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A SERU Project Research Paper[*]

Ethical Decision-Making in College: Choosing Between Right, Wrong, and the Space In Between

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ABSTRACT

It is important to understand how students' changing belief structures influence their values and behaviors, including their ethical beliefs and decision-making patterns. As such, this study will address the following research questions: 1) what are students' ethical beliefs and their perceptions of students' ethical behaviors; and 2) how do students' personal values and perceptions of behaviors differ? Using data from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, survey items about ethical decisions are grouped according to their association with the following themes: academic integrity and honesty, social activities, and behaviors influenced by perceptions of convenience. When analyzing student responses to the UCLA wildcard module within UCUES with these thematic constructs, it is possible to identify patterns of personal ethical belief, perceptions of ethics among peers, and differences between these two classes of variables. Our research indicates that students' perceptions of their peers' beliefs and behaviors are the best predictors of the respondents' own ethical behavior. Within academia, particularly in subject areas that engender greater competition such as science and engineering, it is important that institutions promote an explicit code of conduct. If students are taking cues from their peers as to what beliefs and behaviors are appropriate, a strong message from the institution, the faculty, and staff can intervene in this process in order to promote ethical decision-making skills and practices.

Introduction and Purpose

Given the rise of questionable behaviors in corporate and government institutions, many look to improve ethical standards by promoting moral development in higher education

[*] The SERU Project is a collaborative effort based at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at UC Berkeley, focused on developing new types of data and innovative, policy-relevant scholarly analyses on the academic and civic experience of students at major research universities. One of the main products of the SERU Project has been the development and administration of the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES).

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(Baily, 1968; Miller and Miller, 1976; Trawick and Darden, 1980; Nucci and Pascarella, 1987). Higher education has a great potential for social impact as the numbers of students continue to increase. Additionally, while stage theories do not specify a particular schedule for development, late adolescence (the age of traditional college students) is the primary window for transitional phases of personal and moral development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

While the number and age of students attending colleges and universities across the country makes higher education uniquely poised to impart moral standards and ethical decision-making, significant differences in student background, preparation for higher education, and expectations for college present a wide range of contexts in which students develop their personal ethical systems. For example, there has been a slight decrease in the proportion of entering college students who affiliate with a specific religious tradition (Astin, Oseguera, Sax & Korn, 2002), which often provides the framework for morality and ethical decision-making in early stages of personal development.

Additionally, research indicates significant variation in students' perceptions of the purpose of higher education. While some students pursue a broad liberal arts education, others narrowly focus on the credentials and skills necessary for the labor market, indicating potentially different sets of values and ethics among students (Astin, Oseguera, Sax & Korn, 2002; Brint, 2002; Scott, 2004). Advancements in technology have affected student behaviors by reinforcing desires for instant gratification and by blurring the lines between proprietary and public information. These shifts, among others, contribute to the diminished focus on broader social or collective benefit and the increasing emphasis on personal or private gain (Bok, 2006).

Given these changes in students' values and perspectives, institutions of higher education need to understand how students' changing beliefs influence their values and behaviors, including their ethical stances and decision-making patterns. It is important to understand both students' perception of moral choices and the areas in which institutions may facilitate ethical development. As such, this study will address the following research questions: 1) what are students' ethical beliefs and their perceptions of students' ethical behaviors; and 2) how do students' personal values and perceptions of behaviors differ?

Methodology

Data Source

In the spring of 2006, all students in the University of California (UC) system were asked to participate in the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES). The administration of the survey began early May and concluded in the middle of August 2006. UCUES was designed and implemented to provide an in-depth examination of undergraduate students at the University of California campuses. Through a modular approach, students at nine UC campuses were invited to complete a common set of core questions and one other module that consisted of questions related to their academic engagement, civic engagement, student development, student services, or a campus-specific module referred to as the wildcard.

UCLA used its institution-specific module to address students' ethical values and their perceptions of students' ethical behaviors. First, students were asked to report their

level of agreement ("agree strongly," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," "disagree strongly") with choices describing 13 scenarios that represent ethical and moral decisions from a range of student experiences (e.g., cheating on a test, installing unlicensed software on their computers, using a fake method of identification to gain access to a bar). The wildcard module also asked students to report their perceptions of the proportion of UCLA students who engaged in these same 13 activities at least once during the academic year: "although you may not personally engage in the following activities, what proportion of UCLA students has done the following at least once during this [*2005-2006*] academic year?" The response options for these items were: "no idea," "none," "a few," "some," "most," "all."

