A Review of the Literature on Perceived Prevalence Rates and Reasons for Academic Dishonesty

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Abstract

This paper investigates the differences between undergraduate and graduate student prevalence rates of cheating and the reported reasons for cheating through a thorough review of the literature. Too often, the results of undergraduate studies are used as equivalent comparisons to studies on graduate student cheating. These inferences are likely inappropriate, warranting an overview of the literature regarding academic integrity for both undergraduate and graduate students. A summary of findings is presented in a table. Inappropriate generalizations, existing gaps in the literature and questions for future examination are presented.
A Review of the Literature on Perceived Prevalence Rates and Reasons for Academic Dishonesty

Many differences exist between undergraduate programs of study and graduate programs of study. These differences occur on many levels. As an institution, undergraduate and graduate programs are managed separately with their own specific guidelines and criteria for acceptance, coursework, and graduation. While there is some overlap in university legislature, such as universal codes of conduct, the two types of higher education are mostly polarized in their structure and inner processes. Furthermore, few would argue against the notion that on an individual level, undergraduate and graduate students differ in terms of attitudes and general characteristics. Why is it then that so many studies on the beliefs and behaviors of college students lump the two groups together? This is an area of concern with regard to the study of academic integrity with undergraduate and graduate student populations.

Objectives/Purpose

The current body of literature on student academic dishonesty (i.e. cheating) consists of studies using undergraduate and graduate students. In most studies, however, the group of students being studied is not specified and/or references to previous studies do not include information on which group was examined or to which group of students the researchers are referring. In the academic integrity literature, studies often compare the results of graduate student cheating with results of undergraduate cheating and versa. Frequently, both groups are included in statements concerning ‘students’ in general. Another label that blankets both groups without specification or reference is ‘higher education’ students. To help answer some of these questions, the purpose of this literature
review is to examine some of the differences and similarities between self-reported and perceived rates of academic dishonesty among undergraduate and graduate students. Self-reported and hypothesized reasons for committing such unethical academic acts of misconduct are also reviewed.

Methods

In order to provide an appropriate and current report on the existing body of literature regarding undergraduate and graduate student academic dishonesty, the review focuses on published works dating no earlier than 1990 and exclusively using sample populations of undergraduates and graduate students. The articles in review were found using computer-based ERIC and EBSCOhost research databases and located using keywords and phrases such as “academic integrity,” “academic dishonesty,” “cheating,” “graduate programs,” “college students,” “ethics,” “classroom behavior,” and “morality.” The content analysis of such recent publications includes literature examining the prevalence and frequency of unethical academic behaviors (i.e. cheating) and reported or deduced reasons behind students’ academic misconduct. Additionally, the review draws attention to numerous problems with the current body of information on academic integrity using undergraduate and graduate student samples interchangeably. Upon further review of the literature and completion of content analysis, a table was constructed to display research pulled from the literature, particularly the sample, methods, findings and inferences of each study (See Table 1).
Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

Reported and Perceived Prevalence Rates of Academic Dishonesty

A review of previous studies on undergraduate cheating reveals that 65-100% of undergraduates admit to cheating on at least one occasion anytime throughout their college education (McCabe, 1992; McCabe & Bowers, 1994; Stearns, 1997). According to the Center for Academic Integrity (Fields, 2003), 75% of students in higher education admit to cheating behaviors. In a study by Stearns (2001), however, only over 20% of 1,369 undergraduates studied reported that they had committed an act of academic dishonesty while in college. Using one full semester as the unit of measurement, Ward and Beck (1990) found only 28% of undergraduates surveyed admitted to cheating at least once during the semester in question. Likewise, McCabe and Trevino’s (1996) investigation of undergraduate cheating behaviors at college with or without academic codes found differences in prevalence and frequency of academic dishonesty for schools with honor codes (54% and 7%, respectively) and those without such codes (71% and 17%, respectively).

Several studies with undergraduate students reveal differences not only in prevalence but also in the frequency of undergraduate cheating dependent on the existence and student awareness of an honor code (McCabe & Pavela, 2000; Zimmerman, 1999). On the other hand, graduate student cheating literature is less abundant than that of undergraduate student cheating; yet graduate student academic dishonesty is still shown to occur. Wajda-Johnston, Handal, Brawer, & Fabricators (2001) found that up to 55.1% of graduate students in their study admitted to cheating during their graduate student career. Approximately 80% of graduate business students
from another study (Brown, 1995) admitted to engaging in at least one of 15 unethical academic practices in their graduate career. A study with medical students revealed that approximately five percent of second-year students admitted to cheating in medical school, 16% reported cheating in college, and 40.5% in high school (Baldwin, Daugherty, Rowley, & Schwartz, 1996). Do these findings suggest that cheating in graduate school is less prevalent than among undergraduates? Or are the stakes higher for admitting to acts of academic dishonesty?

