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## **Academic Integrity in an Online Business Communication Environment**

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### Abstract

There is a growing increase of academic dishonesty, especially in online technology. A primary focus is to have students gain an awareness of academic integrity, which includes cheating, plagiarizing, or using deceptive online exam tools. The American University at the Center for Academic Integrity ("Academic Integrity," n.d.) categorizes academic integrity into five fundamental values including honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. This study uses qualitative research questions by Hofstra University as open-ended blog questions for students to use critical thinking skills to express their opinions. The students' feedback in this sample indicates that overwhelmingly (97%) of the responses mentioned one or more of the precepts of academic integrity (honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility). This study employs a content analysis methodology using NVivo to analyze the data and interpret the findings into themes. The study validates that students are aware of academic integrity and what is morally appropriate.

*Keywords:* academic integrity, business communication, online

## **Academic Integrity in an Online Business Communication Environment**

From public schools to universities, there has been a growing increase of academic dishonesty. Rapidly expanding technology makes it difficult to preserve academic integrity policies at most colleges and universities. As the recent experience at Harvard University demonstrates (Christakis & Christakis, 2012), maintaining academic integrity is a problem in the online classroom. Educational institutions are developing new instructional delivery models with online classes. Thus, distance learning in a digital age with virtual programs creates a need for faculty scrutiny of student responsibility to follow academic ethical principles. An online class offers enriched technology as well as mobility with which students can use smartphones, tablets, and other electronic devices easily. A principal focus for online classes is to make students more cognizant of academic integrity including cheating, online plagiarizing, and taking online exams with test banks or other unauthorized aids such as notes or textbooks. The American University at the Center for Academic Integrity ("Academic Integrity," n.d.) defines academic integrity as a commitment in the face of adversity to five fundamental values: (1) honesty, (2) trust, (3) fairness, (4) respect, and (5) responsibility. Every participant in a learning community of inquiry has an obligation to support practices that promote academic integrity, prevent dishonesty, and punish offenses when they occur.

### **Purpose**

To inform and educate morals, academic dishonesty, and cheating, we developed an integrity action plan. Faculty and administrators need to be cognizant about academic integrity, versus dishonesty. The purpose of this study is to make online business communication students appreciate the importance of academic integrity by using a blog to identify meaningful answers to the following research questions:

1. What is academic integrity, and why is it important?
2. My professor has notified me that he/she thinks I cheated. What should I do? What can I expect?
3. A friend asked to see my paper; can I show it to him/her? Please explain.
4. How do you interpret academic dishonesty?
5. What is your knowledge of the university's academic integrity policy? ("Hofstra University's Honor Code," n.d.).

This study identifies the perceptions of academic integrity of online business communications students. Few studies have empirically examined the influence of academic integrity among business communication students. This research identifies if students perceive academic integrity with the same five fundamental values as the American University at the Center for Academic Integrity ("Academic Integrity," n.d.). The study also explores the themes among the responses. This study adds to the list of relevant variables as they relate to academic integrity. In addition, it extends convergent validity to academic integrity by assessing student perceptions to specific situations. The research also offers rich data on business communication student perception of academic integrity and academic dishonesty.

## Review of Literature

Distance education can be a great option for many, but it poses questions on academic integrity outside the classroom environment. An online setting makes it difficult for instructors to track or verify dishonesty. The ability of educators to ensure academic integrity in their online courses is a major part of the discussion of effective online instructional design (Braun, 2008; Campbell, 2006; Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006; Wyatt, 2005).

There are innovations to assist students and professors when taking exams and quizzes such as secure monitoring via webcam. Various companies offer online proctoring management systems. Three similar companies are (1) Kryterion ([www.onlineproctoring.com](http://www.onlineproctoring.com)), (2) Proctor Free ([www.proctorfree.com](http://www.proctorfree.com)), and (3) Proctor U ([www.proctoru.com](http://www.proctoru.com)). The online proctoring management systems offer almost any webcam to take recorded proctored evaluations. The proctoring software authenticates the student's identity using facial recognition and maintains continuously identified verification. This proctoring management system will track and record who may affect academic integrity.

