

# **AM I CHEATING? AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Even 100 years ago, academic dishonesty was an issue of concern to educators at American universities and colleges and the beginnings of honor systems were introduced (New York Times, 1915). Students were expected to be above reproach in all scholastic activities. Nonetheless, a decline in moral conduct was noted as far back at 1927 (Thwing, 1927) and a 1964 survey (Bowers, 1964) found that both deans and student body presidents ranked academic dishonesty second among various student discipline problems. Students are still expected to be above reproach in all scholastic activities; however, traditional delivery of education is changing. During the fall 2010 term, more than 6.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This represents an increase of more than a half million online students compared to fall 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2011).*

*Online learning and virtual classes offer the freedom from traditional classroom constraints (Allen & Seaman, 2011). With the advent of online courses, one of the largest concerns on the part of the faculty and administration is how to ensure that the student is actually learning the material and not cheating when it comes to exams. Today, both students and faculty continue to perceive that cheating occurs more frequently online than in a traditional classroom (Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006). In order to obtain online students' perceptions of their behaviors on online exams and other coursework, this study is designed to gauge student attitudes and beliefs as to whether their behaviors constitute academic dishonesty.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The methods for delivering course content to students are continuing to shift from the traditional face-to-face instructor-led classroom settings to a more computer- or Internet-based, self-paced virtual setting. Individuals are virtually connected and even addicted to communicating continually with others throughout a typical day. Communication devices of all types, cell phones, ipads, ipods, and computers, help students keep that invisible thread of connection to friends, family, coworkers, and instructors. Online tutoring, internet instructional modules, social media (Facebook and Twitter), and video chat software (Skype and Oovoo), all are tools that can also be used for online interaction. Even as courses utilize these tools for content

delivery, academic honesty in both face-to-face and online coursework continues to be a concern. This study examines student perceptions of certain behaviors relative to academic dishonesty related to online exams and other online coursework.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Online enrollment is growing faster than traditional enrollment. During fall 2010, more than 6.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This translates to nearly one in three higher education students now taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Universities are keenly aware of the growing popularity of online courses and while 15% of college presidents surveyed say most of their current students have taken a class online, half predict that in ten years most of their students will be learning online (Parker, 2011). Sixty-five percent of reporting institutions see online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Concurrent with the growth of online education is a growing concern among administration and faculty members about student plagiarism and cheating in online courses. This worry appears to be well placed. The Pew Research Center surveyed 1,055 college presidents and 55% stated that plagiarism had increased in the past ten years; 40% said it had stayed the same; and only 2% stated it had declined (Parker, 2011). Of those presidents reporting an increase in plagiarism, 89% said computers and the Internet have played a major role in this increase (Parker, 2011). Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, and Davis (2000) reported both faculty (64%) and students (57%) believe it is easier to cheat in online courses. They predicted "Because both students and faculty believe it is easier to cheat in a distance learning class ... as the number of distance learning classes increases so will academic dishonesty" (Kennedy, et.al., 2000). McNabb and Olmstead's survey (2009) of University of Texas faculty members showed 32% believed an online course to be more conducive to cheating for undergraduate students while about one-half of the surveyed faculty believed there were equivalent cheating opportunities in online and face-to-face undergraduate and graduate courses. Kwun, Alshare, & Grandon (2005) conducted a cross-cultural survey of American and South Korean faculty and students with regard to their perceptions of online teaching and learning. They reported the American and South Korean instructors surveyed were more likely to agree with the statement, "It would be easy to cheat and plagiarize in an online course."

