# Religiosity and test-taking ethics among Business School students

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the years, research has documented a steady increase in cheating and unethical behavior among college students. Previous research on this topic has investigated several causal factors like poor academic standards, large class sizes, increased competition for jobs, distance learning technologies, membership in fraternities and sororities, access to unlimited resources on the internet, poor role models etc. This study examined the relationship between overall value systems as reflected in religiosity or participation in religious activities and academic dishonesty in test taking among business school students. 236 students in the college of business at a major southeastern university were surveyed concerning the frequency with which they engaged in several different kinds of unethical behavior while taking tests, as well as their frequency of participation in religious activities. Results showed that a large majority of the students (86%) had engaged in some form of unethical test taking behaviors at some point in their college careers. A high percentage (72%) also indicated they had participated in religious activities at least once every quarter. Overall results gave some positive indications, showing that students who were more 'religious' and participated more in religious activities were significantly ($\alpha \leq .05$) less likely to engage in unethical test taking practices. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Student ethics, Test-taking ethics, Business Student ethics, Religiosity.

## INTRODUCTION

Unethical practices in government, business, and universities are reported regularly in the national press. In particular, the rising rate of academic dishonesty among college students in recent years has gained the attention of both academic administrators and researchers (McCabe and Pavela 2000). The corporate scandals at Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia Communications, and Tyco International have brought the focus on business schools and have compelled them to review the ethical training of students (Burke, Polimeni, and Slavin 2007). Previous research on this topic has investigated several causal factors like poor academic standards, class sizes, increased competition for jobs, distance learning technologies, membership in fraternities and sororities, access to unlimited resources on the internet, poor role models etc. Surprisingly, however, few studies have examined the relationship between overall value systems and academic dishonesty. This study examines this relationship, focusing on value systems as reflected in religiosity or participation in religious practices and academic dishonesty in test taking among business school students.

## RESEARCH REVIEW

Over the years, research in this area has documented a steady increase in cheating and unethical behavior among college students (Brown and Emmett 2001). Going as far back as 1941, Baird (1980) reported that college cheating had increased from 23% in 1941 to 55% in 1970 to 75% in 1980. Moving forward, McCabe and Bowers (1994) reported that college cheating had increased from 63% in 1962 to 70% in 1993.

More recently, Burke, Polimeni, and Slavin (2007) stated that "various studies suggest that we may be at the precipice of a culture of academic malfeasance, where large numbers of students engage in various forms of cheating." The Center for Academic Integrity at Oklahoma State University (2009), conducted a conducted a large scale survey of 1,901 students and 431 faculty members and found some very disturbing results, showing that 60% of college students engaged in at least one behavior that violated academic integrity and that 72% of undergraduate business majors reported doing this, versus 56% from other disciplines. Brown, Weible, and Olmosk (2010) also reported that the percentage of cheating in undergraduate management classes in 2008 was close to 100% which was an increase from the recorded 49% in 1988. Business school students therefore seemed more likely to engage in academic misconduct as compared to students in other programs.

In response to these increases in academic dishonesty, several campuses have specified honor-codes which are explicitly stated in college catalogs and course syllabi. In an early study researching the effects of such honor-codes, McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported that 54% of the students on honor-code campuses admitted to one or more incidents of serious cheating compared to 71% on campuses with no honor code. They suggested that a modified honor code approach, involving significant student participation in promoting academic integrity, might be a viable alternative for colleges where traditional honor code systems are less effective. In later research, McCabe and Pavela (2000) reported empirical confirmation of a relationship between modified honor codes and lower levels of student cheating, even on larger campuses where student cheating is generally higher.

As mentioned previously, several other causal factors like poor academic standards, class sizes, increased competition for jobs, distance learning technologies, membership in fraternities and

sororities, access to unlimited resources on the internet, poor role models etc. have also been examined by previous research. For example, Kennedy, Novak, Raghuraman, Thomas, and Davis (2000) reported that both students and faculty believe that it is easier to cheat in a distance learning class and suggested that as the number of distance learning classes increase so will academic dishonesty. Storch and Storch (2002) reported that members of fraternities and sororities had higher rates of academic dishonesty than nonmembers. Thorpe, Pittenger, and Reed (1999) had an unusual finding, suggesting that the rates of cheating are related to the student's need for approval. A study of discarded cheat sheets done by Pullen, Ortloff, Casey, and Payne (2000) also found interesting results, suggesting a distinct pattern of increased cheating as the quarter progressed, and that the use of cheat sheets was more common in business courses than math courses.

