

February 2023

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### Recommended Citation

Riad, Jennifer (2023) "Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education: What We Know and What We Can Do," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol7/iss2/11>

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## Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education: What We Know and What We Can Do

### About the Author(s)

Jennifer Riad is the Curriculum and Accreditation Coordinator at California Baptist University. She has a Master of Science in Higher Education Leadership and Student Development and is working towards a Doctorate of Education in Organization Change and Administration. She is a higher education professional dedicated to continuous improvement and educational effectiveness. Her background includes leadership, curriculum, assessment, student success, study abroad, disability services, retention, and mentoring.

### Keywords

Higher education, cheating, academic integrity, student development



## **Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education: What We Know and What We Can Do**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the history of academics, cheating in various forms has coincided, evolving alongside university advancements. This paper explores the concept of academic dishonesty as a critical issue facing higher education in a modern context, establishes the cause of the problem, and concludes with potential solutions. The idea of academic dishonesty is contextualized through a synopsis of its types, a review of its history and related research, and its establishment in a modern context. Academic dishonesty should not be disregarded; instead, it must be treated as a serious concern; as such, this review discusses why cheating is an issue and why society should care. The focus then shifts to analyzing why students cheat, consisting of situational factors, competitive pressures, and lack of morals. In response to this amoral behavior, universities can employ short-term combatants against cheating, such as assigned seats and anti-plagiarism software. However, to effectively prevent cheating in the long term, academics must ultimately concern themselves with educating students about the importance of academic integrity.

Keywords: Higher education, cheating, academic integrity, student development

### **Introduction**

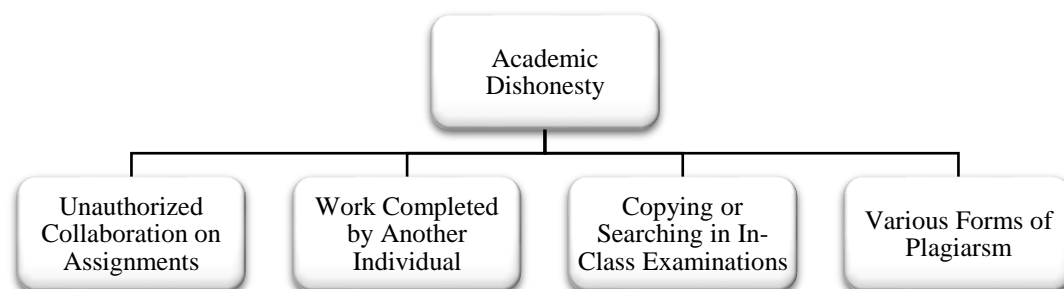
In the spring of 2017, the history department at a private Southern California university hired me as a teaching assistant, whereby I assisted in classroom facilitation, attendance input, and assignment grading. The professor I worked with required students to turn in assignments as hard copies in class, nothing electronic. When grading the first assignment, I came across a student who used peculiar verbiage to describe the events of the Mayflower Compact, suspiciously with no citations. After a Google search, I discovered that the eloquent words in the student's paper were, in fact, not theirs. By the time I finished grading, I had caught nine of the 60 students attempting to take credit for work that was not their own. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon in higher

education—thousands of students worldwide revert to academic dishonesty (Josephson Institute, 2012; McCabe, 2005; Simkin & McLeod, 2010). This article will examine academic dishonesty as a critical issue facing higher education to answer three pertinent questions: Why is cheating a problem? Why do students cheat? What can be done to prevent it?

## Background

### Types of Academic Dishonesty

There are several types of academic dishonesty. One example includes unauthorized collaboration, whereby students work in groups of two or more on assignments with an expectation of independent work and thinking. Another instance of cheating is when a student has another individual work on and complete their homework, written assignments, or tests (Davis et al., 2009). In resistance to memorization, students can also cheat during in-class examinations by copying work off a neighboring test, using an electronic device to search for answers, or having the answers written down in some form for reference. The most common method of cheating in higher education, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, occurs in plagiarism (Lang, 2013). There are many forms of plagiarism, such as sham and illicit paraphrasing, verbatim copying, recycling, purloining, and ghostwriting—all of which consist of an individual copying an outside source without proper citation (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017). This is not an exhaustive list of the types of academic misconduct, but it does enumerate the most common forms of academic dishonesty.



