

# Attributes and statuses of college students associated with classroom cheating on a small-sized campus.

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An exploratory study examines self-reported acts of academic dishonesty for a sample of 858 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students on a small college campus (8,350 students). The study raises awareness to the occurrences, and challenges of academic dishonesty at small-sized institutions, somewhat overlooked in empirical research. Attributes of students and characteristics of the campus are found to be associated with cheating on classroom examinations (42.4%), but less so for copying from the internet or "cyber-cheating" (19.8%). More important in the decision to cheat however, are the informal networking, and socialization among students.

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## The Study

Research on academic dishonesty in higher education is generally reported in prevalence rates of cheaters, and in dimensions related to cheating (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; Whitley, 1998). Yet, the literature shows wide disagreement on the prevalence and dimensions of academic dishonesty based on the researcher's design, sample, and setting. Surprisingly, these distinctions have been generally ignored in the literature. This cross-sectional exploratory study investigates these differences, specifically in terms of research setting among a sample of 857 students at a small-sized state university.

## Prevalence Rates

Prevalence rates of academic dishonesty are reviewed first in selected longitudinal and cross-sectional research, respectively. Accordingly, one major trend study found various types of cheating among a sample of 5,000 students on 99 different sized campuses. The percentages ranged from a low of 11% to a high of 49% (Bowers, 1964). In a follow-up study, the dimensions for academic dishonesty in the prior mentioned study were replicated. By comparisons, the lowest rate of cheating was reported at 14% and the highest rate at 54% (McCabe & Bowers, 1994). A third longitudinal study involved over 6,000 students at 31 small to modest size private schools. Non-honor code students (Diekhoff, Laeff, Clark, Williams, Francis, & Haines, 1966) reported the highest percentage of cheating at 66%.

Next, an extensive selection of cross-sectional research has revealed wider disparity in the rates of academic dishonesty than did longitudinal designs. For example, in contrast to the rates of cheating reported for non-honor code students above, research at a small prestigious university with strong honor codes (May & Loyd, 1993), found students cheating at 24%. At another small regional university (Davis, Becker, & Gregor, 1992), males reported involvement in various types of academic dishonesty ranged as high as 64%. Among a sample of undergraduates at a mid-major sized university of approximately 12,000 students e.g. (Tibbetts, 1998), cheating on tests at least once in the past year was reported at 39%. Similarly, at a large sized major state university of over 35,000 (Murphy, 2002),

students admitted to cheating at least once since entering college was at 68%. Finally, a review of 107 differently designed studies established conservative estimates of cheating as low as four percent, and some rates as high as 82% (Whitley, 1998).

#### Dimensions of Academic Dishonesty

Another body of research linked prevalence rates of cheating, to cheaters' personal backgrounds (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), contextual dimensions (Whitley, 1998), and situational factors (Tibbetts, 1998). In general, this research has shown demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, employment), school dimensions (e.g., class standing, school residence), and extracurricular experiences (e.g., fraternities, sororities, inter-collegiate athletics) among selected factors significantly related to academic dishonesty. Moreover, students' behavior (McCabe & Trevino, 1996), and motivation (Roach, 1998) have been linked to differential types of cheating behaviors (e.g., using crib notes, coping from others, helping others to cheat, inappropriate collaborations on assignments, high-tech cheating). Likewise, peer influence has been consistently found highly related to academic dishonesty (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2000; Tibbetts, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Eskridge & Ames, 1993; Bowers, 1964).

Other evidence has introduced new concerns to the growing list of challenges to academic integrity. For example, sources have reported escalating incidents of hi-tech cheating (Campbell, Swift, Denton, & Mello, 2000), distance learning cheating (Kennedy, Nowal, Raghuraman, Thomas & Davis, 2000), and cyber-cheating (Roach, 1998). Some have noted a general increase in "cyber-plagiarism" among diverse student populations and academic settings, inclusive of prestigious private universities e.g. (Hickman, 1998).

#### Summary of relevant factors

##### Locations and rates

My review of the literature establishes academic dishonesty to occur at colleges and universities of all types, sizes, and locations (Diekhoff et al., 1996; Aaron & Georgia, 1994; Davis, 1993). Moreover different levels of test cheating are found based on the institution's type, size, and location. On average, the higher rates of cheating dishonesty are shown for longitudinal research (56.0%) in comparison with cross-sectional research (48.5%). The rates for cheating however, are less clear relative to school size particularly for small regional public colleges and universities.