However, as mentioned previously, very little empirical research has been conducted examining the relationship between overall value systems as reflected in religiosity and participation in religious practices and academic dishonesty. This would seem to be a logical extension of the research in this area, based on the assumption that cheating behavior is a reflection of the students ethical values, and that such values should be present to a higher extent in more 'religious' students who participate more in religious activities. The purpose of this study was therefore to examine the relationship between self-reported academic dishonesty in test taking among business school students and the degree of participation in religious practices. Several mediating demographic variables including gender, race, and membership in fraternities/sororities were also examined.

## METHODOLOGY

Surveys were administered to 236 students in randomly chosen classes in the college of business at a major southeastern university. A majority of the respondents were juniors and seniors (the business school has mainly upper division classes) between 19 – 24 years of age (median 21). Also, in keeping with overall enrollment at the university, 47.5% were male while 52.5% were female and 71.6 were Caucasian, while 23% were African American.

A seven-item scale (alpha .91) was used to assess the frequency with which college students engaged in dishonest behavior while taking tests (Table 1). The items covered copying from others, letting others copy from them, using signals, using crib notes, memorizing questions and stealing a test. Responses were on a five point scale with '1' - never to '5' - often.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they attended religious functions and participated in religious activities on a 6 point scale ranging from none to daily participation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of dishonest/unethical behavior in test taking measured on the seven-item scale, data were analyzed on a composite basis as well as in terms of individual items. In terms of a composite (average response over 7 items) the results showed that a large percentage (86%) of the respondents had engaged in unethical test taking behaviors to some extent. Any response except 'never' was included in this segment. Only 14% indicated that they had never engaged in any of these behaviors. There were no significant differences in mean responses based on gender and membership in fraternities/sororities. However there was a significant difference ($\alpha \leq .05$) in race with African Americans saying they are likely to engage in unethical behaviors more often (Table 2).

Although the overall figure of 86% is high it is not unsurprising given that previous studies have found numbers as high as 75% for cheating on tests. Our number was a composite over several items or several kinds of unethical behaviors and we included all degrees of participation except never. What this result indicates is that a large majority of the students have engaged in some form of unethical test taking behaviors at some point in their college careers. The significant difference in unethical behaviors based on race may be related to other moderating variables like lower socio-economic status and more pressure to succeed in school. These variables should be explored further in future research.

Individual items (Table 1) included questions about copying from others, letting others copy from them, using signals, using crib notes, memorizing questions and giving them to others, turning in a test that was not your own, and stealing a test. Responses to these indicated that copying from others was the activity engaged in by the highest number of individuals. Fully 58.2 % said that they had done this at least some of the time. The second highest activity was letting others copy from them, with 54% indicating that they had engaged in this to some extent. 51% said they had memorized questions and given them to others. Using crib notes and signaling during an exam were activities engaged in by lower numbers of individuals, with 22% saying they had used crib notes at some point and 15% saying they had ever signaled during a test. The activity least engaged in, not surprisingly was actually stealing a test, with only 5.9% indicating that they had ever done this. However, even this is a high number considering what this activity might involve.

Although the percentages on the individual items are not as high as those reported in previous studies, it is still disturbing to learn that more than half the students had, at least some point in their college careers, participated in activities like copying from others, letting others copy from them as well as memorizing questions and giving them to others. It confirms the results of previous studies indicating the prevalence of a culture among students that considers such activities to be 'acceptable behavior' to a large extent.

The results on the question about level of attendance at religious events and participation in religious activities seem to fit with the fact that most of these students were from the traditional South with its high emphasis on religion. The highest percentage (27%) indicated that they attended religious services once a week and a very high percentage (72%) said that they attended such services at least once every quarter. Only 13% said they did not attend any services at all (Table 3).

