The Academic Ethics Of Students In Principles Of Economics

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Abstract

Questionnaires on academic ethics were completed by 115 students enrolled in principles of economics at a state university. Ninety-seven percent admitted to having engaged in at least 1 of 16 academic practices while a university student considered unethical in the literature. Levels of participation in specific practices ranged from 20% to 88% and were unrelated to student characteristics. Students participated more in practices they rated less unethical. Primary reasons for participation were that students wanted high grades and did not use available time to study. Effects of academic dishonesty on institutions and ways of limiting dishonest behavior are discussed.

Introduction

College and university students have been surveyed for several decades about their academic ethics, academic dishonesty, or cheating behavior. Some of the surveys have been of specific types of students, such as biomedical (Kalichman & Friedman, 1992), medical (Sierles, Hendrickx, & Circle, 1980), or graduate business students (Brown, 1995). Other studies have targeted a broader base of students by distributing questionnaires to samples drawn from the student body at large or from general education courses. This paper reports the results of a study of the latter type. Questionnaires on academic ethics were completed by students enrolled in principles of economics courses at a state university.

Literature Review

Stern and Havlicek (1986) surveyed 314 students in three survey courses in a large midwestern university. Levels of participation in 36 unethical behaviors ranged from 4% for getting a copy of an exam by having a student not in the class "sit in" for the exam and not turn it in, to 76% for asking other students about exam questions and obtaining notes from another student. Overall, 82% of respondents had participated in at least one of the activities. Freshmen were less likely to participate than other class ranks.

Michaels and Mieth (1989) surveyed 623 students enrolled in undergraduate sociology classes at a large state university. Cheating on exams was reported by 41.9% of respondents, 22.9% admitted to cheating on term papers or projects, and 77.5% had cheated on homework.

Moffatt (1990), in a survey of 232 undergraduate students at Rutgers University, found 45% of respondents had cheated "occasionally" and 33% were "hardcore," having cheated in at least eight courses. The most popular forms of cheating among hardcore cheaters were copying during an exam (33%) and studying from past exams (21%). Students most likely to cheat were economics majors, upperclassmen, and students with lower grade point averages (GPAs).

Greene and Saxe's (1992) sample of undergraduate students was 74% female but evenly distributed across GPAs and majors. They found 81% of respondents had cheated on at least one of 15 behaviors and believed 99% of their classmates had done so.

Readers with comments or questions are encouraged to contact the authors via email.

Bunn, Caudill, and Gropper (1992) published a study similar to the one reported in this paper. The authors surveyed 476 students in two principles of microeconomics courses. Cheating on exams and written assignments was reported by 50% of the respondents. The incidence of cheating varied inversely with GPA. Students who had seen others cheat and who gave higher estimates of the proportion of students who cheat were more likely to cheat.

Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1996) received 1672 responses in a survey of undergraduate students enrolled in 27 mostly introductory general education courses at a major public university. Ten items were included on the questionnaire, but factor analysis reduced them to four constructs. The constructs and proportions of students who had participated in them in one semester were: taking information, 46.7%; tendering information, 21.1%; plagiarism, 37.7%; and misrepresentation, 22.7%. At least one of the practices had been engaged in by 68.1% of the students during one 15-week semester.

Nowell and Laufer (1997) devised a method to detect cheating when 209 students in principles of accounting and principles of economics classes were allowed to grade their own quizzes. Twenty-seven percent of students cheated. Cheaters tended to be computer information systems majors, working, and enrolled in large classes taught by adjuncts. Non-cheaters tended to be seniors and have a higher course grade.

In a survey of 288 students in general education courses, Tang and Zuo (1997) found 39% had cheated on a college examination. The rates for the four class ranks were: freshmen, 26.7%; sophomores, 44%; juniors, 52%; and seniors, 48%. Males cheated more than females (47.5% v 33.3%). Cheating incidence was negatively related to GPA and positively related to credit hours completed. Students strongly opposed to cheating reported lower rates of cheating behavior.

Method

We administered a questionnaire originally developed by Brown (1995) for a study of graduate business students, adapted to an undergraduate population, to students enrolled in principles of economics courses at an eastern state university. The questionnaire included 16 academic practices selected from published studies of academic dishonesty. Students were asked to rate the ethical level of each practice on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unethical*) to 5 (*not at all unethical*). They were also asked to rate on a 6-point scale how often they had engaged in the practices in their university courses. Point 1 on the scale was labeled *frequently;* point 3, *occasionally*; and point 5, *infrequently*. Point 6 was labeled *never*. The scale allowed the measurement of the level of participation in the practices as well as the relative frequency of participation of those who had engaged in them.