Sample

The overall rate of response to the UCLA administration of the 2006 UCUES was 33 percent of the student population, or 7,882 students. Only a random sub-sample of the population received the wildcard module, which included the items related to students' ethical beliefs and behaviors. Approximately 33 percent of this sub-sample completed the UCLA wildcard module of the UCUES (N=1,568). The sample is generally representative of the population of interest (see Table 1). However, it is important to note that the sample slightly overrepresents female, upper-division, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. The slight overrepresentation of Asian/Pacific Islander students may be partially explained by the proportion of international students on the UCLA campus.

Table 1. Representativenss of UCUES, UCLA Wildcard Respondents

	UCLA UCUES Wildcard Respondents (n=1,582)	UCLA UCUES Survey Respondents (n=7,882)
Gender		
Female	60.2	56.5
Male	39.8	43.5
Entry		
Direct	73.3	70.6
Transfer	26.7	29.4
Level		
Freshmen	9.9	15.7
Sophomore	17.3	15.2
Junior	29.7	29.0
Senior	43.1	40.1
Lower Division	39.1	38.6
Upper Division	60.3	61.4
Ethnicity		
Black Non-Hispanic	2.4	3.2
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.6	0.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	45.2	38.1
Hispanic	13.7	15.3
White Non-Hispanic	32.9	33.6
Unstated, Unknown, Other	5.1	5.8
Geographic Location		
California	94.8	94.9
United States (except CA)	2.9	3
International	2.1	2.1

*Students were asked about their international status in a separate question.

Analytical Methods

Descriptive analyses (i.e., frequency distributions and counts) were conducted on students' ethical values and their perceptions of other students' ethical behaviors in

academic, technological, and social situations. The variables representing students' own ethical beliefs (i.e., agreement with particular moral and ethical decisions) as well as those related to students' perceptions of ethical/moral decision-making among their peers were grouped thematically according to their association with the following themes: 1) academic integrity and honesty, 2) social activities, and 3) behaviors influenced by perceptions of convenience. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of these thematic constructs for the variables representing students' personal beliefs as well as those that served as a measure of their perceptions of peer behaviors.

The "academic" construct consisted of five variables: lying to a professor about the reason for late work or absence, cheating on a test, copying material from the Internet without attribution, using solution sets from previous terms to complete assignments, and actively hindering other students from doing well. Although the reliability of the construct related to students' own beliefs was sufficiently high (Cronbach's alpha=0.65), the academic construct related to students' perceptions of ethical decision-making among their peers was particularly robust (Cronbach's alpha=0.82).

The "social" construct contained three variables that most often occur within groups or in social settings: using a fake ID to get into a bar, selling tickets to a social event for a profit, and taking more food than allowed from the residence hall dining facility. Both the construct related to the students' own behavior and that representing their perception of ethical decision-making among their peers yielded moderately high reliability estimates (Cronbach's alphas of 0.65 and 0.66 respectively).

The "convenience" factor consisted of five variables: downloading copyrighted material without paying, installing unlicensed software onto a personal computer, parking illegally while attending class, falsifying a handicapped parking permit application, and littering on campus. While some of these variables could also be included in the academic factor, these five variables yielded moderate reliability estimates when categorized around the issue of convenience: 0.68 for the construct related to students' own ethical beliefs and 0.76 for students' perception of ethical behaviors among their peers.

Results

Students' Personal Values and Beliefs

Frequency distributions of survey items related to students' agreement on a series of ethical decisions serve as a means for students to rank their moral beliefs (Table 2). Findings indicate that over half of students "strongly agree" or "agree" that it is acceptable to take more food than allowed from the dining hall facility. Approximately one-quarter of students agreed that it is all right to use solution sets or sample papers from previous terms to complete assignments, download copyrighted material without paying for it, install unlicensed software on their personal computer, sell sports or entertainment tickets for greater than face value, or use a fake ID to get into a bar. Additionally, one percent or fewer "strongly agree" or "agree" that it is okay to cheat on a test, actively hinder other students from doing well, plagiarize from the Internet, or litter on campus.

