

# Prevalence, Motives, and Views of Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education

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**Abstract-***Academic dishonesty in educational institutions is a cause for concern at present. In this paper, the prevalence and severity of various types of dishonest academic behaviors were determined based on the experiences and perceptions of college students. Self-reports on reasons for engaging in a type of cheating or plagiarism were also collected and analyzed to identify certain themes. Findings suggest that cheating on exams and homework is still prevalent, students view these dishonest behaviors as ordinary school acts, and their actions are a product of several factors – teacher’s and student’s incompetence, unfavorable environment, and lenient imposition of school policy. Certain ethical dilemmas were deduced from the results of the study, such as the varying perceptions on the morality of unfair academic manners and the relative importance of deceit over success.*

**Keywords-** *cheating, plagiarism, ethical dilemma*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty, or more commonly known as cheating and plagiarism, has been a constant problem for years at all educational levels. A number of studies have shown evidence of the growing prevalence of academic dishonesty in academic institutions (Baillo, 2000; Reyes, 1998; Bautista, 1980). It is disheartening to note that it all emanates from the context of the community and the school. It is a common image of most institutions of higher learning to aim for academic excellence and to develop character. However, owing to the results of these studies, we can see a different picture (Resurreccion, 2012). In the U.S., there were reports of an increasing percentage of students who have committed at least one act of academic dishonesty (Mohr, Ingram, Fell & Mabey, 2011; Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar, 2007).

Academic dishonesty and misconduct, as a research subject, has gained much attention since the early part of the twentieth century (Hulsart & McCarthy, 2009). These studies have determined the possible long-term effects of academic dishonesty on the students and the school. They speculated that cheating and plagiarism will more likely result to unethical behavior in the place of work (Mohr, Ingram, Fell & Mabey, 2011). It is also assumed that if a higher education institution (HEI) shall be identified for poor academic integrity, the community

and other stakeholders will tend to lose trust on the degrees conferred on graduates and on the capability and moral character of the graduates themselves (Resurreccion, 2012).

Meanwhile, a number of studies on academic dishonesty had focused on business schools. It is to be noted that business students in the U.S. were commonly more unethical in their behavior than non-business majors (Smyth & Davis, 2004). The question now is, “Are these findings true to Filipino teacher education students as well?”

For the past decades, Filipino scholars have conducted studies on academic integrity which mostly revolved around cheating on assignments and examinations, more than half of which involved students in the elementary and secondary levels (Mocorro, 2008; Baillo, 2000; Reyes, 1998; Koo, 1990; Binuya, 1988; Abrantes, 1984; Bautista, 1980). There seems to be limited literature in the Philippines on ethical dilemmas faced by college students in the context of academic integrity in the digital age.

Long before the digital age, many educators have long predicted that computer technology would change the way by which educational endeavors are practiced (Etter, Cramer, & Finn, 2006). Of equal importance, however, has been its supposed effect on student practices that threaten academic integrity. For example, a series of survey conducted by the Center

for Academic Integrity has noted a steep increase in the number of college students who have used the World Wide Web to write papers based on uncited text passages from websites (McCabe, 2005).

Much research endeavors have been conducted on academic integrity and dishonesty; however, there seems to be limited studies and literature on the ethical dilemmas that plague students' choice and course of actions. Certain reasons must have been considered in student's unfavourable decisions to commit an act of dishonesty and plagiarism in the school. Students who cheated probably had been torn between two difficult choices rooted on different concerns for social acceptance—desirable values and high academic achievement. Thus, these ethical dilemmas must be properly elucidated to give educators a critical understanding of this academic misconduct.

This study was conducted to enlighten the dim view of ethical orientations in student's perception of and attitude towards cheating and plagiarism. Specifically, it intended to provide answers to the following questions: a) How prevalent is academic dishonesty in the college? b) What are the driving forces for student's cheating/plagiarism? c) How do students perceive the morality of cheating and plagiarism? and d) What are the ethical dilemmas faced by students on academic dishonesty.

