

Academic and Non-Academic Dishonesty:  
A Relational Analysis of Four-Year College Students

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## Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between academic dishonesty and non-academic dishonesty as it relates to money, relationships and cheating. Students from a small campus in the south were randomly selected to participate in this study. Each participant received a survey via e-mail and/or in the classroom. Of 292 surveys sent, 136 surveys were completed. The study examines three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: High scores on the academic dishonesty survey will correlate positively with scores on the relationship part of the survey. Hypothesis 2: High scores on the academic dishonesty survey will correlate positively with scores on the money dishonesty part of the survey. Hypothesis 3: High scores on the academic dishonesty survey will correlate positively with scores on the cheating part of the survey. The survey is comprised of 30 items and uses a four-point Likert response scale. Results support all three hypotheses.

# Academic and Non-Academic Dishonesty: A Relational Analysis of Four-Year College Students

## Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a prevalent problem among college students all over the country. Cheating on tests and papers is becoming increasingly common in college and university settings while, at the same time, dishonesty in non-academic areas of life is becoming an enormous problem. Major corporations (e.g., Enron, Arthur Anderson, Citibank and so on) have been caught in unethical and illegal scams all based on greed for the almighty dollar. These, and other, corporations are destroying the lives of citizens through the fraudulent monetary and accounting schemes they have engaged in without thought of consequences. On a much lower level, we are all aware that individuals lie on their taxes, cheat on their spouses, deceive their loved ones and fabricate the truth at work. Perhaps, then, it's no wonder that our college students are dishonest in academia – it seems to be the way the world works and the means to get ahead.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between cheating in academics and cheating in life. Specifically, three hypotheses will be tested: Hypothesis 1: students who score high on the academic dishonesty scale are more likely to score high on the relationship dishonesty part of the survey; Hypothesis 2: students who score high on the academic dishonesty scale are more likely to score high on the money dishonesty part of the survey; Hypothesis 3: students who score high on the academic dishonesty scale are more likely to score high on the lying part of the survey.

## Literature Review

Many studies (e.g. Kidwell, et. al., 2003; McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Allen, Fuller & Luckett, 1998; Wilfried, 2002) have reported that students are engaged in academic dishonesty at ever-increasing levels. Historically, academic dishonesty dates back to the time when the Chinese Civil Service exam was administered thousands of years ago during an era when cheating was punishable by death (Bushway & Nash, 1977). By the late 1800s/early 1900s, cheating was viewed as acceptable behavior and was widespread on U.S. college campuses (Simmons, 1999). By the 1940s, it was common practice for fraternities to keep files of term papers which were shared with other frat members over the years and submitted over and over again for a grade. By the 1960s, however, attitudes were changing and students and professors alike began to take a dim view of academic dishonesty. Academic integrity policies flourished and honor codes abounded. Then research studies on academic dishonesty began emerging in the '60s. The first scholarly studies of academic dishonesty found that nationally, in the U.S., somewhere between 50 percent and 70 percent of college students had cheated at least once. Today, the reports suggest that between 75 and 90 percent of all students have cheated at some time in their academic careers (Edmunds & Scudder, 2009).

Much of the research on academic dishonesty is frequently contradictory. Methodology may be an underlying cause for much of these discrepant research findings. When researchers

assess student cheating, it is often with the false understanding that the definition of what constitutes cheating is universal to students. In a 1977 study (Ashworth, et. al, 1997), however, research findings suggest that many students do not have a deep understanding of what exactly constitutes cheating and plagiarizing behaviors. Further muddying the waters is the fact that the concept of cheating varies, not only by student, but also by culture. Research further indicates that students' understanding of cheating/plagiarism policies and the consequences for participating in those behaviors is unclear, which is in contrast to faculty assumptions that their policies on cheating are crystal clear (Paterson, et.al., 2003; Taylor, et. al., 2004).

Kohlberg's (1981) theory of morality is one of the accepted cognitive theories on human interaction within society and the morality of behavior that is enmeshed in it. The theory suggests five stages that an individual must move through to reach the final stage which Kohlberg's theory says is "highly moral, internally regulated behavior" (1981, p. 39). Not all individuals are capable of reaching the final stage, and even for those who do, environmental influences often mediate the behavior one would expect at the final stage resulting in a response at a lower level of morality. For example, an individual who sees stealing as morally wrong would not participate in a bank heist, but if that same individual found ten dollars on ground they might pocket it and think they've had a lucky day. Smith (1998) found that significant differences in student cheating behavior occurred based on student classification and gender. Two of Smith's findings are worthy of note. Thirteen percent of males in his study indicated that they would look over a future exam if they were given the opportunity, compared to only four percent of the females in the study. In addition, differences by classification resulted in 47 percent of freshmen indicating they would look at answers from someone sitting near to them while taking an exam; the results for this same item were 19, 21 and 27 percent respectively for sophomores, juniors and seniors.

