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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that cheating on tests and other forms of academic dishonesty are rampant, there is no standard definition of academic dishonesty, nor is there agreement as to the particular behaviors that constitute cheating. In this study, a survey was administered to 160 university professors in order to obtain faculty estimates of the clarity and prevalence of types of academic dishonesty. Results indicate that most faculty members had encountered incidents of cheating. While professors agreed on certain behaviors as clear examples of dishonesty, other behaviors produced a greater variety of opinions. The most commonly offered reasons for not taking action on encountering incidents of cheating were insufficient proof of the occurrence of an infraction and the difficult process involved in reporting violations. Increasing administrative support of professors and educating students about the University policy on cheating are suggested avenues for increasing faculty reports of cheating. (Contains 1 table and 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

Faculty Assessments of the Clarity and Prevalence of Academic Dishonesty

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Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 2001.

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Abstract

Despite the fact that cheating on tests and other forms of academic dishonesty are rampant, there is no standard definition of academic dishonesty, nor is there agreement as to the particular behaviors that constitute cheating. In the present study, a survey was administered to university professors in order to obtain faculty estimates of the clarity and prevalence of types of academic dishonesty. Results indicted that most faculty members had encountered incidents of cheating. While professors converged on certain behaviors as clear examples of dishonesty, other behaviors produced a greater variety of opinions. The most commonly offered reasons for not taking action upon encountering incidents were insufficient proof of an infraction's occurrence and the difficult process involved in reporting violations. Increasing administrative support of professors and educating students about the University policy on cheating are suggested avenues for increasing faculty reporting of cheating.

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Most estimates of cheating at the college level are high, with McCabe (1993) concluding that "student cheating is pervasive" (p. 648) and others claiming that it is "reaching epidemic proportions" (Desruisseaux, 1999, p. A45). And yet, there appears to be a disconnect between these high prevalence rates, as typically self-reported by students, and estimates by faculty members, the latter group believing that it occurs less often (Cizek, 1999). In addition to the lack of awareness that some faculty members may exhibit about behaviors that are occurring in their classrooms, two factors contribute to this discordant situation.

The first stems from the fact that there appears to be no commonly accepted standard definition of what constitutes academic dishonesty. It appears deceptively easy to provide a definition of cheating (e.g., "the act of defrauding by deceitful means," *Webster's new universal unabridged dictionary*, 1983, p. 308). However, it is far more difficult to arrive at agreement as to the *particular behaviors* that could be classified as cheating, not to mention examining the dimensions that people use in arriving at that classification (e.g., seriousness of offense, justification). Some behaviors (e.g., plagiarism, copying from someone else's exam, purchasing term papers) are generally agreed upon to be academically dishonest (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995). Other, more ambiguous behaviors (e.g., allowing someone to copy homework, using a paper for more than one class) are more vague and less agreed upon. Arriving at a universal definition of cheating is further complicated by discrepancies between student and faculty perceptions of what constitutes scholastic deceitfulness. For example, Schmelkin, Spencer, Gilbert, Lieberman, and Pincus (2000) found that students viewed submitting the same term paper to another class without permission and collaborating with others on an assignment that was assigned as individual work to be less clear violations of academic integrity. However, in a study by Pincus (1995), faculty members perceived these behaviors to be more obvious examples of dishonesty.

The second issue relates to the fact that even when they are aware of cheating, faculty members tend not to confront students, nor to report it (e.g., Jendrek, 1989). Many faculty maintain that dealing with academic dishonesty is the most onerous part of their job (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnik, Whitley, & Washburn, 1998). Included among the reasons why faculty may not confront students is that they do not understand the published university policy on these types of cases, they believe that the sanctions are punitive rather than educational, they do not agree with the policy, they believe that giving a hearing board the opportunity to overturn a faculty member's decision is a violation of academic freedom, they are hesitant to bring a case before a board because they themselves are uncertain whether the behavior meets the definition of cheating, they are concerned about the ramifications if the hearing board finds the student not responsible, and they are concerned with litigation liability (e.g., Fass, 1986; Jendrek, 1989; Maramark & Maline, 1993).

