

UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC DISHONESTY POLICY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CHEATING: AN EXPLORATORY CONTENT ANALYSIS ACROSS FOURTEEN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on academic cheating has examined correlates of cheating, cheating methods and ways to reduce cheating. This study looks at cheating from a slightly different angle by examining the relationship between an institution's policy on academic dishonesty and the students' perceptions that cheating is commonplace. The results indicate two characteristics of academic dishonesty policies, specificity and student commitment, are negatively associated with student perceptions that cheating is commonplace. In addition, students that are younger, that choose lenient professors, that perceive themselves as good students, and that do not place great importance on the university's reputation for excellence are more likely to perceive cheating as commonplace at the institution.

INTRODUCTION

Cheating in the college classroom is of critical concern. Reports indicate that cheating is already widespread (Newstead 1996), and since the mid1980s cheating has been on the rise (Dickhoff, et al 1996). Some go so far as to suggest that cheating is at an epidemic level (Niels 1996). These reports do not seem exaggerated in light of the findings of many academic studies. Roberts, Anderson and Yanish (1997) found that 91.7 percent of the respondents in their university study reported to have engaged in at least some form of academic misconduct within the studied academic year. Only 36 of 422 students selfreported that they had never cheated. Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1996) reported that over two-thirds of the university students in their survey had participated in academic dishonesty within the sample semester. Furthermore, business students have shown the highest level of collaborative cheating (Roberts, et al. 1997). Of course, there are long term complications of cheating when students graduate from degree programs without the skills and knowledge traditionally associated with obtaining the degree (Tankersley 1997).

Research on college student cheating is not new. For more than 60 years researchers have examined students' decisions to cheat and other forms of ethical decision-making in a collegiate environment (Crown and Spiller 1998). Much of this research has focused on the nature of cheaters or the nature of cheating. Previous research has examined the types of students who cheat (e.g. Buckley, Wiese and Harvey 1998, Whitley 1998); motivations for cheating (e.g. Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield 1998, Love and Simmons 1997, Whitley 1998); and methods of cheating (e.g. Kimmel 1997, McCabe and Bowers 1996). Others have concentrated on detecting cheating on exams (Bay 1995). Crown and Spiller (1998) provide a very comprehensive review of the cheating literature.

The previous research has discovered a great deal about cheating behavior and academic dishonesty. As suggested by this research, there is profound need to understand the correlates of cheating, to better understand cheaters, and to develop methods to reduce cheating. It is worth noting, however, that like many aspects of marketing, perceptions and beliefs about cheating behavior are as important as the behavior itself. Albers-Miller, Straughan, and Prenshaw (2000) establish the importance of studying *perceptions* that cheating is commonplace at their institution (as opposed to simply studying the occurrence of the behavior itself). In their study, they showed that both university level characteristics and individual level characteristics are related to a student's perception that cheating is common. Their study reported a significant relationship between perceptions of commonplace cheating and dissatisfaction with university choice, an undesirable outcome from the perspective of both the university and the student/alumnus. Further, they suggest some consequences for the university if these perceptions are left unchecked. Although the Albers-Miller, et al. (2000) study provided some insight into the antecedents and consequences of perceptions of cheating, there were many questions left unanswered. Building on their work, the objective of this study is to examine the effect that proactive institutional policies regarding academic dishonesty and student characteristics have on the perception of commonplace cheating.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHEATING

Numerous problems are created by the perception that cheating is commonplace within a university. This perception increases the frequency of actual cheating behavior as others feel the need to cheat to remain competitive with those already engaged in cheating (McCabe and Trevino 1997, Mixon 1996). Those students who are disinclined to cheat are discouraged by the apparent lack of control exhibited by the instructors or institution. Honest students call for adequate systems to control cheating with meaningful consequences for unethical behavior (Tankersley 1997). These calls are in response to worries about the decline in "degree equity" caused by other students graduating from their university without mastering materials. Policies regarding academic dishonesty are a common way of managing both dishonest actions and the perceptions of such actions.

The obvious effect of such policies is to provide disincentive for students to cheat. Previous research has indicated that students are much more likely to cheat if they believe they can get away with it (Whitley 1998). Conversely, they are less likely to cheat if they think they will be caught and/or punished (Buckley, et al. 1998, Dickoff, et al 1996, Love and Simmons 1997, McCabe and Trevino 1997, Odom 1997).

There is, however, a more subtle effect at work as well. If appropriately conceived, structured, and administered, these policies alter the culture and social dynamics of the university. Students engage in academic dishonesty if they think the social norms at the university support cheating (Niels 1996, Whitley 1998). Alternatively, fear of alienation, embarrassment and peer disapproval can be strong deterrents to cheating (Ashworth, et al 1997, Dickoff et al 1996, McCabe and Trevino 1997).

