

The Cognitive Conditions Associated with Academic Dishonesty in University
Students and Its Effect on Society

Zachary A. von Jena

University of California, Merced

Abstract

The problem of cheating in universities has existed as long as education itself; however, the problem has gotten exponentially worse in recent years. While consequences of cheating are not as noticeable today, the growing numbers of students cheating will have detrimental effects to the society of humans. The act of cheating to complete course work creates a mentality deprived of life satisfaction through hard work as well as incentives to live a dishonest life after college. The future society of the earth will depend upon competent innovators and strong leaders, of which are currently in college getting the education required to do so. Students who have cheated to get through college will be unprepared and unmotivated to continue leading the world on its current path towards a progressive future. It is up to current students to reduce the numbers of students cheating, such that, their graduating class will be full of intelligent innovators and motivational leaders instead of slackers that are desensitized to any form of satisfaction.

The Cognitive Conditions Associated with Academic Dishonesty in University Students and Its Effect on Society

On University campuses today, it is all too common to observe students cheating, paying others to complete their course work, or actively participating in other forms of academic dishonesty. The growing ethical acceptance of cheating amongst university students will soon show drastic, negative side effects on society and the economy when they are run by those graduating with a cheating mentality. The world we live in is advancing rapidly, with new innovations and technological discoveries happening every day. Many of the world's top innovators, including tech companies in Silicon Valley and political leaders, pushing for better quality of life, depend on competent employees with necessary skills and knowledge obtained in their college experience to lead themselves and society towards the progressive future commonly promised by innovators and world leaders. The societal impacts of large groups of university students cheating to get good grades include a work force deprived of the necessary skills to fill rolls in certain specialty jobs, ultimately leading to a failing job market and economy. The conditions of modern universities, both in person and online, could be changed and reformatted to not only catch more students cheating, but also to encourage students to actively take part in their education in a

responsible manner. Addressing the psychological influences causing students in universities to cheat and lack academic responsibility is important in reducing cheating in higher education and creating a population well prepared for the job market as well as a future full of technology and innovation. Creating a population that can understand how current technology works and how they can innovate on top of it is crucial to staying on the progressive path toward a brighter future. With the invention of smartphones and online college courses, cheating is becoming easier as we become digitally connected. Universities are experiencing more and more competition for admittance each year, leading to students having an increasing number of incentives than ever before to cheat for a better grade. Those in positions that preside over student bodies should act to better understand academic dishonesty and its psychological influences in order to comprehend the effects it has on society and how to better educate current students on academic dishonesty and its effect on themselves and society.

Academic Dishonesty

Amongst university students, cheating and academic dishonesty is becoming more widely accepted and practiced, with more and more students caught every year. Academic Dishonesty, also known as Academic Misconduct, is defined by any type of cheating that occurs in relation to a formal academic exercise. This can include everything from turning in someone else's work as their own, to physically having someone else take a test for another student. In small numbers, academic dishonesty's negative

impact on people is negligible; however, those side effects begin to affect a society when larger numbers of students are involved. In the United States, one study found that 57% of students had cheated within the previous 6 months (Hensley, Kirkpatrick, & Burgoon, 2013). With such a large portion of the student body cheating, problems such as student ranking are bound to appear, getting worse as cheating increases. With students in modern universities having easy access to the internet and smartphones, cheating is easier than ever, leading to an increase in cheating amongst college students. State records show the number of public school students disciplined for academic dishonesty, which includes cheating, rose about 3.5 percent from 4,285 in the 2012-13 school year to 4,434 in 2014-15 (Davis, 2016). The sharp rise in cheating from 2013 to 2014 mentioned by Davis is a huge increase, which is expected to get exponentially worse as the rate of students cheating increases. The exponential rise in cheating could cause detrimental damage to the economy and the workforce through larger and larger pools of students graduating with a cheating mentality. With a population accepting of cheating, the morale of the work force decreases as well, which on a large scale could damage the economy in a variety of areas.

