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Student Perspectives of Academic Integrity in an Online Environment: A Pilot Study

In looking for people to hire, look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first one, the other two will kill you.

-Warren Buffet

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ABSTRACT

The March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused many universities to move face-to-face and hybrid courses to completely online formats, resulting in increased challenges to academic integrity. Although academic misconduct and academic dishonesty among students is nothing new, the literature is inconclusive as to whether there is more cheating in online classes than in face-to-face classes. However, online education has made it much more difficult for instructors to detect instances of cheating. The purpose of this study is to identify student perceptions and attitudes regarding violations of academic integrity, particularly in online courses. An Internet survey link was sent to all students enrolled at a southwestern university.

Keywords: online, academic integrity, safeguards, technology

INTRODUCTION

Online education has grown at a rapid pace in the last few years as more and more universities develop programs to reach the online community and to offset declines in on-campus attendance. In some cases, this has allowed universities to reach entirely new market segments. The movement to an online environment has also brought with it the possibility of a decrease in academic integrity of courses as many online websites offer "help" with homework, term papers and even taking complete courses for students. This research addresses student attitudes toward these issues through a survey of students at a regional university in the southwest.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic integrity has received a great deal of interest in the educational literature, both for universities and K-12 schools, (e.g., Silver & Stafford, 2017). Incidents such as the Atlanta school cheating scandal (Blinder, 2015) raise awareness in the general public, but teachers, administrators, and students are aware that cheating is an everyday problem. According to McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino (2012) over the 13-year period from 2002 to 2015, in a survey of 71,300 students, 68% of undergraduates admitted to cheating in some form as did 43% of graduate students. In the same survey, 95% of high school students reported they had either cheated on a test, plagiarized, or copied homework (McCabe, et al., 2012).

While there are numerous definitions of academic integrity (e.g., East & Donnelly, 2012; Turner & Beemsterboer, 2003), the International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI] defines academic integrity as the ethical principles that guide academic practice. ICAI breaks down "academic integrity" into *academic misconduct*, and *academic dishonesty*. Academic misconduct is a violation of ethical conduct (e.g., intentional cheating or plagiarism) while academic dishonesty refers to behaviors that lead to the misrepresentation of scholarly work (ICAI, 2015). It is this definition of academic integrity, along with the concepts of misconduct and dishonesty we use in this paper.

Academic dishonesty includes a number of behaviors that include such things as unauthorized collaboration on homework, cheating during exams, plagiarism, and purchasing term papers. Collaboration on homework is a form of collusion where students work together or share information about an assignment and then present it as an individual effort. Plagiarism includes, at the low end, improperly citing another person's work and, at the high end, completely incorporating someone else's work into an assignment and presenting it as one's own work. Purchasing term papers is a form of "contract cheating," particular to online classes and is discussed below (Atkinson, Nau & Symons, 2016).

When asked why they cheat, students often say, in one form or another, "It depends." Richards (2012) in his work on K-12 cheating made the following observation:

"*Perhaps the most alarming news is that students say their cheating is contextual: based on the teacher, the assignment, or their overall workload. Decisions appear to be based on the extent to which the student can rationalize cheating in a given circumstance. Essentially, the academic integrity scale is a sliding one given the situation at hand, rather than a matter of a person's sense of right or wrong (p. 97*)."

Two other factors may contribute to cheating: culture and English language proficiency. Many foreign students, when entering U. S. universities, experience culture shock and need to learn Western academic mores. Some time may need to be set aside for intercultural learning on the part of the student and the instructor.

Many universities in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the U.K. require English language proficiency. Yet, students arrive at English speaking universities with a variety of English language skills. This lack of language skill may cause inadvertent plagiarism through misunderstanding or, if the language skills are deficient enough, as the only way to pass the assignment. The solution is not to

punish the students but for the institution to have sufficient language support services (Atkinson, et al., 2016).

The literature is inconsistent as to whether there is more cheating in online classes than in face-to-face classes (Lanier, 2006). While there may be no difference in cheating incidents in different delivery methods, online education has made it much more difficult for instructors to detect academic dishonesty (Malesky, Baley, & Crow, 2016). As of 2016, 6.3 million university students in the United States were taking an online course (Freidman, 2018).

