

To Pass At Any Cost: Addressing Academic Integrity Violations

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Abstract

Academic integrity has been an issue in academia for decades. The fact that academic integrity violations occur is nothing new, however the ways in which it is occurring has changed. Students are more tech-savvy and are finding new and “creative” ways to cheat. This paper will explore the student and faculty responses at a small private university and compare them to national findings. Implications will be discussed with respect to policy making and cultural change.

Introduction

While not a new problem on college campuses, cheating has reached epidemic proportions in recent times. In 1990 the American Council on Higher Education reported that cheating was increasing and that the trend was expected to continue (Nowell & Laufer, 1997). Studies over the past 15 years have confirmed this trend, revealing that up to 75 percent of college students had cheated sometime during their college careers, many on a regular basis (Gallant & Drinan, 2006; Chapman, et. al, 2004; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001; Koch, 2000; Mercuri, 1998). The rapid growth of computer technologies and their application in education has provided unethical students with new tools for their cheating activities (Kisamore, 2007; Strom & Strom, 2007). There have been numerous cases of students using the Internet to copy unattributed excerpts from web sites and this trend is increasing at an alarming rate according to the Center for Academic Integrity (Etter, et. al., 2006, McCabe, 2008). Back in 1999, 117 freshman students at the University of Edinburgh were implicated in the largest computer cheating investigation in the United Kingdom. The students were discovered to have used email to exchange test answers during an examination. By using plagiarism-detection software and examining internal email records, university officials verified students had transmitted answers to each other (Wilson, 1999). Since then, there have been many others across academia (Hutton, 2006; McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). However, for each of the well-publicized cases, there are countless others that never reach the press as colleges and universities do not want to publicly acknowledge that the problem exists nor bring negative attention to their institutions. This has led to many universities adopting policies or Honor Codes in an effort to combat the problem of rampant cheating (Melgoza & Smith, 2008; McCabe & Pavela, 2004; Park, 2004; McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2002). Academic integrity violations are actually part of a much larger problem across the nation, one that often has its roots in high school; students bring these attitudes with them to college (Strom & Strom, 2007). This paper will investigate the results of a national survey given to students and faculty at a small private university and how they compare to other schools across the country. Pedagogical implications as well as some suggestions for combating the problem will be discussed.

Methodology

In an attempt to gauge the extent of academic integrity violations occurring on campus, a survey was administered to students and faculty at a small private university in the Southeast U.S. Approximately 1100 students filled out the student survey and 42 faculty members completed the faculty survey. The response rates were approximately 40% for both groups. The paper surveys were filled out anonymously and students were encouraged to add comments in two open-ended questions at the end of the survey.

The surveys were sent to the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University where they were analyzed and compared to national statistics.

Results

Since many students claim that they were unaware of the academic integrity policy when accused of an academic integrity violation, a question was addressed to refute this claim. 91% of the students responded that they were, in fact, aware of the school’s academic integrity policy, with only 9% stating that they were not. This might be the result of a last-chance effort to avoid blame for the violation or possibly it is this small percentage of students who are actually doing the violations. In an effort to get a better handle on the extent of the problem students were asked to complete a survey in which they were asked various questions about academic integrity and their views on the frequency of its occurrence.

Students were first asked to rate the academic environment on several factors using a five-point Likert scale from “very low” to “very high”. These included the severity of penalties for cheating, student understanding of the policies concerning cheating, student support of these policies, faculty support of these policies, and the effectiveness of them.

<i>How would you rate your campus on the following factors:</i>	Very Low		Medium		Very High
	The severity of penalties for cheating?	1%	5%	22%	42%
Student understanding of campus policies concerning cheating?	3%	14%	37%	33%	14%
The faculty’s understanding of these policies?	0%	1%	18%	41%	40%
Student support of these policies?	2%	10%	47%	26%	16%
Faculty support of these policies?	1%	1%	21%	40%	38%
The effectiveness of these policies?	4%	14%	30%	36%	17%

Table 1. Academic Environment: Small Private University

The results indicate that almost three-quarters of the students feel that the current penalties for cheating are severe, yet student support of these policies is about 40% compared to 78% for faculty. Slightly more than half of the students find these policies effective. This compares favorably with national results (see Table 2).