The questionnaire included 11 reasons why students might engage in unethical academic practices. Students were asked to think of the typical university student who engages in unethical academic behavior and rate on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all likely)* to 5 (*very likely)* the likelihood that each item would be a reason for the behavior. They were also asked to rate on a 5-point scale from 1 (*very unethical*) to 5(*very ethical*) how ethical they believe undergraduate university students in general are with respect to their academic studies. Questions about the following student characteristics were included: class rank, major (undecided, business, economics, other), GPA, hours worked per week on a paying job, course load, gender, and year of birth.

Questionnaires were distributed in day and evening classes. A cover letter explained that participation was voluntary, that results would be used for research purposes only, and assured anonymity. Instructors left the room and gave students class time to complete the questionnaires. Students were provided plain envelopes in which to seal their questionnaires before depositing them in boxes at the fronts of the rooms.

Results

One-hundred-fifteen usable questionnaires were returned. The respondents were younger students, both academically and chronologically. Almost half (49.6%) were freshmen, and about 28% were sophomores. Almost 80% of respondents were 21 or younger. The above characteristics probably account for the one-fifth (19.5%) that had not yet decided on a major. About one-third were business or economics majors (35.4%), and 45% were

majoring in other areas. Approximately one-third (31%) had GPAs less than 2.5 (on a 4-point scale). Almost one-fourth (23%) were between 2.50 and 2.99. Another third (33.6%) were in the 3.00 to 3.49 range. Only 12.4% had GPAs of 3.5 or above. One-third of the students (32.7%) were not employed while enrolled in university courses. Of those who worked, most worked less than 40 hours per week (49.5% of total sample). Eighty-three percent carried a 13 to 18 semester hour course load. The sample was somewhat skewed in the direction of males, at 54.9%.

Table 1 shows the results of the questions about participation in the practices and the ratings of their ethical levels. The percents admitting participation, means on the frequency of participation rating scale, and ranks from *highest* to *lowest* proportion of respondents admitting participation are shown in the columns labeled "Participation." When the percents admitting participation tied, the practice with the highest frequency was ranked lower. The mean ratings of the ethical levels of the practices and their ranks from *least* to *most* unethical are shown in the columns labeled "Ethical Level."

Table 1
Participation In and Ethical Level of Practices

	Participation			Ethical Level	
Practice	**Rank**	**Pct.[1]**	**Mean[2]**	**Rank[3]**	**Mean[4]**
Having someone check over a paper before turning it in	1	87.6	2.44	1	4.22
Working with others on an individual project	2	81.4	3.70	2	3.21
Asking about the content of exam from someone who has taken it	3	80.4	3.22	3	3.06
Giving information about the content of an exam to someone who has not yet taken it	4	75.0	3.50	4	3.02
Padding a bibliography	5	59.8	3.87	6	2.61
Allowing another to see exam answers	6	45.1	4.28	13	1.83
Visiting a professor to influence grade	7	43.4	3.90	5	2.73
Plagiarism	8	43.4	4.27	8/9	2.25
Using a false excuse to delay an exam or paper	9	39.8	4.20	12	1.95
Before taking an exam, looking at a copy that was not supposed to be available to students	10	32.7	3.78	7	2.27
Taking credit for full participation in a group project without doing a fair share of the work	11	32.7	4.05	8/9	2.25
Copying off another's exam	12	31.3	4.00	15	1.59
Using exam crib notes	13	25.0	4.14	11	2.01
Turning in work done by someone else as own	14	23.0	4.39	14	1.69
Having information programmed into a calculator during an exam	15	22.1	4.16	10	2.07
Passing answers during exam	16	20.5	4.26	16	1.57
Means		46.5	3.89		2.40

[1]Percent admitting participation
[2]Scale: 1=*frequently,* 5=i*nfrequently*
[3]Ranked from *least* to *most* unethical
[4] Scale: 1 = *very unethical*, 5 = *not at all unethical*

The mean proportion of students admitting participation in the practices was 46.5%. The four practices engaged in by the highest proportions of students had participation levels of 75% or higher. "Having someone check over a paper before turning it in" had the highest participation level at 87.6%. "Working with others on an individual project" was second at 81.4%. "Asking about the content of an exam from someone who has taken it" was third, engaged in by 80.4% of respondents. Fourth was "Giving information about the content of an exam to someone who has not yet taken it," at 75%.

