

Preliminary Findings from a Pilot Intervention to Address Academic Misconduct among First-year College Students

Jed Locquiao & Bob Ives

University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract: *This study examined academic misconduct knowledge and motivations of first-year college students enrolled in a major Western U.S. public university. Data involved student responses to online prompts. Several findings emerged. First, students started college with gaps in knowledge on citations/references, test/assignment cheating, and the nature of academic integrity, despite higher education institutions' (HEIs) elevated scrutiny on students adhering to academic conventions and ethics. Second, the great majority of students cited extrinsic motivations with going to college. Results speak to the relevancy of HEI programs that explicitly instructs new students in academic misconduct topics (e.g., definitions, procedures, and consequences). And results suggest that such programs might yield more efficient lasting lessons by stressing the tangible instrumental costs of academic misconduct (e.g. financial costs, work prospects, and social disapproval).*

Key Words: Academic misconduct, academic integrity, college student plagiarism, college student cheating, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, motivation and academic misconduct

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Globally, 60% to over 90% of post-secondary students acknowledge in anonymous surveys that they have committed some kind of academic misconduct (AM), including plagiarism, cheating on tests, and cheating on assignments (Ives et al., 2017; Ives & Guikin, in press; Northcutt, Ho, & Chuang, 2016; Orosz et al., 2015; Tatum & Schwartz, 2017). Students in the United States have reported similar rates of AM for decades (Jones, 2011; McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Yardley, Rodriguez, Bates, & Nelson, 2009).

Concerns about these high rates of AM have led to a variety of recommendations for reducing the rates of AM in higher education (Al Qahtani, 2016; Corrigan-Gibbs, Gupta, Northcutt, & Thies, 2015; Ewing, Anast, & Roehling, 2016; Northcutt et al., 2016). Some of these recommendations are grounded in specific theories about motivation (e.g. Eriksson & McGee, 2015; Rettinger, 2017).

At the same time, scholars have noted a dearth of research evidence to support the effectiveness of interventions to reduce AM, and the poor quality of the research that does exist (Baird & Clare, 2017; Cronan, McHaney, Douglas, & Mullins, 2016; Henslee, Goldsmith, Stone,

& Krueger, 2015; Ives & Nehr Korn, 2019; Marshall & Vernon, 2017; Obeid & Hill, 2017). A review of 97 of these studies (Ives & Nehr Korn, 2019) found that all of the intervention approaches fell into one of five categories: text matching software, instruction related to plagiarism, honor codes, proctoring examinations, and academic integrity training. The studies reviewed consistently supported the use of text matching software, and honor codes to reduce AM. However, results for the other three approaches were inconsistent. Further, these studies rarely assessed implementation fidelity, 25 of the studies reported no significance testing, and a large majority of studies used small convenience samples, limiting their generalizability.

Given the high prevalence of AM among post-secondary students, and the limited evidence for the effectiveness of interventions to reduce AM, we are reporting on a pilot intervention program implemented at a mid-sized university. For this report, our research questions are:

1. What do students know about citations and references prior to enrollment, and from whom did they get that knowledge?
2. What do students know about cheating on assignments and tests prior to enrollment, and from whom did they get that knowledge?
3. What motivates students to enroll in college as understood by Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation Theory?

This preliminary report does not address any change in AM behavior related to the implementation of the intervention. However, data on AM behavior and motivations across the university were gathered prior to implementation of the implementation, and additional data collection is planned after implementation to assess the goal of reducing AM behavior.

SAMPLE, SETTING, AND DATA COLLECTION

This study scrutinized academic misconduct knowledge and motivations of first-year college students enrolled in a major Western public university. Demographic variables were not disclosed with the dataset, so we assume that most students comprised young adults aged 18-22 years old and that they represented the racial/ethnic characteristics of the region. All the students participated in a week-long orientation program before the formal start of the semester. The students identified as either college of business (CoB) or college of education (CoE) majors. Students with either business or education majors participated because their respective colleges chose to have their students complete an academic misconduct pilot intervention as an added orientation component. Therefore, the study examined a sample of convenience. The final sample size amounted to N=362-401 students split between $n_1=278-303$ CoB students and $n_2=84-98$ CoE students.

