

## Undergraduate Online Business Students' Views on Plagiarism

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**Abstract:** With the continued growth of online courses, the academic integrity of students has received much attention. Through the Internet and other technology mediated strategies, students today have many more ways to “cheat” compared to students a decade ago. Cheating is certainly not a new phenomenon. However, the difference between today’s environment and that of previous decades is that cheating behavior has apparently become common. It appears that cheating is no longer the exception to the rule. So the question is posed, has the Internet provided an avenue to create a “cheating culture”? This research seeks to examine perceptions of cheating among online undergraduate business students.

**Key words:** online, cheating, ethics

### 1. Introduction

Academic integrity has been a major concern to instructors involved in the implementation and teaching of online courses (Trenholm, 2006–2007). The premise of academic integrity lies in intellectual honesty. It encompasses honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility (Swartz & Cole, 2013). Many in academe simply refer to academic integrity as “cheating”.

With the rise of online course delivery, concerns about cheating are being raised. While there have been many studies conducted related to in-class classes, studies conducted on cheating in on-line courses have been sporadic (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2006; Lanier, 2006; Stuber-McEwen et al., 2009; Szabo & Underwood, 2003, Szabo & Underwood 2004, Swartz & Cole, 2013).

The number of students participating in college level online courses has outpaced all other forms of distance learning (Raines, Ricci, Brown, Eggenberger, Hindle, & Schiff, 2011). As a result, the growth in online learning opportunities has intensified the concerns about cheating in online courses (Raines et al., 2011). Travis and Price (2005) stated a problem that faculty who use distance education technology are often faced with academic integrity issues, especially with written examinations. Nowadays, with the Internet as the primary tool, students can readily find written work electronically and manipulate it to make it their own. Travis and Price (2005) indicated that any written work required in web-based classes could be viewed as an enticement for students to be dishonest, causing faculty to consider the implementation of safeguards, many of which may not be completely effective.

The popularity of Web-based courses demands that researchers study academic integrity in ways that they

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have not before while utilizing previous research to guide them in how to best predict and eliminate cheating. Gaining insights into academic integrity in this new learning environment can ensure that educators and administrators are still on the path to insuring that current students will matriculate into honest employees and community members. This research seeks to examine academic integrity among online undergraduate business students by examining their perceptions of cheating

## **2. Background Literature**

Online learning is a valuable commodity to higher education where institutions can extend their academic missions beyond their traditional brick-and-mortar campuses. Although online learning has become a definite asset to institutions and learners alike, the problem of academic integrity — in ways both similar and dissimilar to traditional on campus, face-to-face classes — has emerged as an important issue for this new educational delivery platform (Etter et al., 2006; Grijalva et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2000; Lanier, 2006; Underwood & Szabo, 2003). In fact, academic dishonesty has become so widespread that the print media has called the problem a “plague” (Embleton & Helfer, 2007) and scholars have labeled it a “crisis on campus” (Burke et al., 2007).

### **2.1 Online Cheating**

Previous research has found that students perceived cheating to be easier in online course (Guyette et al., 2008). Many instructors have acknowledged that dishonesty in online classes is easier because of the readily available material via the Internet materials (Renard, 2000). In addition, Swartz and Cole (2013) reported that students found online to be easier because the student is off-site and supervised. Peer standards of behavior and even ignorance to the fact that their behaviors are in violation of the university's student code of ethics are reasons often cited for cheating (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012).

A study conducted by Brown (1996) found that education online students (85.7%) reported more than infrequent participation in at least one unethical practice, which was higher than both business (81.2%) and engineering (80.2%) students. Education students were more likely than engineering students to do so “to get a high grade” and were more likely than engineering or business students to behave dishonestly because of peer pressure. Results also showed that students generally wanted good grades but did not want to study for them, and they felt that no one suffered by their cheating. Laziness, lack of preparation time for assignments and exams, lack of interest in the subject matter, and even rebellion are other commonly cited reasons for cheating (Ashworthy & Bannister, 1997). Some also stated that although they knew that cheating was morally wrong, students justified their behavior as driven to remain competitive in today's competitive society. Other reported contributors to cheating included poor assessment formats, the environment of the institution, poor resources and teaching, and that the work being asked of them did not seem to have any greater or lasting significance.

In the online platform, Nath and Lovaglia (2009) found two thirds of cheating cases involved students getting together on an exam and the other one third copying another student's paper without their knowledge. Young (2010) discussed the problem of cheating that occurred among college students majoring in physics and engineering. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a physics professor added a detection system to his online courses that looked for abnormal behavior patterns. The professor and his research team found that during the first year, approximately 11% of homework problems were most likely copied. Many students used websites to download or purchase papers and submit them as original work. In addition, students often have private email conversations with peers when taking online examinations. Obviously, instructors have no knowledge of these

conversations. In some cases, students accessed and downloaded class assessments prior to examination dates, looked up answers, and shared them with classmates via email (Olt, 2002).

