

CHEATING ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKFORCE PLACEMENT

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### **Statement of the Problem**

Ethical considerations in the workplace have garnered a great deal of attention in the past several years following the many revelations of major proportion since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the United States, the corporate scandals of Pacific Gas and Electric, WorldCom, Enron, Chiquita Brands, Adelphia Communications and others focused attention on corporate mismanagement, particularly on ethical issues involving cheating, lying, and greed. It is evident there was more to the problem than lack of experience, mistakes in accounting, or a poor economic environment. The problem was in the values and moral fiber of corporate owners and leaders.

Ethical behavior in the workplace, like other psychological phenomenon, is a product of values, culture, or antecedent and circumstantial issues that impact decision making. While there may be different words used for many kinds of ethical behavior, the common thread of greed and financial gain can be found in most corporate business scandals. The Bible declares, “The love of money is the root of all evil” (I Timothy 6:10, KJV) suggesting that evil behavior usually has a reason associated with a perceived benefit for the perpetrator. Many behaviors are not about money but are none-the-less about gaining a personal benefit, whether it is a grade, increased status, self-esteem, or self-justification.

Cheating encompasses several constructs. It is a form of lying and it may be motivated by several factors including greed, peer pressure, or fear among others. The question is whether cheating, like lying, does not need an extrinsic reward to induce the behavior. The adage that some people tell lies for the sake of lying infers a habitual predisposition toward the behavior based on moral rationalization that contributes to intrinsic rewards such as self-esteem, self-justification, or other forms of self-efficacy. The question is whether some-one who cheats in college for whatever reason is prone to cheat in business?

### **Literature review**

Klein, Levenburg, McKendall, and Mothersell (2007) report on research by Norris and Swift (2001) which studied the self-reported behaviors of 1,051 business students, “and found that the frequency of cheating in college was highly correlated with cheating at work” (p. 197). The authors further reported studies by Sims (1993) who “found a high degree of correlation between cheating in school and unethical behaviors at work” (p. 197). The major question is why do students cheat? If students are able to rationalize cheating at school, does not this predict cheating behavior in the workplace? The research points to a high degree of correlation between cheating at school and unethical behavior on the workplace. While the antecedents in terms of

motivation may be different (i.e. grades vs. money), the common psychological factors must point to attitudes, values, or the moral underpinning, especially if it results in a predisposition to cheat.

Burris, Jones, Sackley, and Walker (2013) note students and faculty often disagree on the definition of cheating. They may agree on looking at another student's paper during an exam but disagree whether using an old test for exam preparation is cheating (p. 51). The authors note "perceptions about what peers are doing often drives college cheating" (p. 57). Is an "everybody does it" mentality pervasive in college and business? Klein, Levenburg, McKendall, and Mothersell (2007) write "business school students who cheat are more likely to be accepting of unethical workplace behavior" (p. 198).

Simkin and McLeon (2010) write "Business schools would appear to have a particularly strong interest in cheating activity. . . Studies consistently find that the propensity to cheat in college carries over to the workplace – a concern of particular interest for professional schools preparing students for business careers" (p. 442-443). Everest University and other "for-profit" universities are already challenged by criticism and have been targets of Department of Education regulators who have mandated "gainful employment" regulations for proprietary schools. The issue of cheating in college, when unaddressed, leaves open the possibility of a damaged reputation should cheating become a greater problem in the workplace.

### **Methodology**

In order to discuss the issue of cheating with business majors at the Everest University Lakeland Campus, a survey was developed to query business students about cheating and attitudes toward continued cheating either at school or at work. Ten business students surveyed 20 other students with a series of 8 questions as follows:

- Q1 - Have you ever cheated in school?
- Q2 - Do you feel that cheating is right?
- Q3 - How likely would you help someone else cheat?
- Q4 - Would you cheat on a job?
- Q5 - Would you tell on someone else that you knew was cheating?
- Q6 - Is cheating an easy way to get by?
- Q7 – Would you cheat for money?
- Q7 - If you have cheated in the past, would you do it again?

A likert scale of 1 – 5 was used for each question with a 1 being an answer of “never” and a 5 being an answer of “often”. The data from the pool of 20 students was tabulated based on the average of response scores compared against the maximum response.

**Findings**

Table 1 shows the tabulation of data for the cheating survey and indicates that 57% of the students surveyed self-reported that they have cheated while in college. When the question was asked “if you cheated in the past would you cheat again”, the answer suggested that almost half agreed they would likely cheat again.