The four practices engaged in by the smallest proportions of students had participation levels ranging from about 20% to 25%. The practice engaged in by the lowest proportion of students was "Passing answers during an exam," at 20.5%. "Having information programmed into a calculator during an exam" was reported at 22.1%. "Turning in work done by someone else as one's own" was at 23%. The fourth practice was "Using exam crib notes," at 25%. The proportion of respondents reporting having engaged in at least one of the practices in their university courses was 97.3%.

In order to see if participation in the practices was related to the demographic characteristics of students, we transformed participation into dichotomous variables indicating participation or no participation. The demographic questions also had nominal-level categorical answers. The Chi-square statistic was used to test for significance between participation in each practice and each of the demographics. Of the 112 statistical tests, only five were statistically significant at the .05 level, about what would be expected by chance. We concluded that the level of participation in the practices was not related to student characteristics.

The mean rating on the frequency of participation scale of those who had engaged in the practices was 3.89, on the *infrequently* side of the midpoint of the scale. There is a general tendency for the means to increase moving down the "Mean" column. This indicates a tendency for the practices that were engaged in by smaller proportions of students to be engaged in less frequently.

The mean rating on the ethical level scale was 2.40, on the *very unethical* side of the midpoint. There was a tendency for practices engaged in by higher proportions of students to be rated less unethical, as indicated by the higher means on the ethical level scale being generally near the top of the column. "Having someone check over a paper before turning it in," the practice engaged in by the largest proportion of students, was rated 4.22, where 5 was *not at all unethical.* "Passing answers during an exam," the practice engaged in by the smallest proportion of students, was rated 1.57, where 1 was *very unethical.*

Table 2
Actual and Predicted Levels of Participation in Practices

Practice	Actual Percent	Predicted Percent	Actual-Predicted
Having someone check over a paper before turning it in	87.6	98.9	-11.3
Working with others on an individual project	81.4	69.9	11.5
Asking about the content of exam from someone who has taken it	80.4	65.6	14.8
Giving information about the content of an exam to someone who has not yet taken it	75.0	64.4	10.6
Padding a bibliography	59.8	52.6	7.2
Allowing another to see exam answers	45.1	30.2	14.9
Visiting a professor to influence grade	43.4	56.1	-12.7
Plagiarism	43.4	42.3	1.1
Using a false excuse to delay an exam or paper	39.8	33.6	6.2
Before taking an exam, looking at a copy that was not supposed to be available to students	32.7	42.8	-10.1
Taking credit for full participation in a group project without doing a fair share of the work	32.7	42.3	-9.6
Copying off another's exam	31.3	23.3	8.0
Using exam crib notes	25.0	35.3	-10.3
Turning in work done by someone else as one's own	23.0	26.1	-3.1
Having information programmed into a calculator during an exam	22.1	37.1	-15.0
Passing answers during an exam	20.5	22.7	-2.2

We analyzed the relationship between the ethical level of the practices and the extent of participation in them by performing a regression analysis with the percentage of students participating in the practices as the dependent variable and the mean ratings on the ethical level scales as the independent variable. The regression equation was:

$$\text{Percent} = -22.54 + 28.80 \text{ Mean rating} \quad (1)$$

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed the equation significant at the .001 level. The mean rating on the ethical level scale explained 77.6% of the variation in the percentage of students participating in the practices. However, the proportion participating in several practices varied considerably from the level predicted by the regression equation, as shown in Table 2. For example, the proportions of students asking others about the content of an exam and allowing others to see exam answers exceeded the predicted proportion by almost 15%. The proportion of students visiting a professor to influence a grade was almost 13% less than predicted, and the proportion having information programmed into a calculator during an exam fell 15% below the predicted proportion. The potential gain, the risk of getting caught, and opportunity are other factors that have been found to be related to the incidence of unethical academic behavior.

Table 3 shows the ratings of the likelihood of the reasons for participating in unethical academic behavior. The most likely reason was "To get a high grade" at 4.17, with five being *very likely.* "Has the time but does not study" and "Difficulty of material" also had high likelihoods. Students were not very likely to engage in the behavior because everyone does it, it was a challenge or a thrill, or because of peer pressure.