Universities have tried to come up with different processes to keep students from cheating. According to the McCabe Academic Integrity Survey (2010), students reported that their instructors frequently discuss policies concerning plagiarism, group work, and the proper citation of written sources or internet sources. Proving academic dishonesty is difficult online, the primary reason being a lack of substantial evidence.

Dishonesty is a focal point for academic dishonesty. Cheating, according to the Western Michigan University website (<http://www.wmich.edu/it/news11academicintegrity>), is the intention to use or attempt to use unauthorized materials, information, notes, study aids, or other devices or materials in any academic exercise. Gary Pavela, Director of Academic Integrity at Syracuse University (<http://www.academicintegrity.org/ica/icaresources-4.php>), describes four stages of institutional development. Stage One is primitive, which describes a school with no policy or procedures and where there is a significant disparity in faculty and administrative functions of cheating. Stage Two describes the radar screen where cheating issues have increased because of an alleged weakness of academic integrity. Stage Three is mature, which has established academic integrity policies and known commonly maintained procedures. Finally, Stage Four is the "honor code," in which students take a major responsibility for implementing the academic integrity policy with public recognition. Institutions may learn what kinds of campus cultures can sustain academic integrity. The most critical part is to be an informed citizen with an awareness leading toward ethical behaviors and moral development.

Most universities include websites related to academic integrity. A sample of the contexts at four Pennsylvania higher education institutions comprises Carnegie Mellon University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Pittsburgh.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania (<http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=66725>) defines academic integrity as "...any issue occurring within a classroom, class-related activity, or class-related function" (Moreland, 2013). Several studies address the need to determine rules that will deter students from facing sanctions. Timothy Moreland, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (2013), describes 12 types of violations based on academic integrity. The 12 types of violations include the following:

1. Providing or receiving unauthorized assistance in coursework;
2. Using unauthorized materials or devices;
3. Plagiarizing papers;
4. Using the same paper or work more than once without authorization;
5. Possessing course examination materials before the administration of the exam;
6. Intentionally evading IUP academic policies and procedures;
7. Falsifying information;
8. Attempting to use unauthorized computing accounts or other information;
9. Failing to comply with previously imposed sanctions for academic violations;
10. Disrupting the learning process as a threat to others;
11. Buying, selling, stealing, or engaging in an unauthorized exchange of, or improperly using, any assignments, papers, or projects; and finally,
12. A faculty member or administrator may bring up charges of academic integrity violations.

Carnegie Mellon University ([http://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/dean/acad\\_int/](http://www.cmu.edu/student-affairs/dean/acad_int/)) states cheating takes place when a student engages in an unfair, disallowed, use of study materials on an exam, copying from a comrade on an examination, submitting falsified information, providing false statements to obtain extensions on assignments, and falsification of academic credentials.

Penn State's University Faculty Senate Policy 49-20 (<https://handbook.psu.edu/content/academic-integrity>) states academic integrity comprises a commitment by all members of the University community not to engage in or accept acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception.

The University of Pittsburgh (<http://www.as.pitt.edu/fac/policies/academic-integrity>) includes student conduct, obligations, and adjudication. The four Pennsylvania related universities include the following: Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie Mellon University, Penn State University, and the University of Pittsburgh; all have similar academic integrity components. Thus, the most significant is to inform and educate students.

## Methodology

Higher education can benefit when colleges and universities have standards of integrity that provide the foundation for a vibrant academic life and prepare students for responsible moral and ethical leaders thus, ongoing active communications with a student.

Students should be aware of academic integrity and reassure themselves through information about the importance and implications of dishonesty including ethical and moral processes.

The blog provided open-ended questions designed to prompt the student's thinking on academic integrity, cheating, academic dishonesty, and knowledge of the institution's academic policy. The blog asks respondents the following five questions:

1. What is academic integrity, and why is it important?
2. My professor has notified me that he/she thinks I cheated. What should I do? What can I expect?
3. A friend asked to see my paper; can I show it to him/her? Please explain.