Kwun, Alshare, & Grandon (2005) reported in their cross-cultural survey that American and South Korean students were also more likely to agree with the statement, "It would be easy to cheat and plagiarize in an online course." This finding is in agreement with the results of King, Guyette, & Piotrowski's survey (2009) of 121 undergraduate business students that found 73.6% of the students perceived it was easier to cheat in online v. traditional courses. This also concurs with the results of Watson & Sottile's (2010) survey of 635 undergraduate and graduate students. That study sought to determine self-reported dishonest behaviors, knowledge of others' dishonest behaviors, and perceptions of cheating in online and face-to-face classes. Students perceived their classmates were 61% more likely to cheat in online classes and only 11.5% perceived their classmates were likely to cheat in face-to-face classes. As far as self-reported behavior, students reported they were 42.2% more likely to cheat in an online class and 10.2% likely to cheat in a face-to-face class. In contrast, Spaulding (2009) found no significant differences in student perceptions of academic honesty for 103 undergraduate students enrolled in either the online or face-to-face technology integration course in a teacher education program. Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet (2006) surveyed 796 undergraduate online students regarding their online course

experience and found the level of cheating in an online course to be consistent with that of an on-campus face-to-face class during a single semester. The researchers concluded “as online education expands, there is no reason to suspect that academic dishonesty will become more common.” However, as Varvel (2005) noted with regard to cheating in online and face-to-face educational situations, “with such a high rate in both, it would admittedly be hard to detect a difference.”

In 1963, Bowers surveyed 5,000 college students and reported more than half engaged in academic dishonesty (Bowers, 1964). Thirty years later McCabe and Trevino surveyed students on nine of the campuses included in Bowers’ report and found that while 39% admitted cheating on tests or exams in the 1963 study, that rate had increased to 64% in the 1993-94 survey (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Over the course of three academic years, McCabe also surveyed more than 80,000 U.S. and Canadian college students with regard to cheating behaviors on tests and examinations and found that 21% of students engaged in one of four types of academic dishonesty: cheating, copying, using crib notes or helping someone else to cheat on a test or exam (McCabe, 2006).

McCabe & Bowers (1994) concluded in their thirty year perspective of academic honesty among college males that student cheating in the 1980’s and the 1990’s had not dramatically increased. Whitley (1998) performed a meta-analysis of 107 studies that examined cheating. He reported a 70% mean prevalence rate of cheating overall. Forty-seven percent of the students admitted to plagiarism while 43% admitted to cheating on exams (Whitley, 1998).

In McCabe’s (2006) three year survey of 12,000 U.S. and Canadian college faculty, 41% of faculty members had observed a student copying from another student without that student’s knowledge; 33% had observed a student copying from another student with that student’s knowledge; 26% had observed the use of crib notes; and 29% had seen a student helping someone else cheat on a test or exam (McCabe, 2006). McCabe’s 2010 Academic Integrity Survey Report for Texas Tech University revealed more than 50% of faculty members had observed unpermitted collaboration during an online test or exam; more than 40% had observed students using notes or books on a closed book online test or exam; and more than 35% reported students had received unauthorized help on an online test or exam or looked up information on the Internet (Texas Tech University, 2010).

Scanlon & Neumann’s survey (2002) of 698 college students showed that nearly 90% viewed cutting and pasting without citation as unethical, although 24.5% admitted to “sometimes” to “very frequent” use of this type of plagiarism. In McCabe’s radio interview with National Public Radio, he discussed his survey of 14,000 undergraduates over the last four years and his finding that about two-thirds of students admitted to cheating on assignments and exams (Conan, 2010). In a separate interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, McCabe, drawing from his research surveys of more than 200,000 college students, 50,000 high school students and about 20,000 faculty members, stated up to 40 percent of students admit to “cut-and-paste” plagiarism (Chicago Tribune, 2012). Jocoy and DiBiase (2006) cite a Center for Academic Integrity survey of approximately 50,000 students from more than 60 universities that revealed 77% of the

participants did not view “cutting and pasting” as a very serious issue (Jocoy & DiBiase, 2006). McCabe has also hypothesized that students do not regard cutting and pasting from the Internet as an act of cheating (McCabe, 2005). This is supported by the results of Palazzo, et al. (2010) who developed an algorithm to detect copying in an online tutorial system and then administered an academic dishonesty survey to students and utilized the online tutorial to compare the extent of self-reported vs. actual copying. The researchers determined that students actually committed about 50% more copying than they self-reported on the self-reported survey (Palazzo, et.al, 2010).