Several methods of detecting online cheating include remote proctoring of exams, requiring students to prove their identity, and submitting students' written work through such links as Turnitin or SafeAssign to detect plagiarism. Yet, these methods have their limitations. A new way to get around these limitations is to engage a company online to take the course for the student. This is known as "contract cheating" (Atkinson, Nau, & Symons, 2016). One particular problem with contract cheating is that the companies that offer these services submit assignments of high-quality original content and are not detected ty Turnitin and SafeAssign (Malesky, et al., 2016).

In a recent study, Malesky, et al. (2016) established an online introduction to psychology course. Both the instructors, who were experienced online teachers, and the students knew the course was not for credit. The students were blind to the instructors just as in any online course. Students were instructed to cheat and there was a reward of $200 if the instructors did not catch them.

One student contacted an online company that, for $917, would take the course for him and guarantee him an "A." This included tests, papers, and discussion boards. One glitch was that the student was required to make a live presentation on Go-To-Meeting with PowerPoint slides. The company sent the slides to the student along with a script he was to read verbatim. The student received an "A" on the presentation.

Other methods of detecting cheating were used by the instructors. For the mid-term and final, the student took 46 minutes and 37 minutes to take an hour-long 50-question test, which was not considered unreasonably fast. The student's written work was run through Turnitin and instructors also did Google searches of the student's work. In the end, neither instructor had any reason to believe the student had cheated (Malesky, et al., 2016).

Cheating does not begin in college. As noted above, in one study 95% of high school students admitted to some form of cheating. An emphasis on grades and high stakes testing for college admissions contribute to this trend (Price-Mitchell, 2015). The solution to the problem of cheating is not an easy one and views differ on how to address it. There is even a difference in attitudes about whether academic integrity can be taught (Lofstrom, et al. 2015).

In a survey of university professors in New Zealand and Finland, Lofstrom, et al. (2015) found that while professors agreed that academic integrity was more than following rules, they disagreed on whose role it was to teach academic integrity or even whether the underlying values of academic integrity could be taught at all.

Potential employers are also concerned about the integrity of online courses. A study done in 2018 found that 41.6% of CPAs would let an online degree impact their decision to hire an employee (Richards, Stevens, Silver, Metts, 2018). As part of this study the authors conducted interviews with CPAs and found that many CPA firms are now giving entrance exams to evaluate new hires. This concern has come from CPA firms' experience with hiring students with accounting degrees who have very limited knowledge of accounting. Also, in this study, the authors learned from CPAs that they viewed the CPA exam as a leveling tool for accounting degrees. The CPA exam is a nationwide exam given in a secure testing environment. With a CPA license, employers were not concerned with online learning due to the uniformity of the exam and the security and identification controls in place for testing.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, an Internet survey link was sent to all students who were enrolled in online courses at a southwestern university. The list included about 2300 students. The survey had been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Vice President of Academic Affairs prior to sending it to the student body. Respondents were informed of the nature of the survey and given a definition of academic integrity to assure cognizance of the survey intent. Two hundred seventy-one students responded, yielding a 11.7% response rate. The survey instrument used in this study was adapted from a questionnaire developed at the University of Central Florida. (http://www.facultysenate.ucf.edu/committees/Steering/2005-2006/Minutes/1-19-2006/Academic%20Integrity%20Survey.pdf)

Respondent characteristics were as follows: (1) 86% were juniors, seniors or graduate students; (2) 29% were in the School of Arts and Sciences, 45% were from the School of Business, and 22% were from the School of Education; (3) 65% were female and 35% were male.

For purposes of this study, academic integrity was defined as follows: Academic integrity is the moral code or ethical policy of academia. This includes values such as avoidance of cheating or plagiarism; maintenance of academic standards; honesty and rigor in research and academic publishing. (https://oaa.osu.edu/academic-integrity-and-misconduct)

SPSS software was used to analyse the resulting data. The analysis produced means, medians, and percentages where appropriate with the results show in the tables below.

In addition to the survey instrument, students were asked to answer two open-ended questions: "What Role do you think faculty should play in promoting academic honesty and/or controlling cheating in their courses?" and, "Do you think an honor code would be effective at this university?" Thirteen students responded to the first question and fourteen responded to the second question.

FINDINGS - SURVEY

In the middle of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in most campuses across the US to close for face-to-face and hybrid/blended courses. This is reflected in Exhibit 1, as it shows that 31% of the respondents in this survey had never taken an online course before the current semester. This means that these students had no experience in online education and the challenges to academic integrity that ensue with such courses. Some of the University's programs

were already 100% online and therefore, were unaffected by the changes involved in an online format.