In addition to considering university policies regarding cheating, individual-level variation is worth consideration as well. Albers-Miller, et al (2000) found an inverse relationship between age and the perception of commonplace cheating. Perhaps this is a result of ethical maturity as students age. Alternatively, it might be a residual effect of perceptions of commonplace cheating at the high school level. Such perceptions may be initially transferred to the university level, but modified as the student becomes acclimated to university life.

While good students are less likely to cheat themselves (Love and Simmons 1997), they are more sensitive to the problems it creates. Because of this concern, they may be more likely to perceive cheating as a widespread problem (Albers-Miller, et al. 2000). This research also argues that lesser students who seek out easier classes are more likely to perceive cheating as commonplace. Interestingly, the emphasis individual students assign to the relative academic reputation of their schools also influences these perceptions. Those that place a greater emphasis on academic reputation may assume tighter controls among the faculty, and therefore they perceive cheating as less common.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Dishonesty Policies

The academic dishonesty policies of fourteen universities were content analyzed for dis/similarities in structure and procedure as well as variation in distribution policies across universities. The content analysis yielded six dimensions across which variation was observed. Some policies used very formal language in naming the policy. The most common term used in the manner was "Code." Others used no such formal declarations. Some policies were very detailed regarding the specific acts that constituted academic dishonesty (and those that were excluded from the policy), while others were more general. Similarly, some were detailed regarding the procedure for determining if a violation had occurred and what sanctions were appropriate. Variation was observed along several specific procedural dimensions. Some policies required students to sign a formal agreement to abide by the policy or suffer the consequences, while others were simply imposed. Some involved students in the implementation and administration of the policy, while others did not. Some specified a procedure for appeal of pronouncements and/or sanctions, while others either discouraged such appeals or made no mention of an appeal process.

In addition to the structural and procedural variation among the policies, it was found that universities varied somewhat in how they distributed and/or communicated the policy to interested parties. Efforts to obtain the universities' academic dishonesty policies revealed variations in accessibility. In some cases the policy could be found on the university's web site. Of these instances, some were easily located while others required a more extensive search. For those universities that did not communicate the policy via their web page, a telephone call was placed to the university to attempt to obtain a copy of the policy. As with those that utilized the web, some of these phone calls yielded an immediate response; most often a catalog or student handbook was mailed, while others required several follow-up phone calls and/or phone transfers. Thus, two additional dimensions of variation were identified: general in/accessibility and universities' use of the web.

Because some of these dimensions seem clearly related to each other, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to check for uniqueness across these eight points of variation. Admittedly, a factor analysis with only fourteen data points is problematic. However, the need to control for potential multicollinearity in these measures warrants such a data reduction technique and yields insight into the appropriate structural, procedural, and accessibility dimensions of the academic dishonesty policies. Using a minimum eigenvalue of 1.0, principle components analysis yielded three distinct factors. The three factors explain 78.62 percent of the overall variation. After Varimax orthogonal rotation, all eight points of variation loaded cleanly (0.60 or greater) on one of the three factors. Table I shows the factor loadings.

Factor 1 represents a dimension of specificity. This factor accounted for 3.13 variance explained. The factor combined variation related to the policy's formal description (e.g., a "code"), specificity of acts that violate the policy, specificity of procedures and sanctions, and specificity of student responsibilities in administration. Factor 2 represents variation accessibility, both the general accessibility of the policy and use of the web as a means of access. This factor accounted for 1.71 variance explained. Factor 3 represents a legality dimension. This factor accounted for 1.45 variance explained. Variation in the use of a signed statement of compliance and in the availability of an appeal process loaded onto this factor.

To minimize the perception of commonplace cheating, each of these dimensions needs to either directly communicate sanctions or punitive actions in cases of academic dishonesty or work to create a social environment in which cheating is frowned upon (or both). It is intuitive to think that all three would accomplish the objectives of not only reducing the occurrence of cheating, but also the perception that cheating is commonplace. With respect to the later, it is hypothesized that:

H1a: University policies on academic dishonesty containing specific detail will be negatively associated with student perceptions of commonplace cheating.

H1b: University policies on academic dishonesty that are easily accessible to students will be negatively associated with student perceptions of commonplace cheating.

H1c: University policies on academic dishonesty containing legalistic structure will be negatively associated with student perceptions of commonplace cheating.

Personal Characteristics

As noted previously, research has shown older students to perceive cheating as less common than younger students. In addition, those students with a sense of personal academic accomplishment and those who generally seek easier classes are more likely to believe cheating is commonplace. Lastly, as noted previously, those placing great emphasis on the academic reputation of their schools perceive cheating to be less widespread. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2a: Age will be negatively associated with perceptions of commonplace cheating.

