Comparing Cheating Behaviors among Graduate and Undergraduate Online Business Students

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The continued growth of online courses has brought to the forefront concern over the academic integrity of students. This is because online students typically complete course requirements outside the confines of the classroom and/or without much instructor supervision. Cheating is certainly not a new phenomenon in the classroom. However, the difference between today's environment and that of previous decades is that cheating behavior has apparently become a common occurrence. This research examined and compared the cheating behaviors of business students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Our findings showed that graduate and undergraduate students generally perceived to be more common and easier in the online platform. We also found that students seemed to be unclear to what constitutes plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

It appears that cheating is no longer the exception to the rule. Through the Internet and other 'creative' technology mediated strategies, students today have many more ways to "cheat" compared to their counterparts a decade ago. Similarly, the problem of academic dishonesty in Business Schools has risen to a crisis level according to Caldwell (2010). This is understandable given the fact that business students ranked highest in self-reported cheating (Sulphey & Jnanewwar, 2013). Callahan (2004) has suggested that there exists a 'cheating culture' whereby students have become nonchalant and/or tolerant of cheating. This trend is alarming given the roles these students will have when they join the workforce.

Further exacerbating the issue of cheating is the rapidly growing number of students taking online courses. In fact, the number of students participating in college level online courses has outpaced all other forms of distance learning (Raines et al., 2011). These online students take their courses outside the premises of the classroom and therefore not monitored by instructors. In the online platform, Nath and Lovaglia (2009) found that two thirds of cheating cases involved students getting together during an exam and the other one third copying another student's paper without his/her knowledge.

It is disconcerting to note that previous research has found that students generally perceived cheating to be easier in online courses (Guyette et al., 2008). While there has been a plethora of studies conducted relating to cheating in traditional in-class courses, only a few studies have been conducted on cheating in on-line courses (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2006; Lanier, 2006; Stuber-McEwen et al., 2009; Szabo &

Underwood, 2003, 2006). This study attempts to fill some gap in the extant literature by looking into cheating behaviors of online graduate and undergraduate business students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although online learning has become a definite asset to institutions and learners alike, the problem of academic integrity has emerged as an important issue for this educational delivery platform (Etter et al., 2006; Grijalva et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2000; Lanier, 2006; Underwood & Szabo, 2003). Academic integrity has been defined as 'understanding what it means to be honest in the particular culture of the academic world, and being able to apply the scholarly conventions of acknowledgment' (East & Donnelly, 2012).

The popularity of online courses demands that researchers study academic dishonesty in ways that they have not before while utilizing the previous research to guide them in how to best predict and minimize cheating. Unfortunately, tech-savvy students are finding ways to 'creatively' cheat in ways that are difficult to detect. As a result, the number of people "gaming" the system appears to be growing rapidly (Young, 2012). Gaining insights into academic dishonesty in this new learning environment can ensure that educators and administrators are still on the path to insuring that current students will matriculate into honest employees and community members.

Cheating is defined by King et al. (2009) "as a transgression against academic integrity which entails taking unfair advantage that results in a misrepresentation of a student's ability and grasp of knowledge" (p. 4). Cheating behaviors are motivated by pressure to get good grades and student stress (Davis et al., 1995). Some students cheat because they think no one gets hurt by their behaviors and because the material is too hard (Sulphey & Jnaneswar, 2013). Laziness, lack of preparation time for assignments and exams, lack of interest in the subject matter, and even rebellion are other commonly cited reasons for cheating (Ashworty & Bannister, 1997).

Simha, Armstrong and Albert (2012) suggested that cheating behaviors that tend to be most frequently engaged in revolved around telling others what is on an exam. This can be curbed effectively if there are multiple exam questions that are changed on a regular basis. Doing so would eliminate the desire of students to inquire about exam questions from other students that have already taken those exams. Similarly, if homework assignments could be individualized to a certain degree, this would possibly eliminate people cheating (Simha, Armstrong, & Albert, 2012).

