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Fall 2004

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Ethics on an Honors College Campus: An Analysis of Attitudes and Behaviors of Honors versus Non-Honors Students

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ABSTRACT

Since cheating, or academic dishonesty, has appeared to increase over the years, it is important to observe the “new” forms of cheating present within higher learning institutions. Earlier studies have shown conflicting evidence regarding the deterrence rate of an honor code system in higher learning institutions. This study looked at the Honors and non-Honors students’ beliefs and actions regarding the honor code, the internet, and suspect cheating behaviors. Surprisingly 81 (75%) students, both Honors and non-Honors, did not believe that the honor code prevents cheating, contrary to most literature. One other area of interest dealt with the internet and its profound effects on the availability of information. Results indicated that 102 (94.4%) students believed that printing a paper from the internet is cheating, but respondents tend not to report such incidents. Chi-square analyses were also conducted for certain variables with only two being statistically significant at the .10 level or below. Possible explanations and limitations are discussed.

Cheating, or academic dishonesty, is not a new phenomenon within the educational system; whether cheating has increased over the years has become an empirical debate. Some, such as Brown and Emmett (2001), indicate that cheating is not the epidemic it appears to be while others, such as Moore (2002), tend to disagree, believing that steps need to be taken to protect the integrity of the future. While the battle over the frequency of cheating continues, the problem of defining cheating is still present. There have been hundreds of studies conducted and many discussions surrounding the elusive arena of deceitfulness on college campuses around the world; however, there needs to be a clarification of what exactly constitutes cheating (Higbee & Thomas, 2000; Thorpe, Pittenger, & Reed, 1999). Thorpe, Pittenger, &

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Reed (1999) found that specific categories of cheating allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of what should be considered cheating behavior. It is, therefore, very important to have a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating so that administrators and faculty will be able to communicate clearly to students what cheating is at a particular institution.

In regard to preventing academic dishonesty, some institutions have implemented an honor code, but it is naïve to think that having an honor code makes an institution completely immune to the dishonest student. McCabe & Trevino (1993) found that institutions with an honor code have students that do not self-report cheating as often as non-honor code institutions. It should be noted that there were outliers in this study in which there were non-honor code institutions whose students reported fewer occurrences of cheating than honor code institutions. Other studies have found that honor code institutions report lower incidents of cheating and, therefore, conclude that having an honor code is useful and effective in deterring academic dishonesty (May & Loyd, 1993; McCabe & Pavela, 2000; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002). Meanwhile, McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield (1999) found that a number of students do not think that having an honor code at their institution dissuades cheaters. Overall the researchers concluded that a community atmosphere characteristic of honor code institutions is an effective tool in deterring cheaters.

Despite all the research supporting the effectiveness of an honor code, some studies have found the honor code to be ineffective as a deterrent in higher learning institutions (Gardner, Roper, Gonzalez, & Simpson, 1988; Jendrek, 1992). In cases where the code requires the student to turn in another student (i.e., the students are responsible for reporting the bulk of code violations), Jendrek (1992) discovered that many students will not turn in their fellow students. Instead, the students try to work the problem out one-on-one or in some other arrangement that does not involve the formalities required by the code. To these types of students there is no real point to having an honor code. The literature on the effectiveness of an honor code appears to be split, but differences could be due to testing methods, type of sample, and/or sampling error.

Even though an institution may have an honor code, there are other factors that influence and distinguish students who cheat from those who do not. One such factor is the internet. With the introduction of the World Wide Web, it has become easier for students to take classes online, research quickly, and cheat efficiently. Many websites designed for “student” use offer low cost pre-written term papers, blurring the line between what is and is not cheating in the minds of some students who may believe that the information on the internet is for anyone’s use with no respect for the author(s) of the material. Others believe that information from the internet should be treated with as much respect as any hard-copy print material. These beliefs are probably shaped by the emphasis a professor puts on integrity in his/her courses. Even though technology is becoming a major part of an education, Lester and Diekhoff (2002) found that there is no difference between traditional and high-tech cheaters. Yet, little research exists concerning what students deem as cheating with respect to the internet. Perhaps behaviors perceived as cheating are modified by technology.

