

Methodological decisions in undertaking academic integrity policy analysis: Considerations for future research

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to share details of the methodological decisions regarding data collection that a researcher or research team may want to consider when undertaking a policy analysis.

Methods: We have undertaken a meticulous documentation of our decision-making processes throughout the research design process.

Results: We provide narrative evidence of what worked for us as a collaborative research team.

Implications: Understanding the decisions we made throughout our research design and implementation may help other research teams, particularly those working as virtual collaborators and/or those undertaking academic integrity policy analysis.

Keywords: *academic dishonesty, academic integrity, academic misconduct, Canada, collaboration, contract cheating, policy, post-secondary, qualitative, research methods*

Background

The purpose of this article is to share details of the methodological decisions regarding data collection that a researcher or research team may want to consider when undertaking a policy analysis. We have documented the process we used in our research on academic integrity policy, casting a specific lens on contract cheating. By doing so, we aim to assist others interested in undertaking similar work. Our study involved analyzing policy documents from 22 publicly-funded colleges in Ontario, Canada. Our research team consisted of a team of four individuals, all of whom had subject-related expertise in

academic integrity, and one of whom (Eaton) had previously published policy research. This work was presented at the 2019 International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) Conference (Thacker, Miron, Eaton, & Stoesz, 2019) and the Canadian Symposium on Academic Integrity (Thacker, Eaton, Stoesz, & Miron, 2019), and was subsequently developed into a full-length peer-reviewed journal article (Stoesz, Eaton, Miron, & Thacker, 2019). In this article, we expand on the methodological decisions we made as a research team regarding exactly how we conducted our study, so others may learn from what we did to conduct their own policy research.

Study Design Decisions

The study was originally conceptualized (by Eaton) in spring 2018 as a nation-wide project in which academic integrity policies from post-secondary institutions across Canada would be examined in a systematic way (Eaton, 2019). A call went out to experts across Canada to engage in an initial conference call to determine what levels of interest and commitment there would be to engage in such a project. Dr. Tracey Bretag, in a personal Skype interview with Sarah Elaine Eaton, offered advice on conducting and leading a policy analysis based on her experience in the Australian context (T. Bretag, personal communication, June 25, 2018).

Although the goal of a nation-wide project was admirable, it became evident during the consultation with Dr. Bretag that the scope of such an endeavour would be unwieldy. As such, the project was scaled back to focus on policies within a single Canadian province. During a call with a larger team, the group agreed to undertake an academic policy analysis of colleges in a single province: Ontario. The intention was that other groups would follow who would analyze policies at Ontario universities, as well as policies for post-secondary institutions in other regions of Canada. Although that idea sounded straightforward in the early stages, as the team who committed to undertake that piece of work, we quickly determined that we needed to make decisions about the research design itself, such as inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Determining Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Institutions

We engaged in discussions about whether to include publicly-funded colleges and/or privately-run colleges. The research team decided to focus our study on publicly-funded colleges exclusively. The decision to exclude privately-funded colleges was influenced, in part, by the fact that two research members (Miron and Thacker) were employed through public colleges in Ontario. The team unanimously concluded that this lived experience would add credibility to the study and depth of tacit knowledge about the public college

system. This proved to be useful throughout the study, as the professional experience and expertise of these two researchers added insight to our discussions.

A second factor that influenced our decision was the availability of documentation to help us develop a list of publicly-funded institutions (Government of Ontario, n.d.). Based on our decisions about the institutional inclusion criteria, we identified 24 publicly-funded colleges in Ontario, which became the initial set of institutions for our study. We also made an intentional decision to include colleges that were independent institutions, rather than subsidiaries of larger organizations.

Study Design Decisions Based on Language

The documents retrieved from 22 colleges were written in English and two were in French. Through the process of ongoing dialogue during the document retrieval process, the team made an intentional decision to limit our data extraction and analysis to the documents written in English, therefore limited to institutions where English was the primary language of instruction. The rationale for this is that none of the research team members thought they had sufficient language proficiency in French to adequately conduct research in that language. Our discussions addressed the possibility of inviting additional team members with native or near-native proficiency in French. Because we had agreed to engage in two independent cycles of coding the data, this would have meant the addition of a minimum of two people with adequate proficiency in French. As a result, the team ultimately decided to proceed with the established team, noting the restriction to English as a limitation of the study.

In retrospect, we could have made the decision around the limitation of language before we began our document retrieval, and if we were to conduct another policy analysis, we would feel empowered to do so from the beginning, based on our experience with this project.

