Does a Strong Academic Integrity Culture Discourage Academic Dishonesty Among Graduate Students?

Mostafa Amir, Sabbih

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Abstract

The issue of academic dishonesty has received a considerable amount of attention in academic studies over the past 20 years. Researchers have tried to empirically test a number of determinants and factors to explain academic dishonesty. This article aim to investigate the influence of an integrity culture on discouraging academic dishonesty among graduate students of KDI School through applying the knowledge of previous studies related to the academic integrity culture. It applied simple correlation test to observe the influence of contextual factors including existence of honor codes, chance of getting caught and punishment on the likelihood of cheating. However, it could not find enough evidence to support that a strong academic integrity culture discourage academic dishonesty and suspected that there may be other demographic and cultural factors associated.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, academic researchers and scholars in the USA are paying much attention on the problem of academic dishonesty, and concerns are growing on this issue in Europe, Australia and elsewhere due to the recent scandals involving unethical conduct (Kidwell and Kent, 2008). However, academic dishonesty is not new and can be traced more than half a decade ago and appears to be continuing since then. While 23 per cent of students reported cheating in a study conducted by Drake as early as in 1941, the levels of cheating found by McCabe ranged between 47 and 71 percent in 2005 (Kisamore, Stone and Jawahar, 2007). Further, increased use of technology seems to have widened the list of potential dishonesty or misconduct over time.

Academic integrity culture can be defined as the values that an institution upholds in order to promote academic honesty as well as the measures it takes to prevent and punish academic misconduct. The reflection of such values can be found in faculty and students' tolerance and reporting of academic violations, the severity of penalties imposed for academic violations, as well as the presence or absence of an institutional honor code (Kisamore et al., 2007). After conducting a series of studies, McCabe and his colleagues (McCabe and Trevino, 1993, 1997; McCabe et al., 2002) argued that perceptions related to cheating and academic dishonesty are primarily driven by academic integrity culture. Smyth and Davis (2004) in their study found that 45 per cent of the sample of 265 two-year college students indicated that cheating is acceptable social behavior. Smyth and Davis (2004) also highlighted in their additional findings the importance of culture in terms of intentionally or unintentionally supporting or preventing academic misconduct. In this case, other factors related to higher levels of actual cheating and greater social acceptance of cheating were associated with being male, in the business school or living in a dormitory. However, study result by Kisamore et al. (2007) contradicts results of McCabe and others that academic integrity culture is the most

important factor in predicting academic dishonesty. They found other personality constructs were associated with influencing academic dishonesty.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the influence of an integrity culture on discouraging academic dishonesty among graduate students of Korean Development Institue (KDI) School of Public Policy and Management through applying the knowledge of previous studies related to the academic integrity culture. The outcome or result of this research may also contribute to the Graduate Schools toward better understanding of the effectiveness of their current integrity policies.

Previous Studies on Academic Cheating

Cheating by students is a measure of academic dishonesty. Examination of factors related to student's likelihood of cheating is important to better understand the circumstances and characteristics that can enhance vigilance among students. Hetherington and Feldman (1964) investigated cheating on exams in three contrived classroom situations that provided students opportunities to be academically dishonest and found that cheaters, compared to non-cheaters, were more likely to be male, and first-born. The relationship of gender with several forms of academic dishonesty were also found by several other studies (e.g., Davis et al., 1992; Kelly and Worrell, 1978; McCabe and Trevino, 1997; Nonis and Swift, 2001; Simon et al., 2004; Smyth and Davis, 2004). Researchers have also found influence of age and general mental ability on propensity to cheat. Results indicate that students who are younger in age (Kelly and Worrell, 1978; McCabe and Trevino, 1997; Nonis and Swift, 2001; Smyth and Davis, 2004), have lower ACT scores (Kelly and Worrell, 1978), intelligence (Hartshorn and May, 1928; Hetherington and Feldman, 1964) and grade point averages (GPA) (Crown and Spiller, 1998; Hetherington and Feldman, 1964; McCabe and Trevino, 1997) are more likely to engage in various forms of academic misconduct compared to their peers. Nowell and Laufer

(1997) also found cheating to be positively associated with poor classroom performance among undergraduate students but unrelated to gender and religion. However, the current research only aims to investigate the influence of contextual factors related to the integrity culture on academic misconduct of students.