Since cheating and plagiarism are ethical concerns in most of the educational institutions, this study is deemed pivotal in the dissection of conditions that promote academic dishonesty to provide educators with a critical challenge to cope with. An in-depth understanding of external and internal factors contributing to this misbehaviour will enable educators to form informed decisions on the prevention and solution of the problems associated with students' dishonesty.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a survey in which participants were tasked to answer a set of questionnaires composed of checklists and open-ended questions. The instrument used was adopted from the Academic Integrity Survey developed by McCabe (2005, June), a pioneer in the study of issues related to academic dishonesty. It was composed of rating scales on the frequency (never, once, more than once, not relevant) of students' engagement in certain dishonest behaviors and on their beliefs on the severity (not cheating, trivial cheating, moderate cheating, serious cheating) of each behavior. To

ensure student's anonymity, each one was directed to fold his/her accomplished questionnaire after answering it and then place it in a secrecy box.

Thirty (30) college students from a class composed of thirty-seven (37) members enrolled in their third of four-year baccalaureate degree in mathematics teacher education participated in this study. (During the day of administration of questionnaire-checklist, seven participants were absent.) The respondents were selected considering that mathematics major students are frequently exposed to tests and that the field of their study is considered one of the most difficult school subjects. So it is assumed that there is greater likelihood that certain types of dishonest academic behaviors will be committed by this group of teacher education students.

Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were used to understand the three concepts investigated in this study—motives, prevalence and views on the morality of academically dishonest behaviors. To determine the students' motives on cheating, respondents' self-reports on why they committed cheating/plagiarism and why they refrained from doing so were scrutinized to find some similarities which were grouped into themes. Some implications were made from these themes based on the existing accounts provided by research literature and some moral principles.

In analysing the quantitative data from the responses of the participants, this study used descriptive statistics, primarily percentage. Students' engagement in dishonest academic behaviors and their views on the seriousness of each behavior were analysed by comparing the number of the responses. If at least half of the respondents reported that they had engaged in a certain behavior more than once, then such behavior would be considered as prevalent. The number of responses in a given behavior (in rows) and frequency (in columns) was expressed as percentage to facilitate comparison. Similarly, if at least 50 percent of the respondents reported that they view a certain behavior as "not cheating" or "trivial cheating", then such behavior is not perceived to be academically dishonest or the behaviour is morally acceptable.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Academic dishonesty is more commonly understood as cheating during exams. Students perceive its immorality; some view it as an ordinary mistake. It is also viewed as an alternative to hurdle the hindrances in the academic race, especially when

the student is unprepared, incapable, pressured, and ignorant of the ethics. It is blamed on the teacher's incompetence, on peer's consent, on rigid curriculum, and on the lack of strict school policy. In the succeeding discussions of findings, the reader will note some dilemmas that send students to crossroads where they have to choose a difficult decision. Should they follow the rules and fail in the test? Should they break the rules to comply with the academic standards?

### Prevalence of Cheating

In Table 1, the responses of the participants on the frequency of their engagement in certain dishonest behaviors in and out of the school. Referring to the number of students who reported their engagement in such behaviors, one can notice that a type of dishonest behavior was committed at least once by about half of the participants. This means that academic dishonesty is still prevalent in our schools as was found in literature reviews.

Of these behaviors, cheating on assignments or home work was the most prevalent. Twenty-four or 80% of the participants reported that they engaged in the behavior more than once. This was followed by cheating during a test or exam 67%, working in group for an individual assignment 57%, and plagiarizing

from printed materials 37%. On the other hand, the least prevalent dishonest behavior was using unauthorized gadgets during exams, followed by using *kodigo*, disseminating leaked test papers, and submitting term papers copied mostly from websites and printed sources.

The prevalence of cheating on homework or assignments can be attributed to the enhanced opportunities provided by the circumstances (Michaels & Miethe, 1989; Perry, Kane, Bernesser, & Spicker, 1990) and the freedom from surveillance by the teacher (Concoran & Rotter, 1987; Covey, Saladin, & Killen, 1989). Students can freely do what they want with their assigned tasks without fear of being caught. Since homework is done outside the school, dishonest students have the chance to share their works before entering the class and submitting to the teacher.