4. How do you interpret academic dishonesty?
5. What is your knowledge of the university's academic integrity policy?

The qualitative research method used stems from the nature and context of the study. Researchers use qualitative methods to understand the context of the research matter regarding how and why it occurs (Cassell & Symon, 1994) and when the research phenomena are emergent, rather than prefigured (Creswell, 2003). These features are present in this study. This study employs a content analysis methodology to analyze the qualitative data and interpret the findings. This exploratory study provides an in-depth investigation to supply evidence of the students' perceptions of academic integrity and attempts to identify and conceptualize the relationship between the emerging themes grounded in the data.

One way to promote academic integrity for students is to introduce them to academic integrity in an online business communication class. The business communication population comprises 80 students enrolled in an online business communications course at a mid-size western Pennsylvania University. The sample consists of a voluntary group of 67 online business communication students responding to a series of five questions in a blog post referencing Hofstra University, Honor Code (n.d.). The response rate among all classes was slightly more than 83 percent.

Computer-aided content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). We used NVivo 11, a QSR software designed for non-numeric unstructured data (Bazeley, 2002) for data analysis that provides a streamlined structure for emerging themes.

Based on the guidelines by Miles and Huberman (1994), Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2000), Creswell (2006) and Bazeley (2007), this study undergoes the following steps to analyze the data. We copied each participant's response to an individual document with a numbered label to keep the student's identity autonomy in preparation for importing into NVivo. Units of analysis were the responses to each of the five questions. Using NVivo, we coded each respondent's answer to the five questions by creating nodes, which indicate a collection of references to specific themes. The coding process was for not only summarizing segments of data but also grouping those summaries into a smaller number of themes or constructs. To facilitate the coding process, the study uses operational definitions. This process also was useful in identifying the relationship of the themes arising from the students' responses.

The initial coding was deductive in developing free nodes, which is useful when researchers are not sure about their research findings (themes). Then, we developed tree nodes, which have an organized structure, moving from the general category at the top (parent node) the research questions, towards more accurate categories (child node) and keywords to identify themes. The researchers coded the predetermined categories into tree nodes. Another researcher performed the second round of coding by carefully reviewing all responses and the categorizing of text sentences into emergent themes. The emergent themes formed the subcategory codes within each of the major categories. This approach helped to manage the data and eliminate unrelated data. Using selective coding, we specified the components of each subcategory including grouping quotations from the responses into each subcategory enabling us to use the participants' words as much as possible to maximize representation of participants' views.

The researchers completed the cross-case analysis after the comprehensive coding process. We compared the different points for each of the codes. Careful analysis of the coded

record helped to ensure that the domains derived accurately reflected participants' perceptions. We further explored the data to identify relationships within the data using the search option. This enabled an in-depth understanding of what each code statement and relationship meant and the exploration of complex ideas. We identified concepts as the lowest level with keywords. Categories represent a combination of these keywords or concepts. We used themes to describe an integrating, relational idea from the data (Richards, 2005).

The study presents themes and concepts visually using cognitive mapping including relational and spatial analyses to determine relevant semantic networks (Smith, 2003), clusters and knowledge structures of key concepts, themes, and contexts related to accountability research. The coding process helped to construct a coding model (see Figure 1) (Berg, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), serving as a tool for identifying and analyzing new themes arising from the blog entries. Similar to Samkin and Schneider (2008), we used hierarchical cluster analysis to combine words based on their similarity or co-occurrences. The researchers identified clusters in an ordinal and discrete way. NVivo provides coding for descriptions contained in each response, developing approximately 23 categories. The researchers reduced these categories into five broader categories through discussion and further analysis of each research question. The researchers generated summaries of each of the five broader categories from the data text retrieved at these nodes. We named the categories directly from a participant's words.

