The Demographics of Cheating in College Students

MELANIE BUTLER

TIFFANI RIDLEY

MARY ALLEN*

California State University, Bakersfield

*Cheating in college has become a serious problem. Thirteen cheating behaviors were examined among 81 state university and 29 community college students with an average age of 23.38 years (*SD *= 5.92). Based on the literature, we hypothesized that men and students with low grade point averages cheat more often. In addition, we examined the effects of ethnicity, campus type (community college vs. university), student status (full- vs. part-time), and age on types and rates of cheating behaviors. Students were asked to report the frequency of each behavior in an academic year. Most students (78%) reported cheating of at least one type. Grade point average and age were significantly negatively related to reported cheating; sex, ethnicity, campus type, and student status were not. Although more common among younger and academically weaker students, cheating occurs across ethnic groups, campuses, and types of students. Cheating may be caused by a number of different factors. Steps should be taken to create an environment in which cheating is less likely to occur.*

CHEATING IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS IS COMMON, and students cheat in a number of ways. Sixty-eight percent of the high school students surveyed by Schab (1991) reported using a cheat sheet on an exam, 52% reported turning in another's work, and 98% reported letting others copy their work. Ward and Tittle (1993) found that 74% of surveyed upper-division students at a southeastern state university admitted cheating. Singhal (1982) found that 56% of surveyed American college students admitted cheating in some form at the college level. Cheating rates vary with type of institution. Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor (1992) found that cheating is less often reported at small, private colleges than at larger state and private universities. The reasons for cheating given by students in the Davis et al. (1992) study were the necessity of achieving good grades, high levels of stress, inadequate monitoring of tests, and little or no consequences for cheating.

Sex differences in cheating have been found. Johnson and Gormly (1972) found men tended to cheat more often than women and that cheating was related to greater risk taking. Ward and Beck (1989) found 77% of men and 51% of women report cheating. Ward and Beck gave a student opinion questionnaire at the beginning of the term measuring approval or disapproval of five cheating excuse statements. Later in the term a test was given and secretly graded, then passed back to the students to be "self-graded." Women lied more about cheating, and a significant percentage of the women who cheated also scored highly on the excuse measure. Ward and Beck conclude that these women had more need to justify their cheating than men. Evans and Craig (1990) found no sex difference in reported cheating, and Davis et al. (1992) had mixed results, but generally found that women admit to cheating less often than men at both high school and college levels. The evidence for a sex difference in cheating behavior is not consistent, and further research is needed to better understand conditions related to sex differences in cheating.

Most researchers have found that grade point average or course grades are negatively related to cheating (Gardner, Roper, Gonzales, & Simpson, 1988; Johnson & Gormly, 1972; Kanfer & Duerfeldt, 1968; Scheers & Dayton, 1987; Singhal, 1982). Ellenburg (1973), however, found no significant difference in reported cheating between those with high GPAs and those with low GPAs. Johnson and Gormly (1972) found that noncheaters have a greater need for achievement, a higher ability to delay gratification, and a more internal locus of control. Gardner et al. (1988) suggest that students who cheat most

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often rebel against authority. It may be that high achievers are also high conformers who feel in control of their grades.

A comprehensive survey has not been published identifying the influence of other demographic variables on cheating. We expected to find a high incidence of cheating among college students, as did Singhal (1982) and Ward and Tittle (1993). We also predicted that men self-report cheating more often than women (Davis et al., 1992; Johnson & Gormly, 1972; Ward & Beck, 1989). Grade point average was expected to be negatively correlated to reported cheating (Gardner et al., 1988; Johnson & Gormly, 1972; Scheers & Dayton, 1987). In addition, we examined the relationship between cheating and four other variables: ethnicity, campus type (community college vs. university), student status (full- vs. part-time), and age.

Method

Participants

Eighty-one students from a California university and 29 students from a California community college responded to an academic dishonesty survey. Participants were students attending four general education courses which were sampled to obtain a cross section of the student body. Data were collected in February, about halfway into the winter quarter at the university and about a quarter of the way into the spring semester at the community college. We assume all participants had completed at least one quarter or semester of college work. Respondents included 67 women, 39 men, and 4 people who declined to state sex. Their average age was 23.38 years (SD = 5.92). Among the 84% who reported ethnicity, 56% were Caucasian, 26% were Latino, 10% were African American, 4% were Asian American, 1% were Native American, and 3% were in other categories. Reported grade point averages had a mean of 3.10 (SD = .48). Reported class hours per week averaged 14.94 (SD = 4.22).