Research has established that the term plagiarism is open to different interpretations, resulting in confusion among students and instructors alike. University policy on academic integrity/misconduct defines the behaviors that all stakeholders must abide by, and the parameters for reporting, investigating and penalizing infringements. These definitions are the benchmark for assessing how well students understand plagiarism (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014).

Online Cheating

There is evidence that suggests that from a student's point of view, the academic transgressions are seemingly more rampant in an online setting (Guyette et al., 2008). Whether cheating in a face-to-face or an online environment, student cheating behaviors appears to center around a recurrent theme. The "desire to get ahead" (Simkin & McLeod, 2010) is the most common explanation for cheating.

Kennedy et al.'s (2000) survey of students and faculty generated some interesting findings. Faculty and students generally held similar perceptions regarding the ease of cheating in online classes. That is, more than half of the respondents surveyed perceived cheating to be easier in online courses. These perceptions were compounded when students had previously taken an online course.

King et al. (2009) conducted a study to gauge the attitudes of undergraduate students about using technology to cheat online compared to traditional classroom. Of the 121 undergraduate students surveyed, at least 73% of the students also felt it was easier to cheat online. However, when there was a written policy against cheating or academic dishonesty the percentage who felt that cheating was appropriate declined significantly.

What About Online Business Students?

Klein et al. (2007) found that the incidence of cheating among business students were similar to those in other professional schools. A study conducted by Brown (1996) found that education online students (85.7%) reported participation in at least one transgression. This reported incidence was higher for business (81.2%) and engineering (80.2%) students. Brown's results also showed that students generally wanted good grades but did not want to study for them. They felt that no one suffered by their cheating.

Graduate vs. Undergraduate Online Cheating

Previous studies that compared cheating perceptions and/or behaviors of graduate and undergraduate students have mainly focused on the traditional face-to-face context. However, as more universities offer online courses, it is incumbent among academics that we attempt to learn more about online cheating behaviors at all levels. After all, as Crown and Spiller (1998) suggested, [business] students' academic transgressions can offer insights to business ethics. This in turn will determine how they will behave when they become active players in Corporate America. If American universities are churning more and more online-educated students, then it is imperative that we investigate online academic dishonesty.

Unfortunately, studies that compare online cheating between online undergraduate and graduate students have been sporadic. To address this void, we looked at self-reported responses of online business students. The data presented here were based on a survey completed by 84 graduate and undergraduate online students attending a mid-sized university in Texas. The study used a quantitative design featuring a one-time survey to gauge level and type of academic dishonesty occurring in online courses.

This study was designed to compare responses of undergraduate and graduate business students based on the following:

- Perceptions of cheating and specifically, plagiarism;
- Forms and tools used to cheat; and
- Instructor awareness of cheating practices.
- Students' awareness of academic dishonesty policies

METHODOLOGY

Sample Size

This study utilized the responses of graduate and undergraduate online business students attending a mid-sized regional university in Texas. The graduate students were enrolled in the introduction to marketing course in the MBA Program. The undergraduate students were seniors enrolled in a business administration course. These students attended a mid-sized regional university in Texas. An email was initially sent to a total of 217 students seeking their *voluntary* participation in an online and anonymous survey. Of the 217, 84 students completed the survey. Of the 84 respondents, 55 were MBA and 29 undergraduate students.

Sample Selection

Given the sensitive nature of the survey, this research had to be conducted on a voluntary basis. As a result, the effective sample size is relatively small. The instructor deemed it unethical to provide students with extra credit points [to boost sample size] for participation since this would necessitate having to determine the names of the respondents.

Instead, students were selected through a petition from two university faculty members each teaching the undergraduate and graduate courses. Students were given a secure web address to visit and complete the survey. The study used a quantitative design featuring a one-time survey to gauge level and type of academic dishonesty occurring in online business courses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was to explore and compare the academic dishonesty perceptions and behaviors of graduate and undergraduate online business students. Presented below are the key findings in this study. In general, both groups of online business students appear to follow the same mindset when it comes to cheating perceptions and behaviors.