A Global Issue

The worsening problem of cheating is not limited to universities within the United States and includes many countries of different social and economic standings. Though most studies of Academic Dishonesty focus on American universities, there is a major problem of cheating in Austria,

Portugal, Rumania, Spain, China and Japan (Thorne-Figueroa, 2010). Even the smartest students in the wealthiest countries around the world are starting to accept cheating as a constant in education. At an anonymous medical school in Europe, 97% of the students admitted to some form of academic dishonesty (Thomas, 2017). Those cheating their way through medical school will soon be responsible for saving lives and may risk the deaths of innocent citizens due to their lack of academic responsibility. In China, there are severe issues with academic dishonesty involving not only students but also lecturers and researchers. In a government study conducted in China, 2000 scientists admitted to academic dishonesty (Jacobs, 2010). The smartest people that humanity can produce around the world are cheating through their work, showing a fake sense of work ethic and quality, to immorally gain an advantage in their career. The culture of people and how they are raised influences academic dishonesty in individuals, showing trends country to country. In Thailand, the cultural aspects such as the Thai people's personality characteristics of *sanuk* (love of fun) and *mai pen rai* (easy going) and a focus on the present rather than the long term contributes to academic dishonesty (Young, 2013). Cultural influences on an individual affects a student's likelihood to cheat and the ways in which they do so. Possibly, one country could suffer more than others as a result of cultural influences on academic dishonesty.

How They Do It

Universities experience many different forms of academic dishonesty due to the many ways students can cheat with advancing technology and increasing moral acceptance of cheating. Academic dishonesty can take on the form of plagiarism, fabrication, deception, and sabotage. When a student is cheating by themselves using their own produced cheating material, it is defined as independent-planned cheating. Social-active cheating is copying the answer of another student without that student's knowledge. Social-passive cheating is one student allowing another student to copy an answer without objection (Garavalia, Olson, Russell, & Christensen, 2007). Online colleges and universities have a larger set of problems involving academic dishonesty and have a hard time catching and dealing with perpetrators, but there are a few things such as panic cheating on a pop quiz in which they don't have to deal with. Because students in online classes don't have test monitors and easy access to the internet and course materials, cheating is a lot more common online than in physical classrooms.

Student Psychology

The cognitive conditions that individual students experience when participating in academic dishonesty are extensive and vary on their impact depending on the individual. Studies showed that personality and academic dishonesty are associated (Cazan, 2017). The surroundings of an individual as well as their current moral standing play a huge part in whether one participates in academic dishonesty, making it rather challenging to predict students that may or may not cheat in the future. In addition, Cazan

exemplifies that “many recent studies indicate that academic dishonesty is more frequent in higher education, under the form plagiarism, cheating on exams, and copying assignments from other students.” Cazan knows very well that the influences on high school students and university students, both internal and external, are drastically different, explaining the empirical divide between their cheating habits despite many stereotypical opinions. Whether it be more stress or just less care in general, college students cheat more than those in high school and isolating the difference in education between high school and college can help better find what it is that causes students to cheat in college.

External Influences

The social influences behind cheating play a variety of different roles in how students cheat. Despite the importance of honesty and responsibility in the personal, professional, social and academic contexts, and the social pressure which exists regarding inappropriate behavior, various studies have indicated an increase in academic dishonesty at all levels of education (Garcia, 2014). Despite the majority of schools advertise a strict policy against academic dishonesty and claim that their institution will crack down on cheating, empirical evidence as stated above shows an increase in cheating amongst students. Many choose to blame the increase of academic dishonesty on the social changes affecting the opinion of students on cheating, making it more socially acceptable. To protect status, students may resort to academic dishonesty to protect their academic achievement

(Thomas, 143). Some schools may be so rigorous that smart students turn to cheating to achieve nearly impossible scores, creating a safety net for themselves and the awards they hold but could lose to a student doing better than they are. The influence of cheating has the potential to affect any student from any background with a multitude of reasons justified with their own dissonance.

Personal Cognitive Effects

Alongside the negative effects that students cheating in university courses have on society and the job market, there are lesser-known personal cognitive effects of having cheated that permeate other areas of their lives, as well as their ability to feel satisfaction. The cheating mentality some students learn in school is very likely the same mentality they will use to address real life problems. Life satisfaction has been shown to relate to expressions of integrity and commitment in the form of values of benevolence and universalism, as well as responsibility, moral commitment, conscientiousness and low tolerance for transgressions (Garcia, 2014). It would, therefore, be reasonable to expect a negative relationship between academic dishonesty and work morale (Garcia, 2014). Life satisfaction is essential to worker morale, with those having higher life satisfaction working more diligently than a distraught worker distracted from their duties. Perhaps if students were made aware of this effect of cheating, it would create incentive to not cheat or stop cheating, opposed to being told that their actions only affect others.