This prevalence of cheating on assignments and tests poses enormous challenge to the evaluation of students' academic performance. Teachers should consider assessment results from homework and objective tests as questionable basis of giving student mark in the subject. Giving authentic tasks and directly observing them as they perform can check the authenticity of the students' understanding of the subject matter at hand.

Table 1. Students' degree of engagement in dishonest behaviors

Behavior	Prevalence (%), <i>n</i> = 30			
	Never	Once	More than once	Not relevant
Copied from another student during a test or exam.	10	23	67	0
Used unpermitted crib notes (or <i>kodigo</i> ) during a test or exam.	90	10	0	0
Got questions or answers from someone who had already taken a test.	47	20	33	0
Using an electronic or digital device as an unauthorized aid during an exam.	93	3	3	1
Helped someone else cheat on a test.	56	19	22	3
Read an abridged version of a book rather than the original.	45	28	17	10
Turned in work you copied from another student.	45	28	20	7
Worked on an assignment with other students when the teacher asked for individual work.	20	23	57	0
Copied a few sentences from a site on the Internet without citing them.	54	23	23	0
Copied a few sentences from a book, magazine, or other source without citing them.	29	29	39	3
Let another student copy homework.	7	13	80	0
Turned in paper obtained in large part from a term paper "mill" or website, or from a book, journal, or other source.	75	11	7	7
Sold, purchased, or distributed in some other way test/exam copies, questions, essays, or class notes.	91	3	3	3

Note: Shaded value means that the corresponding behavior is prevalent

### Why Students Cheated and Why They Didn't

Students were asked on why they cheated or why they did not. Here are some of the responses of the participants. (Minor grammatical corrections of the responses were done to avoid unintentional alterations on the message that each participant wants to convey.):

I cheat[ed] because I d[id]n't want to fail[.]. But not all the time. Sometimes I cheat[ed] because of I c[ould]n't really [give] the answer. (S2)

I cheat[ed] sometimes...because I [was] scared to fail[] [i]n [the] subject, and [I was not able to study] the lesson. (S3)

Sometimes I cheat[ed], but not that serious, because I didn't study well. But I d[id]n't cheat especially on final exams because I [was] confident [with] my answers[,] and it [was] mine. (S5)

Sometimes [the reason why I cheat] is to pass the exam and to g[e]t high grades. So, [my] parents [would be] proud of me. (S6)

Sometimes I want[ed] to cheat because some of the topic[s] that I [had] encountered [was hard to] understand. And some insight [we]re very complicated. (S12)

I cheat sometimes because I'm very busy...[T]here is no time for studying. (S16)

Because I d[id]n't know the answer[,] and sometimes I c[ould]n't understand the lesson. (S19)

I cheat[ed] because sometimes I d[id]n't know [...] the answer. So if you want [to finish the] exam already, then you must cheat on your seatmate or classmate. (S21)

Cheating is not a good behavior. It is a violation of school rules/policies. But sometimes, or there are times when you need to get some help from others, just to save your own reputation. (S22)

I cheated within the times in which I d[id] not know the answer to [the] given problem, or sometimes because of laziness. (S28)

From the above responses emerge certain themes that describe external or internal motives that force students to commit dishonest academic behaviors. The frequency of the use of the adverb "sometimes" (S2,3,5,6,12,16,19,21,22,28) implies occasional engagement in the behavior, or that there are some circumstances which urge them to cheat. Another remarkable finding is the student's reason for cheating because "they did not study well"(S3,16), "they did not understand the teacher or the lesson"(S7,8,15,19), or "they forgot the right answer"(S1,2,21). The first reason is an indication of academic procrastination, the second is of learning difficulty, and the third is of memory disorder. Furthermore, they cheated on tests because they were motivated to "get high grades"(S6,20) or "pass the exam"(S4,7). This motivation is a kind of social pressure(Bowers, 1964; Leming, 1980). In Filipino society, getting high grades and passing the school tests are highly prized, so these students wanted to live up to societal expectations—from peers and parents—by any means, despite their inability, to avoid rejection and self-pity.