It is therefore important to continually assess faculty members' estimates not only of the prevalence of academic dishonesty in their classes, but also their evaluations of *what* constitutes academic dishonesty and how they deal with these issues.

Method

Participants

A survey was administered in the Spring of 2000 to both full-time and adjunct faculty at a private suburban university in the Northeast. A total of 160 faculty members responded to the survey; 62% were male and 79% primarily taught undergraduate classes. The vast majority of respondents were full-time faculty (83%) and more than half (56%) were tenured.

Survey

The survey addressed three primary areas, in addition to demographic information: (a) Faculty were asked to rate the extent to which each of 30 academic behaviors (e.g., plagiarizing, copying homework, giving answers to someone else during an exam) was a *clear example* of academic dishonesty. (b) They were also asked to indicate the percent of students who are involved in each of those 30 behaviors in a typical semester. (c) The last section included several questions that dealt with how faculty handle incidents of academic dishonesty. For example, professors were asked to indicate what measures they had taken upon encountering such incidents and what would keep them from reporting these transgressions.

Results

Mean clarity ratings (on a 9-point scale with 1 = *unclear* and 9 = *clear*) ranged from a low of 2.37 for "studying from someone else's notes" to a high of 8.87 for "obtaining answers from someone else during an exam," with 22 of the 30 means being greater than 7 (see Table 1). However, the standard deviations displayed a great deal of diversity among faculty in their evaluations. For example, there was a good deal of homogeneity on the issue of "obtaining answers from someone else during an exam" with a standard deviation of .69, whereas the standard deviation for "utilizing a term paper or exam from a fraternity or sorority test file" was 3.05, exhibiting greater divergence in faculty opinions.

In terms of prevalence, overall, 91% had encountered one or more incidents of academic dishonesty at the University. Mean percentage estimates of the number of students involved in each of the 30 academic behaviors in a typical semester ranged from 1% for "taking a test for someone else" to 22% for "copying material without proper footnotes or citations" (also presented in Table 1). It is important to note that we took a conservative approach here, assigning a 0 whenever the faculty member left an estimate blank. Had we treated these blanks as missing data, on the other hand, the mean estimates would range from 2% to 36%.

Only 41% of faculty members indicated including the University's policy on academic dishonesty on their syllabus. Faculty members were more likely (72%) to discuss the University policy with individual students as needed. Of the 61% of professors who stated that they have their own policy regarding academic dishonesty, the majority (79%) claimed to have discussions with individual students as needed, while 61% hold class discussions and 40% included the policy on their syllabus. The majority (90%) of respondents feel that the faculty member who

encounters an incident of academic dishonesty is the most appropriate individual to handle the case, followed by the Department Chairperson (60%), and a representative from the Dean's Office (43%).

A content analysis was performed on the open-ended questions. The most frequently taken courses of action were failing the student on the assignment (35.7%) and confronting the student (33.6%), while faculty members were least likely to seek advice from colleagues (1.4%) and to force the student to with draw from the class (0.7%). The most frequently offered explanations for not reporting incidents were insufficient proof of the incident or obscurity surrounding an incident's occurrence (18.2%) and the experience of reporting such infractions as a difficult and time-consuming process (17.4%). The most commonly proposed suggestions for improvement in the university's handling of violations include increasing awareness of the school's policy (34.8%) and vigorously enforcing the stated regulations (19.3%).

Discussion

The results of this study support the notion that cheating is highly prevalent among college students today, with the majority of faculty members reporting having encountered one or more incidents of academic dishonesty. However, the lack of a consensus as to the particular behaviors that constitute clear examples of cheating serves as an obstacle to arriving at accurate estimates of prevalence. While the faculty members in this study possessed converging opinions regarding the clarity of several behaviors as examples of dishonesty, they also exhibited variation in their judgments of many other behaviors. It is interesting to note that the obtained clarity ratings of faculty members are consistent with those reported in previous research (i.e., Pincus, 1995). Therefore, while there appears to be a degree of ambiguity surrounding the classification of certain behaviors as dishonest, this perceived vagueness could be considered steady over time. In contrast, when faculty clarity ratings are compared to those of college students surveyed in a prior study by Schmelkin et al. (2000), large discrepancies emerge. This indicates that educators and their pupils possess discordant beliefs regarding the specific behaviors that exemplify violations of scholastic integrity. This issue should be examined in future research.

