

Student plagiarism: A comparison between a for-profit and a non-profit university

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore perceived gender differences as they relate to academic dishonesty. Undergraduate students at two institutions were examined; one for-profit and one non-profit public university, to determine if there are any significant differences in cheating when comparing males vs. females. Among the key findings are that males tend to reoffend more than females, especially at for-profit institutions, that females, on a percentage basis, cheat more often than males, and that when confronted with the evidence of cheating, college students persist in their stance of no wrongdoing. Additionally, research indicates that students may be exercising their sense of entitlement for an education at any cost and that tuition may indeed play a part in plagiarism.

Keywords: Student Plagiarism, Student Cheating, Ethics, Ethical Behavior

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Student cheating is an issue that should concern both post-secondary instructors as well as the community at-large; in that it deals with unethical behaviors (Reisenwitz, 2012). According to Education-Portal, somewhere between 75% and 98% of college students have admitted to cheating (2011). When does cheating begin? Does it magically start in a college student's freshman year? Certainly, studies have shown that as early as middle school students cheat. Motivations vary, but the competitiveness for grades for those interested in pursuing a college degree become tantamount starting in middle school and continue through high school due to college admission standards (Murdock and Anderman, 2006). Additionally, this study found that 80% to 90% of high school students cheat prior to graduation.

There is some research that indicates that no differences exist between males and females when it comes to cheating. One study concluded that student cheating is not based on age or sex (Jurdi, Hage, & Henry, 2011), but may be based on the moral values developed in the home (Kecici, Bulduk, Oruc, & Celik, 2011). This lack of ethics or moral reasoning apparently carries over from the classroom to the work environment (Elmore, Anitsal, & Anitsal, 2011). A comparative study by (Brown & Choony, 2005) affirmed that there is little difference in cheating at public and private universities. Gross (2011) posits that perhaps students define cheating differently than their professors implying an incongruent moral base for reasoning. Additional credence to this theory by de Lambert, Ellen, & Taylor (2003), as they speculate that students and faculty not only have differing ideas of how cheating is defined, but also as to what consequences are appropriate once cheating is identified. Studies have shown that values are shifting away from a traditional approach (Blum, 2009) to one that holds cheating in a "positive regard" (Gross, 2011, p. 435). Blum identifies the cultural differences and communication disconnects between the professoriate and college students. Students value sharing and seek to succeed at any cost; professors find that behavior unacceptable, and regard plagiarism as serious academic misconduct. Gross (2011) postulated that today's students have a vastly different perception of cheating than the professoriate and developed a 10-point matrix organized as either Traditional/Modern or Post-Modern/Emergent. Her findings are interesting in that the first category includes, but are not limited to, universal grading standards, the concept of private property, and integrity as an adherence to absolute rules. These views are primarily held by instructors. The dominant student views included in the Post-Modern/Emergent category include a situational application of grading standards, the view that anything published on the Internet is public-domain and therefore free to use, and integrity defined as that which one gains by being compassionate and caring for others.

INTRODUCTION AND DATA COLLECTION

From the days of passing notes and writing test answers on one's arm, student cheating has plagued higher education. Student cheating has many definitions but in this paper's context, it will be identified as using someone else's work to satisfy a course requirement. This paper will be concerned with the instances of cheating and not necessarily the method, or even the academic discipline in which the occurrences took place. The data collection began in 2011 for both the for-profit and the non-profit university and encompassed spring, fall, and summer semesters. In order to eliminate any potential biases across multiple faculty members, the data collected involved a single professor that teaches for both types of universities. The data included written papers submitted by students that were in turn passed through software

instruments to ascertain whether plagiarism was present. The cheating was validated using software instruments including Turnitin®, Safe Assign®, and numerous other custom-written plagiarism engines that detect if a student has used another student's work. Additionally, a team of independent investigators was used to verify each instance of cheating. Therefore, the supposition of this paper is that cheating indeed took place, and not just an accusation of cheating.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

When these data were evaluated it appeared that for-profit university students cheated at a greater rate, 67 students at the for-profit versus 35 students at the non-profit institution. Table 1 (Appendix) depicts the number of overall students in the classes where students cheated were factored in (212 for-profit and 307 non-profit) but the only difference was the class sizes. The total number of for-profit class sections was 15, versus the non-profit which was 12. Therefore one might conclude that nearly one-third of the for-profit students cheated whereas only 11.5% of the non-profit students cheated. One interesting observation is that when the face to face students as well as the hybrid online students were removed from the non-profit institution's numbers, the percentage of students that were caught cheating dropped significantly to 3%. While this is a very small sample size to use for statistical purposes, the evaluation spanned over 2.5 years.

With respect to cheating, it appears that males simply don't get it. Even after being caught once, on multiple occasions males repeated their offense, often within the same course. The knowledge gained from a previous experience didn't deter them even with the knowledge that they would suffer a loss of points, loss of an overall letter grade, or potentially being dismissed from the institution. In the for-profit setting, males duplicated cheating within the same class at a rate of 34% or in other words, one out of every three males cheated repeatedly in the same course. In contrast, females only repeated their offense at a 4% rate, or one out of every 25 females. In non-profit institution classes this number decreased significantly. Males repeated the offense only 4% of the time or one out of every 25 occurrences; whereas, females did not have any instances of cheating the second time. Even lower than these numbers, for face-to-face [FTF] or hybrid online/Interactive Television [ITV] classes, there were no occurrences or repeated cheating for males or females. One interesting phenomenon to note is that female students made up only 10% of the classes for online in both the non-profit and for-profit institutions, but cheat at a higher rate than males on a percentage basis. This might be discipline specific and warrants further study.

