

Analysis on Motivations for Cheating

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction

With the implementation of distancing measures in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities shifted towards an online learning environment. This shift presented many new challenges for instructors and students alike, but one result of the change was an increase in cheating. According to North Illinois University, academic cheating is defined as, “unauthorized use of information, materials, devices, sources or practice in completing academic activities” (*Academic Dishonesty Definition and Types - NIU - Academic Integrity Tutorial for Faculty*, n.d.). Common ways students conduct academic dishonesty include collaborating with peers, using outside sources during closed-notes assignments, and using a variety of online technologies such as Chegg.com and other pay-to-access homework sites. With traditional in-person exams moving to an online format, proctoring became more difficult to implement and exploitation of unauthorized technology became more feasible.

Although cheating in universities is not a new phenomenon, the rising incident rates during the pandemic shows the importance and seriousness of the problem. In this paper, a literary review will be conducted to examine the common factors motivating students’ decision to cheat and the different technologies available to cheat from that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic by using the actor-network theory and the theory of planned behavior. By understanding the many factors that lead to cheating, potential solutions can be developed through collaborations between students, professors, and technologies.

The Problem of Cheating

The majority of higher education institutions share two main goals when educating their students: fostering the intellectual growth of their students and providing a way to rank those

students for stakeholders. Stakeholders can include graduate schools, medical schools, and employers. Admission officers for graduate programs or prospective employers then use this measure of what students know or can do as a predictor of future success. In order to standardize students across a wide variety of backgrounds, grades are used as a proxy to quantify an individual's knowledge or competency. Although relying solely on grades does not provide a holistic view of a student, it is one of the quickest and most convenient methods available to stakeholders when filtering through thousands of applicants.

One reason that cheating is problematic then is that it can result in admission/recruitment of unqualified individuals. By obtaining grades without actually needing to learn the intended knowledge or skills assessed, these students are more likely to enter graduate programs or jobs without being able to fulfill their duties. A second issue of concern is that cheating in college may be predictive of future problematic behavior in the workplace. Multiple studies have found significant correlations between cheating and unethical or rule-violating workplace behavior (Harding, 2004; Carpenter, Harding, Finelli, et al., 2006). Overall, academic cheating violates the values of honesty, trust, and fairness associated with academic integrity.

Why Students Cheat

Getting caught cheating can result in severe punishment, ranging from failure of the assignment to expulsion. For instance, UVA possesses a very strict honor system with the sole sanction for violations being dismissal from the university. Despite likely knowing this sanction, nearly fifty students were expelled from the University of Virginia in 2002 for plagiarism, with three of those students having their degrees revoked after already graduating (Boorstein, 2002). From Harvard University to local community colleges, almost every higher educational institute

has a strict honor code with severe consequences. So why do students still cheat despite such heavy repercussions?

Surveys on cheating behavior have revealed a number of motivating factors. Hosny and Shameem (2014) provide one summary of common situational reasons for why students could decide to cheat: “peer culture, pressure to succeed, high family expectations, importance of good grades, external work commitments, heavy course loads, fear of future career damage, competition with other students, and the limited time students have to complete assignments.” Harding (2001) reports that the most common factor is a “pressure to succeed.” There are many reasons one could think of for why students could feel this pressure today. For some, this pressure can be financially-related. Students relying on scholarships to pay for tuition may need to maintain some grade point average in order to keep their scholarship. For example, many financial aid scholarships require students to maintain at least a 2.0 GPA in order to keep the scholarship. Students attending prestigious universities may also have built up high expectations for themselves through high school and feel a need to be ahead of their peers. A common phrase used compares the move from high school to college as transforming from a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big lake. This sentiment is unsurprising as prestigious universities only pick the top students from each high school, and thus, academic pressure increases in college. Students may also face pressure from fellow students or family to do well academically. Fear of failure or concerns about the impact of low grades on one’s career could also result in cheating as an act of desperation. Others could just struggle with finishing assignments due to difficulty or time constraints, especially since some might even have to work to pay for tuition while being full-time students.

Harding et al. (2001) also notes the role of what they refer to as “psychological factors,” which can reduce cheating. Among these, they emphasize the importance of an agreed upon understanding of the values and expectations of the institution and the reflection of these values in the institution’s policy of academic integrity. The desired result is increased understanding of what behavior constitutes cheating. The need for this approach is evidenced by Ashworth et al.’s (1997) study which found the notion of plagiarism as “extremely unclear” among students interviewed.

Other scholars point to societal factors involved in the decision to cheat. Nicholas (1979) draws a link between society’s orientation towards external goals and emphasis on performance and cheating rates (Nicholas, 1979, as cited in Baird Jr., 1980). With this in mind, there can be a disconnect between the values of instructors and students. One perspective propagated by some instructors is that students that cheat do themselves a disservice by surrendering the learning opportunities presented by whatever assignments they cheated on. However, such sentiments may not align with students’ perceptions of the priorities of education, which views achievement as the primary goal. The absence of learning as a significant intrinsic motivation is exemplified by how students will prioritize professors that have higher grade point averages over ones that effectively teach material (Baird Jr., 1980).