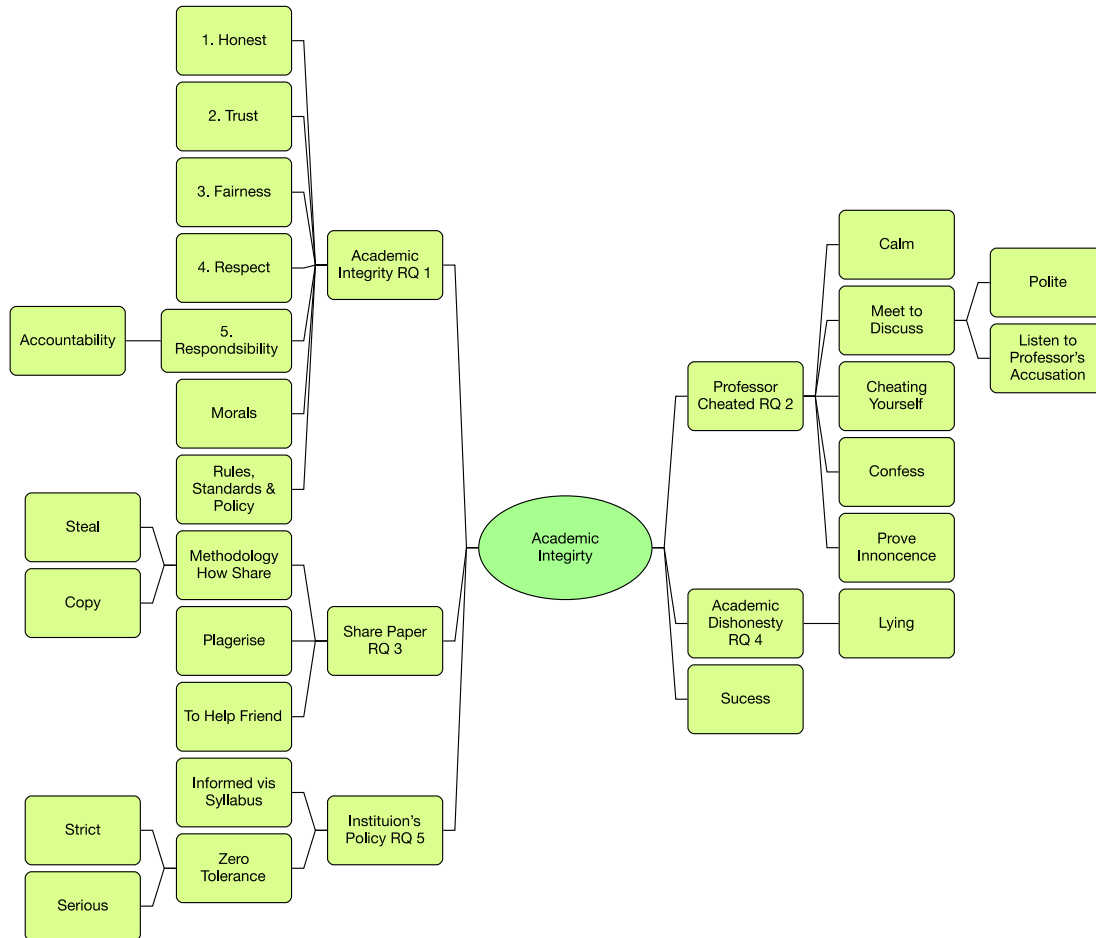


Figure 1. The Cognitive Mapping of Themes, Categories, and Key Words. Source: Our elaboration.

Several checks were put in place to promote research trustworthiness, establishing “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We promoted credibility through peer debriefing and reviewed coding by academics with qualitative research experience. This had the effect of forcing us to explain more thoroughly our findings, and especially the themes and patterns emerging from the responses. The manual analysis provides confirmation of the emergent themes and concepts. Two researchers independently performed an in-depth reading of text data at least two times, identifying the possible nodes to produce themes (Adams, 2002; Patton, 2002). We compared the core themes, with the cross-themes to reduce redundancy of the same factors across themes, which is essential for validity and reliability in qualitative data analysis. Table 1 lists the final themes.

