

Academic Dishonesty: Then and Now, A Comparison

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Background

Questionable academic behavior, academic integrity or simply “cheating,” whatever the preferred terminology students/faculty chose to use, is a critical concern on college campuses. Questionable ethical behavior in academics is noted within early Chinese civilizations (Lang 2013), thus what research has illustrated of cheating in today’s academic world should be nothing new nor surprising to faculty and students. A literature review of academic integrity demonstrates that cheating is not confined to the collegiate ranks. Studies have shown cheating occurs at the elementary age where during these formative years the parent is often tasked with trying to instill proper academic behavior for their child (Shellenbarger 2013, NPR News 2013). Academic cheating occurs at the secondary high school level of education; this includes high school students attending high performing schools (Perez-Pena 2012, Selby 2019).

Cheating at the collegiate level is demonstrated across all disciplines of collegiate education (Khalid 2015). As cheating occurs at all disciplines of college education, the question(s) of college students associated with the practice of cheating creates ethical and social concerns (Kaufman 2008). Ethically, why do college students find it necessary to cheat, what motivates them to cheat, and how do they justify cheating as an ethically proper thing to do? Socially, what impact will academic cheating have on the social norms of hard work for high achievement, integrity and fairness in worldly dealings (Anonymous, University of Illinois)? Many questions surround the concept of questionable academic behavior.

This research study provides the results from a survey of college students on the campus of a midsized university with multidiscipline degree offerings. The results of the study allow for comparisons of similar research study results from other universities or colleges, as well as, a comparison with the results of an earlier study from the same midsized university. The current study considers the technology available to students for purposes of cheating, whereas the earlier study displayed no results from a technological aspect. Additionally, the results will assist in examining remedies for such unethical acts as academic cheating.

The comparison study (Brown and McInerney 2008), examined the ethical rating of 16 academic practices that might be considered unethical or academically dishonest in the year 2006. The study also asked respondents to provide their opinion on reasons why students

might engage in these behaviors by ranking various given reasons on a 5-point scale from not at all likely to very likely. Reasons included items such as peer pressure and the need for a good grade. While not addressed in the current study, the Brown and McInerney research did attempt to ascertain actual engagement by students in the dishonest behaviors.

Methodology

A survey instrument was developed with various demographic and academic questions, such as GPA, student rank, credit hours enrolled in, employment status, etc. The survey also included a section asking respondents to rate the level of ethicalness for academic practices used in the Brown and McInerney study along with 2 additional activities reflecting the use of newer technology now available to students. The new items included were “using some type of physical or audible signaling to share information during an exam” and “sharing screen shots taken of an exam”. The survey also included a rating of reasons why students may choose to engage in these questionable practices, just as in the previous research. See Tables 1 and 2 for survey items. The survey was electronically distributed to registered students via campus email.

Results

A sample size of 453 was obtained within a week of the initial email. Of that, 72% were female, 25% were male, with the remaining preferring not to answer or leaving the response blank. All ranks from freshman to graduate student were represented with the majority GPAs reported in the 2.50 to 3.99 range. A majority of respondents reported residency in the United States (387) with a small amount (22) reporting to be international students.

When examining the current data, it was found that female students, almost entirely, rated the academically dishonest behaviors as more unethical than the male students with statistical significance of .05 or less. The exceptions were the behaviors of “passing answers during an exam” and “turning in work done by someone else as one’s own”. See Table 1.

Table 1 also displays the differences in the previous ratings from the Brown and McInerney study with the current study’s ratings. As can be seen, with few exceptions, the current ratings are significantly lower, or rated as more unethical, than ratings from the previous study.

In examining possible reasons for engaging in the behavior, significant differences did occur between the 2006 and current ratings or means. However, in the current study, there were no difference in means between male and female respondents. See Table 2.