Several researchers combine undergraduates and graduate students into one subject pool for their studies on academic dishonesty and the factors that influence cheating. Zimmerman (1999) aggregated the two groups of students to study negative cheating attitudes of students and its effect on the prevalence of cheating. She concluded that negative cheating attitudes, such as institutions’ inconsistent responses to student cheating and the lack of instructor diligence at catching cheaters, was significantly correlated with cheating prevalence. The detachment of students from the university system may be a result of misperceptions about student cheating by the faculty and administration or an unspoken conflict between student and institutional views of the severity of academic dishonesty on an ethical level. Additionally, the lack of student involvement in leadership and code implementation may play a role in the prevalence of student cheating.

**Faculty and Administrators’ Perceived Prevalence Rates**

No instructor or administrator wants to believe that the students in his or her own classroom or at his or her university have ever cheated on their exams or assignments. This lack of awareness or possible denial is reflected in the research on faculty and
administrator perceptions of academic dishonesty among college students. Studies show that faculty significantly underestimates their students’ rates of cheating (Wajda-Johnston et al., 2001). While students claim that 10-20% of them commit acts of academic dishonesty, faculty members perceive these rates to be much lower, around 0-10% (Wajda-Johnston et al.). The research also indicates a significant difference between student and faculty severity ratings of academically dishonest behaviors such as studying old versions of exams or the instructor manual and collaborating on work that was intended to be individual projects (Wajda-Johnston, et al.).

_Reasons for Academic Dishonesty_

As noted in the Zimmerman (1999) study, the prevalence of cheating has been strongly associated with the presence or absence of a traditional or modified honors code made known and enforced in the university setting. Anzivino (1997) found that among undergraduate students, student membership to groups, such as athletic or Greek organizations, was significantly related to increases in cheating behaviors. Still, other researchers claim student-instructor relationships to be influential in the occurrence of cheating among students. But, are there other perceptions of students and characteristics of the university that influence such unethical academic behaviors? Answers to this question may be found in the reported and theorized reasoning for committing such acts in one’s undergraduate or graduate career.

McCabe and Trevino (1997) reported findings from their study on academic integrity suggest contextual factors have more influence on student cheating behaviors than individual or personal characteristics. One such contextual factor is the students’ perceived pressures to succeed. Similarly, Daniel, Adams, and Smith (1994) reported that
the potential to obtain great rewards with the least amount of effort was strongly related
to cheating behaviors among nursing students. Therefore more external reasons such as
stress, course and program requirements, and expectancies to graduate could be
considered external or contextually perceived reasons for academic dishonesty at any
level of student education. That said, it is strikingly interesting that even though in some
studies graduate students admit to cheating as much as undergraduates do, graduate
students have reported themselves as being more ethical than undergraduates when it
comes to academic integrity (Brown, 1995).

As mentioned, studies have shown that students’ perceptions of student-instructor
relationships have an impact on admitted rates of cheating in the classroom (Stearns,
2001). Negative evaluations of the instructor were significantly linked with committing
academic dishonesty while students who did not admit to committing academic
dishonesty were associated with more positive instructor evaluations (2001). Therefore, it
is imaginable that students who cheat have used their negative evaluations of their
instructor to justify or rationalize their decisions to cheat. Results from Graham and
colleagues’ research on perceived teacher fairness supports this notion, revealing that
25% of the students studied endorsed that they would be more likely to cheat if they
thought the teacher was being unfair (1994). Still, what are the significant differences, if
any, between undergraduate and graduate students as it pertains to their choices regarding
academic integrity? Clarification on student samples and filling the gap in the research on
graduate students is needed to help answer this question. The issues bring one back to the
beginning of the discussion – limitation in the research.

*Problems in the Existing Literature*
Several problems exist in the current body of literature dedicated to the issues of academic dishonesty. One such problem is that of the amount of research involving graduate students. The lack of graduate student samples in studies on academic integrity is a known constraint to research in this field. Wajda-Johnston et al. (2001) point out that studies on academic misconduct rarely focus on graduate student populations. How is it possible to make generalization about one student population from studies examining a very different group of students? Although it is a poor way of conducting quality research due to the lack of an equivocal comparative group, the majority of research on graduate students cites this limitation but continues to use the assessment of undergraduate rates and reported reasonings as analogous study samples.

Parallel to this argument are the inappropriate inferences made about graduate student behaviors based on results using undergraduates as a unit of measurement for unethical academic practices. As previously mentioned, undergraduate and graduate student are dissimilar on a number of different levels, as well as, the program guidelines that govern such contrasting populations. Still, generalizations from undergraduate studies blanket graduate student assumed behaviors and beliefs under the heading of ‘higher education’ or ‘higher learning’ students. Along those same lines, graduate student testimonials, as well as self-reported cheating, decreases as students further their academic careers (Baldwin, Daugherty, Rowley, & Schwartz, 1996), thus contradicting the inferences made about them by undergraduate results. So where does that leave researchers and administrative boards when wondering about the differences in cheating behaviors between the two groups? The numerous issues and conundrums at hand call for investigations to reveal the scope of and remedy the problems in the literature.
Results

Rates of student cheating vary in the research literature but are most often cited somewhere between 65-100%. Prevalence and reported rates for the separate groups under focus, undergraduate and graduate students, are made difficult to disentangle given the lack of research on graduate student cheating and the common use of the term student, without a clear definition of what constitutes a student. A summary of the literature search is presented in Table 1. The table focuses on 11 studies selected from the literature search on issues of academic dishonesty involving students, such as prevalence rates and self-reported incidents of cheating as well as information on the reasons for cheating and faculty perceptions of student cheating behaviors. The studies were selected from the review based on relevance to the issue of academic integrity violations and were alphabetically organized by the primary author’s surname.