<i>How would you rate your campus on the following factors:</i>	Very Low		Medium		Very High
	The severity of penalties for cheating?	2%	5%	27%	42%
Student understanding of campus policies concerning cheating?	5%	17%	34%	31%	11%
The faculty’s understanding of these policies?	1%	3%	18%	42%	35%
Student support of these policies?	3%	12%	41%	32%	9%
Faculty support of these policies?	1%	3%	20%	42%	32%
The effectiveness of these policies?	5%	14%	36%	30%	11%

Table 2. Academic Environment: Nationwide

Analysis of these findings suggest that students nationwide rate the penalties for cheating as high, generally understand the policies, but do not support them to a large degree. This may be the result of cultural differences between students and faculty regarding what is appropriate. Students, having grown

up with technology, view the Internet as “public domain” and do not realize that when they “cut and paste” they are actually plagiarizing. Their culture of social networking and sharing makes such behaviors rational in their eyes. Many also lack formal training on how to cite sources as high schools often do not require them to write formal papers to the extent that universities do. Education on the policies may be the most important and beneficial activity to instill awareness and prevent violations.

<i>How frequently do you think the following occur on your campus?</i>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Very Seldom</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Often</u>	<u>Very Often</u>
Plagiarism on written assignments	3%	19%	41%	30%	7%
Inappropriate sharing in group assignments	1%	12%	39%	36%	12%
Cheating during tests/examinations	4%	36%	37%	18%	5%
Falsifying lab data	10%	32%	41%	17%	2%
Falsifying research data	9%	31%	42%	15%	4%

Table 3. Frequency of Violation: Small Private University

<i>How frequently do you think the following occur on your campus?</i>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Very Seldom</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Often</u>	<u>Very Often</u>
Plagiarism on written assignments	2%	18%	44%	28%	9%
Inappropriate sharing in group assignments	1%	12%	32%	37%	18%
Cheating during tests/examinations	4%	31%	36%	20%	8%
Falsifying lab data	5%	32%	39%	18%	6%
Falsifying research data	6%	34%	40%	15%	5%

Table 4. Frequency of Violation: Nationwide

With respect to the frequency of academic integrity violations and the type of violation, students were asked to assess the frequency that they occur on campus. Table 3 presents the results for our small private university and table 4 illustrates the nationwide response. Interestingly, there is little variation from the nationwide norm, suggesting that the problem occurs with equal frequency across the country.

Next, students were asked whether they suspected other students of cheating or were sure it occurred. Approximately 20% suspected it or witnessed it on a regular basis but 50% never saw or suspected it. Regardless of the rate of occurrence, over 95% never reported another student for cheating.

Perhaps the more telling statistic is that more than three-quarters of the students would probably not report and incident of cheating if they witnessed it and more than 80% would not report a close friend.

Thus, while many students acknowledge that cheating is occurring on campus and some have even witnessed it, it has largely gone unreported. This is somewhat understandable given the current generational culture in which students don't rat out each other even when they see something unethical occurring (Oblinger, 2003). Could it also be that students themselves are engaging in the same behavior and do not want to report what they too are doing? The results suggest that this might be true.

Students have different views on what constitutes cheating and what is acceptable behavior. We would like to ask you some questions about specific behaviors that some students might consider cheating.