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) emphasizes the role of beliefs and has been applied to explain student cheating. The model posits that three components predict intention to engage in a behavior and subsequent engagement in that behavior: attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Stone et al., 2009). *Attitudes towards the behavior* refers to beliefs about it or its consequences, relating to expected outcome. *Perceived behavioral control* refers to the difficulty of performing the behavior. *Subjective norms* refer to perceived

social norms. (Stone et al., 2009). This framework model will be utilized as a way of explaining the increase of cheating during the pandemic.

Cheating during the Pandemic

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities moved to online environments. This change created concern for instructors over the academic integrity of exams because of the reduced ability to detect cheating. With the change to online examinations, there is nothing stopping a student from looking at their notes or searching online for answers. Many online proctoring programs have arisen during the pandemic, such as ExamOnline, which force students to use a secure browser — which restricts browsing function — and to allow the software to monitor their camera, microphone, and screen (“Remote Proctoring Software | AI Based Proctoring - Remote Proctor,” n.d.). Proctoring does not come without tradeoffs, however. In addition to financial costs, Eaton and Turner (2020) found that remote proctoring could result in student stress and anxiety. In un-proctored environments, students have little to no inhibitions keeping them from cheating. Lancaster (2021) confirms the concerns of instructors, finding a large surge in exam-style questions posted on Chegg during the Spring 2020 semester. Chegg is an online service that allows subscribed users to post homework problems and receive solutions. Many of the questions Lancaster observed during the 2020 semester had point values beside them, indicating that these questions came from graded homework, quizzes, or exams. Others were observed to be posted in series of requests in the form of low-quality images, suggesting that students were utilizing Chegg to get unauthorized help during exams. Shown below is how TPB can explain the use of Chegg in un-proctored online exams:

Attitudes towards cheating. Without proctoring, the risks of cheating became much lower. Thus, students likely began to perceive more favorable outcomes from cheating in online learning environments.

Perceived behavioral control. Cheating became much easier online. On in-person exams, contract cheating would be much more difficult or infeasible in some cases. However, with online exams, students were able to post pictures/screenshots or paste excerpts of exam questions. Additionally, the temptation to cheat persistently looms in front of students as they take exams online, with “help” being only a few clicks away.

Subjective norms. Even prior to the shift to online learning, there were already signs of the normalization of cheating. In a questionnaire about cheating, Baird Jr. (1980) found that “over 75% [of respondents] felt cheating is a normal part of life.” In some circumstances, students may even condone cheating. Ashworth et al. (1997) argue that students consider peer loyalty and fellow-feeling (sympathy towards peers). Actions that betray other students are viewed negatively while actions that help others are viewed positively. Thus, cheating may be viewed as acceptable behavior in the context of helping a struggling friend, for example. Additionally, students generally remain reluctant to take action against others who cheat, as “all have their reasons” (Ashworth et al., 1997), enabling the continued social norm of cheating. In some contexts, students may even come to believe that instructors accept cheating as a norm. In a survey of 4,500 high school students, Stricherz (2001) found that 47% of respondents believed that teachers sometimes chose to ignore students that cheated; 26% of those respondents believed that teachers “did not want to go to the trouble of reporting suspected academic dishonesty.” While learning online, students likely became aware of more opportunities to cheat, and it is not difficult to imagine that more students perceived cheating to be expected in such an environment.

Chegg is not the only site where students can get unauthorized aid on schoolwork. Contract cheating, the recruitment of third-parties to complete student assessments, operates through a multitude of online services. Hill et al. (2021) conducted a study comparing the number of Google search results for “assignment help” and “online exam help” between 2020 and 2021. They found an increase of 23 million for the first search and an increase of 21 million for the second. While it is difficult to discern how many students used such services, the growing search results could indicate a growing market for contract cheating tools. Michigan Technological University warns faculty of a few other contract cheating sites alongside Chegg: bartleby, EduBirdie, HomeworkMarket, Socratic, Studypool, and CourseHero (Dudley, n.d.). Five of these market themselves as “homework help” services and one, EduBirdie, advertises itself as an essay writing service. One possibility is that these sites misleadingly advertise themselves as being frequently used, even if they may not be (Hill et al., 2021), contributing to students’ perception of cheating as a norm. EduBirdie, for example, does not hide its nature as a contract cheating service but instead proudly displays its positive customer reviews.

Conclusion

As shown in the review of literature, there exists a complex web of potential factors which influence students’ decision to cheat. While the shift to online learning did reduce the risk and increase ease of cheating, many existing factors motivate cheating behavior. Technology to detect or restrict cheating only solves a part of the problem. Students undergo very serious pressures to perform and perceive cheating not to be abnormal. A more holistic solution should take into consideration not only technological factors but also psychological, societal, and situational ones. Potential solutions can include more accommodations provided by the professors and universities as a whole to decrease the factors discussed previously that contribute

to cheating. Professors can help reduce pressure for students by creating exams that do not require large curves in order to do well in, providing opportunities to regain points and learn from mistakes through test corrections, and fostering an environment focused on curiosity and growth rather than achievement. Additionally, they can combat the social norms of cheating by being clear and concise on what they classify as cheating. Universities as a whole can provide more aid to students through free tutoring programs and define an honor code that communicates shared values and is actively promoted.

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