Table 1

QUESTION #	QUESTION				SCALE		SCALE	
1	Have you ever cheated				Never		1	
2	Is cheating right				Seldom		2	
3	How likely would you help someone cheat				Sometimes		3	
4	Would you cheat on a job				Likely		4	
5	would you tell on someone who is cheating				Often		5	
6	Would you cheat for money							
7	Is cheating an easy way of getting buy							
8	If you cheated in the past would you cheat again							
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Barrios	5.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	3.00
Barrios	5.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	1.00
Brown	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Brown	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Luciano	3.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	1.00
Luciano	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	2.00
McVay	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
McVay	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	2.00
Mercer	2.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	1.00

Mercer	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Oneill	2.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	2.00
Oneill	5.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	3.00	4.00
Perry	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Perry	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Peterson	5.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Peterson	5.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Roberts	2.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	5.00
Roberts	4.00	3.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Sotolongo	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	3.00
Sotolongo	4.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	3.00
AVERAGE	2.85	1.65	1.75	1.40	2.40	2.70	2.45	2.30
PERCENTAGE	0.57	0.33	0.35	0.28	0.48	0.54	0.49	0.46

The survey Q1, 3, 4, and 8 had questions about the behavior activity, but Q2, 5, 6, and 7 are suggestions concerning the values or attitudes concerned with the cheating. The inference that a person who has cheated would cheat again is not surprising, but question 3 and 4 suggest possible differences in reasoning. For example, students might contend they would not be as likely to cheat on a job, but one might ask “why not”? Because the question speaks to something that has not happened, but one must consider the motivations for cheating or not cheating in college depend on college related values, while cheating on the job relates to how one values a job. A person might be less likely to cheat on the job if losing the job means more to them in comparison to perceived consequences about failing a class or being dismissed from school. There may be other variables.

### Limitations

Several limitations exist in this survey. First the questions and tabulations are hastily designed for a “quick” survey intended to be class exercise but not vetted for reliability as a research project might be. I posit some of the questions are poorly worded, for example question

7 – “Is cheating an easy way to get by”? How does someone determine “sometimes” it is an easy way to get by to “likely” and easy way to get by?

Secondly, the undergraduate business students are not trained in research and whether they communicated the questions for clarity while doing the survey is unknown. Note for example, Q2 by Mercer to a student who was asked “Do you feel cheating is alright”. The 4.00 score (likely) suggest that student might not have understood the question. A case can be made that a 3.00 (sometimes) is a reasonable answer for the question based on the concepts of moral relativity, but while someone might believe cheating is right most of the time, the respondent should be probed for whether there is clarity in the question.

Obviously the sampling is small and I posit the questions are too few. While there are questions both about cheating and four that can allude to values, I posit there needs to be a larger number of questions, that delve into greater specifics about the motivation and rationale for cheating as predictors of cheating on the job after college.

## **Summary**

Why do students cheat and how will that impact the potential for cheating in the workplace? Simkins and McLeod (2010) point to several factors, one being the differing views about what constitutes dishonesty. Simkins and McLeod quote Sutton, Dean of the Stanford University School of Design who stated “If you found somebody to help you write an exam, in our view that’s a sign of an inventive person who gets stuff done” (p. 442). Another concern is the “success” mantra that drives the mindset of many business students. There is a business culture in the U.S. where success, winning, and achievement are cultural values and status is important to the individualistic nature of our society. Simkins and McLeod write “A second possible explanation is the desire to succeed. If winning is everything, then cheating simply becomes a tool to use in pursuit of this higher goal” (p. 443).

Gross (2011) contends however that the bigger concern is the clashing changing values between contemporary views about cheating compared to traditional beliefs and practices. Gross writes “Current research establishes that a value shift justifying a positive regard of cheating has been replacing the more traditional standard of viewing cheating as a priori unethical, immoral, and wrong” (p. 435). Among the core concepts proposed by Gross as reasons for cheating are the differences in moral functioning for students born after 1982 who “prefer to engage in decisions based on personality, relationship, and expediency rather than on abstract rules about right or wrong” (p. 436). The emergent morality tends to be subjective, situational, opportunistic, and avoids requiring that behavior be deemed “right or wrong” (p. 440).

What is the implication for research? If more research helps us to understand why students cheat, will that also mean that we understand how to stop cheating? I posit we may already know why, but unless there is a return to concepts of right, wrong, and absolute, it is unlikely that we change the tide.

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