To reiterate what Garcia had stated, the life satisfaction of graduates who have admitted to cheating is lower than those who have not. As a result of their irresponsible cheating, such students have had little experience completing their assignments and getting good test scores on their own, such that they have not experienced the satisfaction of doing so through their own hard work. Cheating students are desensitizing themselves of the feeling of satisfaction through hard work and accomplishments. This translates over to a student's life after graduating, as Garcia mentioned, cheating students are less satisfied with their career and the accomplishments made in it because they have desensitized themselves to that feeling. In addition, workers with low life satisfaction have lower work morale; therefore, there is no incentive to do exceptional work in their career. By cheating through classes in college, students are cheating themselves out of a satisfying and successful future that they are happy with.

Effects on Society

While the negative effects of cheating and academic dishonesty on society are not so apparent today, the rise in cheating could soon result in devastating consequences, including long term damage to the job market or the economy. With the rate of students cheating so high, an exponential amount of underprepared potential employees will be applying for jobs with no way for an employer to tell if they are prepared and well educated or not. In the example of the technological and progressive future innovators and

intellectuals are pushing for, Morales explains in her dissertation of cheating in the current generation, "In our eagerness to embrace the future, we're overlooking principles that used to be handed down from generation to generation during far less frenetic times" (Morales, 2000). Morales compares the students of today and students in the past and their cheating habits, concluding that the students today cheat way more often and that the students of the past have a sense of academic responsibility that current generations lack. Students now lack the academic responsibility to not cheat, especially in desperate situations, which is found evident by the increase in cheating among university students. Something among students has changed, whether it be technology or a cognitive change, students are on a path toward being unprepared for their career. Whatever the change may be, it will be to blame for another market crash due to uneducated people being trusted with tasks outside of their skill set.

Many specialists believe that the rise in academic dishonesty can be blamed on kids encouraging its use over time, changing societal norms to more widely accept cheating as a way to succeed instead of avoiding a failing grade. As stated by Morales, "It's one thing to read about politicians lying under oath and millionaire athletes taking banned, performance-enhancing drugs, it's something else altogether, though, to realize that the majority of our young people also apparently see nothing wrong with lying and cheating" (Morales, 2000). Children and young people are responsible for innovating in the future, something that will be negatively impacted by

such students lying and cheating their way through life. The acceptance of cheating in schools today is teaching kids that it's ok to lie and cheat in life, a lesson that could be detrimental to the academic integrity of elementary students. In addition to affecting all of those who didn't cheat in the job market, habits of academic dishonesty have more disadvantages later in life and career. For example, there are substantial amounts of empirical evidence showing students cheating in school are more likely to engage in unethical behavior in the workplace (Sims, 1993). As mentioned by Garcia, the lack of satisfaction in a student's life created through chronic cheating translates to adulthood, creating workers with little influence to perform well and complete exceptional work. The social aspect while in school also negatively translates to a student's career, allowing an increasing number of people to engage in unethical behavior as it was a social norm in their lives for many of their hardest years in college. In this, students actively cheating are creating a big problem for themselves, their employers, and the economy. While the employer is stuck with a bad employee or looking for a new one, the economy must adjust to make up for the lost productivity of a few workers incompetent in their jobs. The social acceptance of lying and cheating in life alone has detrimental consequences on an individual as well as a society as a whole, calling for action to reduce the acceptance of such practices to get through life.