Lastly, research on academic dishonesty has led to some demographic trends. Some evidence suggests that athletes, who often have a full schedule, are more

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likely to cheat than those students who are not athletes (Storch, Storch, & Clark, 2002). Membership in Greek life also seems to have a relationship with higher levels of cheating (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Storch & Storch, 2002). One explanation for the higher rates of cheating within these groups is the level of involvement within the group. Storch & Storch (2002) found that the more heavily involved a student is in a fraternity or sorority, the more likely that student is to cheat. If a student is very involved with certain activities, then it is possible that he or she has no time for academics. Most involved in Greek Life and sports have little time to prepare for tests or write papers because membership demands time and many commitments. The last reason for higher levels of cheating is the groups' tolerance of the activity. It may be socially acceptable for athletes or Greek members to cheat in order to focus on other duties more "important" to that group. Demographics are essential in understanding students' opinions on cheating as they may reveal that school-sponsored group affiliations see themselves as untouchable or do not view certain activities as cheating because they seem customary.

The previous research on academic dishonesty has opened up the eyes of many in higher learning institutions. This study looked at the relevance of the honor code to Honors students; the effect the internet has had in academics; how Honors students view certain suspect behaviors; and whether or not these students will report suspected cheaters. Although the honors code has variable effectiveness as a deterrent to cheating, it is likely that Honors students—because they are in a program that stresses honor and integrity—feel the code is effective. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a significance level of .10 or less was used to determine if any analysis demonstrated a significant difference between Honors and non-Honors.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

There were 108 students who completed an anonymous survey. Of these subjects there were: 71 (65.7%) females and 37 (34.3%) males; 60 (55.6%) Honors students and 48 (44.4%) non-Honors students; 14 (13.0%) Greek Life participants and 94 (87.0%) non-participants; and 33 (30.6%) collegiate athletes and 75 (69.4%) non-athletes. The participants were: 47 (43.5%) Freshmen, 33 (30.6%) Sophomores, 13 (12.0%) Juniors, 13 (12.0%) Seniors, and 2 (1.9%) students classified as "Other" (meaning Access or special undergraduate students at the institution).

All subjects were from a small, liberal arts college in Virginia that has an honor code policy and an Honors program. The survey included ten questions aimed at certain activities that could be classified as academic dishonesty. Three different times within one week, the surveys were distributed for completion. The students in this sample were all volunteers, with no student declining to complete the survey. To ensure that no person filled out the survey twice, the experimenter gave explicit instructions not to fill out the survey if the person had previously participated.

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PROCEDURE

A survey was created to measure students' beliefs concerning what constitutes academic dishonesty, whether the student would report cheating, and what opinion the student had concerning the relevance of having an honor code (see Figure 1). There were five demographic variables and ten ethical issue questions on the survey; for statistical purposes, these questions were limited to "Yes" or "No." Survey questions ranged from student attitudes and physical responses (i.e., reporting a cheater) regarding traditional cheating methods, such as copying a neighbor's paper, to more high-tech behaviors, such as turning in a printed paper from the internet as one's own. None of the ethical issue questions dealt with areas other than cheating. For validity purposes, the survey was pre-tested using two classes in a philosophy course, "Introduction to Ethics." The pre-test groups expressed, in verbal feedback to the experimenter, good comprehension of the layout and wording of the questionnaire. No changes, therefore, were made to the original form. After the pre-test, the survey was given to students participating in the Westover Honors Program, one section of a peer-tutor training seminar, and, lastly, one section of an introductory psychology class. These three groups were convenient samples as the experimenter had access to them.