Table 1  
*Emergent Themes from Qualitative Analysis*

| Concept  | Category                       | Theme                                    |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Honesty<br>Trust<br>Fairness<br>Respect<br>Responsibility                              | 5 Values                       | Academic Integrity (Q1)                  |
| Personally Meet<br>Politely listen<br>Explain<br>Proof of Innocence<br>Confess<br>Calm | Discussion Topics<br>Demeanor  | Professor suspects you are Cheating (Q2) |
| Help<br>Limited Sharing<br>Fear of Copy<br>Cheating,<br>Plagiarize                     | Sharing Methods                | Share work or paper (Q3)                 |
| Lying  | Cheating                       | Academic Dishonesty (Q4)                 |
| Zero tolerance<br>Strict<br>Syllabus<br>Serious  | Awareness & Specific Knowledge | Institution’s Policy (Q5)                |
| Success<br>Cheating yourself   | Code of Conduct                | Standards & Policy                       |

## Results

Frequencies of codes or keywords provide an indication of the importance of that very element in the student's responses (Breton & Cote, 2006; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). We developed a frequency scale to summarize the replies. Table 2 shows the results of the frequency scale. We calculated the scale based purely on the count of terms or concepts in the text responses to each of the questions. By structuring the response data into nodes, the following topics surfaced: cheating, integrity, policy, plagiarism, and honesty. Other categorical results that emerged from the responses included success, confessing, lying, strict policy, and knowledge learning. Given that our study concerns academic integrity, it is not surprising to observe that "academic integrity" is the foremost concept mentioned in the list.

Table 2  
*Words Frequency all Responses*

| Word       | Count | Weighted Percentage |
|------------|-------|---------------------|
| Academic   | 520   | 100.00%             |
| Cheats     | 354   | 68.08%              |
| Integrity  | 314   | 60.38%              |
| Paper      | 245   | 47.12%              |
| Works      | 224   | 43.08%              |
| Professor  | 206   | 39.62%              |
| Student    | 190   | 36.54%              |
| Policy     | 177   | 34.04%              |
| Friend     | 168   | 32.31%              |
| Dishonesty | 158   | 30.38%              |
| Shows      | 154   | 29.62%              |
| Important  | 142   | 27.31%              |
| Thinks     | 121   | 23.27%              |
| Expect     | 103   | 19.81%              |
| Asked      | 90    | 17.31%              |
| Explain    | 86    | 16.54%              |
| Interpret  | 79    | 15.19%              |
| Assignment | 78    | 15.00%              |
| Notified   | 77    | 14.81%              |
| Plagiarism | 76    | 14.62%              |
| Taking     | 74    | 14.23%              |
| Honest     | 71    | 13.65%              |

The student's blog responses indicated what constituted academic integrity. For this study, we identified the five values the International Center for Academic Integrity present as precepts. With regard to students' views of academic integrity, 65 respondents (97.0%) mentioned one or more of the precepts of academic integrity (honesty, fairness, respect,



responsibility, and trust). Table 3 displays the concepts in rank order according to the number of occurrences of that keyword in the student's responses. Of interest is the five concepts "honesty," "responsibility," respect," "fairness," and "trust" mentioned 90, 24, 17, 13, and 8, respectively.

Table 3  
*Words Related to Academic Integrity Characteristics*

| Word           | Count |
|----------------|-------|
| Honest         | 90    |
| Responsibility | 24    |
| Respectful     | 17    |
| Fairness       | 13    |
| Trust          | 8     |

### ***Academic Integrity***

We gathered business communication students' perceptions about academic integrity as they related to honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Table 4 shows the results from the questions. All sixty-seven (67) respondents indicated honesty as a measure of academic integrity.

The core premise of academic integrity is intellectual honesty. This construct describes how students perceive academic integrity as a measure of good grades with 51 (76%) respondents agreeing with this premise. The student's response to question one suggests honesty is a fundamental component in maintaining academic integrity.