Organizing these results by thematic construct reveals that students appear to have clearer and more consistent ethical standards with respect to their academic behaviors (since they tend to be clustered at the bottom of the list). There seems to be greater ambiguity with respect to ethical decision-making for social activities and for behaviors

that represent convenience (see Table 2). The most obvious exception to this pattern is with respect to "using solution sets or sample papers from previous terms to complete assignments," which represents acceptable behavior for over a quarter of survey respondents (29%).

This difference from other academic behaviors may be partially explained by the fact that this variable can also be classified as a task of convenience depending upon the interpretation of students' situation. This may also indicate that students do not view this assistance as inappropriate, as opposed to plagiarizing from the Internet. Replicating some else's procedure, process, and/or ideas to complete one's own work, although not authentic, does not appear to be viewed as immoral from the students' perspective.

Table 2. Percent of Students Who Strongly Agree/Agree that Behavior is Okay

	Thematic Category	Percent
Take more than the allowed amount of food out of a residence hall dining facility	Social	51
Use solution sets or sample papers from previous terms to complete assignments	Academic	29
Download copyrighted material without paying	Convenience	28
Install unlicensed software on a personal computer	Convenience	26
Sell sports or entertainment tickets for a higher price than face value	Social	25
Use a fake ID to get into a bar	Social	25
Park illegally while going to class	Convenience	14
Lie to a professor about the reason for overdue work or absence from class	Academic	9
Falsify an application for a handicapped parking permit	Convenience	2
Litter on campus	Convenience	1
Copy and paste material from the Internet direclty into an assignment without attribution	Academic	1
Actively try to prevent other students from doing well	Academic	1
Cheat on a test in class	Academic	<1

UCUES 2006, UCLA Wildcard Module

Overall, these results suggest that students are most uncomfortable and most strongly disagree with behaviors that compromised academic integrity and honesty (e.g., cheating on a test, actively hindering others from doing well, plagiarizing material from the Internet). Additionally, it can be said that students appear to have determined that variables that are socially unacceptable by the larger society, such as littering on campus and falsifying an application for a handicapped parking permit, despite the extra convenience these behaviors generate, are also viewed as unacceptable behaviors. Perhaps students have internalized the negative social connotations associated with such behavior and have integrated them into their own value and belief structure.

Perceptions of Other Students' Beliefs and Behaviors

In addition to students' personal beliefs about acceptable choices and behavior, the wildcard module of the 2006 UCUES asked students to indicate how frequently they think other students have engaged in the same 13 behaviors that they rated for themselves (Table 3). Students believed that the most pervasive behavior among their peers is downloading copyrighted material without paying for it: two-thirds of survey

respondents (64%) felt that most, if not all, students had engaged in this behavior at least once during the past academic year.

Further, between one-third and one-half of respondents indicated that "most" or "all" of students have taken more food than allowed from the residence hall dining facility or have installed unlicensed software onto a personal computer. At the opposite end of the frequency range, survey respondents most often indicated that none of their peers had falsified an application for a handicapped parking permit (27%), actively hindered other students from doing well (22%), or plagiarized from the Internet without attribution (16%) during the past academic year (Table 3). Student responses to these items do not reveal a pattern with respect to thematic construct (i.e., academic, social, or convenience).

Table 3. Students' perception of UCLA students who has done the following at least once:

	Percent			
	Most or All	A Few or Some	None	No Idea
Downloaded copyrighted material without paying	64	24	3	9
Taken more than the allowed amount of food out of a residence hall dining facility	47	35	3	15
Installed unlicensed software on a personal computer	38	40	6	17
Used solution sets or sample papers from previous terms to complete assignments	31	51	5	14
Littered on campus	21	63	7	10
Lied to a professor about the reason for overdue work or absence from class	19	56	7	17
Used a fake ID to get into a bar	18	59	6	18
Copied and pasted material from the Internet directly into an assignment without attribution	6	52	16	26
Sold sports or entertainment tickets for a higher price than face value	6	47	13	35
Actively tried to prevent other students from doing well	6	44	22	28
Cheated on a test in class	5	61	13	21
Parked illegally while going to class	5	53	12	30
Falsified an application for a handicapped parking permit	3	33	27	38

While responses regarding students' perceptions of communal behaviors are interesting, it is also important to recognize the relatively high percentage of students who indicated that they had "no idea" whether other students engaged in these behaviors. More than one-quarter of student respondents reported ambiguity on five activities: plagiarism on assignments (26%), active hindrance of other students from doing well (28%), parked illegally while attending class (30%), scalping tickets (35%), or falsified an application for a handicapped parking permit (38%). Interestingly, students have not conceded the inappropriateness of these activities for themselves and appeared to be unclear about the practice among their peers.