Despite the evidence showing the socioeconomic impact of academic dishonesty, many professionals believe that something else must be the

leading cause of the aforementioned societal impacts. Many of them chose to believe that it's not the fault of academic dishonesty, but still believe it's up to institutions to improve their setting to prevent the dystopian future described above. Christopher Hawley, one such professional, concludes that "the ideas of independent scholarship and respect for original thinking are seldom taught in a direct manner." Thus, it is concluded that a lack of education is responsible for some of the academic dishonesty on university campuses (Sims, 1993). Many students do probably cheat due to a lack of education; however, it may be in a totally unexpected way. Students cheating more than likely has to do with a lack of education on the dangers of cheating rather than a lack of teaching course material. Richard Fass, yet another expert in this field, exclaimed that the reasons that students give for dishonesty are common rationalizations with little moral interference, explaining that "stated that honest students may be at a disadvantage in the job market" (Fass, 1986). Fass argues that the decision to cheat may be the correct response in certain situations in order to outshine the competition when it comes to GPA and academics. Even though GPA is an important part of picking employees, it is in no way the most important part and can easily be outweighed by job experience and good references. It's important for children in school today to be taught about the impacts of cheating on their careers and their personal lives in adulthood, such that they know that there is never an okay time to cheat in life.

Solution

The effect that academic dishonesty has upon a society has put the future society of humans at risk and efforts must be taken to prevent the dystopian future that personifies the worst economic fears. As stated above, lots of students are unaware or uneducated on the problem that cheating has created, thus students of all grade levels should be taught about cheating and how it will negatively impact their future, even if they are never caught cheating. As Randi Sims once proclaimed, "What an undergraduate really needs are adults willing to insist that students take responsibility for their own behaviors and not help them in shunning moral obligations" (Sims, 1993). While all schools have an academic dishonesty policy to punish those participating in it, administrators should take an initiative to help students succeed in their education responsibly through teaching students about the personal and psychological affects cheating has on them. It may be more useful to the student and society to teach a student to work through academics differently and take the F today then to cheat and never learn the material. In some extreme cases, some students have no idea that academic dishonesty is even wrong to begin with. As Thomas Karikari exclaims "they believed that they committed no misconduct once the parties involved had agreed on the act" (Karikari, 2016). When compared to the information presented in Garcia's paper, students are bound to have low satisfaction from their career when they see no problem in cheating and don't feel satisfaction from complete hard work. A student being totally ignorant to the misconduct of cheating is unacceptable and whatever school administration

that is responsible failed in their job as an educator. Too many university students are unaware of the consequences of cheating or are ignorant of its misconduct at all, concluding that students should be educated from a young age about how cheating will affect them and the society they live in, even if they are never caught cheating. Students need to understand the affect their actions have on the future wellbeing of society.

External Influences

With the millions of different things and ideas that influence students to cheat in the first place, it can be hard to pinpoint what influences need to be reduced. Regardless, educators and parents can at least agree that, “the pursuit of good grades, high academic load and pressure to please family and guardians were the leading causes of Academic Dishonesty” (Karikari, 2016). The external influences of cheating outside of school are a major problem that school administrators don’t have any power over directly; however, administrators and educators can teach students that cheating is not the answer to the social pressure of succeeding in college. While educators and administrators need to act against academic dishonesty, parents and guardians have an incentive to help them eliminate external forces outside of school that can cause students to participate in academic dishonesty. In addition, these external influences translate directly to a student’s life after college, in their career and personal lives. In his own research paper, Williams found a fascinating link between societal misconduct and academic misconduct, as when he states, “a small to

moderate relationship between academic dishonesty and general criminality was present, including correlations with general dishonesty, violent crime and drug offending sub-categories" (Williams, 2010). Williams research, combined with Garcia's work on academic dishonesty, help to paint the picture of the association between satisfaction in what one chooses to do in their lives and how cheating influences such decisions. Many cheating students may choose not to pursue an honest career in their field of study due to their lack of experience in feeling satisfaction from accomplishing such a goal, and instead turn to a dishonest life which may include crime and drugs. For some students, cheating may be all they know, acting as yet another external influence on dishonesty and cheating outside of college. Understanding such influences is crucial to halting the exponential increase in cheating and is something students and educators must understand well to fight the growth in cheating.