Materials

A one-page survey of 13 questions on cheating was adapted from the literature. Demographic information (e.g., class level, sex, age, major, grade point average, ethnicity, and class hours) was included on the form. In Table 1 we abbreviated the survey and reordered the items to indicate relative incidence. Within Table 1, items 1 and 2 are adapted from Schab (1991), items 3 through 9 and item 12 are adapted from Singhal (1982), and items 10, 11, and 13 are adapted from Scheers and Dayton (1987). Questions were changed to standardize wording, to clarify ambiguous wording, and to adapt them to a Likert scale. Scaled responses were from 0 (I never do this) to 4 (I do this six or more times a year). All 110 participants responded to the 13 items.

Procedure

Students in four general education classes were asked, during a regular class meeting, to complete the cheating survey. Participants were informed of their rights to decline, to discontinue participation, and to omit any question they preferred not to answer. All but one person complied. After filling out the form, participants were debriefed on the nature and purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, no names were gathered, and no "extra credit" or other incentives were offered.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and the reported frequency of each behavior per year. Seventy-eight percent of the participants reported cheating in some manner. Thirteen percent of the respondents reported cheating in only 1 of the 13 ways, 6% cheated in 2 ways, 13% in 3 ways, 12% in 4 ways, 7% in 5 ways, 9% in 6 ways, 11% in 7 ways, 6% in 8 ways, and 2% in 9 ways.

Four discriminant analyses were conducted to compare men and women, community college and university students, Caucasians and Latinos (the two largest ethnic groups represented in our study), and part- and full-time students (status was dichotomized at 11.99 hours) on the 13 behavior ratings. Discriminant analysis was chosen to examine the dependent variables simultaneously in order to control the experiment-wise type I error rate. None of the overall discriminant analyses was significant at the .05 level.

A total cheating score was calculated for each participant by totaling responses to the 13 cheating items, and this score was correlated with age and GPA. The correlations were significant with age, $r(101) = -.36$, $p < .001$, and with GPA, $r(79) = -.33$, $p < .005$. In addition, age and GPA were significantly correlated, $r(74) = .35$, $p < .005$. The partial correlation between cheating and GPA, controlling for age, was significant, $r(71) = -.24$, $p < .05$, as was the partial correlation between cheating and age, controlling for GPA, $r(71) = -.30$, $p < .01$. The degrees of freedom varied because some participants did not report age or GPA.

Discussion

Consistent with the first hypothesis, cheating had a relatively high incidence; the majority of students (78%) reported cheating in at least 1 way. Only 22%

TABLE 1

Summary of Students' Responses to Cheating Behavior Questions

Question	Descriptive statistic[a]		Number of times/year (%)				
	M	*SD*	0	1	2–3	4–5	6+
Let others copy my assignments	1.65	.83	40	32	20	6	3
Copy homework or lab reports from other students	1.43	.70	47	36	13	7	1
Work with other students when told to work alone	1.94	.89	53	16	21	6	4
Compare answers to other students' during exams	1.38	.70	69	22	7	1	1
Rewrite previously turned-in papers	1.21	.57	74	22	2	2	0
Copy from other students tests	1.26	.54	79	16	4	1	0
Cheat during exams when instructor not there	1.23	.53	80	16	3	1	0
Cheat using "crib sheets"	1.57	1.02	87	9	1	2	1
Make excuses to turn in term papers late	1.17	.39	89	9	2	0	0
Make excuses to avoid exams	1.36	.50	90	6	4	0	0
Turn in another student's work	1.27	.47	90	7	3	0	0
Put off exams to get questions from other students	1.00	.00	98	2	0	0	0

[a] Calculated among students who indicated they had done the behavior. Responses ranged from 0 (I never do this) to 4 (I do this six or more times a year).

reported never having cheated in college, and 32% cheated in 1 to 3 ways. Almost half of the students (47%) indicated that they cheated in 4 to 9 of the 13 ways of cheating we examined. No one admitted cheating in more than 9 ways per year. The frequency of each behavior during a year is reported in Table 1. Most cheating behaviors were never done or were done only once a year. Perhaps most students cheat when they feel stressed or pressured by workload or personal problems or when the opportunity presents itself. Although incidence per type of cheating was low, many students engaged in several different types of cheating during the year, suggesting that they received some grades that were undeserved. The effect on all students is a devaluing of honestly earned grades.