	In the past year, how often have you engaged in any of the following behaviors?				How serious do you consider this form of cheating?			
	0	1	2+	NA	N	T	M	S
Turning in work done by someone else.	86%	9%	3%	2%	10%	15%	28%	48%
Working on an assignment with others when the instructor asked for individual work.	53%	20%	24%	4%	20%	42%	29%	10%
Receiving unpermitted help on an assignment.	70%	14%	12%	4%	20%	40%	30%	10%
Writing or providing a paper for another student.	89%	4%	5%	3%	10%	5%	24%	61%
Providing a previously graded assignment to someone to submit as their own work.	85%	11%	4%	1%	7%	12%	25%	57%
Sharing an assignment with another student so they have an example to work from.	39%	20%	41%	1%	45%	30%	15%	10%
Getting Q/A from someone who has taken test	63%	18%	19%	1%	12%	24%	31%	33%
In a course requiring computer work, copying a friend's program rather than doing your own.	70%	6%	4%	20%	11%	15%	28%	46%
Helping someone else cheat on a test.	84%	12%	3%	1%	8%	5%	24%	63%
Fabricating or falsifying lab data.	82%	1%	1%	16%	10%	19%	31%	41%
Fabricating or falsifying research data.	85%	5%	1%	10%	10%	16%	30%	44%
Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography.	84%	5%	7%	5%	12%	29%	27%	33%
Copying from another student during a test or exam <u>without</u> his or her knowing it.	92%	3%	4%	2%	9%	3%	18%	71%
Copying from another student during a test <u>with</u> his or her knowledge.	87%	9%	2%	3%	8%	4%	21%	68%
Copying a few sentences of material from a written source without footnoting them in a paper.	58%	24%	17%	1%	14%	35%	29%	22%
Turning in a paper obtained in large part from a free term paper "mill" or website	91%	4%	1%	4%	11%	3%	27%	60%
Turning in a paper obtained in large part from a paper "mill"/website that charged for this info.	94%	3%	0%	4%	11%	4%	21%	64%
Copying a few sentences from an Internet source without footnoting them in a paper.	62%	22%	15%	1%	18%	28%	28%	26%
Using unpermitted crib notes during a test.	88%	8%	3%	1%	9%	6%	24%	60%
Copying material almost word for word from a written source and turning it in as your own work.	93%	3%	3%	1%	9%	6%	22%	63%
Altering graded test to try to get additional credit.	92%	4%	0%	4%	14%	6%	25%	54%
Turning in a paper copied from another student.	95%	3%	1%	1%	10%	11%	23%	57%
Using false excuse to obtain extension on due date.	83%	9%	5%	3%	21%	27%	26%	26%
Hiding library or course materials.	96%	1%	0%	4%	32%	23%	15%	30%
Damaging library or course materials.	95%	0%	0%	5%	39%	15%	18%	28%
Cheating on a computer based test.	87%	3%	2%	8%	13%	7%	27%	53%
Using computer technology to cheat on exam.	92%	0%	1%	7%	12%	7%	22%	59%
Cheating on a test in any other way.	77%	0%	1%	23%	23%	5%	13%	59%
Cheating on a written assignment in any other way.	77%	0%	0%	23%	23%	3%	20%	54%

Table 6. Student Views on Cheating: Small Private University

Students have different views on what constitutes cheating and what is acceptable behavior. We would like to ask you some questions about specific behaviors that some students might consider cheating.