Student Perceptions of Online Cheating

Kennedy et al. (2008) suggested that efforts to reduce academic misconduct should be two pronged. First, students must be educated as to what constitutes academic misconduct. Second, instructors should use the information from appropriate studies to structure their classes in a way that deters cheating. To reduce academic misconduct, students need to not only understand that their action is inappropriate and dishonest but must also be convinced that the probability of being caught is high (Kennedy, Bisping, Patron, & Roskelley, 2008).

As presented in Table 1, it appears that there is a prevailing perception that there is ample opportunity to cheat in an online course. This perception is more rampant among graduate students. In fact, roughly a third of those surveyed believed that cheating is a fairly common occurrence among online students. Perhaps, the reason why it is common is because students, particularly graduate students, generally find it easier to cheat in the online format.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON CHEATING PERCEPTIONS

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
General Cheating Perceptions		
1. There is greater opportunity for me to cheat in online courses		
Yes	47.3%	37.93%
No	50.9%	55.17%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	6.90%
2. I believe that cheating is common among online students		
Yes	36.4%	31.03%
No	60.0%	65.52%
I prefer not to answer	3.6%	3.45%
3. I believe that students cheat because it is easy to cheat		
Yes	56.4%	41.38%
No	41.8%	55.17%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	3.45%

Forms of Online Cheating

Interestingly, despite the opportunity to cheat and the prevailing mindset that it is easier for online students to cheat, most students in the sample responded that they generally do not cheat. However, those who did, cheated on either a quiz or course assignment.

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON FORMS OF ONLINE CHEATING

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
Forms of Cheating		
4. I have helped someone else cheat in their online course		
Yes	1.8%	0.0%
No	96.4%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
5. I have cheated on an assignment		
Yes	9.1%	3.45%
No	87.3%	96.55%
I prefer not to answer	3.6%	0.0%
6. I have cheated on a quiz		
Yes	7.3%	6.90%
No	89.1%	89.66%
I prefer not to answer	3.6%	3.45%
7. I have cheated on an exam		
Yes	3.6%	0.0%
No	92.7%	96.55%
I prefer not to answer	3.6%	3.45%
8. I have submitted others' work as my own		
Yes	0.0%	0.0%
No	98.2%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
9. I have received answers to a quiz or exam from someone who has already taken it		
Yes	9.1%	0.0%
No	87.3%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	3.6%	0.0%

What is Plagiarism?

The Center for Academic Integrity (2007) defined plagiarism as any act that misrepresents a student's work as his/her own work product in completing a course related assignment. Based on the reported responses in this study, graduate and undergraduate students understood plagiarism as a form of cheating (over 90%), but over 50% did not consider submitting information deemed common knowledge as cheating. Likewise, over 70% believed information and media found on the Internet was "fair game." This is consistent with previous research that has shown that many students do not identify "cutting and pasting" as plagiarism and may not understand that unapproved collaboration is academic dishonesty, Perhaps, educating students about what actually constitutes plagiarism is the key to preventing academic dishonesty (Lorenzetti, 2010).

TABLE 3
STUDENTS SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON PLAGIARISM

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
Plagiarism		
10. Plagiarism is a form of cheating		
Yes	96.4%	93.10%
No	6.90%	6.90%
I prefer not to answer	0.0%	0.0%
11. I have copied another student's work without their permission and submitted it as my own		
Yes	0.0%	0.0%
No	98.2%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
12. I have knowingly copied passages from an article or book directly into a paper without citing it as someone else's work		
Yes	5.5%	0.0%
No	92.7%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
13. Submitting information considered common knowledge is not cheating		
Yes	56.4%	51.72%
No	36.4%	44.83%
I prefer not to answer	7.3%	3.45%
14. I do not feel guilty about using information taken from the Internet as my own work		
Yes	18.2%	13.79%
No	74.5%	79.31%
I prefer not to answer	7.3%	6.90%
15. I believe that using media from the Internet (pictures, music, videos, etc.) is not cheating because it's on the Internet		
Yes	21.8%	17.24%
No	76.4%	79.31%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	3.45%