The most frequently reported ways to cheat are also the most ambiguous: letting others copy assignments, working together on homework assignments when told to work alone, and copying homework or lab reports. Some faculty apparently agree that copying another student's homework is not cheating. Singhal (1982) found that most instructors (51%) do not judge this behavior to be cheating. However, Singhal's questionnaire described this behavior as "copying another student's homework" and did not clarify this behavior with our modifier, "when students are instructed to work alone." Responses to this modified question may show more agreement among faculty that copying is unethical student behavior. If instructors continue to disagree, faculty consensus on academic honesty should be reached. In order to avoid confusion, professors should make clear whether they encourage working together on homework or if they consider it cheating.

Results support the hypothesis that there is a negative relationship between grades and reported cheating; students with higher grades report cheating less often than those with lower grades. Those with lower grades may view cheating as a way to avoid failure, as suggested by Gardner et al. (1988) and Johnson and Gormly (1972). Students who do well in their classes may be less tempted to cheat because of their history of success on their own, and they may do well because they study rather than rely on cheating to earn grades. Another explanation may be that students who earn high grades do cheat, but are less likely to admit it.

Age is negatively related to reported cheating; older students are less likely to report cheating. It is possible that older students are more responsible, more conservative about personal behaviors, more motivated to learn, and have greater internal locus of control (Evans & Craig, 1990). The partial correlation results demonstrate that the relationships of cheating with age and grades are not simple artifacts of the relationship between age and grades. Students who earn high grades (regardless of their age) and older students (regardless of their grades) are less likely to report cheating. On the other hand, older

students, or students with better grades, may not be as willing as other students to admit cheating. They may have greater need to project positive self-images.

The expected sex difference, that men would report cheating more often than women, was not significant. The finding of no sex difference is consistent with Evans and Craig (1990), but inconsistent with Johnson and Gormly (1972) and Ward and Beck (1989). Davis et al. (1992) had mixed results, but generally found that men report cheating more often than women. The relationship between sex and cheating has not been consistently found. Further research in this area is needed to better understand when sex differences occur.

Steps should be taken to create an environment in which cheating is less likely to occur. Professors should carefully monitor exams. Singhal (1982) found that 56% of the students he surveyed admitted to cheating, but only 3% reported being caught by their professors. Students may view cheating as a common, casual occurrence with no real consequences, especially if they observe instructors who are casual about monitoring cheating and enforcing academic honesty codes. According to Singhal increased faculty awareness of the opportunities to cheat may reduce its occurrence.

Students could be asked to sign an honor code promising not only to refrain from cheating, but to discourage others from academic dishonesty and to turn them in if they do cheat. May and Loyd (1993) studied a state university that instituted an honor code of this type for students and faculty. Punishment for serious infractions is expulsion from school. May and Loyd found that the honor system at this university significantly reduced the incidence of cheating.

Detection and punishment of cheating are important, but the prevention of academic dishonesty is a far better goal. Perhaps students do not see the importance of learning by understanding and processing information. Davis and Ludvigson (1995) suggest that learning takes place when students use the course content to build their own "personal theory" (p. 121) of the covered material. When students cheat they short-circuit this process and leave the class without mastery of course materials.

As a culture, we may be moving toward a greater tolerance for dishonest and unethical behavior in academic settings. Schab (1991) describes a *60 Minutes* (March 25, 1990) report in which high school personnel used questions from the SAT to coach students and improve school averages. Such institutionalized cheating sends a powerful message to students that it is not only okay to cheat, but that cheating is necessary for success. Students may think these behaviors are normal and that they do not hurt anyone, but these behaviors threaten student learning and the meaningfulness of grades.

A correction in the direction toward greater academic honesty is urgently needed. Students should be held responsible for their actions by their peers, their parents, and their community. But the ultimate responsibility for cheating lies within the student. Students should hold themselves to a personal honor code. School administrators and instructors should model and reinforce honesty. Only then can academic institutions ensure that students will be rewarded for honesty by grades that reflect actual achievement.

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