	In the past year, how often have <u>you</u> engaged in any of the following behaviors?				How serious do you consider this form of cheating?			
	0 = Never 1 = Once 2 = More than once NA = Not applicable				N = Not cheating T = Trivial cheating M = Moderate cheating S = Serious cheating			
	0	1	2+	NA	N	T	M	S
Turning in work done by someone else.	88%	6%	3%	2%	7%	15%	25%	54%
Working on an assignment with others when the instructor asked for individual work.	59%	18%	19%	4%	18%	45%	28%	9%
Receiving unpermitted help on an assignment.	72%	12%	10%	6%	20%	39%	29%	12%
Writing or providing a paper for another student.	91%	5%	2%	2%	6%	6%	17%	71%
Providing a previously graded assignment to someone to submit as their own work.	89%	6%	4%	2%	6%	9%	25%	61%
Sharing an assignment with another student so they have an example to work from.	36%	23%	40%	2%	50%	30%	15%	5%
Getting Q/A from someone who has taken test	63%	17%	18%	2%	13%	25%	29%	34%
In a course requiring computer work, copying a friend's program rather than doing your own.	64%	4%	2%	29%	6%	11%	28%	54%
Helping someone else cheat on a test.	88%	6%	4%	2%	5%	6%	16%	73%
Fabricating or falsifying lab data.	67%	7%	4%	22%	8%	20%	32%	40%
Fabricating or falsifying research data.	73%	4%	2%	21%	6%	13%	33%	48%
Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography.	79%	9%	4%	8%	8%	25%	32%	35%
Copying from another student during a test or exam without his or her knowing it.	87%	7%	4%	2%	4%	4%	12%	79%
Copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge.	89%	6%	4%	2%	5%	5%	13%	77%
Copying a few sentences of material from a written source without footnoting them in a paper.	58%	20%	18%	3%	11%	34%	34%	21%
Turning in a paper obtained in large part from a free term paper "mill" or website	92%	3%	2%	4%	6%	7%	20%	67%
Turning in a paper obtained in large part from a paper "mill"/website that charged for this info.	94%	1%	1%	5%	6%	6%	20%	69%
Copying a few sentences from an Internet source without footnoting them in a paper.	61%	20%	16%	3%	11%	33%	32%	24%
Using unpermitted crib notes during a test.	89%	5%	3%	2%	5%	7%	19%	69%
Copying material almost word for word from a written source and turning it in as your own work.	89%	6%	3%	2%	5%	6%	17%	72%
Altering graded test to try to get additional credit.	93%	2%	1%	4%	8%	7%	18%	68%
Turning in a paper copied from another student.	91%	5%	2%	3%	5%	8%	29%	58%
Using false excuse to obtain extension on due date.	81%	11%	6%	2%	15%	27%	30%	27%
Hiding library or course materials.	91%	2%	1%	6%	26%	20%	25%	29%
Damaging library or course materials.	93%	1%	1%	6%	33%	14%	20%	33%
Cheating on a test in any other way.	76%	2%	2%	20%	18%	9%	15%	58%
Cheating on a written assignment in any other way.	76%	2%	2%	20%	18%	12%	17%	53%

Table 7. Student Views on Cheating: Nationwide

When asked about the cheating, student had specific views about the extent to which cheating occurs, the academic process, the difficulty and amount of coursework and assessments as learning tools.

How strongly do you agree with the following statements?					
	Disagree strongly			Agree strongly	
Cheating is a serious problem here.	12%	36%	37%	11%	4%
Our academic honor process is fair and impartial.	4%	12%	50%	29%	6%
Students should be held responsible for monitoring the academic integrity of other students.	22%	37%	20%	20%	1%
Faculty change exams/assignments on a regular basis.	6%	10%	24%	45%	16%
The amount of course work is reasonable.	3%	14%	7%	65%	12%
Difficulty of exams/assignments is appropriate.	3%	9%	10%	65%	12%
Assessments used in my courses are effective.	3%	8%	14%	64%	11%
Assessment used in my courses help me learn concepts.	1%	11%	13%	61%	14%

Table 8. Student Views on Cheating: Small Private University

How strongly do you agree with the following statements?					
	Disagree strongly			Agree strongly	
Cheating is a serious problem here.	9%	31%	43%	13%	4%
Our academic honor process is fair and impartial.	4%	8%	53%	30%	6%
Students should be held responsible for monitoring the academic integrity of other students.	19%	31%	22%	23%	5%
*Faculty change exams/assignments on a regular basis.	3%	13%	21%	47%	16%
*The amount of course work is reasonable.	4%	15%	8%	61%	13%
*Difficulty of exams/assignments is appropriate.	3%	13%	9%	62%	14%
*Assessments used in my courses are effective.	5%	17%	13%	56%	9%
*Assessment used in my courses help me learn concepts.	4%	15%	15%	57%	9%
*These data are based on an N of 4,000.					

Table 9. Student Views on Cheating: Nationwide

Despite the occurrences of cheating which occur, students have many reasons and excuses for doing it. Given the culture that these students have grown up with, they are somewhat understandable. Many shed light on the problem and some of the reasons for cheating are telling. Some of the verbatim student comments concerning cheating are humorous and some are insightful. What is clear is that some students clearly see academic integrity violation as a problem while others are not concerned. In the eyes of one student, the goal is to “pass at any cost”.