Uhrakova and Podaril, (2006) drawing from the research efforts of Moon and Bassendowski, divided academic dishonesty into three overlapping categories deriving from cooperation: 1) cheating, 2) plagiarism, and 3) collusion. They further illustrated Culwin and Lancaster’s relationship as a single line starting with collaboration, moving to collusion, and ending with copying. They note plagiarism *may* exist midway between collaboration and collusion and *does* exist after a point midway between collusion and copying (Uhrakova & Podaril, 2006). Gallant (2008) further delineates academic dishonesty into five discrete categories: 1) “Plagiarism—using another’s words or ideas without appropriate attribution or without following citation conventions; 2) Fabrication—making up data, results, information, or numbers, and recording and reporting them; 3) Falsification—manipulating research, data, or results to inaccurately portray information in reports (research, financial, or other) or academic assignments; 4) Misrepresentation—falsely representing oneself, efforts, or abilities; and 5) Misbehavior—acting in ways that are not overtly misconduct but are counter to prevailing behavioral expectations” (Gallant, 2008).

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Sample.** This study was administered at a mid-size southern Hispanic Serving Institution to students enrolled in junior and senior level Paralegal or Business online courses during the spring, summer and fall 2012 semesters. The survey was conducted through Survey Monkey and a hyperlink was supplied to all students through their online course portal. Participation was voluntary and no class time or credit was provided for volunteering to take the survey. Only online courses that met Allen & Seaman’s (2011) definition in which “at least 80% of the course content is delivered online” were surveyed.

**Instrument.** The authors reviewed a wide variety of published survey instruments used to ascertain information about academic integrity at different universities and colleges. From these surveys, the authors utilized the *2010 McCabe Academic Integrity Survey Report* prepared by Texas Tech University (2010) because the questions indicated specific behaviors and perceptions of the level of honesty for specific behaviors from students. Using this survey, the authors adapted the survey to replicate only the student questions that applied to online courses. The instrument was divided into three sections: Specific Behaviors, Opinion of Specific Behaviors, and Demographic Data. The administered survey instrument consisted of 16 specific behavioral questions about cheating; 16 opinions as to the level of cheating for the different behaviors; four demographic questions; and one short answer question (Appendix A).

Of the 194 students that participated in the study, 194 students answered the behavior portion of the survey; 183 answered the perception of honesty portion; and approximately 174 responded to the demographic information and open-ended question. Of the 194 participants in this study,

54% were seniors; 34% were juniors; 10% sophomores and only 1 was a freshman. 69% of the participants were female with the remaining 31% male. Under ethnicity, the participants identified themselves as 78.2% White Hispanic; 15.5% White Non-Hispanic; 2.9% Black, African American or Negro; and 3.4% in the other category.

The age groups reflected by the participants in this study included: 18-23 years of age; 24-29 ; 30-35; 36-41; 42-47; 48-53; and 54-59. The following table depicts the distribution of participants according to age groups (Table 1: Age Distribution):

Age Range by Years	Percentage of Participants
18-23	18.4%
24-29	25.3%
30-35	19.5%
36-41	18.4%
42-47	13.2%
48-53	3.4%
54-59	1.7%
60 and Above	0.0%
Total	99.9%

**FINDINGS**

Junior and senior level students in online Paralegal or Business courses were offered the opportunity to volunteer for this survey. The first section of the survey instrument asked students about specific behaviors and how often they had engaged in such behaviors in the past year in their online courses. The following table provides a summary of the responses to this first section (Table 2: Specific Behaviors):