The Smith study suggests that cheating behaviors may be more prevalent in younger individuals. This jibes with a study that indicates that younger individuals are also more likely to cheat on a partner (<http://www.womansavers.com/infidelity-statistics.asp>). This study on unfaithfulness also found that younger females are just as likely as are younger males to be unfaithful. Today, although reliable adultery statistics are difficult to locate, it is estimated that 60 to 70 percent of adultery victims are female while 30 to 40 percent of adultery victims are male (<http://www.articlesbase.com/relationships-articles/how-adultery-statistics-affect-divorce-119179.html>, 2009).

Anzivino, et. al. (1997) studied the correlation between self-esteem and academic dishonesty and how gender and group membership impacted this relationship. Results of the study suggest that students having group membership in academic organizations were significantly less likely to cheat than were those who did not have membership in an academic organization. In Baird's study (1980), individuals who cheated identified five situational factors that contributed to their cheating behaviors. The factors were (1) the seating arrangement, (2) knowledge how those sitting near them had performed on previous tests, (3) low grades such that the lower the cheater's grades the more likely he/she would cheat and (4) the curriculum (students are more likely to cheat in statistics than art) and (5) whether there was surveillance during testing. It appears that students cheat to get good grades and to be accepted into good graduate schools.

It appears that students justify their cheating by the pressure they are under to obtain good grades needed to get good jobs or get into good graduate schools. In addition to the pressure of academic achievement, students are also pressured to participate in multiple academic organizations. For many students, there is additional pressure due to family and work obligations, which can leave students feeling overwhelmed. Thus, in order to get ahead, students perceive cheating behaviors as a necessary evil. In an environment where student perceptions are that everyone else cheats anyway, cheating *themselves* is the next logical step (Pytel, [http://classroom-issues.suite101.com/article.cfm/cheating\\_is\\_on\\_the\\_rise](http://classroom-issues.suite101.com/article.cfm/cheating_is_on_the_rise)).

Student cheaters tend to be motivated by high grades, not learning per se (Thorpe, et.al., 1999). Males have a greater likelihood of cheating than do females (Athanasou & Olabisi, 2002). More than 75 percent of students admit to some cheating and there is significant growth in the occurrence of cheating on tests, collaborating when collaboration is not allowed and the pervasiveness of chronic cheating. Since students feel it is unlikely they will get caught cheating, a quick cost/benefit analysis shows them that cheating is in their favor (Hutton, 2006).

## Method

**Survey Development.** Part I of the survey contained 30 items related to academic dishonesty behaviors; Part II of the survey contained five items *each* related to dishonesty (a) in personal relationships, (b) monetary dishonesty and (c) lying behavior for a total of 30 survey items. All items used a four-point Likert-type response scale ranging from one (1) to four (4).

**Distribution of the survey.** Surveys were administered to approximately half of the participants in a classroom setting, with the remainder of the surveys being e-mailed to potential participants. Students were told that all individual information was strictly confidential, and that only group statistics would be used for the final report.

## Results

One hundred and thirty-seven usable surveys were obtained. A correlational analysis was conducted to test the three hypotheses developed for this study. Results suggest that academic dishonesty and personal relationship dishonesty were positively correlated ( $r = .293$ ,  $p < .01$ ) such that the more one is prone to academic dishonesty, the more likely the chance that one will cheat in a personal relationship. Academic dishonesty and monetary dishonesty were also positively correlated ( $r = .539$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, as academic dishonesty increases, so does the likelihood of being dishonest when it comes to monetary/financial matters. Finally, academic dishonesty and dishonesty with respect to lying behaviors were positively correlated ( $r = .376$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that as academic dishonesty increased, so does the likelihood of lying.

### Responses by Gender.

**Males.** For males, results suggest a positive relationship between academic dishonesty and personal relationship dishonesty ( $p < .01$ ), meaning that males who cheat in school are also likely to cheat in personal relationships. Men who participate in academic dishonesty are also more likely to engage in dishonesty about money/financial matters ( $r = 4.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and lying behaviors ( $r = 3.19$ ,  $p < 3.19$ ).

**Females.** Results for females were also significant across all three non-academic dishonesty variables. Academic dishonesty correlated with (a) personal relationship dishonesty ( $p < .01$ ), (b) monetary/financial dishonesty ( $p < .01$ ) and lying behaviors ( $p < .01$ ).

No significant relationships were found for age or classification of student. While this finding is inconsistent with the literature, there are many variables that may have mediated the results such as size of the school, teacher to student ratio, and so forth.