Additionally, at the for-profit school, the academic dishonesty policy was modified in 2011 and required students to submit a certification of one's own work with every assignment. The number of students caught cheating did not reduce significantly for either males or females. Chart 1 (Appendix) depicts an overall 15% increase in occurrences of cheating after the implementation of a personal integrity statement! While Bartlett & Smallwood (2004), posited that some institutions turn their head to protect both the tuition and the image of the institution, it was noted that this for-profit school supports its faculty's accusation of cheating by issuing, as a minimum, a letter in the students file plus they enforce the professor's policy, up to and including issuing a failing grade for the class.

This process is not duplicated at the non-profit university but written and verbal warnings are issued to students at the beginning of the class. The written warnings are typically delivered in syllabi and often reinforced with syllabus quizzes. Anecdotally, it does not seem to make a

difference in either type of institution except when dealing with reoccurrences. One observation that may be of importance is that the more face time that the instructor had with students, the rate of cheating was diminished. Although, Simkin and MacLeod (2010) found that professors as “influencers” had no impact on student’s decision to cheat; that only family play a significant role in this capacity (p. 451). Interestingly enough, for non-cheaters family held relatively little influence while family held a strong influencing role for cheaters. This finding seems to reinforce the idea that, for this group, that cheating is considered acceptable at home and therefore is simply a means to an end. Eby, Hartley, & Hodges (2013), discovered, based on a student survey, that some students possess a sense of entitlement and feel that they are above the law. Students in these situations feel that copying and pasting does not constitute plagiarism as the material has already been published and is available for use. Some students profess that if an answer exists online then it is fair game for use.

An additional observation of interest is taken from a colleague’s personal experience. In 2002, in a class of 160 students, 32 students were caught cheating from a single original student-source. The instructor decided to offer these students anonymity by allowing them to submit a single page written explanation of the offense. The reward was receiving a zero for that one assignment, the consequence of not admitting to the offense more severe, failing the entire course. The vast majority of the students submitted the one-page explanation requesting forgiveness. At least one student stated in her paper that the cause of her cheating was the course structure. Her reasoning was that some tasks were difficult and she was unable to meet with the instructor outside of class for assistance, primarily due to her own work schedule, that she was “forced to cheat.” The results in this study seemed to validate this anecdotal evidence as even when presented with the evidence, only 50% of the students acknowledged that cheating had indeed taken place. Further, the student behavior in this scenario appears to support the conclusions of Murdock and Anderman (2006), based upon two of the three question they posed; “Can I do this task?” and “What are the costs associate with cheating?” Motivators for students that decide to cheat are diverse but the inability to perform tasks assigned or the perceived notion that a task is too difficult, seem to emerge as a consistent theme.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

Today’s students will cheat if given an opportunity and few demonstrate any remorse, except the remorse of being caught. Research suggests that students with weak moral upbringing will be the most likely to cheat (Kecici, Bulduk, Oruc, & Celik, 2011). Perhaps the real discussion should be among the professoriate with the purpose of achieving ways of preventing cheating as opposed to the traditional reactive approach. Many software auto-grading engines already have the ability of validating submitted files. Assuming the file is properly named, it is scored automatically providing feedback to students almost immediately. Violations of submitting another person’s file is caught automatically and reported to the instructor to handle. Suppose the engine simply checked the file for potential violations and refused to upload the file for scoring. A proactive approach to cheating may not be possible in every situation, but it might be appropriate especially tasks that can be machine-graded.

Further study is recommended; comparing non-profit and for-profit universities by gender, discipline, and even G.P.A.; comparing students by delivery modalities such as online, hybrid, and ITV classes would also be informative. Additionally, the investigation into the cognitive dissonance identified in the definition of cheating by students versus faculty, and how it may have changed over the years would be of value. Has cheating become more of a game or

challenge for students to conquer? For those researchers interested in the K-12 years; are there learned behaviors, especially beginning in the middle school-aged years, which might lead students to believe that cheating is justified (Gross, 2011)? Has the sophistication of cheating progressed with the Internet and array of social networking sites that are available to any student with a “smart” device?

Finally, it would be interesting to note whether the cost of tuition, coupled with the economic condition of the student plays a part in plagiarism. This is anecdotally evident in the sheer number of plagiarism cases as depicted in Table 1. An analysis based on student income, employment situation, and other economic factors could be used to pinpoint a further determinant of plagiarism and possibly cease, or at least mitigate this devastating experience for the student and the institution.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Percentage of Students Cheating at Selected For-Profit and Public Universities

	Number of Students	Percent that cheated	Percent that cheated more than once
For-profit Institution	214	32.2%	
Males		22%	34%
Females		10.3%	4%
Non-profit Institution	307	11.5%	
Males		10.8%	4%
Females		<1%	0%

Chart 1: Cheating at a For-Profit Before and After Implementation of Integrity Statement