### Brief History & Related Research

Cheating in an academic setting can be traced back thousands of years to the first tests (Bushway & Nash, 1977). According to Brickman (1961), cheating during the ancient Chinese civil service examinations was so prevalent that the government began employing methods of deterrence, such as searching individuals for notes before the exam, separating test takers with cubicles, and threatening execution as a penalty for cheating. Historically, the cheating problem in

higher education is not a recent phenomenon, but research continues to show how academic dishonesty is frequent due to modern applications (Chiang et al., 2022; Jones, 2011; King et al., 2009).

Research surrounding academic dishonesty among modern college students dates to the late 1920s when H. C. Brownell (1928) studied the correlation between intelligence and cheating on 30 students known to have previously cheated on a test. In the last two decades, research volume on cheating has increased considerably with new research interests (Marques, Reis, & Gomes, 2019). As seen through research, academic dishonesty is not a new concept. Still, it continues to pose a problem in higher education due to innovative changes brought about by the internet and online learning.

### **Modern Context**

With the rise of technology, higher education institutions have been forced to evolve and embrace the concept of online learning. As a result, novel forms of academic dishonesty emerged in response. A new underground economy allows students to purchase custom work for special assignments or even on a whole-class basis (Wolverton, 2016). Alvin Malesky and Robert Crow, professors at Western Carolina University, conducted an experiment to assess how easily a student could enlist another individual to assume their identity and take an online course in their place. While professors could detect several forms of plagiarism and improper collaboration, they could not identify the fraudulent student (Wolverton, 2015). Although plagiarism is the most common form of cheating in higher education, educators are prepared to catch it; however, they are ill-equipped to handle paid custom work and cheaters who assume a student's identity. Moreover, some research has established that online cheating is more accessible to students than traditional in-course cheating (Chiang et al., 2022; King et al., 2009). Due to modern adaptations, academic dishonesty is a critical issue facing higher education that needs immediate reevaluation.

### **Why Academic Dishonesty is an Issue**

Before addressing why students cheat and what must be done to prevention, it is pertinent to discuss why cheating needs to be viewed as a severe issue and why academia should care to act against it. Some argue that cheating is not a significant concern, either because "everyone is doing it" or because it is a "victimless crime" in which only the cheaters themselves are harmed (Davis et al., 2009, p. 5). These arguments could not be further from the truth, considering that cheating

has plagued society in every form and field. Explicitly referring to the higher educational field, the normalization of cheating within academics impedes learning opportunities intended by educators and defrauds the value of diplomas (Davis et al., 2009). Moreover, academic dishonesty exists in opposition to the fundamentals of higher education, both in educational experiences and learning objectives. Additionally, systematic cheating is a gateway to corruption, and if left unaddressed, students will transfer it into the professional world (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017; Vittrup, 2016). Therefore, it is the ethical responsibility of educational institutions to treat academic dishonesty as a critical issue and employ proper prevention techniques to maintain the integrity of the higher education experience.

According to Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2001), academic administrators and faculty members should care about academic integrity for eight reasons: equity, character development, the mission to transfer knowledge, student morale, faculty morale, student's future behavior, the reputation of the institution, and public confidence in higher education. Unfortunately, many professors are reluctant to act against academic cheating, finding it easier to save energy, turn a blind eye, and avoid the additional paperwork (Vittrup, 2016). However, dishonesty will breed dishonesty, and disregarding it will ensure a vicious cycle as cheating students become cheating professionals. Failing to punish cheating inadvertently rewards dishonesty, having a "lethal effect on personal integrity" (Callahan, 2004, p. 69).

### **Why Cheating Occurs**

The modern cheating phenomenon comes from the "massification" of higher education over the last century (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017, p. 2). College attendance rose steadily from 1.5 million in the 1940s to 7.9 million in the 1970s but spiked to approximately 20 million in 2019 (College Enrollment Statistics). Since the 1960s, rates of cheating have been "high and stable," with no signs of abating (Stoltzfus, 2015). Research conducted by Simkin and McLeod (2010) found that 64% of students use dishonest tactics during their undergraduate careers. Additionally, recent studies reveal that 50% of students admit they are willing to pay for assignments (Wolverton, 2016). This disturbing trend arises with many excuses given by students caught in the act, thus begging the question: *why* do students cheat? This section analyzes the three components—situational factors, competitive pressures, and lack of morals—in determining why cheating occurs.