Exhibit 1: Number of Online Courses Taken Before the Current Semester

None	81	31%
1-3	59	22%
4-6	54	20%
7 or more	**74**	**28%**
Total	268	

However, they were all aware of the need for academic integrity and had specific actions that they felt would be taken by the instructor if a student cheated on a major test or assignment in their course. These results are shown in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: If you or another student was caught cheating on a major test or assignment in your course, how likely your instructor would do any of the following:

	Very Unlikely	**Unlikely**	**Neutral**	**Likely**	**Very Likely**	**Responses**
Reprimand or warn the student.	12 5%	7 3%	22 8%	66 25%	**156** **59%**	263
Lower the student's grade.	10 4%	3 1%	29 11%	79 30%	**142** **54%**	263
Fail the student on the test or assignment.	3 1%	9 3%	23 9%	84 32%	**144** **55%**	263
Give the student a failing grade for the course.	18 7%	24 9%	**76** **29%**	69 26%	76 29%	263
Report the student to the department chair or Director of Student Conduct.	11 4%	14 5%	65 25%	71 27%	**103** **39%**	264
Do nothing/ignore the incident.	**173** **66%**	39 15%	22 8%	7 3%	21 8%	262

When asked about their observances of student cheating, most students reported seeing few instances of cheating. The most common forms of cheating reported were 1) working on an assignment with another student when it was supposed to individual effort, 2) getting answers from someone who already taken an exam, and 3) copying some material without footnoting it in the paper. These results are shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3: In the last three years, how often the following behaviors have been done or observed in classes:

	Never	Once	More Than Once	Responses	Occurrence Frequency
Copying from another student during a test or exam without his or her knowledge.	**236 89%**	17 6%	12 5%	265	29 11%
Copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge.	**226 86%**	26 10%	11 4%	263	37 14%
Using unpermitted crib notes (or cheat sheet) during a test.	**231 88%**	18 7%	15 6%	264	33 13%
Getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken the test.	211 80%	31 12%	23 9%	265	54 21%
Helping someone else cheat on a test	**229 87%**	20 8%	14 5%	263	34 13%
Altering a graded test or exam and submitting it for additional credit.	**255 97%**	5 2%	2 1%	262	7 3%
Copying material, almost word for word, from any source and turning it in as one's own work.	**232 88%**	23 9%	10 4%	265	23 13%
Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography.	**251 95%**	8 3%	4 2%	263	12 5%
Turning in as one's own, work done by someone else.	**230 87%**	25 10%	8 3%	263	33 13%
Receiving substantial, unpermitted help on an assignment.	**227 86%**	24 9%	14 5%	265	38 14%
Working on an assignment with other students when the instructor asked for individual work.	**205 77%**	36 14%	24 9%	265	60 23%
Copying a few sentences of material without footnoting them in the paper.	**211 80%**	33 12%	21 8%	265	53 20%
Writing or providing a paper for another student.	**238 91%**	11 4%	12 5%	261	23 9%
Turning in a paper either purchased or plagiarized, in large part, from a term paper mill or website.	**252 95%**	7 3%	5 2%	264	12 5%
Using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date.	**237 89%**	16 6%	12 5%	265	28 11%

Plagiarizing a paper in any way using the Internet as a source.	**230 87%**	21 8%	13 5%	264	34 13%
In a course requiring computer work, copying a friend's program rather than doing one's own.	**248 94%**	8 3%	7 3%	263	15 6%
Falsifying lab or research data.	**245 93%**	13 5%	5 2%	263	18 7%

When respondents were asked what incidents with student cheating, they had experienced in the last three years, the most frequently occurring issue was related to plagiarism. These results are shown in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4: Most Frequently Occurring Issues Experienced in the Last 3 Years