When viewed through a thematic lens, it appears that three of these activities are classified as a "convenience" and the remaining two fall into the "academic" construct. Given the shifting social contexts that shape perceptions of appropriateness of "convenience" constructs, open discussion regarding the ambiguity of these behaviors would enable valuable ethical and moral development opportunities for students.

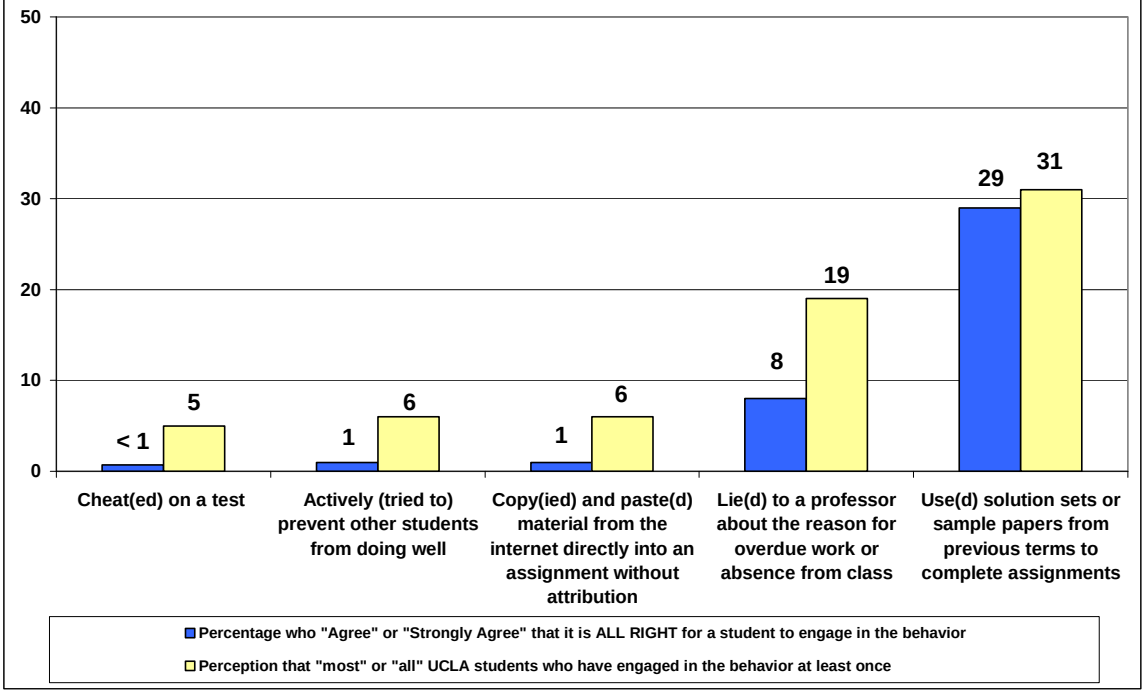
Comparison of Students' Perception of Self and Others

In addition to analyzing students' ethical values in relation to their perceptions of their peers, it is also valuable to compare the two. This comparison provides a more complete understanding of students' ethical decision-making processes by contextualizing their personal moral beliefs within a larger framework. Although it is important to understand that this framework is a product of students' *interpretation* of ethical behaviors in the community at large, student perceptions of ethics within the student community can be a powerful influence on their own moral compasses.

In situations that involve ethical behavior in academics (Figure 1), the most commonly perceived activity includes using solution sets or sample papers to complete assignments (31%). This perception of other students' ethical decisions in this domain is very consistent with students' own views on this behavior (29% agreed that this was an acceptable academic behavior). In students' responses to other questions about ethical decisions in academics, both the level of agreement and the perception of other students engaging in such behavior were low. Furthermore, these findings suggest that students generally perceive that their own value structure is more ethical than those of their peers (i.e., the level of agreement is significantly lower than their perceptions of peers engaging in these activities).