Research question: What is the rate of test cheating at this small-size college?

##### Personal characteristics

Higher rates of dishonesty are shown for male students than for female students (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Diekhoff et al., 1996; McCabe & Bowers, 1994). Underclassmen are also reported to cheat more than upperclassmen (Tibbetts, 1998; Whitley, 1998). Age is commonly found inversely related to cheating dishonesty (Whitley 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Employment, based on number of hours worked is also found negatively related with cheating (Diekhoff et al., 1996; Whitley, 1998).

Research question: What demography variables are related to test cheating?

##### Extracurricular activities

Fraternity and sorority memberships are shown to be small but positively associated with cheating (Whitley, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Social and athletic events have been treated as extracurricular activities in selected studies. And the findings range from no association to strong positive associations with academic dishonesty. Athletic participation is generally found positively and highly related to cheating (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Diekhoff et al., 1996).

Research question: Are extracurricular activities related to test cheating in this setting?

##### Contextual factors

Contextual variables, such as dormitory residences, number of roommates, and number in dormitory are found to be differentially associated with academic dishonesty (Whitley, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Bowers, 1964).

Research question: Does context play a role in test cheating at this small-size campus?

#### Situational factors

Peer behavior shows one of the more consistent patterns of highly significant and positive association with several dimensions of academic dishonesty (Tibbetts, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1997, 1996; McCabe & Bowen, 1994; Diekhoff et.al., 1996; Bowers, 1964). Socializing and partying are also found to be positively and highly related to academic dishonesty (Whitley, 1998). Research question: Is peer behavior important in classroom cheating behavior?

#### Purpose of research

The purpose of this study is to examine on an exploratory basis, selected attributes and experiences of college students associated with academic dishonesty at a small-sized state university. My interest is to establish a fuller empirical awareness to the prevalence and nature of academic dishonesty relatively unknown for the smaller collegiate campuses. The theoretical basis for this study are established by questions formulated from the literature 1) what is the extent (prevalence) of academic dishonesty, 2) what is the nature (type) of dishonesty behavior, 3) who is involved, and 4) what is the status of high-tech cheating? The practical interest of this study is to raise awareness to apparently overlooked occurrences of academic dishonesty in small public college and university settings.

#### Methods

The investigation is conducted at a relatively small-sized state university in a southern gulf coast state. Approximately 8,350 students are enrolled in spring 2001 and fall 2002. This study is part of a larger cross-sectional research on campus security and safety conducted at this university during the time period mentioned above. A representative sampling procedure yields a sample of 858 students. An anonymous questionnaire provides four categories of factors that are examined in terms of their association with cheating on classroom tests: 1) social attributes of students; 2) campus contexts; 3) students' school statuses (activities, and experiences), and 4) dimensions of academic dishonesty.

#### Descriptive Characteristics

##### Social attributes

The sample consists of 858 undergraduate, graduate, professional, and doctoral students. A majority of the students is female (55%). The median age is 21. Slightly more than three-quarters of the students (82%) are residents in the state of the college's location. Practically one-half (45%) is employed.

##### Campus contexts

Slightly more than one-half of the students live on-campus in resident dormitories (57%), and nearly three-thirds (88%) have at least one roommate. The median dormitory occupancy is 300 students.

##### Student statuses, activities, and experiences

Seniors comprise the largest class of students (29%), followed by freshman (25%), sophomores (21%), juniors (19%), graduate students (4%), and professional students (3%). The mean number of extra-curricular memberships is two. A little less than three-thirds of the sample (85%) attend campus events, activities and functions (i.e., social, athletic, and academic).

##### Academic dishonesty

Four dimensions of dishonesty behavior in this study are 1) cheating on classroom tests, 2) copying from the internet, 3) knowledge and awareness of others (peers) cheating, and 4) lying to avoid detection. Cumulative percentages for each dimension appear in Table 1. Forty-one percent cheat on classroom tests, 19% copy from the internet, 70% are aware of others (i.e., peer / friend) cheating, and 30% report lying to avoid detection.

#### Analysis

The findings from self-reported responses are presented in contingency tables. Academic dishonesty defined as "cheating on tests" in this study is recoded from the likert responses 0 = none, 1 = rarely, 2 = some, 3 = a lot, to dichotomous categories with 0 = no, 1 = yes. The strength of relationships between variables is measured by the

Gamma statistic (G) and all variables are operationalized to meet the necessary assumptions (Healey, 2002).