Table 3
Reasons for Unethical Behavior

Reason	Mean[1]
To get a high grade	4.17
Has the time but does not study	4.12
Difficulty of material	3.84
Feels no one is hurt by behavior	3.54
Instructor is poor or indifferent	3.30
Low risk of getting caught	3.28
Does not have time to study	3.27
Feels work is irrelevant	3.22
Everyone does it	2.45
Was a challenge or thrill	2.42
Peer pressure to do it	2.26

[1] Scale: 1 = *not at all likely*, 5 = *very likely.*

The mean rating on the question of how ethical respondents believe undergraduate students are in general with respect to their academic studies was 3.24. This is about the midpoint on the 5-point, *very unethical* to *very ethical* scale.

Discussion

Articles in the popular press have claimed that the already low academic ethics of college students are sinking even lower (Donahue & Heard, 1997; Young, 1998; "Your cheatin' heart," 1992). The results reported in this paper suggest that these claims may have merit.

Making comparisons with other studies on specific practices is difficult, as studies often do not include the same practices. Three comparisons were possible from the studies included in the literature review. Stern and

Havlicek (1986) found 76% of the students in their study had asked others about examination questions, compared to 80.4% in this study. Moffatt (1990) found 33% had copied during an examination, compared to 31.3% reported here. He reported a rate of 21% for studying from past exams while a rate of 32.7% was found in this study.

Four comparisons to the overall level of participation in unethical academic activities of 97% found in this study were possible. Levels found in other studies were: Stern and Havlicek (1986), 82%; Moffatt (1990), 78%; Greene and Saxe (1992), 81%; and Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1996), 68.1%. The level of 97% reported here is 15% higher than the next-highest level.

As reported in the literature review, other studies have generally found levels of participation in unethical activities to be related to student characteristics. These relationships were not found in this study. This suggests that unethical behavior is broader based than has previously been reported. Furthermore, that almost 50% of respondents were freshmen and about 28% sophomores suggests that unethical behavior begins early in students' academic careers.

Chisholm (1992) discussed the damage dishonest behavior does to an institution of higher learning. It diminishes the reputation of the institution in the academic community and with the general public. Students lose faith in the institution and become alienated. Anxiety is generated among honest students, and their grades may suffer in classes graded on a curve. Dishonest academic behavior that continues unchecked gives the impression it is acceptable, encouraging it even more.

Recommendations

Both college faculty and administrators have a responsibility to ensure that unethical academic behavior on their campuses is minimized. This can be accomplished by taking actions based on the current understanding of academic misconduct and conducting research to better understand the issue.

Actions to Promote Ethical Behavior

Recommended actions that college faculty and administrators can take to minimize dishonest academic behavior have fallen into three categories. The first category consists of "clarification" activities. Their purpose is to make sure students and faculty know what is considered cheating at the institution. In one survey, of the respondents who said they had never cheated in college, 12% admitted to copying homework, 6% to allowing another person to copy from their exam, and 3% to plagiarism. About 25% of respondents said no college instructor had ever talked to them about what is considered cheating. The author recommends the formulation of a cheating policy at the institutional level, distributed to students in written form and explained by instructors in the classroom. Examples of forms of cheating that might not be clear to students, such as plagiarism, should be included. The policy should then be vigorously enforced (Portello, 1993).

The second category consists of "situational" activities. Their purpose is to create an environment in which it is difficult to cheat. These activities are applicable to forms of cheating that take place in the classroom, such as cheating on exams. They include refraining from re-using exams, using multiple versions of exams, and proctoring exams closely (Barnett & Dalton, 1981).

The third category consists of "values-oriented" activities. Their purpose is to get students to see learning as a valued activity rather than just as a means to an end such as getting into graduate school or getting a job. Shropshire (1997) says education should be made more like a game, where students participate to develop the skill of playing, rather than like a CPA exam review course, emphasizing the memorization of material to be played back on the exam. Though it is uncertain how much influence instructors can have on the values of college-age people, this is the only alternative available for influencing the kinds of unethical practices that take place outside of the classroom, out of view of the instructor.

Suggestions for Research

Three types of additional research are suggested. The first is to replicate the study with other student populations to get a better understanding of the extent of the academic ethics problem. The second is to replicate the study over time to track trends in the academic ethics of students. The third is to assess the effectiveness of strategies for reducing unethical academic behavior as they are developed and implemented. 🕮

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Notes