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STUDENT REPORTS AND FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

ABSTRACT. As college students prepare for the business world, what they learn as acceptable behavior on campus may well inform their expectations of acceptable behavior in their professional lives. Numerous studies have reported that most college students admit to cheating on multiple occasions (e.g., McCabe and Trevino, 1993; Sims, 1993; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 1996, 1999). Furthermore, studies have linked academic integrity with ethical business practices (McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 1996; Sims, 1993). One approach to reducing academic dishonesty has been the student honor code. Such codes have been on the rise for the last decade (Pavela and McCabe, 1993). Honor codes have been used as a teaching tool to underscore the importance of professional ethics among business students (Kidwell, 2001).

In the effort to establish a culture of academic integrity, a university must first understand the current state. This paper discusses a two-year study at a small liberal arts university without an honor code at the present time. Students were surveyed about their cheating behaviors as well as their receptiveness to an honor code. Over seventy percent of the students surveyed reported that they were habitual cheaters, i.e., they had cheated on exams, plagiarized papers, or committed other forms of academic dishonesty on multiple occasions. A survey similar to that administered to students was subsequently administered to faculty in order to determine their understanding of student cheating norms. This paper compares the student and faculty perceptions, and the prospects for an honor code at the university are also explored.

INTRODUCTION

"Honesty is the best policy." "Nobody likes a tattletale." Children hear these and similar contradictory statements from their earliest years in school. When they get older and enroll in college, they are constantly faced with choices about academic honesty. To which statements are they going to adhere? Of course, they will look to their past experiences to help them make choices, but they are also part of a new community, one where other people's beliefs and values make an impression on them. McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (1996, p. 462) write that "college ... often marks a crucial turning point in which adolescents abandon their own beliefs in favor of their fellow students' opinions and values." This is good if a student enters a highly moral college community, and conversely, not so good if he or she enters a community with poor moral standards.

Just how honest are college communities today? If one looks at instances of cheating on college campuses, one might answer that they must not be very honest at all. According to Pavela and McCabe (1993, p. 27):

... recent surveys reveal that a majority of college students probably engage in some form of cheating during their undergraduate years. There is even evidence that cheating has become an accepted way of life for some students.

For hundreds of years, schools have utilized honor codes as a way to promote honest, ethical behavior. The College of William and Mary in Virginia adopted the first honor code in the country in the late 1700s, and it is still in use today. Though shrouded in tradition and history, honor codes are not very common across the nation. Out of the 3,500 colleges and universities in the country, only about 100 have honor codes or some type of an honor pledge. Many are well-known, prestigious private schools, including Princeton, Rice, Stanford, and Georgetown (Billups, 2000). However, other types of schools find that honor codes fit in their environments too. One of the more recently adopted honor codes is at the University of Maryland, and one of the most stringent codes is that of the University of Virginia. The University of Virginia's code has recently garnered international attention after a physics professor identified 148 cases of plagiarism, with potential outcomes including expulsion and revocation of degrees (Heuchert, 2001).

FACULTY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

As more colleges and universities are stepping up their efforts to combat academic dishonesty, a useful starting point is to gain an understanding of the current state of affairs. If faculty or administrators attempt to address the problem without knowing what exactly they are facing, the solutions are likely to fall short. The McCabe studies have demonstrated that students are not shy about admitting their own cheating behaviors if asked under anonymous conditions. Therefore it behooves the institution to go to the source and ask the students what they are doing. A next logical step is to survey the faculty as well to find out whether they have a realistic understanding of student behavior.

This paper considers the level of academic integrity at a small, private, liberal arts university. Two studies were conducted over a period of 18 months. The first study involved a survey of undergraduate students, in which they were asked about the frequency of various cheating behaviors, pressures related to cheating, and their perceptions of faculty responses to

cheating. The second study was modeled on the first but was administered to faculty members at the same institution (no graduate teaching assistants are employed by the university). They were asked about their perceptions of cheating, factors that influence student cheating, and their responses to cheating in their classes. Finally both groups were asked about their feelings about honor codes and whether the implementation of an honor code would be possible at their university.