	Never	Once	More than Once
Copying from another student during a test or exam without his or her knowledge.	40 59%	10 15%	18 26%
Copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge	52 76%	9 13%	7 10%
Using unpermitted crib notes (or cheat sheet) during a test	46 69%	13 19%	8 12%
Getting questions or answer from someone who has already taken the test	43 62%	12 17%	14 20%
Helping someone else cheat on a test	50 74%	7 10%	11 16%
Altering a graded test or exam and submitting it for additional credit	64 96%	2 3%	1 1%
Copying material, almost word for word, from any source and turning it in as one's own work	11 16%	12 17%	46 67%
Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography	50 74%	9 13%	9 13%
Turning in as one's own, work done by someone else	26 38%	12 18%	30 44%
Receiving substantial, unpermitted help on an assignment	40 60%	10 15%	17 25%
Working on an assignment with other students when the instructor asked for individual work	40 60%	7 10%	20 30%
Copying a few sentences of material without footnoting them in the paper	18 26%	10 15%	40 59%
Writing or providing a paper for another student	54 79%	7 10%	7 10%
Turning in a paper either purchased or plagiarized, in large part, from a term paper mill or website	40 60%	10 15%	17 25%
Using false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date	35 51%	7 10%	26 38%
Plagiarizing a paper in any way using the Internet as a source	18 26%	10 15%	40 59%
In a course requiring computer work, copying a friend's program rather than doing one's own	50 76%	3 5%	13 20%
Falsifying lab or research data	62 94%	2 3%	2 3%

Respondents were then asked if they felt like the increased availability of technology threatened academic integrity and 54% responded yes. They were also asked about what types of safeguards were used in their courses to prevent cheating. Their responses are shown in Exhibit 5 below. As noted in the findings, the most frequently used safeguard is information placed in the syllabus about cheating and plagiarism, followed by using tools like SafeAssign/Turnitin, and using a lockdown browser for quizzes and exams. They majority (63%) also felt that an honor code would be an effective tool in maintaining academic integrity.

Exhibit 5: Safeguards faculty employ to reduce cheating in courses:

None. don't not use any special safeguards in my courses.	8	3%
Use Internet tools like SafeAssign or Turnitin to confirm plagiarism.	190	73%
Provide information in syllabus about cheating/plagiarism.	**233**	**89%**
Change exams regularly.	103	39%
Use different versions of each exam.	144	55%
Discuss their views on the importance of honest and academic integrity with your students.	167	64%
Remind students periodically about they obligations under your school's academic integrity policy.	152	58%
Tell students about methods used to detect and deter cheating in their course.	114	44%
Utilize Lockdown Browser Software or other monitoring programs during online tests/exams.	206	79%
Set times for online tests/exams.	185	71%
Other	13	5%

FINDINGS – OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Student answers to the question, "What role do you think faculty should play in promoting academic honesty and/or controlling cheating in their courses?" focused on five issues. These are listed with their number of responses per issue in Exhibit 6. The number of comments total more than the thirteen students who responded because several students addressed more than one issue.

Exhibit 6: What Role do you think faculty should play in promoting academic honesty and /or controlling cheating in their courses?

Issue	Number of Responses
Faculty should encourage honesty	2
Faculty should have clear penalties for cheating	4
Faculty should not allow a focus on cheating to interfere with their teaching	4
Faculty can't stop students from cheating and students who cheat only hurt themselves.	4

These responses indicate an almost even split between those who think faculty can and should stop cheating and those who believe that those students who want to cheat will, despite any announced sanctions.

Of the fourteen students who responded to the question about the effectiveness of an honor code, nine believed an honor code would help control cheating and five believed an honor code would have no effect. Those who supported an honor code believed that by signing the code, a student would feel guilt or shame if they violated what they had signed. Those who believed the honor code would have no effect pointed out that students who will cheat will also sign a document with no intent to abide by it.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One interesting observation on the findings of this research is that while most respondents indicated that they felt that the increased availability of technology threatened academic integrity of courses, the most common safeguard to thwart cheating was a statement in the syllabus about cheating. In other words, the increased availability of technology was seen as a threat to course integrity and yet available technology used to identify cheating was not the most frequently mentioned tool used to maintain academic integrity.

This would lead to a conclusion that the respondents were aware of the issue of integrity and knew faculty were concerned about it by the use of various tools to discourage cheating. Hopefully, this awareness, in itself, would be a hindrance to cheating by students.

However, as noted in the literature review, the experiment by Malesky, et al. (2016) resulted in the instructors being unable to detect the company that took the course for the student and the student received an A on the presentation required for the course.

The responses from the open-ended questions indicated that students are concerned about cheating but differ on ways to address the problem. While the number of responses was small, it was somewhat surprising that four students emphasized that faculty should not let a focus on cheating interfere with teaching the course material.

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