Data collection was processed by an online learning platform, WebCT, which served as both the mode of intervention implementation and assessments. Item responses were recorded as students reviewed proceeding sections. The online platform pooled all submissions into a spreadsheet for analysis. The data collection timeline followed the orientation program schedule which meant that the study included submissions made during the single week, while excluding late submissions.

METHODS

The study used a descriptive comparison research design. This design was chosen because the questions asked what knowledge and motivations students hold as they started the academic misconduct pilot intervention. The study is descriptive rather than experimental because it did not seek to attribute causal relationships through randomized assignment or through vetting baseline equivalencies in students' backgrounds. The study is comparative because it seeks to compare results between students with business majors and education majors.

The unit of analysis for this study involved open-ended written responses to select items submitted by students. The open-ended written responses served as qualitative data in that they involved patterns of non-numerical symbols (alphabets, words, and sentences) to relate meaning. The study used Quantitative Content Analysis (Quant-CA) as described by Neuendorf (2002) to code each open-ended written response as a categorical variable. To do so, an entire written response was interpreted as a single coherent *message unit* that expressed latent knowledge/motivations. Message units were compared to a codebook that identified and justified a priori criteria for codes behind each response item (see appendix A). Following first-cycle coding, responses were also reviewed in a second-cycle to capture thematic patterns beyond the scope of initial a priori codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). These second-cycle codes were recorded into the codebook as well.

RESULTS

Tables 1-5 speak to student knowledge on items related to academic misconduct. In terms of knowledge on citation/references, the great majority of business and education students showed beginner knowledge characterized by—at minimum—reference to the principle of accurate attribution or a situation/procedure related to accurate attribution. Much fewer students expressed advanced knowledge where they cited both items. The rationale behind having both as advanced comes from research on expertise which observed that elaboration from general ideas to specific contexts distinguishes experts over novices (Bransford et al., 1999; Gobbo & Chi, 1986). A sizeable number of business students (~20%) and education students (~12%) answered without reference to either criterion (NA), typified by irrelevant answers, inaccurate answers (e.g. academic citations are like police tickets), or disclosure of never having learned about citations/references. Second-cycle analysis generated the impression that most students understood citations/reference in terms of a mechanical procedure with idiosyncratic rules. Unsurprisingly, the great majority of students learned citation/references in a formal setting rather than through family or friends.

With respect to test/assignment cheating, business and education students answered with higher instances of beginner knowledge. But, there existed notably less instances of NA responses. In contrast with citation/references, second-cycle analysis yielded the impression that most responses related test/assignment cheating to consequences, usually punitive personal consequences if caught cheating. Furthermore, a sizeable number of comments cited a value claim where a person “should not, must not, do not, etc.” cheat because it is self-evidently bad. And in contrast to citation/reference instruction, there existed higher rates of mixed (formal and informal) instruction for both student groups. Given the above items, that most students reported beginning knowledge of academic integrity, defined as reference to both accurate attribution and honesty to scholarly process/product, proved unsurprising. Notably, a considerable number of students (~20%) failed to identify both complementary parts.

Table 1. What do you remember learning from instruction [on] citation/references?

	College of Business n ₁ =278 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =84 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Beginner	70.50	73.80
Advanced	9.70	14.30
NA	19.80	11.90
<i>Emergent codes</i> (not mutually exclusive)		
Consequences	3.23	2.40
Don't recall	3.23	0.00
Inaccurate	10.00	5.95
Procedure	58.30	67.85
Value	27.00	33.30

Selected quotes (CoB and CoE)

What I learned about citations was the fact of how to properly use them correctly and the importance as well. There are a variety of styles of citations and/or references to acknowledge from MLA, APA, or Chicago Notes & Bibliography. Not to mention, but which style of citation is recommended to use based off of what you're writing. For example, a english writing assignment would be MLA. Citations include specific dates, authors, publishers, year, website, and much more. (Reference 272, CoB)

For the most part, I remember using citation machine to make the most accurate citations . I used what information the site I needed to reference gave me, and plugged that into the inputs on the citation website. Since every teacher I had wanted a different format, I never learned how to do one specific style. (Reference 52, CoE)

Table 2. Where did you learn this information (high school, tutors, parents, etc.)?