### **Situational Factors**

Situational determinants, whether in the student's control or not, directly influence cheating behavior. Unsurprisingly, a student's unpreparedness and procrastination constitute significant factors in academic dishonesty (Davis et al., 2009). If students do not manage their time correctly or lack interest in studying, when assignments and tests come due, they may feel pressed for other options and tempted to disregard honesty (Callahan, 2004). Other situational factors include stress related to finances or life circumstances. Escalating the cost of living and college attendance and taxing life occurrences outside of a student's control (e.g., a family member dying, employment termination, illness) compels students to neglect class preparation and prompt for a time-saving solution such as cheating (Davis et al., 2009). Although situational factors are influential in why students turn to dishonest behaviors, competitive pressures because of demanding academic performance also play a role in why students cheat.

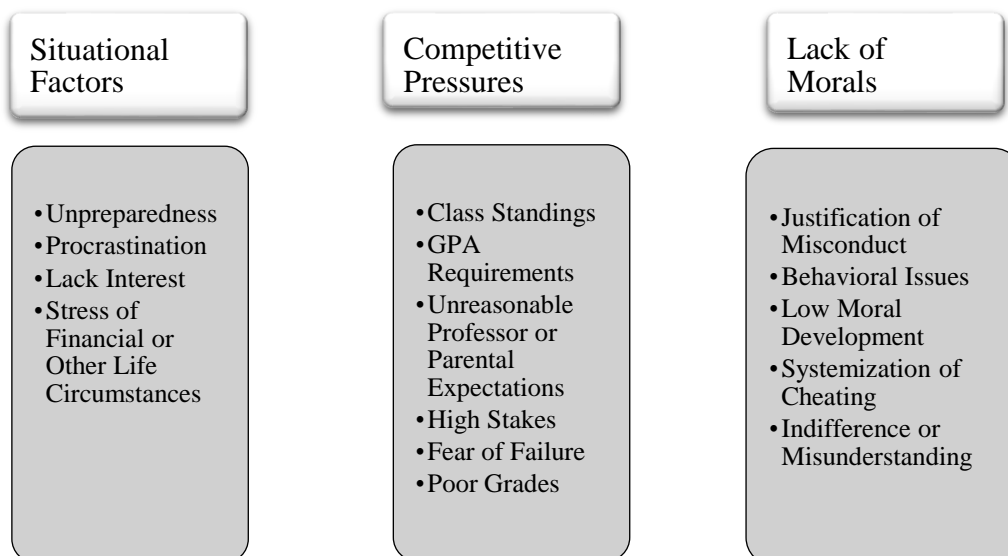
### **Competitive Pressures**

Pressure for better grades is imposed upon students through various factors: class standings, GPA requirements, unreasonable professor or parental expectations, high stakes, fear of failure, and such (Bushway & Nash, 1977). As a result, many students with poor grades feel the intense burden of falling behind and resolve to use dishonest methods to close the gap which may arise with classmates. However, motives to produce better products are not confined to the failing student; it is also quite prevalent for more competent students, pining to meet egregious academic expectations through honors classes and extra units, to deviate towards academic misconduct. Either way, students from all walks of life use illegitimate methods to maintain legitimate grades due to pressures to succeed (Davis et al., 2009). While competitive pressure is the most common excuse, the long-standing problem of why students cheat is because they know they can get away with it (Vittrup, 2016).

### **Lack of Morals**

C.O. Matthews, former Associate Professor of Education at Ohio Wesleyan University, studied student and faculty attitudes toward the honor system in 1932. He concluded that most students were likely to justify academic dishonesty. Discouraged by his findings, he ended the study by asking, "is it any wonder that honor systems seem ineffective and that the problem of academic honesty is always at hand?" (Matthews, 1932, p. 415). Cheating proves to be a behavioral

issue and an ethical dilemma. Put, students cheat because they have always cheated, and more distressing, they cheat because they do not understand why it is wrong (Bushway & Nash, 1977). Research shows that a person's moral development is directly correlated to the inclination to cheat; ergo, lower moral development accompanies higher levels of cheating (Davis et al., 2009). In addition, academic dishonesty stems from the normalization of cheating; students are inclined to cheat because they take cues from contemporary society, led by amoral leaders and shady business practices (Davis et al., 2009). The systemization of cheating, coupled with an indifference to or misunderstanding of the relationship between cheating and morality, has caused problems with moral development among students.