## **2.2 Purpose of This Study**

To further look into academic integrity we investigate the cheating perceptions and behaviors of students. This study specifically examined cheating among undergraduate business students. The following research questions were explored:

- (1) Is cheating easier in the online environment?
- (2) What constitutes as cheating?
- (3) What are the students' impressions of the University's policy and instructor's awareness regarding cheating?

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Sample Size**

This study utilized the responses of undergraduate business students enrolled in an online course. These students attend a mid-sized regional university in Texas. An email was initially sent to 87 students seeking their *voluntary* participation in an online and anonymous survey. Of the eighty seven, 29 students completed the survey.

### **3.2 Sample Selection**

Given the sensitive nature of the survey, this research had to be conducted on a voluntary basis. As a result, the effective sample size is relatively small. The instructor deemed it unethical to provide students with extra credit points [to boost sample size] for participation since this would necessitate having to determine the names of the respondents.

Students were initially contacted through a petition from a university faculty member teaching a business course. Students were given a secure web address to visit and complete the survey. The study used a quantitative design featuring a one-time survey to gauge level and type of academic dishonesty occurring in online undergraduate business courses. Of the 29 participants, 15 identified themselves as female and 14 as male.

## **4. Findings of the Study**

The focus of this study was to further look into academic dishonesty perceptions and behaviors of undergraduate business students. Presented below are the key findings in this study.

### **4.1 Student Perceptions of Online Cheating**

Consistent with previous research, the prevailing perceptions on online cheating suggest: (1) Students believe that there is ample opportunity to cheat in an online course, and (2) Cheating online is easy to do. In fact, as evident in the report in Table 1, more than a third of the sample believed that this is a fairly common occurrence.

### **4.2 Plagiarism**

Interestingly, as shown in Table 2, students understood that plagiarism is a form of cheating, but over 40% did not consider submitting information deemed common knowledge as cheating. Likewise, 80% believed information found on the Internet was fair game to use because it is on the Internet. Research has shown many students do not identify "cutting and pasting" as plagiarism and may not understand that unapproved collaboration is academic dishonesty.

Table 1 Students' Self-reported Perceptions of Online Cheating

General Cheating Perceptions	Response Percent
1. There is greater opportunity for me to cheat in online courses	
Yes	37.93%
No	55.17%
I prefer not to answer	6.90%
2. I believe that cheating is common among online students	
Yes	31.03%
No	65.52%
I prefer not to answer	3.45%
3. I believe that students cheat because it is easy to cheat	
Yes	41.38%
No	55.17%
I prefer not to answer	3.45%

Table 2 Students' Self-reported Perceptions of Plagiarism

Plagiarism	
4. Plagiarism is a form of cheating	
Yes	93.10%
No	6.90%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
5. I have copied another student's work without their permission and submitted it as my own	
Yes	0.0%
No	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
6. I have knowingly copied passages from an article or book directly into a paper without citing it as someone else's work	
Yes	0.0%
No	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
7. Submitting information considered common knowledge is not cheating	
Yes	51.72%
No	44.83%
I prefer not to answer	3.45%
8. I do not feel guilty about using information taken from the Internet as my own work	
Yes	13.79%
No	79.31%
I prefer not to answer	6.90%
9. I believe that using media from the Internet (pictures, music, videos, etc.) is not cheating because it's on the Internet	
Yes	17.24%
No	79.31%
I prefer not to answer	3.45%

### 4.3 Tools Used in Cheating

The data, in Table 3, showed that some students turned in assignments from other courses and used hand held devices to assist during assessments. This sample reported that they did not utilize writing services.

### 4.4 Policy & Instructor Awareness

Table 4 data indicated students were generally aware of the university's policy on plagiarism and cheating. This is encouraging given that universities can help foster a culture of academic honesty. Unfortunately, some students believed that instructors are unaware of the extent of online cheating.

**Table 3 Students' Self-Reported Tools of Cheating**

<b>Specific Cheating Tools</b>	
10. I have used instant messaging through a cell phone or handheld device during a quiz or exam	
Yes	3.45%
No	96.55%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
11. I have used a term paper writing service to complete an assignment	
Yes	0.0%
No	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
12. I have turned in an assignment I previously submitted for another class	
Yes	10.34%
No	89.66%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%

**Table 4 Students Self-Reported Perceptions on University Policy & Instructor Awareness**

<b>University Policy</b>	
13. I am familiar with my school's policy on cheating and/or plagiarism	
Yes	96.55%
No	3.45%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%
<b>Role of Instructor</b>	
14. Professors are often clueless that students are cheating	
Yes	10.34%
No	89.66%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%

## 5. Discussion

The results in this study are consistent with previous works (i.e., Guyette et al., 2008) that suggested students themselves are inclined to believe that cheating is easier online. In fact, there is a perception that cheating is not only easier but also fairly common. This is unfortunate despite the emphasis placed by the university on the importance of the ethical code of conduct as well the sample's self-reported awareness/familiarity with the code. This particular state university has an Academic Honesty Policy signed each semester by students.