For example, despite the small percentage of students who "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that it is acceptable to lie to a professor about the reason for overdue assignments (9%), students appear to perceive that their peers have engaged in this behavior at least once during the past academic year (19%). Further, there were similar, albeit smaller, differences (approximately five percentage-points) for comparisons between variables for cheating, actively preventing other students from doing well, and plagiarizing from the Internet.

Figure 1. Academic Integrity and Honesty (UCUES, 2006)



Comparison of students' beliefs to perceptions of peer behaviors for variables that were included in the social activities thematic construct revealed a different pattern than the one found for academic decisions. All three of these variables represented behaviors that students were more likely to condone despite the perception that it was less common among their peers (Figure 2).

This trend was most notable in the 19-percentage-point difference between the proportion of students who agreed that it was acceptable to sell sports and entertainment tickets at higher than face value (25%) and the proportion of the sample that believed that "most" or "all" of their peers had engaged in this behavior during the past academic year (6%). Comparisons for using a fake ID and taking more food than was allowed from the dining hall yielded smaller differences (7 percentage points and 4 percentage points respectively), that tilted in the same direction. These differences indicate the areas in which students feel more comfortable engaging in these types of behaviors and generally perceive themselves to be more ethical than their peers.

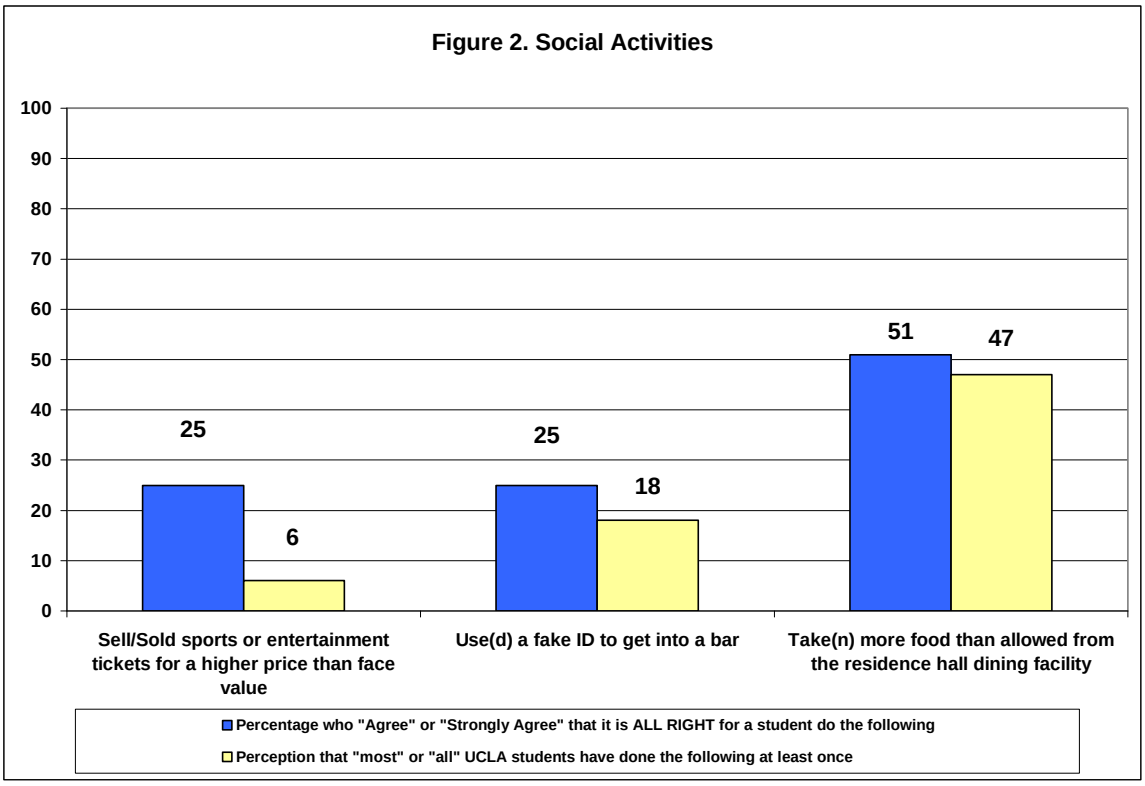


Figure 2. Social Activities
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
25
6
25
18
51
47
Sell/Sold sports or entertainment tickets for a higher price than face value
Use(d) a fake ID to get into a bar
Take(n) more food than allowed from the residence hall dining facility
Percentage who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that it is ALL RIGHT for a student do the following
Perception that "most" or "all" UCLA students have done the following at least once