## Discussion

Nearly three-fourths of all college students report having cheated at sometime during their academic career. Researchers have started to identify many of the elements that influence academic dishonesty such as competition, pressure for good grades, instructional situations that are perceived as unfair/excessively demanding, teachers who are perceived indifferent to students' situations, peer pressure, and a diminishing sense of academic integrity and ethical values among students. In addition, students tend to perceive that the only way to get ahead is to cheat and that virtually everyone does it.

Standards of ethical conduct must be taught and then required from our students. Too often we teach a segment on ethics in the classroom but then fail to follow through in the classroom itself. When cheating occurs it must be addressed immediately and formally in order for students to learn the importance of ethics and integrity and the severe consequences for violating the requirements. In addition, faculty must use every tool at their disposal to detect and prevent academic dishonesty. Today, technologies are available for neutralizing cheating behaviors and teaching pedagogies can be implemented to reduce the likelihood of cheating. Strategies for creating classroom environments that facilitate honesty, rather than cheating, must be implemented.

Cheating is a problem that is all-too-common in almost all classes on nearly every campus in our country. Dealing with academic dishonesty, however, is a serious matter. Any successful approach will have to include strong institutional policies; open communication between students, administrators and faculty; and specific pedagogical approaches to reducing both student pressures and opportunities to cheat. As long as the cost/benefit ratio related to academic honesty is in favor cheating, this problem will continue to be an epidemic in our schools.

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**Table 1**  
**All Respondents**

**Correlation Coefficients**

PAIRWISE deletion (1-tailed test)	Significance Levels: ** =.01, * =.05		
Lying	Academic GPA Dishonesty	Relationship AGE Dishonesty	Monetary GRADE Dishonesty



Academic **	1.000		0.323 **	0.500 **	0.338
	-0.271 **	-0.030	-0.054		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
Relation **	0.323 **	1.000		0.353 **	0.396
	-0.163 *	0.039	-0.067		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
Monetary **	0.500 **	0.353 **	1.000		0.333
	-0.298 **	0.024	-0.063		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
Lying	0.338 **	0.396 **	0.333 **	1.000	
	-0.195 **	-0.047	-0.058		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
GPA **	-0.271 **	-0.163 *	-0.298 **	-0.195	
	1.000	-0.125*	0.077		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
AGE	-0.030	0.039	0.024	-0.047	
	-0.125*	1.000	.708 **		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)
GRADE	-0.054	-0.067	-0.063	-0.058	
	0.077	0.708**	1.000		
	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)	(200)

**Table 2**  
**Males**

**Correlation Coefficients**

Subset: Sex Categories: Male  
PAIRWISE deletion (1-tailed test)      Significance  
Levels: \*\* =.01, \* =.05

	Lying	Academic GPA Dishonesty	Relationship AGE Dishonesty	Monetary GRADE Dishonesty	
Academic -0.333**		1.000	0.271 **	0.425 **	0.338 **
		-0.096	-0.062		
	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)
Relation -0.118	-0.002	0.271 **	1.000	0.280 **	0.346 **
		-0.114			
	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)
Monetary -0.361**		0.425 **	0.280 **	1.000	0.303 **
		0.086	-0.020		
	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)

Lying		0.338 **	0.396 **	0.333 **	1.000
-0.196**	-0.048	0.068			
(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)
GPA		-0.333 **	0.118	-0.361 **	-0.266 **
1.000	-0.130	0.107			
(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)
AGE		-0.096	0.002	0.086	-0.008
-0.130	1.000	0.670 **			
(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)
GRADE		-0.062	-0.114	-0.020	0.028
0.107	0.670**	1.000			
(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)	(94)

**Table 3**  
**Females**

**Correlation Coefficients**

Subset: Sex Categories: Female  
 PAIRWISE deletion (1-tailed test)      Significance  
 Levels: \*\* =.01, \* =.05

	Lying	Academic GPA Dishonesty	Relationship AGE Dishonesty	Monetary GRADE Dishonesty
Academic	1.000		0.306 **	0.506 **
0.285 **		-0.089	-0.011	-.038
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
Relation	0.306 **	1.000		0.345 **
0.409 **		-0.083	.047	-.018
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
Monetary	0.506 **	0.345 **	1.000	
0.300 **		-0.083	-.069	-.086
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
Lying	0.285 **	0.409 **	0.300 **	
1.000		-0.031	-.108	-.123
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
GPA	-0.089	-0.083	-0.083	1.000
-0.031		1.000	-.089	.045
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)

AGE	-0.011	0.047	-0.069
-0.108	-0.089	1.000	.741**
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
	(106)	(106)	(106)
GRADE	-0.038	-0.018	-0.086
-0.123	0.045	.741**	1.000
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)
(106)	(106)	(106)	(106)