Decisions Regarding What Tools to Use for Data Collection and Analysis

Our four team members were situated at different institutions, spread across Canada. Early on in our project we decided to use the Google suite of tools to help us engage in a project that was collaborative, but with tasks assigned to individuals that they could complete asynchronously and independently. We organized our work into a Google folder that included Google Sheets (spreadsheets) and Google Docs. At periodic (though irregular) points throughout the project, different team members individually downloaded copies of materials housed within Google Drive to ensure we had backups stored on local drives.

Decisions Regarding Data Collection

We engaged in two sequential cycles of data collection, which we also called document retrieval. It is important to understand that in policy research, the documents themselves are the data.

First Cycle Data Collection

The team set a timeline goal for collecting as much data as possible within a four-week period. Two team members (Eaton and Stoesz) engaged in the document retrieval process, and as they did so, they noted the exact dates when data was retrieved. The result was that we completed our first cycle of data collection between August 28 and September 22, 2018.

Searches for documents that described academic integrity (i.e., policies, procedures) were conducted through each college's web search function (typically powered by Google) or by inserting institution name and the words 'academic integrity policy' into Google's search bar.

In only one case, we were able to determine that the documents we were seeking were not publicly available. Once we had evidence of this, based on our initial search, a research team member reached out to the institution to request the documents so we could include them in our project. The institution obliged and we ended up with a complete set of documents from 22 publicly-funded colleges.

Second Cycle Data Collection

A second cycle of document retrieval occurred during data extraction when it was deemed necessary to retrieve documents mentioned in the primary documents; one additional document was retrieved.

Being open to the prospect of two cycles of data collection embedded some flexibility into our research design. Although we made a concerted effort to retrieve a complete set of documents the first time, we proceeded with the confidence to revisit our initial set of what we considered to be a relatively complete set of documents and add to it if we determined it was necessary, which we did.

Decisions Regarding Data Extraction and Coding

All documents were coded independently by at least two different coders. All four team members were assigned to extract the data from the documents of 11 colleges independently. Each coder was assigned as the primary coder for about half of the

documents, and as the secondary coder for the other half. In this way, the data extraction process for each document occurred twice.

Prior to data extraction, the research team agreed to extract information for five categories, including document type, title of document, specific language related to contact cheating (i.e., whether direct or indirect), policy principles, and the presence and clarity of contract cheating definitions. Category selection was informed by the recent literature (Bretag, Mahmud, East, Green, & James 2011; Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace et al., 2011; Grigg, 2010). As part of our collaborative analysis process, all four team members committed to reading the foundational research materials identified above. We debriefed and discussed the readings during team meetings. This allowed us to develop our individual and collective understanding of policy analysis research. Our category selection was made collaboratively during our research team meetings to support consistency and quality assurance throughout the research process.

Next, we calculated the level of agreement in our data extraction for each category. Agreement for the identification of document type and presence of specific definitions was the highest (100%) and was the lowest for coding policy principles (68.2%) identified within the documents. Disagreements between coders were reviewed and resolved by consensus.

Later we discussed how in-depth our analysis should be and then decided to dig deeper in our data extraction process. In the end, we made decisions to limit further analysis due to several factors including time and word limits for publications. Ideas for expanding and extending the research ultimately ended up in the discussion section of the manuscript.

Developing an Effective Research Team

In addition to methodological and study design decisions, the team gained additional insights through the collaborative research process that we share here, with the intention of benefitting future research teams.

Research Team Size and Composition

In the early stages of conceptualizing the study, Eaton put out a general interest call to assess the level of interest in undertaking a national policy study. During a personal interview conducted via Skype, Dr. Tracey Bretag offered some cautions and insights that influenced the size and composition of the research team (T. Bretag, personal communication, June 25, 2018). Bretag recommended keeping the team small (a maximum of six people) and assigning clearly defined tasks to each team member. Her second

recommendation was to set clear expectations. This included articulating that being a member of the research team would involve active and hands-on work and not simply advising or offering opinions about the project.

As a result, the initial group who expressed interest was refined to a team of four (the authors of this article) who committed to engaging in the research work for the duration of the project. In the call for participation, the project lead (Eaton) had estimated that a commitment of approximately 10 hours per week would be likely, and asked people to invest that time on a consistent basis to complete the project. As a result of clarifying expectations early on, all those who committed to undertake the college policy analysis remained constant throughout the project, with all research team members actively engaged throughout the entire process.