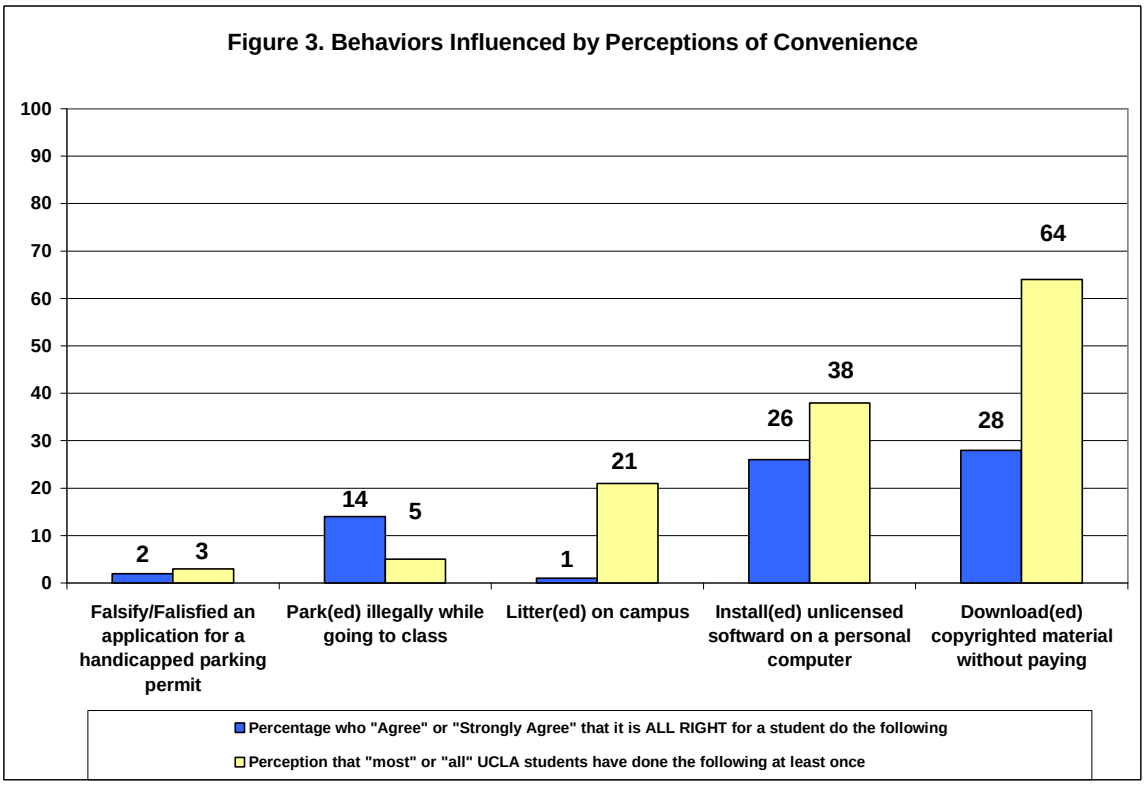


Figure 3. Behaviors Influenced by Perceptions of Convenience
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
2
3
14
5
1
21
26
38
28
64
Falsify/Falisfied an application for a handicapped parking permit
Park(ed) illegally while going to class
Litter(ed) on campus
Install(ed) unlicensed softward on a personal computer
Download(ed) copyrighted material without paying
Percentage who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that it is ALL RIGHT for a student do the following
Perception that "most" or "all" UCLA students have done the following at least once

Comparisons among variables included in the "convenience" thematic construct were less consistent than the other two constructs (Figure 3). Overall, very few students believed it was acceptable to falsify a handicapped parking permit and reported similarly low levels of the behavior's occurrence among their peers. A greater proportion of students agreed that it was all right to park illegally while going to class (14%) than reported that most if not all of their fellow UCLA students had engaged in this behavior at least once during the past academic year (5%).