A series of researches by McCabe and others (e.g., McCabe and Trevino, 1993, 1997; McCabe et al., 2001, 2002) have shown that several contextual factors affect student's tendency to do academic dishonesty and if these factors work properly, they may discourage or deter students from being dishonest. First, the effect of an honor code environment; second, and most importantly, their beliefs about the likelihood that cheaters will be caught; and third, perception of students about the severity of penalties. For the purpose of this research, academic integrity culture has been defined as the presence of any or all of these three factors. Thus, student's perceptions about the culture of integrity at an institution, specifically their perceptions and suspicions regarding cheating will impact the likelihood that they consider engaging in academic misconduct as a viable tool to use in their academic careers. Kisamore et al. (2007) conducted a survey over a sample of 217 undergraduate business students and found that perceptions of the frequency of cheating and suspicions regarding misconduct were lower for students who perceived a strong integrity culture. However, result by Kisamore et al. (2007) contradicts results of McCabe and others that academic integrity culture is the most important factor in predicting academic dishonesty. They found other personality constructs were associated with influencing academic dishonesty.

Contextual factors affecting academic cheating

We begin by examining the theoretical and empirical evidences where academic misconduct were discouraged by the factors of academic integrity culture mentioned before.

Honor code environment and academic cheating

Honor codes discourages cheating through creating a strong normative environment, a culture of integrity (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). McCabe et al. (1999) in their qualitative study found that "code students sense that they are part of a special community that demands compliance with certain standards in exchange for the many privileges associated with honor codes, such as unproctored exams and self-scheduled exams". Honor codes are valued, respected and taken seriously in general. Therefore, we would expect greater commitment to and involvement in the academic environment and greater acceptance of the moral validity of norms against cheating in honor code environments (McCabe et al., 2001). In addition, students actively participate in the creation of this moral context in honor code environments by participating in judicial processes and by establishing and enforcing rules and norms regarding appropriate conduct. As a result, it should give a sense of ownership to the students so that they desire to protect it and enjoy the privileges it offers. However, the validity of these social norms may be threatened if cheaters go unpunished. Therefore, students should be more willing to report a peer who cheats in honor code environments (McCabe et al. 2001). Research at the undergraduate level has consistently shown that honor codes reduce cheating and promote student integrity (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1997; McCabe et al., 2002). Smyth and Davis (2004) highlighting the importance of honor codes in terms of intentionally or unintentionally supporting or preventing academic misconduct found that 45 per cent of the sample of 265 two-year college students indicated that cheating is acceptable social behavior.

Hypothesis 1: Presence of an honor code in an academic institution will be negatively related to estimated frequency of cheating.

Student's perception of getting caught and academic cheating

McCabe et al. (2002) found that students' degree of certainty of being caught engaging in academic misconduct is the best predictor of identifying the extent of dishonesty regardless

of presence or absence of an honor code. McCabe and Trevino (1993) demonstrated that lower levels of cheating were observed where students believed that cheater will be caught. Tittle and Rowe, 1973) also found that the threat of being caught significantly reduced cheating among college students. Students are likely to believe that cheaters will be caught when they perceive that cheating is likely to be reported. A rational choice perspective posits that human behavior is a function of perceived probabilities and magnitudes and rewards and punishment calculated by the perceiver (Piliavin et al., 1986). From this perspective, students trade off the positive consequences of cheating if they are not caught against the negative consequences of being caught cheating (McCabe et al. 2001). When the costs outweigh the benefit, cheating would be lower. Thus cheating should be less likely under conditions where would-be cheaters perceive a relatively high chance of being reported by peers and getting caught than when the opposite conditions exist (McCabe et al., 1993).

Hypothesis 2: Student's perception of being reported by a peer and getting caught will be negatively related to estimated frequency of cheating.