### ***Cheating***

McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2001) researched ten years of cheating in academic institutions, finding that cheating was widespread. By presenting the students with question 2 to consider their professor accusing them of cheating, this study gathers information on student's attitude about cheating based on how they would respond to an accusation of cheating and what they consider cheating.

We present student responses in two scenarios, if the students were guilty of cheating and if not. Several students (35%) admitting guilt would meet personally with the professor to first gain an explanation of how the professor came to that conclusion. An abundance of not guilty students (90%) would meet the professor, and respond calmly and respectfully to the accusation. Additionally, 85% of the not guilty respondents would provide evidential proof to show they did not cheat. Most guilty students (78%) would discuss the circumstances honestly with the professor. Thirty-four (34) students did admit to confessing and being honest with the professor. Most guilty students (55%) would deal with the consequences of cheating, noting several consequences from earning a zero grade on the assignment, possibly failing the course, or expulsion from the university.

Contrary to Chapman, Davis, Toy, and Wright (2004), the findings from our study suggest that students believe cheating is morally wrong. In Chapman et al. (2004), findings show

cheating is acceptable because it reflects real world scenarios; we did not achieve the same results. In our study, 15 of the 67 students believed cheating is wrong and would diminish the student's success after college. While the findings from Chapman et al. (2004) reveal cheating is an easier way to get acceptable grades, our results show that students related not cheating to working hard, thus, supporting the notion that cheating is an easy way out of the hard work to earn higher grades. Students in our study related cheating to laziness and to lack of time or hard work.

Our findings support Chapman et al. (2004) in suggesting that students know what cheating is and believe cheating to be morally wrong. In our study, students identified situations as cheating and cheating as immoral in 309 instances.

### ***Sharing of Work***

Consistent with previous studies (Alien et al. 1998; Maramark & Maline 1993; McCabe & Trevino 1993, 1996; Nonis & Swift 1998, asking about dishonesty as it relates to given situations), we asked Question 3 in relation to student sharing of papers with friends. Several students (70%) would share their paper with a friend. A few students (17/67) agreed that sharing was acceptable for the main reason of helping their friend. Several students (54%) provided varied methods of sharing not allowing a picture or print copy. Only a few students provided an alternative technology method such as Google docs. As in Chapman et al. (2004), where students would help their friends get better grades or social interest cheating, our results support that students will help their friends by sharing their papers.

### ***Academic Dishonesty***

Academic dishonesty among college students is not a new phenomenon. Etiology for academic dishonesty probably stems from a variety of idiosyncratic, psychological, cognitive, and demographic variables (Chapman et al., 2004). Adding different measures of cheating within the same study adds validity and reliability to estimates of academic dishonesty (Allen et al. 1998). Therefore, we asked students to interpret academic dishonesty.

Previous research (McCabe & Trevino, 1995); Nonis & Swift (1998); Roig & Ballew (1994); Tom & Borin (1988)) suggests that business students have the highest incidence of academic dishonesty of any college major. The results show lying as the main definition of academic dishonesty, with 95% of students defining academic dishonesty as lying. An overwhelming majority of the students (60/67) interpreted academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarizing, fabrication, bribery, sabotage, or deception.

### ***Institution's Academic Integrity Policy***

This study asked the last question to provide insights into the student's awareness of the academic policy and the relevant disciplinary actions. Some students (20%) mentioned the delivery of the academic policy in the syllabus and (30/67) in the professor dedicating class time discussing the institution's academic integrity policy. Surprisingly, only a few of the students (10%) were aware of the zero or no academic tolerance policy of the institution. Interestingly, 40

students knew the specific details of the types of violations or the specific disciplinary action steps.