STUDENT SELF-REPORTED CHEATING

Students at the university were surveyed as part of a senior thesis project. The senior had attended the National Conference on Ethics in America at the United States Military Academy at West Point, in which mentors work with small groups of students to draft an honor code for a generic university. Although she had no personal experience with honor codes, the student came to believe that implementing an honor code, or at least debating the idea on campus, could significantly raise the level of academic integrity at the university.

Surveys were administered in classes without a professor present as well as in the student center. Random student selection was not possible in this context, but over 10% of the student population was surveyed with a 78% response rate. Care was taken to find participants from each undergraduate grade level, and respondents represented virtually every major on campus. Although social desirability was a concern, it was clear from the responses that students had few reservations about reporting their dishonest behavior.

The student survey, based on the surveys used by McCabe (e.g., McCabe and Trevino, 1993; McCabe and Trevino, 1995; McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield, 1999) listed seventeen items that "some might consider cheating." Students were asked two questions about each: how often they had committed it and how serious they thought it was. One of the most important statistics is probably the overall percentage of students surveyed who cheat. For the purposes of this paper, a cheater is any student who, *more than once*, engaged in any one of the 17 actions outlined in the survey, listed in Table I. Students who replied that they engaged in a specific behavior *once* are not included in the cheater category, because students who cheated once and decided, for whatever reason, not to do it again are less of a threat to the academic community than those who are chronic cheaters. With that qualifier, 74.5% of students surveyed were cheaters.

The most common forms of cheating were copying a few sentences of material without footnoting them in a paper (47.1%), working on

TABLE I

Cheating behaviors listed in the student survey

- Copying from another student during a test (or exam) *without* his or her knowledge.
- Copying from another student during a test *with* his or her knowledge
- Using unpermitted crib notes (or cheat sheet) during a test
- Getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken a test
- Helping someone else cheat on a test
- Cheating on a test in any other way.
- Copying material, almost word for word, from any source and turning it in as your own work.
- Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography
- Turning in work done by someone else
- Receiving substantial, unpermitted help on an assignment
- Working on an assignment with others when the instructor asked for individual work.
- Copying a few sentences of material without footnoting them in a paper
- Writing or providing a paper for another student
- Turning in a paper based on information obtained from a term paper 'mill' or website
- Plagiarizing a paper in any way using the Internet as a source
- In a course requiring computer work, copying another student's program rather than doing your own.
- Falsifying lab or research data

assignments with others when the professor has asked for individual work (46.7%), and getting questions or answers from someone who had already taken a test (45.8%). The least common forms of cheating, not surprisingly, were geared more to specific classes. Only 8.6% had falsified lab or research data more than once, and 9.2% had copied another student's program rather than doing their own in a course requiring computer work.

In addition to asking about the frequency of cheating, the student survey asked students how serious they thought various forms of cheating were. As one might expect, the forms considered most serious were generally committed less frequently than others. For example, the most serious form of cheating, according to the students, was using unpermitted notes during a test, and only 11.8% of students reported having done so. Turning in other students' work, writing papers for others, and turning in papers from term paper mills were likewise considered serious cheating and were rarely self-reported on the survey instrument. There were some exceptions to this rule, however. Helping someone cheat on a test, copying from someone

during a test with their knowledge, and plagiarizing substantial amounts of material were considered serious cheating (2.37–2.48 on a 3-point scale) but were each committed by over 20% of the students surveyed.