The table illustrates how each of the studies speaks to the topic of student academic dishonesty. This depiction includes information on the sample used in the study, methods of investigation, relevant results and the population(s) to which the study made inferences from the results. The discrepancy between subject samples is one strikingly noticeable and problematic inconsistency in the literature. Four of the 11 studies use undergraduate students as participants; three use graduate students; two include both undergraduate and graduate students; and the remaining two studies do not specify the level of students.

Each study’s methods incorporate, or in some cases completely rely on, self-reported measures such as inventories and surveys that focus on different aspects of student behaviors and cheating depending on the primary goals of the study. The results
also indicate numerous, strong relationships between students and the endorsement of student cheating behaviors. Results portrayed in the table represent the variety of outcomes presented in the current body of research with particular irregularities in the projected reasons why students commit violations of academic integrity. Findings from this review clearly illustrate differences in undergraduate and graduate prevalence rates and self-reported accounts of academic dishonesty.

The instability of the inferences and generalizations are quite alarming. While only two studies did not specify the specific level of student participants in the study, the majority of the studies made inferences about cheating behaviors to the general student population. This compounds the dilemma of studying the two distinct groups of students as well as forecasting why the students cheat and how to stop them.

Conclusion

This paper provides a review of the available information on the subject of student cheating and points to the existing gaps in the literature. Summarized results from various studies have been presented in table format (see Table 1 in Results), offering the study, its participants, the findings, and the population to which inferences are made. At the present time, the majority of studies on academic dishonesty are conducted among undergraduate college students and then, often findings are generalized to both undergraduate and graduate student populations. Such generalizations are lacking in reliability and validity and should instead be replaced with formal research within the populations of interest.

Future research should be conducted on graduate student cheating and compared to the existing literature. Findings could support preventative strategies and offer
suggestions in handling academic misconduct once it has occurred. The unanswered inquiries present researchers, students, faculty and administrators with pending difficulties and unethical behaviors left unchecked.
References


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<th>Sample</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Inferences</th>
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<td>Anzivino (1997)</td>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and McCabe’s Academic Integrity Survey</td>
<td>Significant relationship between student membership to school groups and cheating</td>
<td>College students</td>
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<td>Baldwin, Daugherty, Rowley, &amp; Schwartz (1996)</td>
<td>Second-Year Medical Students</td>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>Approximately 5% self-reported cheating in medical school, 16% in college, and 40.5% in high school.</td>
<td>Medical students in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown (1995)</td>
<td>Graduate Business Students</td>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>(1) Approximately 80% admitted at least 1 unethical practices during their graduate career and (2) reported themselves as more ethical than undergraduates</td>
<td>Graduate students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel, Adams, &amp; Smith (1994)</td>
<td>Nursing Students</td>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>Strong relationship between external influences and cheating</td>
<td>Students in general</td>
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<td>Fields (2003)</td>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Survey on Student Dishonesty</td>
<td>Significant relationship between cheating behaviors and psychological type</td>
<td>Students in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>McCabe &amp; Trevino (1996)</td>
<td>College “students”</td>
<td>Self-report</td>
<td>(1) 54% of students with honor code and 71% without admitted to cheating (7% and 17% more than once, respectively). (2) Contextual factors influence cheating behaviors more than individual student characteristics.</td>
<td>Students in general</td>
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<td>Stearns (2001)</td>
<td>1.369 Students (99.02% Undergraduate)</td>
<td>Survey items measuring academic integrity and student evaluative perceptions of instructor behaviors</td>
<td>(1) 20.5% cheated in at least 1 class during 1 term at college (3/4 of these cheated more than once). (2) Student perceptions of student-instructor relationships significantly relate to cheating.</td>
<td>Students in general</td>
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| Wajda-Johnson, Handal, Brawer, & Fabricators (2001) | Graduate Students, Faculty, and Administrators | Modified version of The Cheating/Academic Dishonesty Survey | (1) 10-20% of students admitted to academic dishonesty, while faculty estimated only 0-10%.  
(2) Significant difference between student and faculty severity ratings for cheating behaviors | Graduate students and faculty |
| Ward & Beck (1990)           | Undergraduates               | Self-report                                  | 28% admitted cheating at least once during the semester                  | Students in general         |
| Zimmerman (1999)             | Undergraduates and Graduate Students | Self-report, scantron survey on different types of cheating behaviors | (1) Significant correlations between cheating prevalence and negative cheating attitudes and  
(2) strong association between cheating prevalence and existence of a university honor code | Higher education in general |