



Students' Experience with Academic Integrity before College

To effectively teach students about academic integrity and why it matters, one needs to understand the prior knowledge and experience that students have regarding academic integrity. Unfortunately, the literature indicates that most incoming college students have had inconsistent exposure to the idea of academic integrity. In most cases, their experience has focused on the negative—avoiding academic misconduct (cheating, writ large)—rather than a more positive framing of why academic integrity is important. This article examines some of the different expectations for academic integrity that students may have experienced in middle- and high-school, differences in the consequences for academic misconduct between high-school and college, reviews data on cheating in middle- and high-school, and summarizes data on student attitudes about academic misconduct.

Ideas of what constitutes academic misconduct are different in secondary education and college. This may be especially true for differences in ideas of what constitutes plagiarism. (Kessler, 2003)

In middle-school and high-school, the standards to which students are held vary from instructor to instructor, with many accepting verbatim responses to questions from students who work together; collaboration between students on individual assignments is not necessarily seen as collusion. It is not uncommon for the desired/acceptable form of answering questions on assignments to involve copying and pasting information from internet sources without a requirement for attribution. Students are not always required to identify the sources of ideas that they paraphrase.

Because many incoming students have experienced lax or variable standards of attribution and unclear rules associated with collaboration, they may not recognize some plagiarism as cheating. The literature is replete with studies of cheating in secondary education, but there is very little focus on academic integrity in its own right, and papers touching on the topic often indicate that it is not taught but should be.

Students are not routinely instructed on the reasons one should behave with academic integrity, or how doing so will benefit them. There is a similar lack of instruction on how academic misconduct will harm them, their friends, or their schools. Instead, students are faced with a culture in which there is constant parental pressure to “get ahead” of their classmates and to maintain class standing and GPA to ensure obtaining the best scholarships. (Baker and LeTendre, 2005; Walker and Holtfreter, 2015). Parents place stress on the final goals of grades, standings, and degrees, and are less invested in the path that students take to achieve those ends (Baker and LeTendre, 2005). This may facilitate attitudes that cheating is just one means to the desired goal, and is bad only if a student is caught.

Some forms of misconduct are recognized as undesirable in secondary education environments, like using unauthorized notes during exams, or copying directly from others on exams. However, even though undesirable, these behaviors are often ignored by instructors. When addressed, the consequences are typically mild, usually involving a lowered score or a mandate to re-do the exam in question (Strom and Strom, 2007; Kessler, 2003).

This may stem, in part, from pedagogical perspectives that stress the acceptability of making mistakes as part of learning, and the recognition that adolescent students lack fully developed executive function, making it more difficult for them to respond with integrity when weighing the costs and benefits of misconduct. However, one cannot discount the influence of feelings of vulnerability among educators, who fear backlash from parents for accusing students of academic misconduct (Strom and Strom, 2007). Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2002) report that up to 70% of educators were reticent to identify and punish cheaters due to concerns about parental reactions.

This picture is further complicated by pressures on faculty and administrators. Because compensation and careers often depend on student performance metrics, those who should serve as role models for the academic integrity of students are also under great pressure to behave dishonestly.

Though this is not the norm, there have been cases of teachers and administrators providing test answers to students, alerting students that they should change and answer during the exam, altering the answers the students have entered, and providing extra time for students to complete the exam— all violations of academic integrity. (Strom and Strom, 2007)

In U.S. secondary education, self-reports from students indicate that from 60-80% of students have cheated at some point, with some of the highest rates of cheating seen in high-performing students. In a survey of 3,000 students from the *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, of the 80% who admitted to cheating on tests or assignments, 95% indicated that they were not caught (Lathrop and Foss, 2005). Since that time, advances in technology have made it easier for students to engage in academic dishonesty.

Students who engage in academic dishonesty offer a variety of justifications for cheating, including that they don't have time to complete all the work, they need good grades to get into college, everybody else is cheating, and the course isn't important to them. (Strom and Strom, 2005, 2006). All these justifications place the responsibility for academic misconduct on something other than the students' choice to engage in it.

Although each campus is slightly different, patterns of cheating established in high school continue in college. In a review of the literature on cheating behavior in college, Whitley (1998) found a significant relationship between cheating at lower academic levels (high school, college) and cheating at higher academic levels (college, graduate school). In a 30-year study, Stiles et al. (2018) reported that nearly half of students in their most recent sample admitted to some cheating in college. In a larger study of 80,000 students attending one of 83 different higher education institutions in the U.S. and Canada, McCabe (2005) presented data that among undergraduates, 42% had worked collaboratively on individual assignments, 38% had paraphrased or directly copied text from another source and not credited it, and 33% had learned what to expect on a test from somebody who had already taken it.

As a result of their prior experiences, incoming students may not view certain types of academic misconduct as being serious, or relate them to breaches of academic integrity. Newton (2016) reported that new college students in the UK recognized that plagiarism was wrong, but did not view it as particularly serious. In fact, they did not find plagiarism of ideas, the purchase of a single essay, or collusion to be exceptionally bad, and routinely recommended punishments that were far less severe than the university typically imposed for such conduct. This aligns with Nuss's 1984 findings in the US, that students and faculty are at odds about what types of academic dishonesty are the most serious.

Given past experiences and attitudes about the banal nature of academic dishonesty, incoming college students may not be prepared for the consequences they could face in college for violations of academic integrity. This schism can lead to culture shock as students transition to college, generating concern among students.

Kessler (2003) reports a number of first-year college students' statements and concerns about academic integrity. These illustrate the difficulties new college students face. The consequences of being caught cheating at an honor-code university are extreme and can include expulsion, showing that the severity with which cheating is handled is out of line with their high-school experience. They are not confident that they know what constitutes misconduct. Because of differences from instructor to instructor, and the multitude of definitions, dos, and don'ts, they are often confused about whether specific behaviors are considered dishonest.

These data should be of concern for those working in higher education because they all point toward incoming students as a population that is not prepared to function with the level of integrity that college instructors expect.

- Incoming students have not received consistent messages about the nature of academic misconduct, so they are not familiar with collegiate standards for academic integrity.
- They are under great pressure to perform.
- They are not adequately instructed in the benefits of not engaging in misconduct or the negative impact of misconduct on themselves and others.
- Their perceptions of the severity of various forms of misconduct is not well-aligned with the perceptions of their instructors, and their perceptions do not reflect an understanding of the values of academic integrity.
- Their experiences with negative consequences of violating academic integrity are out of line with collegiate standards. When on rare occasions they have experienced consequences for cheating, those consequences have been mild. Their experience has likely been that the risks of being caught cheating are low, and the potential rewards of misconduct are high.

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