Questions	By Percentages			
	Never	Once	More Than Once	Not Relevant
1. Using an open book during an online exam	22.7	13.4	56.2	7.7
2. Having another person take an online exam for you	97.4	1.0	0.0	1.5
3. Consulting with other people during an online exam	85.1	5.2	6.2	3.6
4. Obtaining an online exam from another student prior to test time	96.4	0.5	1.0	2.1
5. Saving or copying an online exam for future use	84.5	5.2	7.2	3.1
6. Utilizing online sources during an online exam	64.4	11.9	18.0	5.7
7. Relying on print reference sources, other than the main textbook, during an online exam	70.1	7.7	16.5	5.7
8. Using personal or class notes during an online exam	29.9	13.4	50.0	6.7
9. Using more time on an online exam than allotted by the instructor	76.8	7.2	10.3	5.7
10. Using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or to delay taking an online exam	96.9	0.5	0.0	2.6
11. Using cell phone or text messaging to send or receive online exam questions or answers to/from another student	97.7	0.0	0.5	1.5
12. Cheating on an online test or exam in any other way not described above	96.9	0.0	0.5	2.6
13. Paraphrasing or copying material, almost word for word, or copying a few sentences from a book, magazine, journal, electronic source (Internet), or any written source and submitting it as your own work	85.6	7.2	3.6	3.6
14. Turning in a paper from a “paper mill,” one you purchased or obtained from a Web site or a paper copied, at least in part from another student’s paper, whether or not the student is currently taking the same course	95.9	0.0	0.5	3.6
15. Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography or list of references	94.3	1.0	0.5	4.1
16. Working on an assignment with others (in person, via email or instant	91.8	5.2	0.5	2.6

messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work				
Average Percentages	80.2	5.0	10.7	3.9

In this section about specific behaviors, there were two questions (1 & 8) that garnered the highest responses in the “once” or “more than once” categories. These questions had to do with “using an open book during an online exam (68.6%)” and “using personal or class notes during an online exam (63.4%).” In this section, there were also four questions (10, 11, 12, & 14) that produced a very small response (0.5%) to ever having been done “once” or “more than once”: using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or to delay taking an online exam; using a cell phone or text messaging to send or receive online exam questions or answers to/from another student; cheating on an online test or exam in any other way not described above; and turning in a paper from a “paper mill,” one you purchased or obtained from a Web site or a paper copied, at least in part from another student’s paper, whether or not the student is currently taking the same course.” The responses from students suggest that the behaviors they most frequently engaged in were using an open book during an online exam or using personal or class notes during an online exam.

The second section of the survey instrument asked students their opinions as to the seriousness of each of the specific behaviors. Each question had four types of ratings from which to select: not cheating; trivial cheating; moderate cheating; serious cheating. Table 3 describes the responses for this section (Table 3: Opinion of Specific Behaviors):

Questions	By Percentages			
	Not Cheating	Trivial Cheating	Moderate Cheating	Serious Cheating
1. Using an open book during an online exam	58.2	18.7	13.2	9.9
2. Having another person take an online exam for you	4.4	0.0	1.1	94.5
3. Consulting with other people during an online exam	8.8	14.3	20.3	56.6
4. Obtaining an online exam from another student prior to test time	4.9	1.6	6.6	86.8
5. Saving or copying an online exam for future use	22.0	14.3	18.7	45.1
6. Utilizing online sources during an online exam	22.0	19.2	23.1	35.7
7. Relying on print reference sources, other than the main textbook, during an online exam	33.0	23.6	15.9	27.5
8. Using personal or class notes during an online exam	57.7	18.1	11.0	13.2
9. Using more time on an online exam than allotted by the instructor	34.6	23.6	15.9	25.8
10. Using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or to delay taking an online exam	11.0	9.9	13.2	65.9
11. Using cell phone or text messaging to send or receive online exam questions or answers to/from another student	5.5	7.7	6.6	80.8
12. Cheating on an online test or exam in any other way not described above	7.1	9.9	8.8	74.7
13. Paraphrasing or copying material, almost word for word, or copying a few sentences from a book, magazine, journal, electronic source (Internet), or any written source and submitting it as your own work	7.1	7.7	11.5	73.6
14. Turning in a paper from a “paper mill,” one you purchased or obtained from a Web site or a paper copied, at least in part from another student’s paper, whether or not the student is currently	3.8	2.7	6.6	86.8

taking the same course				
15. Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography or list of references	5.5	6.0	9.9	78.6
16. Working on an assignment with others (in person, via email or instant messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work	8.2	11.5	20.9	59.3
Average Percentages	18.4	11.8	12.7	57.2