The experimenter introduced herself to the subject pool and explained the purpose of this study as trying to find a college student's own personal code of ethics regarding academic dishonesty. The survey was passed out to the subjects while the experimenter explained that the survey was completely confidential and that subjects should not put their names on the survey. It was also explained that refusing to complete a survey would not reflect on the student's grade. These statements were emphasized so the respondents would be completely honest regarding their opinions. It was also emphasized that, if any student had filled out the survey in a previous setting, he/she should not fill out another. After each student was finished, he/she turned in the questionnaire to the experimenter face down.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, 45 (75.0%) Honors students surveyed believe the honor code does not prevent cheating. Students were then asked if the Honor code was a personal deterrent, i.e., prevented the subject from cheating. A majority of Honors students (n=44; 73.3%) indicated that the honor code deters them personally from cheating. Compared with non-Honors students, there is little to no difference in opinions concerning the effectiveness of the honor code; 12 (25.0%) non-Honors students reported that they believe the honor code prevents cheating, and 34 (70.8%) reported that the honor code is a personal deterrent. There were also several questions regarding whether students considered certain behaviors cheating. When asked if inquiring from other students about information on a missed test due to sickness was cheating, 30 (50%) Honors students and 28 (58.3%) non-Honors students thought it to be cheating. When the same question was reworded to refer to the subject asking about the test when he/she was sick, 34 (56.7%) Honors students and 26 (54.2%) non-Honors students believed it to be cheating. In addition, 37 (61.7%)

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FIGURE 1. SURVEY GIVEN TO SUBJECTS.

Sex:

Male Female

Academic Status:

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other

Are you a Westover Honors Student?

Yes No

Are you a member of Greek life on campus?

Yes No

Do you participate in a college sanctioned sport (this excludes intramurals)?

Yes No

1. You are taking a test, when you notice that the person next to you is looking at your paper and copying answers. Would you turn this person in to the professor?
 Yes No
2. You are taking a test, when you notice that the person in front of you is looking at the test of his/her neighbor and copying the answers. Would you turn this person in to the professor?
 Yes No
3. While you are searching the internet for information for a paper, you come across a paper on the same topic assigned. You print the paper out and turn it in as your own. Do you consider this cheating?
 Yes No
4. You are discussing the new topic for a paper, when your friend mentions that he/she paid for a pre-written term paper online. Would you turn this person in to the professor?
 Yes No
5. You are discussing the new topic for a paper, when a classmate mentions that he/she paid for a pre-written term paper online. Would you turn this person in to the professor?
 Yes No
6. Do you feel that the honor code on campus prevents cheating?
 Yes No
7. Do you feel that the honor code on campus prevents you from cheating?
 Yes No
8. A person is sick the day of a test. When he/she sees a classmate he/she asks what was on the test. Do you consider this cheating?
 Yes No
9. There are two sections of an intro class in which the tests are the same. A person, from the earlier section, tells a person, in the later section, what will be on the test. Do you consider this cheating?
 Yes No
10. You are sick the day of a test in class. When you see a friend that is in the same class you ask what was on the test. Do you consider this cheating?
 Yes No

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Honors students believed that, when separate sections of the same class inform one another about a test, then that behavior is cheating. Once again these numbers were similar to those of non-Honors students as 30 (62.5%) indicated that sharing information between different sections is cheating.

Respondents also indicated that they were not likely to report persons they caught cheating in the classroom. If the subject caught a fellow student copying his/her paper during class, then the subject was more likely to report the perpetrator. That is, 18 (30.0%) Honors students and 17 (35.4%) non-Honors students said they would report such a cheater. The number lowers dramatically when the subject witnesses cheating not involving his/her own work. If a respondent witnessed one student copying off the paper of another, only 6 (10.0%) Honors and 11 (22.9%) non-Honors students said they would report the cheater.

In regard to the internet, an overwhelming majority 57 (95.0%) Honors and 45 (93.8%) non-Honors students said that turning in a pre-written paper from the internet as one's own is cheating. Despite this response, most are unwilling to report such cheating. Students were asked whether they would report a friend who turned in a fraudulent paper and then a classmate who did the same. A majority of Honors students (n=40; 66.7%) and non-Honors students (n=37; 77.1%) would not report a friend who turned in a paper from the internet. When it came to a classmate, however, 33 (55.0%) Honors students would not report the incident while 34 (70.8%) non-Honors students would not report the classmate. In other words, an Honors student was more likely to report a classmate that cheated using the internet than a friend who did the same.