Findings suggest that there are certain factors which contribute to the prevalence of cheating in the school. First, poor classroom management by the teacher might have lowered down walls for students to engage in cheating(Michaels & Miethe, 1989; Perry, Kane, Bernesser, & Spicker, 1990), though occasionally. The absence of strict policy implementation or low risk of punishment (Leming, 1980) and poor classroom structure enabled students to freely and easily get involved in a cheating conspiracy. Students collaborate to obtain better marks on tests; they share answers on an objective type test, complementing each other if either of them does not know the best answer to a test item. Furthermore, ineffective teaching might have contributed to students' poor knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, which somehow motivated them to misbehave (as reported by four respondents below).

Sometimes, I cheat[ed] because I [was] afraid to fail especially in major subject, but I tr[ied] my best to pass the exam. Because, sometimes, it's hard to understand some topic/lesson[s] ...especially in major subject. (S7)

I cheat[ed] because sometimes I d[id]n't understand the topic, especially if the teachers [had] not discussed the lesson properly. That is why I find [it] hard to understand what he/she

[was] saying or discussing. Another reason is [the] lack of interest about the topic. (S8)

I cheat[ed] for the circumstances that I didn't understand the topic that the teachers [had] deliver[ed] during class hours. (S15)

I cheat[ed] because, sometimes, I forgot the answer and when I didn't study the lesson. I also cheat[ed] [when] I didn't understand the lesson because other teachers didn't elaborate the topic. (S19)

Second, the student's incompetence in a certain area gives him or her no other choice but to commit an act of cheating. Poor cognitive ability and comprehension skills make a student lag far behind other better ones despite the effective pedagogical processes employed by the teacher. Consequently, this student resorts to cheating and plagiarism lest he or she fails to comply with the class standards. Despite his or her difficulty in understanding the lesson, developing good study habits, enhancing retention, and catching up with the minimum requirement in the subject, he or she still manages to gain confidence with grades elevated by unscrupulous ways. Unfortunately, this student reaches the top of the academic ladder with a questionable proficiency, and

therefore puts the image of the degree conferred to him/her by the school at stake.

On the other hand, a few students view cheating as an unethical behavior that must be avoided (S13,22,30). Ironically, one respondent reported that he/she could not avoid it, even if he/she knew that it is unethical (S28). However, some admitted that they engaged in a certain behavior which they did not know as a form of academic dishonesty. Here is one self-report:

I copied a few sentences from a site on the Internet without citing them because I didn't know that it [was] cheating already. (S24)

With the proliferation of technology in education, for example, copying certain articles from the Internet and turning in the same without due citation of the original authors is not wrong for them. Furthermore, others reported that they were honest "sometimes" and dishonest in some other times (e.g., they cheat on assignments but not on exams). Therefore, a certain dilemma occurs in students' minds with respect to dealing with academic integrity. They view the triviality of cheating as an ethical issue in the educational context.

Table 2. Students' perceptions on the seriousness of each type of dishonest behavior

Behavior	Severity of Dishonest Behavior (%), <i>n</i> = 30			
	Not cheating	Trivial cheating	Moderate cheating	Serious cheating
Copying from another student during a test or exam.	7	53	27	13
Using unpermitted crib notes (or <i>kodigo</i> ) during a test or exam.	50	3	3	43
Getting questions or answers from someone who had already taken a test.	28	38	17	17
Using an electronic or digital device as an unauthorized aid during an exam.	52	10	14	24
Helping someone else cheat on a test.	31	31	31	7
Reading an abridged version of a book rather than the original.	48	30	17	7
Turning in work you copied from another student.	30	33	27	10
Working on an assignment with other students when the teacher asked for individual work.	13	47	37	3
Copying a few sentences from a site on the Internet without citing them.	43	23	20	13
Copying a few sentences from a book, magazine, or other source without citing them.	30	30	23	17
Letting another student copy homework.	13	50	37	0
Turning in paper obtained in large part from a term paper "mill" or website, or from a book, journal, or other source.	52	17	14	17
Selling, purchasing, or distributing in some other way test/exam copies, questions, essays, or class notes.	47	3	10	40

Note: The combined value of the shaded values is sufficient to describe how respondents view the severity of the corresponding dishonest behavior.