T-tests showed that there was a significant difference ($\alpha \leq .05$) in this variables based on race. African Americans were significantly more likely to attend religious activities often. This also fits with generally accepted facts about the African-American culture and lifestyles. In terms of gender there was marginally significant difference ($\alpha \leq .10$) in religious attendance, with females being slightly more likely to attend than males.

Further, a t-test between the two groups, those who said they had engaged in unethical behavior to any extent and those who had never engaged in unethical behavior showed that and there was a significant difference ($\alpha \leq .05$) in religious attendance between those who engaged in unethical behaviors to any extent and those who never engaged in any unethical behaviors, with those who never engaged in such behaviors tending to attend more religious activities.

What we have therefore is a population that overall is traditional in its emphasis on god and religion but one that is also fairly high in their likelihood of engaging in unethical teat taking behavior. However, the extent of religious attendance does seem to have an impact with the analysis showing significantly lower rate of unethical test taking behavior in respondents with higher religious attendance levels.

Overall therefore this study gives us some positive indications in terms of religiosity and unethical test-taking behaviors. It showed that students who were more 'religious' and participated more in religious activities were less likely to engage in unethical test taking practices. This may indicate not just higher ethical values in these students but also the positive impact of participating in activities that reinforce ethical values. It may also have some implications for honor codes on campus, indicating that "reinforcement" of honor codes in business schools may have a positive impact. As mentioned previously, McCabe and Trevino (1996) suggested that an approach involving significant student participation in promoting academic integrity might be a viable alternative for colleges where traditional honor code systems are less effective. Our research seems to support this and to further suggest that not just student participation but any kind of reinforcement and reminder about the honor code may have an impact.

Future research needs to investigate this issue further, perhaps focusing on specific ethical values and the extent to which students consider them important, and how they relate to unethical behaviors. Students from different parts of the country and different majors also need to be surveyed to test the generalizability of these findings and to examine the effects of socio-cultural differences on test-taking ethics.

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**APPENDIX**

Table 1
Participation in unethical test-taking behavior

| Items | Some Extent | Never |
|---|---|---|
| 1. How often have you copied from another's test? | 58.3% | 41.7% |
| 2. How often have you let someone copy from your test? | 54.5% | 45.5% |
| 3. How often have you used signals during a test? | 15.7% | 84.3% |
| 4. How often have you used 'crib' notes during a test? | 22.6% | 77.4% |
| 5. How often have you memorized questions during a test and given them to others? | 49.4% | 50.6% |
| 6. How often have you turned in test work that is not yours? | 18.4% | 71.6% |
| 7. How often have you stolen a test? | 5.9% | 94.3% |

Table 2
Mean differences (T-test) in participation in unethical test-taking behavior

| | | N | Mean | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 109 | 1.65 | .437 |
| | Female | 122 | 1.59 | |
| | | | | |
| Race | Caucasian | 165 | 1.53 | .001* |
| | African American | 53 | 1.80 | |
| | | | | |
| Fraternity/Sorority | Yes | 64 | 1.70 | .124 |
| Member | No | 165 | 1.58 | |

* significant at ($\alpha \leq .05$).

Table 3
Frequency of Attendance at Religious Events

| | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|
| At least once a week | 27.2 | 27.2 |
| At least once a month | 22.0 | 49.1 |
| At least once a semester | 22.8 | 72.0 |
| At least once a year | 14.7 | 86.0 |
| Never | 13.4 | 100 |

Table 4
Mean differences (T-test) in attendance at religious events

| | | N | Mean | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 110 | 2.81 | .095** |
| | Female | 122 | 2.51 | |
| | | | | |
| Race | Caucasian | 168 | 2.79 | .000* |
| | African American | 52 | 2.03 | |
| | | | | |
| Fraternity/Sorority | Yes | 64 | 1.70 | .124 |
| Member | No | 165 | 1.58 | |

Lower numbers signify higher frequency of attendance.
* significant at ($\alpha \leq .05$).
** marginally significant at ($\alpha \leq .10$).

Table 5
Unethical test-taking behavior and attendance at religious events (T-test)

| | N | Mean | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never participated in unethical practices | 29 | 2.60 | .043* |
| | | | |
| Participated in unethical practices to some extent | 196 | 3.06 | |

Lower numbers signify higher frequency of attendance.
* significant at ($\alpha \leq .05$).