Similarly, students reported more frequent cheating in the forms they considered less serious. The most common forms of cheating, as noted above, were plagiarizing small passages and unpermitted collaboration. The students generally did not perceive these as serious forms of cheating, with means of 1.86 and 1.66. Surprisingly to the authors, students also perceived getting questions from someone who had already taken a test to be trivial cheating. More specifically, 50% of students considered it trivial cheating, and 33% did not consider it cheating at all.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS

After the results of the student survey had been shared with a handful of administrators and faculty, it was determined that some aggressive action on campus was necessary to combat cheating. Although the results of the student survey were not out of line with the results of McCabe's national surveys (McCabe, 1995; McCabe and Trevino, 1993, 1995, 1996), they were startling to a community that takes ethics as a core value.[1] Therefore a survey was taken of faculty to determine how well they understood the campus cheating problem. Surveys were mailed through interoffice mail from a faculty member involved in the student project to avoid an administrative role. Of the full-time faculty, 44% responded to the survey; part-time response rates were impossible to determine due to constantly shifting adjunct personnel, but 22% of the part-time surveys were returned complete.

It is difficult to compare directly student cheating reports with faculty perceptions, because students are reporting on their own actions, whereas faculty are reporting on their perceptions of the student body as a whole, formed over several years of observation. Faculty were asked instead how common they thought various forms of cheating were.

As noted earlier, the most common types of cheating reported by students were copying a few sentences without footnoting, prohibited collaboration, and copying during a test with the knowledge of the one being copied. Faculty perceptions were accurate in most cases, but one clear difference was that faculty thought copying with the knowledge of

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[1] The university that is the subject of this study has been cited by the John Templeton Foundation as exemplary in emphasizing character development as an integral aspect of the undergraduate experience.

the other was a rare occurrence. However, over 23% of students admitted to having done this multiple times. One might conclude that students are justifying cheating that is actually done *without* knowledge of the other, but in fact 28% reported having helped someone cheat off their tests. This is an important finding, because faculty rated this as a serious form of cheating, but they may be giving too much credit to a "victim" of cheating who is actually a facilitator.

On the other hand, faculty believed a few cheating behaviors to be more common than perhaps they are. These related to uses of technology to facilitate cheating, including using Internet term paper sites and copying computer programs. Perhaps the stories in the news about how students cheat with computers have sensitized the faculty to a phenomenon that does not yet pose a significant threat.

Faculty were asked what students would do when observing test cheating. Although they accurately perceived that students would not report it, the strong majority thought that the observer would at least mention it to the cheater or other students. A much larger percentage of students said they would ignore the incident altogether. Students did draw a distinction between other students in general and close friends, however. If it were any student, 34% would mention it to other students – gossip, perhaps – but only 12% would mention it to the cheater directly. If the cheater were a friend, only 8% would spread the news, but 40% would confront the friend. This suggests an interesting peer dynamic of disapproval. Students may be bothered to see a friend cheating and want to deal with it directly, whereas they deal with others in the more punishing mode of campus gossip. On the contrary, students may feel that a confrontation with someone other than a friend shows too much interest in another's behavior.

Another aspect of cheating is the set of potential consequences. It is important that students understand what will happen and for faculty both to be consistent in their actions as well as to know the students' expectations. Students were asked what measures faculty were most likely to take, and faculty were asked what they would do when catching a student cheating. Approximately 50% of students expect what 50% of faculty themselves report: failure on the test or assignment. Other remedies are less well understood. For example, 16% of students merely expect a reprimand, but very few faculty stop at that. Instead, almost 20% of faculty make the student retake an exam or rewrite an assignment, whereas very few students expect that form of action. This mismatch in the expected versus actual punishments suggests that faculty either do not list punishments in their syllabi or do not discuss them in class, or that the students do

not pay attention until it pertains to them directly. Conversely, it may be that faculty give more benefit of the doubt in real situations than when taking a survey, and students' expectations reflect their observations. Either explanation would be consistent with a lack of uniformity in how faculty handle dishonesty. When asked whether there was a problem with lack of uniformity in how cheating is handled, faculty agreed more strongly in each successive rank, so this may be an important contributing factor.

Finally, few students seem to understand that the faculty members will report their cheating to the deans. Given the litigious environment, it should not be surprising that most faculty document cheating and report it to the dean. This also suggests that students need to be made aware that cheating in multiple classes may be identified.