Tools used in Cheating

Of the different tools for cheating noted in this survey, the use of assignments submitted in previous courses appears to a common practice. Students may have the impression that since the initial submission is their original work, then it is acceptable to use the same material for another course. Furthermore, Moten et al. (2013) noted that by a few simple keystrokes, students can find a wide array of online services for hire to write research papers, complete homework assignments, or enroll on behalf of the student on record to take the entire online course. Unfortunately, while institutions in higher education have seen online learning as a vehicle to increase student enrollments, the number of Internet-based companies that support or enable academic dishonesty has also increased.

TABLE 4
STUDENTS SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON CHEATING TOOLS

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
Specific Cheating Tools		
16. I have used instant messaging through a cell phone or handheld device during a quiz or exam		
Yes	3.6%	3.45%
No	94.5%	96.55%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
17. I have used a term paper writing service to complete an assignment		
Yes	1.8%	0.0%
No	96.4%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%
18. I have turned in an assignment I previously submitted for another class		
Yes	12.7%	10.34%
No	85.5%	89.66%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%

Instructor Awareness

Results here show that students are quite aware that their professors are in-tune to cheating practices. Students acknowledged that despite having a difficult instructor, this does not justify cheating. Perhaps the findings here reinforce the role instructors play in deterring cheating among online students. As Broeckelman-Post (2008) has suggested, vigilant instructors are less likely to have students inclined to engage in dishonest behaviors.

TABLE 5
STUDENTS SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON INSTRUCTOR AWARENESS

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
Role of Instructors		
19. Professors are often clueless that students are cheating		
Yes	9.1%	10.34%
No	85.5%	89.66%
I prefer not to answer	5.5%	0.0%
20. Cheating is acceptable if the professor is really hard		
Yes	1.8%	0.0%
No	96.4%	100.0%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%

Policy Awareness

The data suggests that over 90% of both graduate and undergraduate students were aware of the university's policy on cheating. However, this level of awareness may not necessarily lead to less

cheating. Strategies to combat student plagiarism such as emphasizing on their knowledge of institutional policies on academic honesty may not be sufficient. Rather than relying solely on students seeking the policy on academic misconduct, universities must take a more proactive role, using a wide range of strategies to include helping students understand the concept of plagiarism. This could include understanding citations and referencing conventions, as well as addressing some students' limited academic skills (e.g., critical analysis, thesis construction, paraphrasing) (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014).

TABLE 6
STUDENTS SELF-REPORTED RESPONSES ON POLICY AWARENESS

Answer Options	Grad %	Undergrad %
University Policy		
21. I am familiar with my school's policy on cheating and/or plagiarism		
Yes	94.5%	96.55%
No	3.6%	3.45%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	0.0%

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As online courses continue to grow exponentially, more research will need to be conducted regarding academic dishonesty. The study presented here is an exploratory attempt to make the initial step in comparing cheating behaviors of undergraduate and graduate online business students. A major limitation of this study was the low response rate of the students surveyed - 217 students were invited but only 84 chose to participate. The sensitive nature of this topic may inherently hamper researchers' attempts to generate higher response rates. A future study to examine the prevalence of cheating of online students, both graduate and undergraduate, from other disciplines also needs to be conducted. Another possible topic is to quantify the extent of cheating by students. This study did not request the respondents to quantify how often they cheated.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this study suggest that undergraduate and graduate online business students generally share the same impressions regarding cheating. It is alarming to point out that the students here are under the impression that cheating is a common occurrence and easier to conduct in the online setting. Consistent with previous studies, the misinterpretation of what constitutes plagiarism is noted. Perhaps, it would be a worthwhile exercise for faculty to always explain to students and reiterate at the onset of each course on what is considered as plagiarism.

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