are important to the extent that students view certain misconduct as cheating but not the others and consider certain misconduct as more serious than others (Bisping, Patron, & Roskelley, 2008; Bloodgood et al., 2010; Jones, 2011; Jordan, 2001; Lim & See, 2001). For example, students considered examination cheating more serious than plagiarism (Lim & See, 2001) but did not perceive turning in an assignment previously submitted for another class as plagiarism or cheating (Jones, 2011). Some researchers suggested that lack of knowledge about what constitutes academic dishonesty contributes to this confusion (Blum, 2009; Carroll, 2007; Hansen, 2003; Howard & Davies, 2009). There are studies finding many students' academic dishonesty related to Internet use as the result of their belief that Internet information is public and free from intellectual property rights and thus failing to cite internet sources is not cheating (Ma, Wan, & Lu, 2008; McCabe, 2001-02, cited in Rimer, 2003; Schrimsher, Northrup, & Alverson, 2009).

Other contextual factors are found to be influential to students' cheating behaviors. Studies indicate that the level of cheating differs by college majors (Baird, 1980; Bowers, 1964; Jackson, Levine, Furnham, & Burr, 2006; McCabe, 1997; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996; Rawwas & Isakson, 2000; Shaughnessy, 1988) and the highest percentage of undergraduates reporting cheating are those enrolled in “vocationally oriented majors such as business and engineering” (McCabe, 1997, p. 444). The differences have implications for the effectiveness of ethics education in various academic disciplines (King & Mayhew, 2002; Luthar & Karri, 2005;

Williams & Dewett, 2005). Peers were also found to be influential in students' attitudes toward cheating. Observation and/or perceptions of others' cheating encourage students to cheat as well (Bowers, 1964; Gulli et al., 2007; Hard et al., 2006; Koljatic & Silva, 2002; Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009; Watson & Sottile, 2010; Whitley, 1998). Students' perceptions of the quality and relevancy of instruction also influence their cheating behaviors (Okoro, 2011; Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). When satisfaction with faculty's instruction declines, it creates "desperation and tension" (Okoro, 2011, p. 177) and "students may well devalue it, making it easier to justifying cheating" (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009, p. 281).

Given the limited amount of research that examines both student and faculty observations of academic cheating, this research study examined the perceptions of what students and faculty believe is academically dishonest behavior by identifying different types of scenarios. Given the cheating behavior by students, it is important to know what students and faculty actually believe is academically dishonest behavior. The research question was "What do students and faculty perceive as cheating?"

Method

Sample and Participant Selection

The survey was administered to 400 undergraduate/graduate students and 57 faculty. The student gender breakdown was 122 males, 276 females, and 2 that did not identify a gender, while the faculty division was 32 male and 25 female.

Assessments and Measures

The instrument was divided into three parts, a demographic section of three questions, and a section in which participants were given 20 scenarios and asked to identify whether they believed the scenario represented academically dishonest behavior. A third section, in which respondents were given the same 20 scenarios and asked if they should be in a new academic dishonesty study was not used in this research. "Yes" responses were given a value of 1 and "No" responses were given a value of 2. These scenarios were single sentence statements covering a wide range of possibilities, from using study guides to seducing classmates for help. The Cronbach Alpha reliability measure for the instrument was .824. The surveys were delivered to participating students in classrooms by one of the researchers, collected after participant completion, and held by investigators. The faculty survey was identical but with two fewer demographic questions dealing with academic rank and college but was otherwise the same.

Sampling Procedures

Participation requests to campus instructors at a Mid-Atlantic university were emailed by the investigators to ask permission to come to class and give the survey instrument, and the student participants were selected from classes in which the instructor had volunteered to let students take the survey. Students in these classes could choose to opt out and not complete the instrument without repercussion. Faculty were invited to participate in the research via email

during the opening of the fall semester of 2013. Faculty followed a link to the survey, completing the same instrument minus two demographic questions, “College rank (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, or Graduate)”, and “Major College.”

Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The factor analysis of the responses yielded three factors that accounted for 62% of the variability of responses. These factors were students who had someone else complete or help with the assignment, technical issues/resubmitting previous own work, and studying from previously created materials. Having someone else complete the assignment was defined as situations in which work completed by someone other than the student was submitted as the student's own. This included such scenarios as having a friend complete homework, paying for a term paper, or receiving test answers while taking an exam. Technical issues were, for example, lying to the professor to get a time extension or submitting your own work from other courses instead of creating something original. Studying from previously created materials encompassed scenarios such as studying course exams from previous semesters or using others' notes. The Cronbach Alpha coefficients for each factor ranged from .638 to .756. Table 1 shows the factors with related scenarios and Table 2 yields the means and standard deviations of the factors.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results for student/faculty data yielded significant results ($p < .05$) for several scenarios as outlined in Table 3. In all but two scenarios faculty mean score for cheating perception was lower, indicating that faculty felt the behavior was cheating more so than students. Two exceptions to this were the statements, “You review exams taken by friends in previous semesters to study.” ($F_{1, 446} = 3.918, p = .048$) and, “You study using the study guide provided by the professor.” ($F_{1, 454} = 8.516, p = .004$). Faculty had a higher mean score than students in both cases. Table 3 gives the analysis of variance between students and faculty responses to all survey questions.

Discussion

The results of this study show that there are significant differences between students and faculty in what constitutes academic dishonesty. This difference puts the issue of cheating as more than a simple crime and punishment but also as a teaching issue. If the argument is made that dishonest behavior is on the rise, data from this study would indicate that students are not becoming more immoral but simply more uneducated in what is acceptable. Part of this issue is directly related to the advent of new technologies and social media. Students today have grown up in a world in which access to information is literally at their fingertips, communication with friends is instantaneous, and the separation of class time and social time is blurred. Less than a generation ago students were physically separated from the outside world within the walls of the classroom and dishonest behaviors were limited to cheat sheets, plagiarism, and paying others to write term papers. Today, cell phones, computers, and tablet devices remove the physical

barriers of the classroom and create opportunities for students to receive information and assistance instantly.