Although most faculty members have encountered incidents of academic dishonesty, only about a third of professors actually confront students, and even fewer report violations to higher authorities. The reasons for inaction most frequently offered by faculty include lack of proof and obscurity surrounding the occurrence of alleged infractions, and the experience of reporting violations as a difficult and effortful process, echoing the findings of previous research (e.g., Pincus, 1995; Keith-Spiegel et al., 1998). In addition to the aforementioned justifications, many professors indicated that they anticipated receiving little or no support from university administrators. Professors' perceptions that appropriate punitive actions would not be taken against students hindered their reporting of infractions to school officials. Another factor figuring prominently in faculty decisions not to take action is the belief that the student's behavior was unintentional and the result of ignorance (e.g., a lack of understanding of what constitutes plagiarism). Thus, it is imperative that administrators offer greater support to faculty members and better educate students about the University's policy on academic dishonesty.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations (SD) for Clarity Ratings and Percentage Estimates

	Clarity Ratings[a]		Percentage Estimates[b]		
Behavior	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Max%
collaborating with others on an assignment that was assigned as individual work	6.71	2.44	17.91	24.90	100
copying homework	8.35	1.60	15.12	20.31	80
copying information without utilizing quotation marks	7.60	1.94	19.84	26.99	95
copying material without proper footnotes or citations	7.63	1.92	22.44	28.87	95
cutting & pasting material from the Internet and submitting it as one's own	8.57	1.31	12.22	20.53	90
delaying taking an exam or turning in a paper due to a false excuse	7.36	2.05	8.97	15.89	90
downloading a complete term paper from the Internet and submitting it as one's own	8.72	1.31	3.09	7.80	65
failing to report a grading error	5.64	2.54	6.73	20.03	100
falsifying or fabricating a bibliography	8.13	1.86	4.42	9.83	75
forging a University document	8.62	1.44	2.43	9.75	90
giving answers to someone else during an exam	8.73	1.06	5.28	10.81	80
giving exam questions to students in a later section	8.07	1.99	5.77	12.56	75
having someone else write a term paper	8.71	1.28	3.69	8.66	80
hiring a ghostwriter	8.43	1.71	2.22	7.37	75
inputting information or formulas needed for an exam into a calculator	7.48	2.53	3.76	12.41	100
not contributing a fair share in a group project	5.45	2.55	12.93	19.05	99
obtaining a copy of the exam to be given prior to class	8.37	1.80	2.43	8.15	50
obtaining a test from a previous semester	4.95	2.94	11.95	24.89	100

Behavior	Clarity Ratings[a]		Percentage Estimates[b]		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Max%
obtaining answers from someone else during an exam	8.87	.69	5.24	10.26	65
plagiarizing	8.61	1.31	11.86	18.52	90
purchasing a term paper to be turned in as one's own	8.65	1.53	2.33	5.91	50
sabotaging someone else's work (on a disk, in a lab, etc.)	8.15	2.01	1.36	6.04	50
stealing or copying a test	8.70	1.44	1.29	5.03	50
studying from someone else's notes	2.37	2.19	16.96	23.99	100
submitting the same term paper to another class without permission	6.11	2.62	5.88	13.19	90
taking a test for someone else	8.68	1.54	.73	2.68	25
using crib sheets	8.25	1.90	4.24	9.68	65
utilizing a term paper or exam from a fraternity or sorority test file	6.84	3.05	8.08	17.13	95
utilizing a tutor or writing center inappropriately	5.48	2.63	2.96	8.48	75
writing a term paper for someone else	8.44	1.52	2.58	6.30	40

[a] "To what extent is each of the following behaviors a *clear example* of academic dishonesty?" *N*s range from 144 to 156.

[b] "Please indicate the % of students who are involved in each of the following behaviors in typical semester." Missing values coded as 0%; therefore, minimum % is 0 for all behaviors.

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