In this section, students identified two primary areas (1 & 8) they believed did not constitute cheating in online courses. The two areas, both selected by 58% of the respondents, were: using an open book during an online exam; and using personal or class notes during an online exam. This suggests that students believe when taking an online exam, that the use of any or all documents or books in order to complete an exam is acceptable. The fact that the majority of these students are juniors and seniors under 35 years of age, might suggest that they are in the workforce and the use of reference or resources in order to accomplish a project is not only acceptable but also necessary.

Two questions received contradictory responses indicating that those behaviors were perceived as both not cheating and serious cheating. Nearly one-third (33%) of the students responded that relying on print reference sources, other than the main textbook, during an online exam was not considered as cheating; while 27.5% indicated that this same behavior was considered serious cheating. More than one-third (34.6%) of the students responded that using more time on an online exam than allotted by the instructor was not cheating while 25.8% indicated that it was serious cheating. Although both behaviors had contradictory responses, the not cheating responses were slightly higher than the rest. Except for the two behaviors with contradictory responses, the remaining questions had responses indicating that the behaviors described were considered serious cheating behaviors by the majority of students.

One opened ended question was posed to all participants in this survey: “What is your definition of cheating in an online class?” There were 183 responses to the open-ended question. Sixteen responses were eliminated as being non-responsive and the rest were classified into five categories: 1) substitution 2) collusion 3) copying 4) other - cheating 5) other – not cheating. Because some of the student-given definitions included several different cheating behaviors, these definitions were counted more than once or placed in more than one category, resulting in a total of 210 entries. The authors defined the substitution category to reflect someone other than the participant completing the exam or doing the work. Collusion was considered taking exams or tests in the presence of or with the assistance of others; copying refers to looking at someone else’s answers, getting answers from someone else, and/or plagiarism. The “other” category contained definitions that were not easily categorized and were therefore subdivided into two areas: “other-cheating” and “other-not cheating”. The “other-cheating” subdivision considered responses that represented some type of dishonest behavior other than substitution, collusion and copying. The “other-not cheating” subdivision referred to the concept that using sources, notes, or textbooks while taking the exam considered to be not cheating. Table 4 illustrates the categories and the percentage of responses provided in each category (Table 4: Definitions of Cheating Category Classifications).

Table 4 – Definitions of Cheating Category Classifications					
Substitution	Collusion	Copying	Other		Non-Responsive
			Cheating	Not Cheating	
22.4%	9.4%	11.0%	41.0%	8.6%	7.6%

From the definitions provided on the open-ended question the behavior that was selected by 22.4% of the respondents was of someone other than the person registered for the course taking the exam or completing the assignments. This substitution percentage was a surprise to the authors as they did not believe that the behavior occurred that often. As a matter of fact, 97.4% of the participants stated that they had never had anyone take an online exam for them and 94.5% considered this behavior to be serious cheating. This is a surprising contrast to the participant supplied definition of cheating.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

“The first and most important line of defense against academic dishonesty is simply good teaching.” The second line of defense is the development of integrity in our students. The last line of defense is to help students perceive that the dishonesty of their classmates hurts many students” (Hinman, 2004).

Honor codes have been around for nearly 100 years (New York Times, 1915), and surveys have shown that academic dishonesty is less prevalent at universities that had an honor code (Bowers, 1964; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Online faculty should give consideration to incorporating an online honor code in their syllabus if their institution has not already adopted an honor code.

The authors also recommend that additional information be included in the syllabus to clarify faculty expectations of academic behavior. As students indicated that the use of textbooks, notes, or other sources was not seen as cheating behavior, a statement clarifying those perceptions as being correct or incorrect is needed in the course syllabus.

Additional research needs to continue to be conducted as new teaching delivery systems are developed. Kidder’s statement that “honesty is one of the world’s five most cherished values” (Raising Ethical Children, 2010) continues to be true.

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