Student views on the severity of certain dishonest behaviors are found in Table 2. There were thirteen (13) behaviors identified and used in the interviews. The relative frequency of responses in columns were compared to determine the common perceptions of participants on the given behavior.

Respondents view the severity of each dishonest behavior differently. Copying from another student during a test or exam was viewed as “trivial cheating” by a greater number of participants. This means that copying from another student during a test or exam is just normal. Using unpermitted crib notes (or *kodigo*) during a test or exam was viewed differently as either “not cheating” or “serious cheating”. It is kind of a confusion about the severity of using cheat sheets in an exam or test. The other given behaviors were viewed as follows: getting information from students who have taken a test was deemed as a “trivial cheating”, unauthorized use of device as “not cheating”, helping someone cheat as “not a serious cheating”, reading an abridged book as “not cheating”, submitting copied material as “trivial cheating”, working in groups in an individual task as “trivial cheating”, copying someone’s work without citing as “not cheating”, sharing homework as “trivial cheating”, submitting papers with most contents taken from online source without citing as “not cheating”, and unauthorized dissemination of test leaks as “either least serious or most serious type”.

A relationship between students’ engagement in and view of some behaviors can be noted; that is, more prevalent behaviors are viewed as more severe. In Table 1, copying from another student during a test or exam, working on an assignment with other students when the teacher asked for individual work, and letting another student copy homework are reported to be committed more than once by the respondents. The same are perceived as trivial to moderate cheating behaviors in Table 2. This implies that students still engage in these behaviors even if they knew that these are academically dishonest.

On the average, the reader will note that the overall perception is that the above behaviors are conceived as trivial cheating. This implies that most of the dishonest academic behaviors identified in this study are just ordinary acts in and out of the classroom. Students engage in the behaviors without fear of their consequences. This confirms their qualitative response on the reasons why they cheated. They do not view cheating and plagiarism as a moral issue. There is high likelihood that they will continue this vice unless the academic community curtails

opportunities for engagement and intensifies imposition of policy on academic integrity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Students’ dishonesty in academic matters is still prevalent in higher education. Cheating on test/exams and homework are the most common dishonest behaviors that students commit in various school-community contexts. Poor classroom management, student’s and teacher’s incompetence, and high social pressure/expectations are among the external motives of these misbehaviors. Furthermore, the prosaic notion of the triviality of certain academically dishonest behaviors has resulted to the continued engagement in the same behaviors.

While there are some students who perceive the unethical sides of academic dishonesty, there are also others who conceive the advantages it gives to schooling. They believe that cheating should be avoided, but others say it cannot be. Some view using *kodigos* as not cheating, while some view it as a serious one. Some would rather cheat to live up to expectations than abide by ethical norms to lag behind at school. These are the ethical dilemmas that confuse students to make a better decision. These emanate from the inconsistency in the value system that has permeated in our society, from the way schools impose policy, from the students’ learned ethics, from the teacher’s response to student’s misbehaviour, and from the opportunities given by the school environment.

If the ethical dilemmas on academic dishonesty perpetuate to haunt students’ ability to create favourable choices, the integrity of the academic institution in which these occur and grow will be put in jeopardy. The competence of the graduates, the quality of the curricular programs, and the capability of the school personnel are at stake. So, a participatory and collaborative effort on imposing discipline, values recovery, improving facility, promoting honor code, and faculty development are deemed vital.

Few limitations were observed in this study. First, the results of this study involving a very limited number of samples who were selected purposively and conveniently may not be sufficient to generalize on the prevalence, motives and views on academic dishonesty in higher education. The conclusion drawn from here can only be used to give an in-depth understanding of the current states of academic integrity in this particular class in a local state-owned college. Second, the responses of the participants may not be as authentic as it should have been if the

administration of survey questionnaires was done at random. In the data gathering procedure employed, students could be easily identified—though done in an anonymous individual manner—as a group of “cheaters” if they were not to practice inhibition in answering the survey questionnaires. Probably, the participants hesitated to indicate their true experiences in classroom cheating. Lastly, the self-reports were written in English by vernacular- and Filipino-speaking participants, the veracity of which may have been made better if they stated their reasons for cheating in the language they are most comfortable of using. Further studies on the same topic is highly encouraged.

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