However, student responses to the survey indicated large disparities between their personal beliefs about downloading copyrighted material from the Internet without paying (a 36 percentage-point difference), littering (a 20 percentage-point difference), and installing unlicensed software (an 8 percentage-point difference). Each of these comparisons provides evidence that students generally perceive themselves as more ethical than their peers.

In sum, 7 of 13 comparisons provide evidence that students maintain a more strict moral code for themselves than they observe in the decision-making patterns of their peers, particularly regarding academic integrity and honesty. Furthermore, two comparisons did not yield significant differences. In contrast, students reported higher levels of ethical acceptability (i.e., agreed that the behavior was permissible) than their perceptions of their peers' actions in four comparisons, three of which were in the thematic construct for social activities. These differences indicate the areas in which students are more comfortable with engaging in these types of behaviors.

Significance/ Discussion

Given the strong predictive power of self-reported beliefs to corresponding self-reported behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973, Pratt & McLaughlin, 1989), the results of this study provide a clearer understanding of ethical decision-making among college students, despite the fact that they do not directly report their own activity. Furthermore, research indicates that students' perceptions of peer beliefs and behaviors are the best predictors of the respondents' own ethical behavior (Zey-Ferrell, Weaver, & Ferrell, 1979). As such, the results of this study help identify an ethical code among college students and areas of moral ambiguity, which can inform conversations with students about campus expectations and indicate opportunities for ethical and moral development in the college curriculum.

The comparison of personal beliefs and perception of peer behaviors provides further insight into the student's sense of morality in different domains. Areas in which students report more stringent personal beliefs than their perceptions of peers' behaviors, such as all of the academic measures and several convenience measures, represent domains where students see little need to re-examine their ethical beliefs or to change their behaviors in a positive fashion.

In fact, student perceptions of the pervasiveness of certain activities among their peers (e.g., downloading copyrighted material from the Internet) may make it more challenging for students to uphold their strict code of personal ethics and could even be used as rationalization for engaging in these behaviors in the future. Conversely, areas in which students are more likely to condone the behavior and yet observe fewer peers engaging in these same behaviors represent a point of dissonance in the student's own moral code and thus open an opportunity for intervention and education.

Additionally, the results of this study have the potential to contribute to other areas of understanding and practice in dealing with students' ethical choices and behaviors, and ultimately in facilitating discussions of student moral development in college. Research has indicated that competition within the university environment may lead to a reduction in ethical behavior and decision-making (Ford and Richardson, 1994). Within academia, particularly in subject areas that engender greater competition, it is important that institutions promote an explicit code of conduct. If students are taking cues from their peers as to what beliefs and behaviors are appropriate, a strong message from the institution's faculty and staff can promote ethical decision-making skills and practices. Business research has documented that by communicating the beliefs and behaviors of top management, the ethical beliefs of employees improve as well, since subordinates align their beliefs with those of authority figures (Ferrell & Weaver, 1978). Longitudinal studies have also demonstrated growth in students' moral reasoning when ethical content is included in the curriculum (Duckett & Ryden, 1994; McNeel, Schaffer & Juarez, 1997).

Furthermore, this study will help identify the areas in which programs and workshops can most influence student ethical decision-making and future behavior. Given that students generally perceive themselves to be more ethical than their peers, making this information public will likely enact changes in behaviors and beliefs. Intervention in these particular areas by college campuses should expose perceptions of normative behavior in contrast to actual behaviors, so as to enhance moral development. It is also important to look at how researchers and practitioners can begin to address the student population's moral development systematically and uniformly across the institution.

As universities focus attention on the advancement of ethical decision-making, especially in the areas of technology use and the downloading of copyrighted materials, these findings may help inform administrators and practitioners by highlighting areas of ambiguity (i.e., having "no idea") in the student's decision-making or value-defining process. Findings may also contribute to the function of several Student Affairs and Academic offices, including Judicial Affairs, the Office of Residential Life, and academic tutorial programs, among others, in their efforts to help students develop morally and academically.

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