REMEDY: AN HONOR CODE?

One method colleges have traditionally used to curb cheating is an honor code. There is no authoritative definition of what constitutes an honor code. There are however, basic elements included in honor codes. Brian Melendez, in his 1985 study cited by McCabe, proposed four components that typically make up an honor code, although not all of them need be present to be recognized as a code.

... [T]he defining characteristics of an honor code are one or more of the following: unproctored examinations, some kind of pledge requirement, a peer judiciary, and reportage – an obligation placed on students not to tolerate violations of the honor code by other students. (McCabe, 1995, p. 9)

Students at honor code schools have more responsibility – personally and for others as well – and they also have more privileges, such as unproctored exams on a flexible schedule.

Research has shown that honor codes have a significant impact on the cheating norms on campus. In one national study, 78% of students at colleges without honor codes reported being cheaters (consistent with the college studied here), but only 57% of students at honor code schools reported cheating. The latter number is still higher than one might like, but there is at least a significant reduction from the other schools.

When considering adopting an honor code, then, it may be beneficial to first determine how receptive both students and faculty are to the idea. An honor code cannot succeed if the students will not take it seriously. Likewise, it can only work if the faculty are willing to abide by the proce-dures established under the code (usually involving student-run judicial processes). Therefore both students and faculty were surveyed about their

opinions on honor codes, their elements, and the potential outcomes and obstacles.

Both groups were asked general questions about cheating to determine their basic attitudes. These questions included whether they were bothered by the cheating on campus, whether cheating is a serious problem, and whether cheaters are handled uniformly. On a 5-point scale, both student and faculty means were near 3 (not sure) on almost every question. The only questions that elicited non-neutral responses on average were that students were not terribly bothered by the cheating on campus (3.49) and faculty *did not think cheating was a serious problem on campus* (3.21). The only group of faculty who agreed that there was a serious cheating problem on campus was full professors, i.e., those at highest rank, with a mean response of 2.70.

Both surveys listed several potential outcomes of having an honor code in place and asked how important those outcomes were. This list was based on the common elements of honor codes as well as the research concerning their outcomes. On a 4-point scale (1 = not important; 4 = very important), honest behavior was the most important both for students (3.4) and faculty (3.8). Improved moral character was also important to both groups (3.3 and 3.5, respectively). Two other aspects were highly valued by faculty: mutual respect between faculty and students and increased personal responsibility of students. No aspect listed was considered unimportant (mean < 3.0) by either group.

Finally, many faculty and students were optimistic about the possibility of an honor code. Both groups valued the potential outcomes of increased honesty, moral character, and mutual respect. Neither group was concerned that a student-run judicial board would be too lenient, harsh, or unfair. Both groups recognized that lack of faculty buy-in and reluctance of students to report on each other could be problems, but given the optimism of both as to the outcomes, it seems that these could be overcome in the current climate. At least one-third of students thought that having an honor code would affect their behavior as would a consistent application of strong penalties. Given the current cheating levels of roughly 75%, reducing that level to 50% would be a dramatic improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the two studies described that the college has a serious cheating problem but that it shares its problem with many other universities. Changing the campus culture to one of academic integrity and high expectations is likely to be a slow process. Students and faculty need to

come to a shared understanding of what is expected concerning academic integrity and how it is to be achieved. The "we" versus "they" mentality admitted to by many students in the survey needs to be abandoned, and students need to be shown that the faculty and administration are willing to work with them to ensure their success. It is clear that faculty desire improved mutual trust and student responsibility and would like the opportunity to develop it. Students also have a lot to gain in the long run. Developing a strong sense of integrity in the college environment can foster integrity in graduates as they move through their careers. What they learn as students in the classroom is important, and should rightly be stressed, but just as important is *how* they learned it. College is not just learning course materials, but also learning about what kind of person one is, and what kind of person one could be.

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