	College of Business n ₁ =279 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =86 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Formal Instruction	82.79	90.69
Informal Instruction	3.22	2.32
Mixed	3.58	4.65
NA	10.41	2.34

Table 3. What do you remember learning from instruction [on] test/assignment cheating?

	College of Business n ₁ =298 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =88 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Beginner	87.58	93.18
Advanced	1.35	0.52
NA	11.07	5.68
<i>Emergent codes</i> (not mutually exclusive)		
Consequences	52.34	64.77
Don't recall	0.30	0.00
Inaccurate	6.04	5.6
Procedure	9.73	6.81
Value	37.58	42.04

Selected quotes (CoB and CoE)

I told not to cheat and if you chose to cheat you would get points taken off your assignment or test. I learned that you shouldn't cheat on assignments or test.”
(Reference 299, CoB)

Don't cheat because it got you no where. And you don't learn anything from cheating. Cheating could also get you in a lot of trouble if you get caught, and if you don't get caught, it doesn't mean your helping your grade or your brain.
(Reference 58, CoE)

Table 4. Where did you learn this information (high school, tutors, parents, etc.)?

	College of Business n ₁ =303 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =98 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Formal Instruction	70.29	58.16
Informal Instruction	5.61	2.04
Mixed	14.52	24.48
NA	9.58	15.32

Table 5. How would you describe the term “Academic Integrity”?

	College of Business n ₁ =327 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =97 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Beginner	65.13	63.91
Advanced	15.30	18.55
NA	19.57	17.54

Selected quotes (CoB and CoE)

Doing the work on your own and not using someone else's knowledge (Reference 272, CoB)

Academic Integrity is a standard that you hold yourself and your school work to. It means turning in assignments or projects that are a product of your own mind and not that of others. It means being proud of what you do and being confident in your abilities in lieu of using someone else's work to make up for your academic insecurities. (Reference 35, CoE)

Table 6 reports on motivation towards intrinsic and extrinsic goal contents, marked by contingent instrumental outcomes, as exemplified in the work of Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) to guide analysis. Findings showed that most business and education students enrolled in college for extrinsic motivations that valued going to college because it yields outcomes contingent upon going to college like material gain (e.g. money), social class (e.g. career prospects), or social relationships (e.g., fulfilling parents' expectations or helping others). In contrast, much fewer students identified intrinsic motivations that valued college for what the inherent qualities of going to college like appreciating the experience; desiring to learn/master a subject; acting on values/interests; or improving as a person. A sizeable minority of students across both majors reported mixed motivations that professed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, with education majors reporting slightly greater occurrence. Second-cycle coding yielded thematic patterns on the specific reasons that embodied their intrinsic/extrinsic motivations. Career and Degree/ Learning/ Mastery stood as the most prominent reasons for both majors; but education majors much more often cited career attainment (unsurprisingly being a teacher) as a key reason for college enrollment. Given lower rate of intrinsic or mixed motivations, when students from both majors spoke of the value of college learning, it was as a gatekeeping mechanism to a well-paying career. When students cited personal interest/value/development and social relationships, they presented extrinsic motivations where going to college serves as prerequisite to future success and of being able to fulfill social obligations.

Table 6. What is your most important motivation for attending university?