Table 4  
*Perception, Knowledge, and Actions of Academic Integrity*

*Question 1. What is Academic Integrity and why is it important?*

|  | Absolute<br>Count of Cases | Percentage |
|--|----------------------------|------------|
| Honesty as a measure of Academic Integrity | 67                         | 100%       |
| Moral Code of Ethical Conduct              | 54                         | 80%        |
| Measure of Good Grades                     | 51                         | 76%        |
| Individuality                              | 40                         | 60%        |
| Honor Code                                 | 20                         | 30%        |
| Accountability                             | 20                         | 30%        |
| Success for future employment              | 17                         | 25%        |
| University Reputation                      | 3                          | 5%         |

*Question 2. My professor has notified me that he/she thinks I cheated. What should I do? What can I expect?*

|  | Absolute<br>Count of Cases | Percentage |
|--|----------------------------|------------|
| <i>If Guilty</i>   |                            |            |
| Discuss Circumstances with Professor honestly                    | 52                         | 78%        |
| Deal with the Consequences<br>(Zero, Fail the course, Expulsion) | 37                         | 55%        |
| Confess, Apologize and assure professor never repeat             | 34                         | 50%        |
| Request a Meeting with Professor                                 | 23                         | 35%        |
| <i>If not Guilty</i>   |                            |            |
| Respond calmly and respectfully to Professor                     | 60                         | 90%        |
| Request a Meeting with Professor                                 | 60                         | 90%        |
| Prove with evidence did not cheat                                | 57                         | 85%        |

Question 3. A friend asked to see my paper. Can I show it to him/her? Please explain.

|  | Absolute<br>Count of Cases | Percentage |
|--|----------------------------|------------|
| Share paper with friend, but cannot copy   | 47                         | 70%        |
| Not allow copy, picture, take home or email  | 36                         | 54%        |
| Can show because they can provide valuable feedback on current work                          | 36                         | 36%        |
| Show friend if moving in the wrong direction and provide an example to help                  | 17                         | 24%        |
| Yes. Paper is a reference tool as are books or the internet                                  | 21                         | 21%        |
| If instructed not to show then would not do so, but if not would show the paper to a friend. | 10                         | 15%        |

Question 4. How do you interpret academic dishonesty?

|   | Absolute<br>Count of Cases | Percentage |
|---|----------------------------|------------|
| Being dishonest or lying  | 64                         | 95%        |
| Cheating, plagiarizing, fabrication, bribery, sabotage or deception | 60                         | 90%        |
| Given an unfair advantage over others                               | 17                         | 25%        |
| Pass work as your own that does not belong to you                   | 13                         | 20%        |
| Disregarding University policies                                    | 3                          | 5%         |

Question 5. What is your knowledge of the University academic integrity policy?

|  | Absolute<br>Count<br>of Cases | Percentage |
|--|-------------------------------|------------|
| Holding yourself up to the standards of the universities rules and regulations   | 54                            | 80%        |
| Range from failing a course to expulsion or recession of conferred degree  | 40                            | 60%        |
| Signing of an academic integrity Guarantee at the beginning of the semester  | 23                            | 35%        |
| University has a clear academic integrity policy stated in the very syllabus. There is a set process if anyone disobeys the zero-tolerance policy. | 13                            | 20%        |

|   |    |     |
|---|----|-----|
| University does not tolerate cheating or plagiarism of any sort.  | 11 | 16% |
| Failure to comply with the policy results in disciplinary action from failing the assignment to removal from the University |    |     |
| Zero tolerance policy   | 7  | 10% |
| Forgiven once, but if repeatedly violated removed from institution  | 3  | 5%  |

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### Conclusions

This study contributes to prior research by investigating qualitative data in the form of student blog responses to the role of academic integrity. Our research results add to the list of previous factors of academic integrity and academic dishonesty. The study also demonstrates additional variables to address when measuring cheating, academic integrity, or academic honesty. Our exploratory research results were consistent with prior findings (Chapman et al., 2004) that indicate students are aware of cheating situations and what is morally correct. The study findings demonstrate the common themes in academic integrity definition as the same five prevalent concepts in their definition of academic integrity. The results suggest students are aware of academic integrity policies in their respective institutions. This study helps establish a baseline for future research on academic integrity and students' perception of academic integrity.

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#### Discussion Questions

1. What are the values related to academic integrity?
2. What are the main differences between academic integrity and academic dishonesty?
3. What are the main challenges in upholding academic integrity?

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