Perception of the severity of penalties and academic dishonesty

Deterrence theory suggests that to inhibit the misconduct, wrongdoers must perceive, first, that they will be caught and, second, and that severe penalties will be imposed for the misconduct (Gibbs, 1975). The underlying cognitive mechanism is that there is the expectation of punishment and individuals will behave in ways that maximize rewards and minimize costs (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). Researchers have argued that when students believe others are cheating and their school or individual faculty members are not doing anything about it, many use this as justification for their own cheating (e.g., Kaufmann et al., 2005; McCabe, 1992; McCabe et al., 1999). Deterrence theory also suggests that, all else being equal, an increase in the severity of consequences for a deviant act should reduce the number of individuals willing

to risk it (Zimring and Hawkins, 1973). If the penalty is severe enough, the potential consequences may simply outweigh the potential reward of the misconduct. Not surprisingly, prior research conducted by Michaels and Miethe (1989) indicates that this logic applies to student perceptions concerning the severity of penalties for acts of academic dishonesty. Michaels and Miethe (1989) found that cheating was inversely correlated with the perceived probability of punishment and the perceived severity of punishment among college students.

Hypothesis 3: Academic dishonesty will be inversely related to perceived severity of penalties.

Methodology

The current research is exploratory in nature and it tests the three hypothesis which were developed in Part II. It follows the quantitative method and uses the survey technique to get the primary data.

Sample

Graduate students of Introduction to Research Methodology class of KDI School for three consecutive years (2015, 2016 and 2017) were given the opportunity to participate in the current study, yielding a potential sample of 139 students. Online survey were conducted among the participants using structured questionnaire to get the primary data.

Measures

Major challenges in survey research on academic integrity culture and its influence on academic cheating involve the choice and measurement of the dependent variable. The current research has used three scales and several items per scale adapted from Kisamore et al. (2007) and Kidwell and Kent (2008) to operationalise different concepts in order to measure and test the three hypothesis that have been made.

Frequency of cheating - the frequency of cheating scale (α = 0.77) is a three-item scale designed to assess participants' estimate of the frequency of cheating by others. A five point likert scale was considered (1-never; 2- very seldom; 3- seldom; 4 – often; 5 – very often).

Academic integrity culture - the integrity culture scale (α = 0.79) consisted of 5 items to assess various nuances regarding academic misconduct attitudes, policies, and procedures at the institution. A five point likert scale was considered (1-very low; 2- very low; 3- moderate; 4 – high; 5 – very high) to measure this.

Reporting of cheating - the report cheating scale (α = 0.84) is a two-item scale designed to assess how likely students are to report friends or strangers whom they observe engaging in academic misconduct. It also used a five-point likert scale (1-very unlikely; 2- somewhat unlikely; 3- neutral; 4 – somewhat likely; 5 – very likely).

Results

Before doing the hypothesis testing, we looked at the descriptive relationships between our dependent variable and independent variables. Before generating the tables, an Index Scale was created for the likelihood of cheating by taking average of the 16 items of academic cheating behaviors using the Compute Mean command of the SPSS and Recoded them into two groups: Likely to cheat and unlikely to cheat.

Descriptive statistics

From Table 1, we could see that students have generally shown a lower tendency of doing cheating in the future, who perceive that honor codes, chance of getting caught and penalties have fairly influential (31.7 per cent, 35.3 per cent and 34.5 per cent respectively) or very much influential (28.1 per cent, 41 per cent, 47.5 per cent respectively) impact on their decision compared to other who believe that those three factors don't have that much influence.

Table 1. Contextual factors on the likelihood of cheating (% of total)

	Existence of an honor code					Total
	Not at all influential	Not so influential	Neutral	Fairly influential	Very much influential	
Likely	10.1%	11.5%	15.8%	31.7%	28.1%	97.1%
Unlikely	1.4%			1.4%		2.9%
Total	11.5%	11.5%	15.8%	33.1%	28.1%	100.0%
	Chance for getting caught					Total
Likely	3.6%	4.3%	12.9%	35.3%	41.0%	97.1%
Unlikely			1.4%	1.4%		2.9%
Total	3.6%	4.3%	14.4%	36.7%	41.0%	100.0%
	Penalties for cheating					Total
Likely	2.9%	5.8%	6.5%	34.5%	47.5%	97.1%
Unlikely			0.7%		2.2%	2.9%
Total	2.9%	5.8%	7.2%	34.5%	49.6%	100.0%

Hypothesis testing

In order to find a statistical relationship between our dependent and independent variables, we have done the Correlation test. We also conducted the independent T-test to see whether the difference in mean for the groups are statistically significant or the result of sampling error.