While some universities have very strict academic dishonesty policies against cheating with harsh punishments, many do not enforce their policy to its full extent, somewhat enabling students to cheat their way through rigorous college courses. Though universities are not responsible for the morality of their students, they are responsible for establishing and enforcing behavioral guidelines (Sims, 1993). When a student is willing to learn and listen, such behavioral guidelines can influence a student's morality, such that they are less likely to cheat and feel negatively towards cheating. While not directly responsible for students' morality, institutions have an indirect

incentive to influence the morality of students, for that is the most effective tool in reducing the number of students cheating. No matter what, higher education will always be rigorous and stressful, but guiding students through the hardships they experience can help negate some of the negative side effects on the individual and society.

Conclusion

The current effects of cheating on society are minimal in the capacity that occurred in current college graduates; however, with the drastic rise in cheating, it may become a more substantial problem. With the easy access to friends and the internet, students can cheat easier than ever and somewhat encourage each other by it being so easy to get away with. The cognitive conditions that influence today's university students are much different than those of recent graduating years, somewhat explaining the increase in cheating. It is up to everyone to actively participate in the educational process to reduce cheating. Influences exist inside and outside of the campus, needing educators and civilians alike responsible for helping end the problem. If cheating continues to increase, too many graduates will be unprepared for the work force or graduate school, drastically affecting our economy through an incompetent work force.

References

- Cazan, A M.(2017). Academic Dishonesty, Personality Traits and Academic Adjustment. *Bulletin of the Transylvania University of Brasov - Special Issue Series VII: Social Sciences*. <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=df5494e1-0d1a-41f1-aa63-c9800fdcc293%40sessionmgr103>.
- Davis, Janel. (20 April 2016). Student cheating appears to be increasing. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.myajc.com/news/local-education/student-cheating-appears-increasing/7apdWDsU9mV7m0B5TbKycK/>
- Fass, R. A. (1986). By honor bound: Encouraging academic honesty. *Educational Record*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ347458>
- Hawley, C. (1984). The Thieves of Academe: Plagiarism in the University System. *Improving College and University Teaching*, 32(1), 35-39. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27565598>. Accessed 12 November 2018
- Jacobs, Andrew. (2010, October 6). Rampant fraud threat to China's brisk ascent. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/world/asia/07fraud.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Karikari, T. (2016). Academic dishonesty in higher education: students' perceptions and involvement in an African institution. *Bayaa Martin Saana*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4843210/>.

Hensley L.C, Kirkpatrick K.M. & Burgoon J.M. (2013) Relation of gender, course enrollment, and grades to distinct forms of academic dishonesty. *Teaching in Higher Education*. retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13562517.2013.827641>.

Morales, T. (2000, September 5). School cheating as social corrosion. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from [http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3508816&site=ehost-live)

[direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3508816&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3508816&site=ehost-live)

Muñoz-García, A., & Aviles-Herrera, M. J. (2014). Effects of academic dishonesty on dimensions of spiritual well-being and satisfaction: a comparative study of secondary school and university students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(3), 349–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.832729>

Sims, R. L. (1993). The relationship between academic dishonesty and unethical business practices. *Journal of Education for Business*.

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08832323.1993.10117614#aH](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08832323.1993.10117614#aHR0cHM6Ly)

[R0cHM6Ly](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08832323.1993.10117614#aHR0cHM6Ly)
[93d3cudGFuZGZvbmxpbmUuY29tL2RvaS9wZGYvMTAuMTA4MC8wODgzMj](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08832323.1993.10117614#aHR0cHM6Ly)
[MyMy4xOTkzLjEwMTE3NjE0P25lZWRYBY2Nlc3M9dHJ1ZUBAQDA=..](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08832323.1993.10117614#aHR0cHM6Ly)

Thomas, D. (2016). Factors that explain academic dishonesty in university students in Thailand. *Taylor & Francis Group*.

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=705e9c4b-41d7-4d13-901e-b7eb533d4a04%40pdc-v-sessmgr01>.

Williams, M. (2012). Academic Dishonesty, Self-Control, and General Criminality: A Prospective and Retrospective Study of Academic Dishonesty in a New Zealand University. *Taylor & Francis Group*.

Retrieved from <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=824f0789-13b5-4ce2-982a-396c5ff7b548%40sdc-v-sessmgr05>.

Young, D. (2013). Perspectives on cheating at a Thai university. *Language Testing in Asia*, 3, 6 15. doi: 10.1186/2229-0443-3-6