### Bivariate Relationships

Table 2 presents the results for cheating on classroom test by selected personal attributes of students, campus context, activities and experiences, and dishonesty behaviors. First shown are the findings for social attributes. Males ( $G = .15$ ) are significantly more likely to cheat on classroom test than females. Younger students ( $G = -.20$ ) are significantly more likely to cheat on classroom test than older students.

Next are the findings for classroom cheating and campus contexts. Students living on-campus ( $G = .17$ ), are significantly more likely to engage in classroom cheating than those living off-campus. Those residing in dormitories that are relatively highly occupied (300 students and over) are significantly less likely to cheat ( $G = -.30$ ) than are students in lower occupied (under 300 students) dormitories.

In terms of students' school statuses, activities, and experiences a statistically significant association is shown for undergraduates and cheating on classroom tests ( $G = .75$ ). A moderately significant relationship is shown for students attending campus events and cheating on classroom tests ( $G = .23$ ). A slightly stronger association is shown for those attending campus events with friends and cheating ( $G = .25$ ).

The types of campus dishonesty behaviors are shown next. Here, students who copy from the internet are significantly more likely to cheat on classroom test ( $G = .66$ ). Lying to prevent detection is also significantly related to cheating ( $G = .83$ ). Finally, students who are aware of others cheating are significantly more likely to cheat themselves ( $G = .85$ ).

### Partial Associations

The effects of student's knowledge of others cheating on selected bivariate relationships

The analysis reveals that cheating on classroom tests is associated with selected variables under the categories that are delineated for the purpose of this analysis. Attention now turns to an examination of the extent to which the relationships are due to the effect of students' knowledge of their peers/friends cheating behaviors. Table 3 presents selected bivariate relationships which are found to exist and partial relationships which assess the extent to which these relationships change when "knowledge of others cheating" is taken into account.

First shown for gender, the zero-order ( $G = .15$ ) and partial gammas ( $G = .18$ ) indicate that "knowledge of others cheating" increases the association for males and cheating. This suggests that the zero-order association between males and cheating is genuine. Next, the association between age and cheating ( $G = -.23$ ) weakens slightly under control conditions ( $G = -.20$ ). Meaning the original association is explained slightly by knowledge of others cheating.

The zero-order relationship between campus residency and cheating on test ( $G = .17$ ) disappears when knowledge of others cheating is taken into account ( $G = .03$ ). Accordingly, the original association is spurious. That is, living on- or off-campus is not relevant to cheating. Rather, knowledge of peers cheating explains what appears to be an association between residency and cheating. Next, the same "explanation" exists for attending campus events and cheating on tests. That is, the original association ( $G = .23$ ) disappears completely ( $G = .00$ ). This suggests that knowledge of cheating is responsible for what appears to be an association between attending campus events and cheating. Attending campus events with friends ( $G = .24$ ) however, remain statistically significant, and influenced slightly by peers' behavior.

The bivariate relationship for undergraduate classification and cheating ( $G = .75$ ) diminishes slightly in the partial ( $G = .71$ ). Meaning, that cheating among undergraduate students depends slightly on the cheating of others. The same pattern appears for copying from the internet and cheating on classroom test ( $G = .66$  and  $.62$ ). That is, internet copying relies somewhat on knowledge of others cheating.

In this study, knowledge of others cheating can theoretically precede or coincide in time with lying to conceal personal acts of dishonesty. Therefore, considering lying as an antecedent test factor, the zero-order association with cheating on classroom test ( $G = .83$ ) weakens when knowledge of others cheating is introduced ( $G = .78$ ). Stated another way, students who lie to prevent personal detection from cheating, are also more likely to know about others cheating.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study is exploratory and intended primarily to establish an empirical awareness to academic dishonesty on small college campuses. Several questions that are germane to the focus of this study are re-addressed here and in my

concluding remarks.