At the same time we question the ethics of students and worry about the different ways students can receive assistance within our educational system. This system promotes critical thinking and team work but the issue of ethical and moral education needs to be part of this process. Educators need to avoid sending confusing or mixed message related to what is acceptable behavior in both K-12 and higher education classrooms. In addition, some self-examination of how we assess learning would be beneficial to insure our teaching and learning systems are still the best models in today's educational world.

Character education is a concept frequently heard within the K-12 arena. Observances from this study indicate that this concept needs to be expanded to formal education beyond high school years. Universities and colleges need to have at least one class per major related to the process of moral/ethical resolution. Cheating is an unethical behavior reported by many students. In a technological world where access to information is at the click of the mouse button, "cheating" in many formats is effortless. Professors must not only stress the content requirements of an assignment, but also the ethical responsibilities of doing such assignments. Professors must recognize that any assignments requiring out-of-class work will quite probably reflect group work rather than individual effort, and if non-collaborating students are aware of this activity, they are unlikely to report it to the professor. This means that in courses that stress the measurement of individual achievement, more classroom time will have to be dedicated to this activity. And even during those classroom activities, the professor will have to remain vigilant.

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Table 1
Factors affecting perceptions of cheating

| Factor | I | II | III |
|--|------|------|-----|
| I. Having others complete work | | | |
| 1. You pay for a topic (research) paper from an on-line source and submit it as your own work. | .951 | | |
| 2. You have your friend complete all of your homework assignments. | | | |
| 3. You text someone during an exam to get a question answered. | .910 | | |
| 4. You use a smart phone or other electronic device to search for information during an exam. | .953 | | |
| 5. You take a picture of an exam and send it electronically to a friend who is taking the exam at another time. | .907 | | |
| 6. You take a picture of an exam to send to someone who will send the correct answers back. | .942 | | |
| 7. You have someone else take an online test for you. | .949 | | |
| | .879 | | |
| II. Technical issues/reusing old materials | | | |
| 1. You use a paper you created from a class that you submitted last semester for a class that you are taking this semester but you only make a few changes to the paper. | | .646 | |
| 2. When taking an on-line exam, you ask your friends for help. | | .588 | |
| 3. You tell a professor your hard drive/flash drive crashed to get more time on a paper or project. | | .631 | |
| 4. You tell a professor that technical difficulties prevented you from electronically submitting your work on time when no such problem existed. | | | |

| Factor | I | II | III |
|---|---|------|------|
| | | .644 | |
| III. Studying from previously created materials | | | |
| 1. Your roommate ask you to give him your notes from last semester related to the class exams. | | | |
| 2. You study from a previous (past semester) exam that you acquired from your friend who had the class last year. | | | .596 |
| 3. You review exams taken by friends in previous semester to study. | | | .878 |
| | | | .874 |

Table 2

Average and standard deviation of factors affecting perception of cheating.

| Factors | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|------|--------------------|
| Having others complete work | 1.12 | .315 |
| Technical issues/reusing old materials | 1.32 | .309 |
| Studying from previously created materials | 1.69 | .364 |

Table 3

Analysis of variance between students and faculty

| Statement | df | F | Sig. |
|--|-----|--------|------|
| Your roommate asks you to give him your notes from last semester related to the class exams. | 454 | 1.686 | .195 |
| You study from a previous (past semester) exam that you acquired from your friend who had the class last year. | 453 | .486 | .486 |
| You used a paper you created from a class that you submitted last semester for a class that you are taking this semester but you only make a few changes to the paper. | 454 | 54.259 | .001 |
| You pay for a topic (research) paper from an on-line source and submit it as your own work. | 454 | 9.073 | .003 |
| You work with a group of other students on a research paper but you only do about 2% of the work and tell them to put your name on the paper. | 453 | 1.402 | .237 |
| | 454 | 18.091 | .001 |
| When taking an on-line exam, you ask your friends for help. | | | |
| You check all the books out of the library related to your research paper so no one else can use that topic. | 451 | 3.778 | .053 |
| You pay a person to edit your research paper knowing that grammar accounts for 50% of the assignment grade. | 452 | 9.431 | .002 |
| You seduce (for example- by going on a few dates) the “smart” person in class so he/she can help (or complete) most of your assignments in the class. | 451 | 2.701 | .101 |
| You have your friend complete all of your homework assignments. | 454 | 7.689 | .006 |
| You review exams taken by friends in previous semesters to study. | 446 | 3.918 | .048 |
| You text someone during an exam to get a question answered. | 452 | 8.388 | .004 |
| You use a smart phone or other electronic device to search for information during an exam. | 452 | 9.319 | .002 |
| You take a picture of an exam and send it electronically to a friend who is taking the exam at another time. | 454 | 9.076 | .003 |
| You take a picture of an exam to send to someone who will send the correct answers back. | 454 | 8.516 | .004 |
| You work with classmates on homework assignments. | 451 | .407 | .524 |
| You tell a professor your hard drive/flash drive crashed to get more time on a paper or project. | 451 | 4.919 | .027 |
| You tell a professor that technical difficulties prevented you from electronically submitting your work on time when no such problem existed. | 453 | 6.665 | .010 |
| You study using the study guide provided by the professor. | 454 | 8.516 | .004 |
| You have someone else take an online test for you. | 454 | 9.265 | .002 |