Practice	2019 Mean*	2006 Mean**	Sig.		Male	Female	Sig
Working with other students on an individual paper or project.	3.20	3.00	.002		3.26	3.13	.008
Using a false excuse to delay taking an exam or turning in an assignment	1.82	2.31	.000		1.86	1.77	.003
Copying off another student's exam.	1.28	1.84	.000		1.29	1.26	.031
Passing answers during an exam.	1.27	1.27	.000		1.31	1.26	Ns
Allowing another student to see answers during an exam.	1.42	2.15	.000		1.49	1.38	.018
Turning in work done by someone else as one's own.	1.27	1.89	.000		1.34	1.24	Ns
Using some type of physical or audible signaling to share information during an exam.	1.33	N/A			1.43	1.27	.002
Not citing resources used (plagiarism).	1.89	2.25	.000		2.18	1.78	.001
Having someone else check over a paper/assignment before turning it in.	4.51	3.80	.000		4.32	4.56	Ns
Citing sources in a bibliography that were not read or used.	2.90	2.61	.000		3.08	2.81	.016
Taking credit for full participation in a group project when a student did not do a fair share of the work.	2.08	2.61	.000		2.30	2.01	.041
Visiting a professor in his/her office to obtain a grade not deserved.	2.28	3.16	.000		2.62	2.14	.002
Having information programmed or saved in an electronic device (calculator, smart phone) when taking an exam.	1.58	2.26	.000		1.85	1.46	.000
Asking about the content of an exam from someone who has taken it.	2.97	3.21	.000		3.27	2.82	.000
Giving information about the content of an exam to someone who has not yet taken it.	2.75	3.11	.000		3.11	2.57	.000
Sharing screen shots taken of an exam.	1.54	N/A			1.67	1.46	.001

Table 1: Ethical Level of Academic Practices

*1 = Extremely Unethical, 5 = Not At All Unethical

** 1=Very Unethical, 5=Not At All Unethical

Reason	2006 Means*	2019 Means**	Sig.		Male Means	Female Means	Sig.
Difficulty of material, course, exam.	3.74	4.01	.000		1.98	1.99	Ns
The student does not have adequate time to devote to his/her studies.	3.34	3.49	.000		2.56	2.50	Ns
The student believes everyone does it, so he/she must be competitive.	2.59	2.98	.000		2.97	3.02	Ns
The student wants or needs a high grade.	3.90	4.27	.000		1.72	1.71	Ns
The student feels no one is hurt by the behavior.	3.23	3.77	.000		2.21	2.23	Ns
The student feels there is a low risk of getting caught or punished.	3.03	3.61	.000		2.49	2.34	Ns
The student is under considerable pressure from peers to engage in the behavior.	2.59	2.62	.000		3.46	3.35	Ns
The student feels the material, assignment, or task is irrelevant.	3.25	3.40	.000		2.51	2.68	Ns
The student feels the instructor is indifferent.	3.43	3.03	.000		2.82	3.04	Ns
The student had the time but did not prepare adequately.	3.70	3.92	.000		2.31	1.97	Ns
Engaging in the behavior was a challenge or a thrill for the student.	2.33	2.51	.000		3.54	3.44	Ns

Table 2: Likelihood of Reasons for Participation

*1 = Not at all likely, 5 = Very likely

** 1 = Extremely likely, 5 = Not at all likely (reverse scored for analysis)

Conclusions

Although not the scope of this study, the actual practices of college students with regard to academic dishonest behaviors would be helpful, as well as faculty perceptions of dishonest behaviors. That information, along with data currently collected, may help inform university policies and practices with regard to educating students on exactly what actions are considered to be academic dishonest, and how to avoid through better study habits, time management, etc., possibly in freshman orientation-type courses. Additional research is planned to better understand how dishonest behaviors are perceived and used with various types of students (e.g. international, age cohort, employed), and faculty.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:

Examining academic dishonest behaviors, comparing to past measures and adding measurements of new behaviors resulting from technological change, will allow faculty and students to become more aware of the ethical issues that arise, how and if there have been changes in academic dishonesty from past research, and allow for creating methods to educate students on how to prevent academic dishonesty.

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