First, I am interested in the prevalence of academic dishonesty. In this regard, 41% reports they personally cheat on classroom examinations. However, the largest portion of cheaters (21%) say they "rarely" cheat while the smallest portion (6%) say they cheat "a lot." To this extent, the variation in cheating suggests that the occurrences for this sample are relatively infrequent. The overall percentage or prevalence rate of cheating in this study (41%) is at the mid-point on a range for academic dishonesty (i.e., 4% low to 82% high), established in national cross-sectional research (Whitley, 1998). Moreover, the prevalence rate (41%) is lower than the averages reported above for national longitudinal research (56%) and cross-sectional research (48.5%). Next, 71% of the sample reports knowledge of peers' cheating. While this figure is lower by 20% to other surveys reporting witnesses to cheating (Murphy, 2002), it remains relatively high nevertheless. In self-report studies involving sensitive information, it's not uncommon for under-reporting one's behavior, or for over-reporting the behavior of others. Undoubtedly this occurs in this study. Continuing, nearly 19% reports copying from the internet. Evidence in these findings suggests that cheating on the internet, and on classroom tests are dependent on the other. That is, students who copy from the internet are somewhat more likely to cheat on tests. The relative low percentage of internet cheaters however, does not support the view that ... "technology has ushered in a new and menacing era in the realm of cheating" ... (Roach, 1998), neither that "cyberplagiarism" has increased across a wider population of students, nor academic settings (Hickman, 1998).

Second, I am also interested in the nature and type of dishonesty at small-sized colleges. Along with cheating on examinations and on the internet, two other dimensions of dishonesty in this study are shown to be important in the association with cheating. First, peer behavior (i.e., knowledge of friends cheating) is found to be an important factor in students' personal decisions to cheat. Peer behavior is found equally important in delineating selected school contexts, and personal attributes related to cheating in this study. Criminology "learning" theory cites the importance of peer influence to differential learning and behavior among peer groups (Sutherland, 1947). This is one plausible hypothesis for the importance of peers in peer cheating behavior in this study. Second, lying, the remaining dimension of dishonesty is apparently more a function of deceit (i.e., an ethical/moral wrong) than a specific type of behavior as is cheating. Again, criminology "drift" theory proposes that "morally tinged" influences co-exist with socially acceptable values in society. These influences though publicly repudiated, are privately engaged in by honest, law-abiding people. Thus, in this study, violating behavior (i.e., cheating on tests and copying from the internet) is easily justified or neutralized by offending students through a set of learned techniques to counteract their moral transgressions (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Third, one of the more salient interests of this study is who cheats? The identities of cheaters comprise a composite of personal, school, and social attributes and dimensions. Specifically, male, young, and undergraduate students "remain significantly associated with cheating on tests when knowledge of peers cheating is introduced as a control. Moreover, these results support earlier research of higher test cheating among males (Bowers, 1964), and replicate the findings for younger, undergraduate test cheaters. After controlling for peer cheating, campus dormitory occupancy (a context variable), and attending campus events with friends, (a situational variable) remain significantly related to cheating. Continuing, the statistically significant inverse association found for high dormitory occupancy and cheating on test is new information in this body of research. Indicating that cheating is likely to occur among cohorts of students, and may lack the widespread prominence as reported. This perspective is supported by the statistically significant and positive relationship shown for "cheating and attending on-campus events with friends." As proxies of peer influences ... attending campus events "alone" is not related to cheating, but attending campus events "with friends" is.

Fourth, concerning the status of "high-tech" cheating, 19% reports copying from the internet. This suggests that cyber-cheating at this location is not as prevalent as that found at other institutions (Hickman, 1998). Whereas smaller campuses may be relatively less technologically equipped and sophisticated than the prestigious private or larger state institutions, students at small schools may lack the technical resources or "know how" to engage in, or be successful at cyber cheating.

In concluding, these findings satisfy the primary interests of this study to raise awareness to the occurrences and types of academic dishonesty reported on this small campus. A study of one small-sized college campus however, does not allow these findings to be generalized to other similarly populated settings. Therefore, these are simply illustrative findings of "low-to-moderate" levels of cheating on tests, and of "inconsequential" levels of copying on computers, relative to the rates reported in the literature. Future research on the challenges of academic dishonesty in higher education requires rigorous designs, relevant variables and robust analytical procedures. Criminology and criminal justice fields provide plausible theories and practices to study moral and legal transgressions. Etiology theories of deviant and crime behaviors should thereby be useful in future research on campus dishonesty, as well. Finally, the wide range of topics that comprise the rich body of literature on academic dishonesty is limited in another respect. Considering the narrow focus on the small-sized collegiate campuses, prior research fails to capture the

cultural diversity that characterizes the smaller institutional setting and social cohesion among students. This may add to a fuller understanding of academic dishonesty in higher education. These recommendations should precede, and may assist plans, and strategies for the prevention and control of academic dishonesty for all institutions of higher education, regardless of size.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Dishonesty Dimensions