After comparing the percentages for each variable (see Table 1), several chi-square analyses were conducted, comparing Honors status with question responses (see Table 2). As stated earlier, a significance level of $p < .10$ was used due to the nature of the study. Only two variables concerning Honors status were found to be statistically significant. Looking at the traditional methods of cheating, Honors students were three times less likely to report a cheater copying a neighbor's paper than non-Honors students ($\chi^2 = 3.354$, $p = .059$). Honors students, however, were two times more likely to report a classmate who had printed a paper from the internet and turned it in as his/her own work ($\chi^2 = 2.839$, $p = .068$).

DISCUSSION

This study has two major limitations that will hinder the discussion of the findings: the type of questionnaire and the sample. The questionnaire was designed for ease in calculating statistics, so the answers are forced. In forcing an answer, there is no room for respondents to explain the reasons for answering a question in a certain way. Future researchers may need to allow respondents an explanation section for each question of the survey to help understand why certain people and/or groups answer in particular ways. The second limitation is the fact that the sample used was one of convenience. Some respondents could have filled out more than one questionnaire despite the lengths the experimenter took to ensure no repeat respondents. Also, respondents could have felt obligated in answering the survey to please the

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TABLE 1.
DEMOGRAPHIC AND BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS BY
HONORS STATUS OF RESPONDENTS (N=108).

Variable		Honors (n=60)		Non-Honors (n=48)	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Person Copies Your Paper?	Yes	18	30.0	17	35.4
	No	42	70.0	31	64.6
Person Copies Your Neighbor's Paper?	Yes	6	10.0	11	22.9
	No	54	90.0	37	77.1
You Print Out Paper From Net?	Yes	57	95.0	45	93.8
	No	3	5.0	3	6.3
Friend Prints Paper From Net?	Yes	20	33.3	11	22.9
	No	40	66.7	37	77.1
Classmate Prints Paper From Net?	Yes	27	45.0	14	29.2
	No	33	55.0	34	70.8
Honor Code Prevents Cheating?	Yes	15	25.0	12	25.0
	No	45	75.0	36	75.0
Honor Code Prevents You From Cheating?	Yes	44	73.3	34	70.8
	No	16	26.7	14	29.2
Sick Day of Test?	Yes	30	50.0	28	58.3
	No	30	50.0	20	41.7
You Are Sick Day of Test?	Yes	34	56.7	26	54.2
	No	26	43.3	22	45.8
2 Sections – 1 Informs the Other About Test?	Yes	37	61.7	30	62.5
	No	23	38.3	18	37.5

TABLE 2
CHI SQUARE TEST OF INDEPENDENCE RESULTS FOR
SELECTED REACTIONS BY HONORS STATUS.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Chi Square</u>	<u>P-value</u>
Person Copies Your Paper?	.357	.790
Person Copies Your Neighbor's Paper?	3.354	.059*
You Print Out Paper From Net?	.079	.549
Friend Prints Out Paper From Net?	1.414	.165
Classmate Prints Out Paper From Net?	2.839	.068*
Sick Day of Test?	.745	.252

* Denotes that the difference was statistically significant ($p < .10$).

experimenter, but there was no pressure from the experimenter to complete it, as the experimenter was not their professor. Even with these possibilities, some groups within the sample were overrepresented, underrepresented, and not represented at all. For example, Greek Life members were overshadowed in this sample, and neither faculty members nor graduate students were included. It may be helpful to stratify the sample to get a better representation of a typical college population for a more complete look at attitudes and behaviors regarding academic dishonesty. Also, if faculty members filled out the questionnaire, major differences or similarities in opinion and behaviors could be examined. So the conclusions made from these data could result from the type of sample or sampling error.

Despite these limitations, there are some rather interesting findings. The first is that a majority of Honors and non-Honors students do not have faith in the honor code's effectiveness at deterring cheating. One possible explanation may be a student's use of cognitive heuristics. For example, when a person has witnessed cheating in the classroom or hears about someone cheating, then that person may tend to exaggerate the number of cheating incidents on campus. In another instance, the student may have had a lecture from a professor about cheating and the importance of doing one's own work. In both cases, the student has used the availability heuristic and the base rate fallacy to generalize that cheating occurs all the time and the honor code does not stop it (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2002).