Hypothesis 1: Student's perception of the influence of an honor code will be negatively related to his or her likelihood of cheating

H_0: Student's perception of the influence of an honor code is not associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

H_A: Student's perception of the influence of an honor code is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

As the p value (.108) is not less than α value (0.05), so we could not reject the null hypothesis (Table 2). The Pearson correlation is -.137. Therefore, although we can see a negative association but it is not statistically significant and we cannot conclude that student's perception of the influence of an honor code is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating.

Table 2. Correlation between existence of an honor code and likelihood of cheating

		Existence of an honor code	Likelihood of Cheating
	Pearson Correlation	1	-.137
Existence of a honor code	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.108**
	N	139	139
	Pearson Correlation	-.137	1
Likelihood of Cheating	Sig. (2-tailed)	.108	
	N	139	139

Hypothesis 2: Student's perception of the influence of the chance for getting caught will be negatively related to his or her likelihood of cheating

H₀: Student's perception of the influence of the chance for getting caught is not associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

H_A: Student's perception of the influence of the chance for getting caught is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

As the p value (.259) is not less than α value (0.05), so we could not reject the null hypothesis. The Pearson correlation is -.096. Therefore, although we can see a negative association but it is not statistically significant and we cannot conclude that student's perception of the influence of an honor code is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating.

Table 3. Correlation between chance for getting caught and likelihood of cheating

		Chance for getting caught	Likelihood of Cheating
	Pearson Correlation	1	-.096
Chance for getting caught	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.259**
	N	139	139
Likelihood of Cheating	Pearson Correlation	-.096	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.259	
	N	139	139

Hypothesis 3: Student's perception of the influence of penalties for cheating will be negatively related to his or her likelihood of cheating

H₀: Student's perception of the influence of penalties for cheating is not associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

H$_A$: Student's perception of the influence of penalties for cheating is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating

As the p value (.579) is higher than α value (0.05), so we could not reject the null hypothesis. The Pearson correlation is 0.47. Therefore, we cannot conclude that student's perception of the influence of an honor code is associated to his or her likelihood of cheating.

Table 4. Correlation between penalties for cheating and likelihood of cheating

		Penalties for cheating	Likelihood of Cheating
Penalties for cheating	Pearson Correlation	1	.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.579**
	N	139	139
Likelihood of Cheating	Pearson Correlation	.047	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.579	
	N	139	139

Discussion

Although the analysis found a negative correlation between students' perception of the influence of honor code and their future likelihood of doing academic cheating, it was not statistically significant and we do not have strong evidence to support our hypothesis 1. We also could not reject the null hypothesis based on correlation test and we cannot conclude that students' perception towards the influence of the chance of getting caught do influence their future likelihood of cheating. Similar result was found for hypothesis 3 and no statistically significant relationship was found between students' perception of the influence of penalties with their future likelihood of cheating. Therefore, we do not have strong evidence to support our claim that contextual factors or factors related to academic integrity culture have strong influence on their future likelihood of cheating behavior and there may be other personal and demographic influencing factors. Our finding is consistent with Kisamore et al. (2007) and contradicts results of McCabe and others which state that academic integrity culture is the most important factor in predicting academic dishonesty.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, the issue of academic cheating and dishonest behavior have received much attention in the literature, academic studies and debates. McCabe was an influential researcher during the late 90's and early 2000 who through his investigation found that contextual factors and academic integrity culture have strong influence on the likelihood of cheating by students. With an objective to discourage student from doing academic dishonesty and comply with the integrity policy, this article has attempted to apply the hypotheses of McCabe on the graduate students of KDI School. However, no strong evidence was found to support our hypotheses which could be a result of either not having enough sample or there are other strong influencing factors associated. Nonetheless, we cannot deny the importance of having a modern academic integrity policy and this article can be good reference point for further research for present day academic institutions and researchers.

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