Dimensions of Academic Dishonesty	Descriptive Statistics		
	(N)	%	cum %
Cheating on classroom tests			
a lot	(62)	8.9	8.9
some	(77)	11.1	20.0
rarely	(148)	21.3	41.4
none	(402)	58.6	
Cheating on the internet			
a lot	(39)	5.7	5.7
some	(37)	5.4	11.1
rarely	(59)	8.7	18.8
none	(547)	80.2	
Knowledge of peers cheating			
a lot	(242)	31.9	31.9
some	(163)	21.5	53.4
rarely	(129)	17.0	70.4
none	(225)	29.6	
Lying to avoid detection			
a lot	(45)	6.6	6.6
some	(48)	7.0	13.6
rarely	(109)	15.9	29.5
none	(482)	70.5	

Table 2 Cheating on Classroom Test by Selected Personal Attributes of Students, Campus Context, Activities and Experiences, and Dishonesty Behaviors

Selected Variables	Classroom Cheating	
	No	Yes
Social Attributes		
Gender		
Male	54.4	45.6
Female	61.9	38.1
Age		

22-51 years	60.2	39.8	
17-21 years	50.1	49.9	
Home Residence			
In-state	59.3	40.7	
Out-of-state	55.6	44.4	
Employed			
Yes	57.0	43.0	
No	51.7	48.3	
Campus Contexts			
School Residence			
On-campus	50.3	49.7	
Off-campus	58.9	41.1	
Dormitory Roommate			
Yes	51.1	48.9	
No	43.6	56.4	
Dormitory Occupancy			
Over 300 students	61.5	38.5	
Under 300 students	47.9	52.1	
Student Status, Activities & Experiences			
Class Standings			
Undergraduate	51.6	48.4	
Graduate/Professional	88.0	12.0	
Extra-Curricular Memberships			
High	53.7	46.3	
Low	51.6	48.9	
Attend Campus Activities & Events			
Yes	57.1	42.9	
No	67.7	32.3	
Accompanied	54.8	45.2	
Alone	66.7	33.3	
Dishonesty Behaviors			
Internet Cheating			
Yes	29.0	71.0	
No	66.4	33.6	
Lie to Prevent Detection			
Yes	22.1	77.9	
No	75.4	24.6	
Aware of Others Cheating			
Yes	48.8	51.2	
No	92.4	7.6	
Selected Variables	%	(N)	Gamma
Social Attributes			
Gender			
Male	100	(298)	.154 *
Female	100	(391)	
Age			
22-51 years	100	(206)	-.201 **
17-21 years	100	(385)	
Home Residence			
In-state	100	(568)	-.075
Out-of-state	100	(124)	

Employed			
Yes	100	(272)	-.106
No	100	(325)	
Campus Contexts			
School Residence			
On-campus	100	(342)	.173 *
Off-campus	100	(246)	
Dormitory Roommate			
Yes	100	(311)	-.150
No	100	(39)	
Dormitory Occupancy			
Over 300 students	100	(550)	-.299 **
Under 300 students	100	(144)	
Student Status, Activities & Experiences			
Class Standings			
Undergraduate	100	(560)	.745 ***
Graduate/Professional	100	(133)	
Extra-Curricular Memberships			
High	100	(188)	-.042
Low	100	(246)	
Attend Campus Activities & Events			
Yes	100	(594)	.225 *
No	100	(93)	
Accompanied	100	(498)	.245 *
Alone	100	(102)	
Dishonesty Behaviors			
Internet Cheating			
Yes	100	(131)	.657 ***
No	100	(538)	
Lie to Prevent Detection			
Yes	100	(195)	.831 ***
No	100	(476)	
Aware of Others Cheating			
Yes	100	(441)	.854 ***
No	100	(179)	

\* P<.05. \*\* P<.01. \*\*\* p<.001.

Table 3  
School Context, and Personal, and Academic dimensions of Students  
Associated with Cheating on Classroom Test Controlling for Knowledge  
of Others Cheating

Dimensions	Classroom Cheating	
	Zero-Order Gamma	Partial Gamma
Gender	.154 *	.185 *
Age	-.201 *	-.125
Dormitory Residence	.173 *	.032
High Occupancy Dormitories	-.299 ***	-.290 **
Class Standing	.745 ***	.705 ***
Attend Campus Events	.225 *	.002

Attend Campus Events with Friends	.245 *	.240 *
Cheat on Internet	.657 ***	.618 ***
Lie to Prevent Detection	.831 ***	.779 ***

\* p<.05. \*\* p<.01. \*\*\* p<.001.

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