	College of Business n ₁ =271 (%)	College of Education n ₂ =86 (%)
<i>A priori codes</i>		
Extrinsic	75.64	74.41
Intrinsic	12.17	6.97
Mixed	11.80	18.62
NA	0.39	—
<i>Emergent codes (not mutually exclusive)</i>		
Career	47.23	62.79
Finance	17.34	8.13
Degree/ Learning/ Mastery	47.97	41.86
Personal Interest/ Value/ Development	35.79	34.88
Social Relationships	18.08	26.74

Select quotes (CoB and CoE)

Getting a good degree, building relationships, gaining experience, all eventually leading to a high-paying career that allows independence and travel (CoB 28)

I want to get a degree that will get me a good job in the future. (Reference 255, CoB)

I want to obtain a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential so I can become an elementary school teacher. (Reference 58, CoE)

My most important motivation for attending the university is to be a teacher. I want to be a teacher because I can then help kids and motivate them to be who they want to be in the future. (Reference 6, CoE)

DISCUSSION

The findings speak to several trends. The first trend is that students start college with gaps in knowledge on citations/references, test/assignment cheating, and academic integrity despite the heightened expectations of HEIs on adhering to academic conventions and ethics. What students appear to know amounts to mechanical procedures in writing citations (without understanding the point of accurate attribution) and recognition of the consequences to test cheating (without clear identification of what cheating looks like and its importance beyond personal outcomes). Most students also appear to not understand academic integrity as the complementary qualities of accurate attribution and transparent academic work. Interestingly, the results point to how citation/reference knowledge appears to have been covered in just formal schooling whereas test/assignment cheating knowledge appears to have been taught in the schools and reinforced

through multiple informal settings. This reinforcement across multiple contexts may have impressed students' moral evaluation of cheating and reduced "not applicable" responses as well. It seems then that accurate attribution may be seen as just a school issue which complicates instruction and habit formation. Finally, if motivation influences the effect of instruction, programs might have to stress certain academic misconduct outcomes for certain sorts of students. The high rates of extrinsic motivations for going to college suggests that it may be more efficient to frame academic misconduct by appealing to how it compromises career prospects, money and time lost from spent tuition, negative social relationships, etc.

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APPENDIX A

Codebook for Preliminary Findings from a Pilot Intervention to Address Academic Misconduct among First-year College Students

Organization of codebook

Pertinent open-ended items (Section.Question Number) (e.g., 1.1435895.)

A priori codes

Instruction/rationale for each code

Ignore unanswered items in analysis

First and second style coding via Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) with overall Neuendorf (2002) framework of quantitative content analysis. A priori codes first in reference to research questions; and then revisiting cases as new patterns generate beyond initial scope of a priori codes.

1.1435896: If yes, what do you remember learning from that instruction (citation/references)? (Don't worry about spelling, grammar, complete sentences, etc. Just tell us what you remember, if anything.)

[NA, Beginner, Advanced]

NA=entry does not at all refer to accurate attribution of others' work or a situation/procedure relate to appropriate citations/references.

Beginner=entry at minimum identifies the salient idea of accurate attribution of others' work **or** a situation/procedure related to appropriate citations/references.

Advanced=entry identifies the salient idea of accurate attribution of others' work; **and** a situation/procedure related to appropriate citations/references (e.g., avoiding self-copying, using direct quotes, using a specific formatting style, etc.). Rationale is that Bransford, et al. (1996) and Gobbo and Chi (1986) identified linked elaboration between general and particular knowledge as one quality that distinguishes advanced (expert) knowledge.

Second Cycle Codes-Don't recall, Procedure, Inaccurate, Consequences, Value (quality work, importance, need, must, honest)

1.1435897: Where did you learn this information (high school, tutors, parents, etc.)?

[NA, Formal school instruction, Informal instruction, Mixed]

NA=entries without reference to either formal or informal instruction prior to enrollment.

Formal school instruction=entries that mention being taught by school-based personnel like a teacher, counselor, or administrator prior to enrollment.

Informal instruction=entries that mention being taught by someone who is not school-based personnel like a parent, tutor, friend, etc. prior to enrollment.

Mixed=entries that reference criterion for both formal and informal school instruction above.