Feel that it is not worth the effort to cheat due to the fact that there is so much at risk.
On take home exam, I worked with a class mate, my rationale was that I did not have adequate [sic] time for the volume of work necessary, given that it was finals week and all...
people will sometimes do anything to get the grade they want or think they deserve
Teacher had no clue what she was doing and could not explain how to do the assignment so I had to ask for a friend to help me out.
the definition of cheating varies amongst teachers and students
The pressure of receiving a high grade and being top in the class. Or, I know all of the other information except one thing, so I need a little help from a classmate.
Time! Time! Time! Cannot always be prepared for the unexpected. and when it happens some professors aren't understanding
<i>To pass at any cost.</i>
Too much stress and work to figure out how to do the work, laziness, thinking it doesn't matter because it is just information.
Unfair Professor and tough exams...
Using past projects as a model for mine. This is to have a guide and a perception of what the teacher looked for on it. want to make sure i am right
When do we use most of the stuff that college makes us take again in the real world? Oh that's right, next to none. But hey, if I was a college trying to make money I would make it mandatory for students with a major in the computer field to waste their time in an arts class for the money too.
When you don't study for a test, feel really insecure about your ability to pass on your own or have a grade that depends on how well you do, cheating is an easy way to do good.
would have been a really hard test and needed to get a good grade on it for lab data, if some of the data was wrong or you missed some of it you take someone else's data so that you can finish the report

Table 10. Rationales for Cheating: Small Private University

Cheating should not be looked at as dishonest but rather lazy, cheating is what academia is based on, but the necessity is to teach that academia is the search for truth while sifting through the absorbent [sic] amount of shit that is out there to find the truth
I am not very active in student life on campus and I am not certain of any cheating that goes on, furthermore, I find the habit of professors teaching students to do as they're told and spit up what they have "learned" to swallow, ridiculous. A professor who inspires students to learn more about a topic, for the sheer pleasure of learning is a talented professor. People cheat because school is rarely about learning and more about succeeding!
I have known one person to pass someone's else's work as there [sic] own. When another student brought it to the attention of faculty members who would handle the situation. They acknowledge the student might have but would not do anything to that student. If it was someone else, he/she would have gotten in serious trouble. The staff needs to stop showing favoritism [sic] especially in the case I am referring to. This is why I do not say anything. If the proper authorities do not care, why should I?
I really don't think it's a serious issue. Instructor should not be concerned about it. The few students who actually do cheat will eventually suffer in some way in the future.
If a student can cheat and get away with it, then more power to them, college is hard enough and when you cheat there is guilt...that is enough to deal with. If they hit rock bottom that hard to cheat and they know the consequences
I'm not sure that you will ever stop cheating. Making it impossible to cheat and changing exams is a good way to help prevent it. Professors also should be understanding of the hectic schedules that occur at the end of the semester and maybe renegotiate [sic] the deal with the student to lessen the likelihood [sic] of cheating.
It probably happens more than I realize. I am a junior, so hopefully by now everyone my age level has seen the consequences of cheating. Hopefully they have outgrown cheating.
It's wrong, but at the same time everyone has done it in some form or another throughout their life. Our society accepts lies and bullshit. It's the world we live in. It's wrong and something needs to be done about it
Policies that are never enforced are useless. Why develop new policies when current ones are not enforced.
some students cheat because they are lazy, or just stupid, but people who are threaten [sic] with being kicked out of school because of scholarships [sic] feel a great deal more pressure to cheat
Students should know that it only cheats them

Table 11. Student Comments: Small Private University

Pedagogical Implications

This paper investigated a problem that has occurred in academia since its founding. As the survey data indicates, students will engage in academic integrity violations for many reasons and some will even justify doing it. What is clear is that it is occurring and something must be done. The survey administered at the small private university was done one semester after a major rewrite of the schools academic integrity policy and just before the implementation of TurnItIn.com on campus. A follow-up survey is planned which may determine whether the new policies and tools are effective and whether or not academic integrity violations are continuing to occur at the same rate.

In the age of Enron and Martha Stewart, students are bombarded with images of deceit and a lack of integrity. While they are in college, faculty and administrators must work to change student perceptions of integrity and allow them to make the right decisions, both moral and ethical. An honor code and academic integrity policy is a start in the right direction. The next steps are enforcement, accountability and education.

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