**How to Combat It**

Identifying the issue's roots is only the first step; the next is understanding how to approach and combat the problem. Finally, recognizing why students cheat allows for further investigation into how to prevent it from happening. This section approaches the problem with a multifaceted answer consisting of short-term and long-term prevention techniques.



### **Short-Term Solutions**

The most common and well-known response to cheating results in the student failing the assignment or the entire course, which may or may not lead to expulsion from the university. Threatening failure as a potential consequence of cheating is a proactive strategy to dissuade students from reverting to cheating behaviors; nevertheless, cheating still occurs (Davis et al., 2009). Additionally, a new study reveals that assigning seats helps prevent cheating during in-class and college examinations (Stoltzfus, 2015). However, this randomization, though helpful in inhibiting premeditated cheating, does not prevent students from glancing at a neighboring test. Moreover, with the rise of technology integrating into college learning, universities can use anti-plagiarism tools to combat technology (Wolverton, 2016). These are effective in discovering uncited and copied work but are unsuccessful in detecting paid custom work.

Similarly, institutions could administer random identity checks throughout the semester to prevent fraudulent students from working instead of the actual student in online courses. Though this method is innovative in combating the new cheating market, it is only partially effective and costly (Wolverton, 2016). These methods help prevent and catch cheaters; however, they are ultimately limited. In the endeavor to curtail cheating, a long-term approach might be better suited by way of promoting academic integrity.

### **Long-Term Solutions**

Unfortunately, "a large amount of cheating occurs where students are ignorant of or indifferent to the immediate and ultimate consequences" (Bushway & Nash, 1977, p. 629). As such, it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to teach and uphold the notion of academic integrity (Vittrup, 2016). The alarming rates of cheating within higher education provoke concern about character corruption (Davis et al., 2009). To effectively deal with the issue of cheating, colleges, and universities must rethink their approach to academic dishonesty by addressing the improper actions themselves and confronting the accompanying moral problems. Additionally, with proper role modeling and ethical instruction on moral development, students can be equipped to properly deal with situations of academic integrity (Jones, 2011). Academic integrity is a learned trait made applicable through teachable moments; however, this can only be accomplished after some time. Educators can implement teachable moments into their instructional strategies, such as reviewing the university's honor policy, incorporating hyperlinks

to proper citation, and reviewing ethical dilemmas. Moreover, a call to action within society, educators, and parents to model integrity are pertinent to interrupt students' perceptions of cheating before it inundates the classroom into the world (Vittrup, 2016). Teaching morality to change student thinking allows for a deep-rooted solution to thwart academic dishonesty and enhance societal, ethical behavior.

## **Discussion**

### **Future Research and Implications for Application**

This review provides directions for future research and implications for practices. Perceptions of academic dishonesty merit attention from the academic community. Awosoga et al. (2021) found that most students at a medium-sized Canadian university believed academic honesty is essential; however, Peculea and Peculea's (2020) study of first-year engineering students in Romania found that the students were aware that academic dishonesty was an unethical practice, but they would continue to cheat. This type of variation warrants further research.

Additionally, with the rise in technological advances, further research into the implications of artificial writing intelligence software, such as ChatGPT, is necessary to determine its consequences on academic integrity. Moreover, academic dishonesty in online learning has been a pressing concern for higher education since the mass transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chiang et al., 2021). Therefore, future research must consider this additional component when studying academic dishonesty.

### **Limitations**

This research study comes with limitations. While this article aimed to determine why cheating is a problem, why students cheat, and what can be done to prevent it, it must be noted that the analysis is fundamental and encourages studies for further research.

## **Conclusion**

Cheating is not a new phenomenon. Unfortunately, it evolves with the continuous modernization of higher education. Academic dishonesty takes on many forms in the college classroom. Students and faculty need to understand its negative implications. The influences on why students cheat vary between situational factors, competitive pressures, and lack of morals. While students have many methods for cheating, educators have many deterrents which, although helpful, could be more successful. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to uphold

ethics and learning objectives; therefore, educating students on integrity and understanding the relationship between cheating and morals plays a central role in preventing future incidents of academic dishonesty. I hope these findings and suggestions lead to new research areas for further investigation and provide guidelines for future educators to promote the development of academic integrity within the coming generation of students.

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