H2b: Valuing easy classes will be positively associated with perceptions of commonplace cheating.

H2c: A sense of academic accomplishment will be positively associated with perceptions of commonplace cheating.

H2d: Placing great value in the academic reputation of the university will be negatively associated with perceptions of commonplace cheating.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected with a survey consisting of Likert-type responses to value statements and demographic questions. Students at each of the fourteen universities were contacted through their instructors. Faculty members at several universities were invited to participate by directing their students to the survey that was posted to a web site. Students from 13 universities submitted responses on the web. The professor at one university opted to use a paper version of the web survey. There were 866 usable responses. The universities were nationwide, including public and private, and large (more than 32,000 students) to small (less and 1500 students).

MODEL ESTIMATION

Hypotheses were tested with the estimation of a regression model. The regression equation used seven variables to model the perception of widespread cheating on the university campus. The independent measures included the three factor indices calculated based upon the content analysis. In addition, measures were taken from the student surveys that related to their perception of themselves as a good student, their desire to seek easy classes, and the relative importance they placed on the academic reputation of their school. Each of these was measured on a five-point, Likert scale. In addition, the students were asked to indicate their age. The dependent measure asked students to respond to the following statement, "Cheating is common at my university. Their responses were indicated on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The overall model was significant at the 0.01 level with an F-value of 12.82. The r-square, however, was relatively small (0.09). This model resulted in support for H1a, H1c, H2c, and H2d at the 0.01 level, and H2b and H2c at the 0.05 level. H1b was not supported. Table 2 has the parameter estimates for the Model and a summary of the supported hypotheses.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the characteristics of a university's policy on academic dishonesty and student perceptions of cheating. The findings from this study are important to educators. There are clear indicators that students are likely to observe cheating or at least perceive cheating is common. One of the correlates of perceptions of commonplace cheating relates directly to the classroom instructor. Lenient instructors perpetuate the problem of commonplace cheating. Thus, in addition to concerns voiced in many forums about grade inflation and student qualifications, lenient instructors potentially damage the university's reputation with its own students.

The findings of this study are important in light of the study conducted by Albers-Miller, et al. (2000) that reported a relationship between perceptions of academic dishonesty and dissatisfaction with university choice. Therefore, controlling and monitoring student perceptions of cheating has benefits on multiple levels. On a purely ethical level, honest students are rewarded and dishonest students are not. In addition, however, the university receives strategic benefits. Specifically, the university's overall perception is maintained or enhanced.

The structure of the university's policy on academic dishonesty seems to be closely associated with student perceptions on cheating. A carefully constructed policy, with specific details about the actions that constitute cheating, the procedures for reporting cheating, the procedures for acting on cheating, and the sanctions to be imposed on cheaters all affect perceptions. Involving students in the process is also important. Perhaps one of the most important factors is demanding student commitment in the form of a binding contract not to cheat. Finally, limiting appeal options is also beneficial.

Students that perceive themselves to be accomplished academically are more likely to think that others are cheating at their university. Previous research has indicated that this type of student tends to be more concerned with teaming than with obtaining a specific grade. A university's better students appear to be more sensitive to the widespread occurrence of cheating and academic dishonesty. Thus, for those seeking to improve the overall quality of the student body and recruit stronger future students, controlling perceived academic dishonesty is important. If this occurs, and the university's academic reputation is enhanced, students who place great importance on university reputation will be attracted. The control of perceptions of widespread cheating then becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, as these students who feel that their university has a reputation for academic excellence are less likely to perceive cheating is common.

Furthermore, the study reinforces the idea that younger students are more at risk than are older students. Younger students are significantly more likely to report commonplace cheating than older students. The findings suggest that younger students are more likely to be exposed to others that are cheating or are feeling a residual effect from their pre-college days. This finding is particularly important, because once students have observed successful cheating or perceived such, they are more likely to become cheaters. Universities would be well served to diligently monitor cheating in introductory and lower level classes.

The findings of this study are important to administrators and educators. While the problem of the individual cheater is real, the problems associated with perceptions of commonplace cheating across the university are equally important. The need to control cheating and to reduce the perception that cheating is common and perhaps even tolerated is evident. Fortunately, the university policy on academic dishonesty appears to offer an important tool in fighting the battle.

This study should serve as only a starting point in the path of understanding student perception of cheating. The r -square for the estimated model was somewhat small, indicating that student perceptions of cheating are dependent on more factors than those included here. Future research should examine other factors that might influence perceptions of cheating. Further, as noted previously, some concerns exist regarding the factor analysis conducted. Alternative approaches to investigating the structure, procedure, and administration of academic dishonesty policies are warranted.

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