1.1435899: If yes, what did you learn from that instruction (test/assignment cheating)? (Don't worry about spelling, grammar, complete sentences, etc. Just tell us what you remember, if anything.)

[NA, Beginner, Advanced]

NA=entry does not at all refer to unauthorized or undisclosed means that confer advantage to a student for a given assignment or test; or refer to a situation/procedure related to cheating.

Beginner=entry at minimum identifies the salient idea of unauthorized or undisclosed means that confer advantage to a student for a given assignment or test; **or** identifies a situation/procedure related to cheating.

Advanced=entry identifies the salient idea of unauthorized or undisclosed means that confer advantage to a student for a given assignment or test; **and** a situation/procedure related to cheating (e.g. copying during an exam, peer collusion, accessing an electronic device, etc.). Rationale is that Bransford, et al. (1996) and Gobbo and Chi (1986) identified linked elaboration between general and particular knowledge as one quality that distinguishes advanced (expert) knowledge.

Second Cycle Codes-Don't recall, Procedure, Inaccurate, Consequences, Value (quality work, importance, need, must, honest)

1.1435900: Where did you learn this information (high school, tutors, parents, etc.)?

[NA, Formal school instruction, Informal instruction, Mixed]

NA=entries without reference to either formal or informal instruction prior to enrollment.

Formal school instruction=entries that mention being taught by school-based personnel like a teacher, counselor, or administrator prior to enrollment.

Informal instruction=entries that mention being taught by someone who is not school-based personnel like a parent, tutor, friend, etc. prior to enrollment.

Mixed=entries that reference criterion for both formal and informal school instruction above.

1.1435901: How would you describe the term "Academic Integrity"?

[NA, Beginner, Advanced]

NA=entry **does not at all refer** to either the salient idea of accurate attribution or the salient idea of transparency/honesty of process and product in the context of academics/scholarship.

Beginner=entry identifies **either** the salient idea of accurate attribution or the salient idea of transparency/honesty about process and product in the context of academics/scholarship.

Advanced=entry identifies **both** salient ideas of accurate attribution of others' work; **and** transparency/honesty of process and product in the context of academics/scholarship.

5.1436008: What is your most important motivation for attending university (again, don't worry about spelling, grammar, complete sentences, etc.)?

[NA, Extrinsic, Intrinsic, Mixed].

NA=entry does not at all reference any of the following items.

Extrinsic=entry bases value of going to college for an outcome (e.g., benefit, state, condition, etc.) separate from the inherent activity of going to college. Rationale for codes comes from work of Deci and Ryan (2000).

-External (to meet or avoid a tangible instrumental outcome)

-Introjected (to meet or avoid an internalized pressure like guilt, shame, obligation, etc. activity would not be completed otherwise)

-Identified (where activity consciously valued by the individual and will be engaged in despite adversity/unpleasantness)

-Integrated (where activity reflects one of many activities that fit a person's coherent organization of their values and goals).

Intrinsic= entry bases value of going to college for an innate quality of the activity. No mention of a separate outcome contingent on the activity. In the case of going to college: specifically, a sense of knowledge-building, sense of accomplishment, sensation (e.g. curiosity).

Mixed=entry refers to both an extrinsic and intrinsic value in going to college. Specifically, by referring to an outcome contingent on going to college; and referring to an innate quality that comes with going to college.

Second cycle codes: [NA, Finances, Career, Social Relationships, Learning/Mastery, Personal Interest/Value/Development]

**NOTE: If entry includes more than one item or conflated item (e.g., money for family), mark entry to both items.*

Finances=entry states motivation in reference to finances.

Social relationships=entry states motivation in reference to some kind of social relationship/obligation.

Career=entry states motivation in reference to career.

Degree Learning Mastery=entry states motivation in reference to degree acquisition, learning, process, or becoming more skilled/knowledgeable.

Personal interest value development=entry states motivation in reference to personally-gratifying interest or personal value (e.g. curiosity, challenge, etc.) or in reference to becoming a better or improved kind of person.