What is rather puzzling about the sample is that, while most students feel that many acts should be considered cheating, they are hesitant to report suspected cheaters. Possibly subjects do not feel it is their place to turn in suspected cheaters to the professor or the honor board. Subjects may lack familiarity with the procedures for reporting cheaters. In this case, the school should try to inform students about the proper procedures for handling academic dishonesty. The sample used in this study was taken from an institution that does not hold yearly formal sessions for all students to inform them about proper procedures for reporting such incidents. Instead, a

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manual that contains all the rules and procedures for honor violations is given to students during registration. Students may not have the time or desire to read such a manual to understand what constitutes cheating or the formal steps to report a cheater. This lack of understanding may explain the findings. Perhaps it may be time for institutions to reevaluate how they communicate honor code policies and procedures to students. In fact, it may prove useful to hold seminars for students during the first few weeks of school to acquaint them with the rules, regulations, and procedures so there exists no doubt in a student's mind of what cheating is and what to do about it.

Unwillingness to turn in suspected cheaters may also be due to personality traits or the temperament of the student. Shy people tend not to get actively involved in areas that require them to be put in the spotlight. If such a person were to turn in a fellow classmate for cheating, he might have to testify in front of a judicial board or honor board. This type of situation might make a shy person feel uncomfortable and anxious; to avoid the hassle, the shy student might not bother to report the cheater. Some other students have individualistic values, choosing to mind their own business and hoping that other people do the same. In this case, students might see an academically dishonest act but not feel it is their business to report them. Then there are the students who do not care what other people do, so they do not take the time and energy to report cheating of any kind. These traits can cause problems in implementing an honor code, so future studies may want to test personality characteristics.

With respect to the chi-square analyses, there are several possible explanations for the results. Why would Honors students be less likely to report an offender who copies a neighbor's paper? Perhaps Honors students feel that, if someone not close to the respondent copies another person's paper, then it is that person's problem. Honors students may not report such incidents also because they may instead confront the cheater. In this confrontation, the Honors student may try to convince the culprit to report himself/herself. It is also possible that Honors students view such occurrences in the classroom as a spur of the moment act, in which the cheater seized an opportunity and had a momentary lapse in reasoning.

On the other hand, Honors students are more likely to turn in fellow classmates for handing in a paper from the internet. One reason for such a change in attitude might be the perceived severity of the action. Copying someone's paper may result from unforeseen pressure or a spur of the moment mentality, while printing a paper from the internet and turning it in as one's own seems more premeditated. A student must search the internet for a paper on a specific topic, pay for the paper, and probably make some changes, all of which takes time, money, and effort. Another not so blatant reason may be the nature of Honors students. Most tend to be very competitive when it comes to grades. In most of their classes, teachers tend to put more emphasis on papers in terms of the final grade than on in-class activities such as tests or quizzes. If this scenario is the case, then Honors students might feel more compelled to report the offender. Yet, the lack of reporting in one situation and the willingness to report in another is quite puzzling. Perhaps, technological advances have altered students' perceptions of cheating so that traditional methods elicit less attention than the more sophisticated methods.

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There appears to be agreement about what constitutes cheating among Honors and non-Honors students, but when it comes to reporting such incidents the two groups are somewhat different. Even though there were two significant findings indicating that willingness of Honors students to report a cheater varies by situation, the low number of both Honors and non-Honors students willing to report cheating is surprising. It is no wonder that students no longer have faith in the honor code if they are unwilling to help uphold the code themselves. The perceived failure of the honor code may be due in part to the realities that students observe; when cheating behavior is not reprimanded, the cheater is more likely to continue to cheat. The lack of enforcement by students and/or the institution itself helps defeat the purpose of having an honor code. Maybe it is time to inform both Honors and non-Honors students about the honor code and their role in effectively enforcing such a code; the integrity of the Honor program, their degrees, and their education is on the line.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kimberly McCabe for helping me with the entire research process. I would also like to thank Stephen Gunderson and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts.

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