Lorenzetti (2010) identified three ways universities can address academic dishonesty: (1) Policing, to include efforts to identify academic dishonesty and punish those who engage in this behavior; (2) Prevention, to include efforts to create barriers, such as prevention tools, including test design that might include timed completion of the assessment and limited numbers of log-ins during the exam, and proctoring (either in person or electronic); and (3) Ethical engagement, this is the “most difficult approach”, as it strives to encourage students to want to do their own work. The key is to develop students who do not want to cheat. Interestingly, the students sampled in this study believed that their instructor is in tune with issues relating to online cheating. Unfortunately, this does not seem to deter students from cheating. Howell et al. (2010) noted that while many distance educators know they need to protect the integrity of their programs and prevent cheating whenever possible, few, if any, want to spend the necessary time or resources required to prevent and/or detect cheating. Confronting cheaters and spending resources on deterrents, detection, and discipline is not why distance educators go to work each day. Institutions are employing many methods to mitigate cheating. Some of the methods employ devices, others use procedures and policies, and some use both types. Institutions and policymakers choose from a variety of methods that best fit their philosophy and circumstance (Howell et al., 2010).

While students are aware that plagiarism is a form of cheating — their idea of what comprises plagiarism is noteworthy. The findings here suggested that copying/using materials readily available from the Internet are generally not considered plagiarism by students. This is consistent with previous research (i.e., Lorenzetti, 2010) that has shown that many students do not identify “cutting and pasting” as plagiarism. In fact, they do not understand that unapproved collaboration is academic dishonesty. Therefore, it is imperative that instructors explicitly address what constitutes as unacceptable plagiarism-related behaviors (Lorenzetti, 2010).

The data showed students did consider using hand held devices to assist during assessments and using writing services a form of cheating and did not engage in such practices. Howell et al. (2010) noted the most popular current cheating methods include: mobile phones and iPods, brain dumps (brain dumps are variations on the questions and answers that have been stolen from actual exams), organized cheating, traditional methods, and even how-to cheat sites. Young's (2013) article *Online Classes See Cheating Go High-Tech* noted easy A's may be even easier to score these days, with the growing popularity of online courses. Tech-savvy students are finding ways to cheat that let them ace online courses with minimal effort, in ways that are difficult to detect. Take Young's (2013) example of Bob who spends just 25–30 minutes each week on an online science course. This is the time it took him to take the weekly test. He never read the online materials for the course and never opened a textbook. He learned almost nothing. He got an A. His secret was to cheat, and he is proud of the method he used. It involved four friends and a shared Google Doc, an online word-processing file that all five of them could read and add to at the same time during the test. Although the syllabus clearly forbade academic dishonesty, Bob argued that the university had put so little into the security of the course that it could not be serious about whether the online students are learning anything. He believed that if the university did not think students would cheat, then they did not think it through.

Alarming, one study reported 80% of undergraduates in Australia admitted to cheating academically (Maslen, 2003). It must be noted though, that several researchers have downplayed concerns about academic integrity issues. For example, Grijalva, Nowell, and Kerkvliet (2006), in an empirical investigation, indicated their evidence showed academic dishonesty in online classes is no more pervasive than in traditional classes. Rationalization/attitude becomes prevalent and excusable when there is a perception that “everyone is doing it” (King, Guyette, & Piotrowski, 2009).

Raines et al. (2011) indicated that students believed there is nothing wrong with students helping each other when it comes to school work and testing. It is all about learning together and passing the course. Additionally, they also believed it is not cheating unless one gets caught. And to test online and not expect people to cheat would be unrealistic. People are opportunistic and will take advantage of situations when given the chance.

## 6. Limitations & Future Research

As online courses continue to spread through higher education, more research will be needed to provide insights on academic dishonesty. Unfortunately, researchers have to rely on students' self-reported responses regarding this sensitive topic. As a result, it is not surprising that studies such as ours had a low response rate. As reported earlier, of the 87 undergraduate business students surveyed, 29 chose to participate.

Given the sensitive nature of "cheating", the level of students' honesty is hard to assess. Despite the anonymous nature of the survey conducted as well as the instructor's assurances of non-identification of respondents, it is inevitable that some were hesitant to provide truthful answers.

This study was conducted among junior or senior-level business students. It would be interesting to conduct a future study examine the prevalence of cheating among graduate business students. Further, online students, both graduate and undergraduate, from other disciplines should be included in future studies. Another possible topic is the quantity of cheating by students. This study did not request the respondents to quantify how often they cheated.

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