Developing Trust and Team Identity

When we began our collaboration, our research team was virtual, with each team member from a different institution contributing individually to the collective. It is not uncommon for members of virtual teams to be “geographically and organizationally dispersed” (Greenberg, Greenberg, & Antonucci, 2007, p. 325). In our case, we were spread across three provinces and three time zones.

We developed trust and relationships with one another throughout the project, though in retrospect, we perhaps ought not to have taken this for granted. Greenberg et al. (2007) note that challenges can arise when team members are dispersed. “There are no conversations at the water cooler, over coffee, or during lunch that help teams form a collective identity and group norms” (p. 327).

The group informally named themselves “Team College”, lending a subtle but powerful identity and sense of belonging to the research team. We would add that the research team naming was not a requirement and nor did we spend much time on it. The naming was informal and unplanned, though it slowly helped us to develop a sense of cohesion and team identity. In retrospect, this proved helpful, given that only two of the four team members had met in person prior to undertaking this project.

For the duration of the majority of our project, the team members never saw each other in person. It was not until the knowledge mobilization phase of the project that team members met face-to-face. The first time the entire research team met for the first time was at the International Center for Academic Integrity 2019 conference in New Orleans, LA, where we presented our findings (Thacker, Miron, Eaton, & Stoesz, 2019).

Success in working as a research team was largely dependent on the team members' commitment to open and transparent discussion throughout the data gathering and writing phases of the project. The collegial approach facilitated each researcher's understanding of the extracted data and promoted the ability to safely provide writing critique to support excellence. We found that ongoing dialogue fostered a sense that we were learning together throughout the process. This proved to be important to facilitate each researcher's understanding of the data that was to be extracted, how we were going to undertake the coding, and how wanted to analyze our data.

The chemistry of this team facilitated drafting of the various sections (i.e., writing without expectation of perfection) and comfort with suggesting changes in interpretation of the data and how the writing flowed. We set deadlines and did our best to meet them, but we were also charitable and forgiving with one another at moments when deliverables were delayed.

Commitment to Regular Meetings

At the onset of the work, the research team committed to regular online meetings. We relied mainly on telephone conference calls for our meeting, but occasionally used Adobe Connect, Skype, and Zoom to facilitate synchronous communications. Meetings were scheduled using digital calendaring tools and each person was responsible for ensuring the correct meeting time was in her personal calendar based on her own time zone. Occasionally we engaged in communications to confirm meeting times and dates, given we operated across three time zones.

One person acted as a scribe for each meeting (usually Thacker). Having a scribe to take meeting notes supported seamless and clear communication from meeting to meeting. At the end of each meeting, tasks were assigned to each team member with agreement that these tasks would be completed before the next meeting. An ability to reach out to individual research group members between set meetings allowed for necessary discussion in completing tasks and kept the momentum for the project alive. Meeting notes were archived in our collaborative Google Drive folder. These notes supported knowledge mobilization of the project, such as conference presentations and article writing.

Building in Milestone Goals

We found that concrete goals helped us to stay focused and catalyzed our work. For example, we used conference proposal deadlines and presentations to set goals for our project, so we would be prepared to present our findings. All team members committed to

meeting the milestone goals. Over time, the more goals we met, the further the project advanced.

Conclusions

As we reflect on this project, we realize that our collaboration may have been one of the first of its kind in Canada for academic integrity research, as our country has been lacking in large-scale collaborative research projects (Eaton & Edino, 2018). We came together as four researchers from different institutions across three provinces who committed to undertaking and completing this work. This was an unfunded project, and yet, it still resulted in three peer reviewed outputs: two conference presentations and one journal article, in addition to this practitioner article. Our project provides evidence that multi-institutional, cross-provincial collaborations are not only possible — they can be successful and lay the groundwork for future projects.

At the time of this writing, two other groups have taken on additional pieces of the larger national project. One group is examining academic integrity policies of Ontario universities and another is looking at Western Canadian universities.

As these collaborations continue to develop and produce peer-reviewed research outputs, they will help to establish a strong foundation of larger scale research on academic integrity in Canada. One key to ensuring the quality of such research is to document and share methodological processes and decisions so others can build their research skills and their understanding of what is required for successful collaborations on a larger scale. Collaborations such as ours provide an opportunity for researchers and academic integrity practitioners to realize and promote a shared approach to academic integrity. A shared understanding and responsibility to academic integrity is critical to the development of a culture of integrity within and across institutions.

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