Chapter 2

Why Students Cheat:
A Conceptual Framework of Personal, Contextual, and Situational Factors

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ABSTRACT

The authors present an extensive summary of significant factors associated with college student cheating. They compared these findings to a synthesis of the authors’ own research findings from empirical studies based on a large national sample of college students. Overall, the authors found student characteristics and pre-college experiences (e.g., gender, age, family financial background, self-control, life purpose), individual college experiences and peer environment (extracurricular involvement, favorable perception of cheating environment), organizational context (student perception of faculty’s actions towards academic cheating) are all significant factors associated with academic cheating. More importantly, student academic preparation, extracurricular activities, attitude toward cheating, and perceived opportunities to cheat all served as important mediating variables between lack of self-control and academic misconduct. Implications about research and practice and directions for future research were presented at the end of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that academic misconduct among college students is a pervasive and serious problem on college campuses in the United States (US) (Beasley, 2014, 2016; Bernardi, Baca, Landers, & Witek, 2008; Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2006; Jurdì, Hage, & Chow, 2011; Levy & Rakovski, 2006; McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Schmelkin, Gilbert, Spencer, Pincus, & Silva, 2008; Wowra, DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1610-1.ch002
According to a review of various national studies over the past five decades, scholars found that more than two-thirds of college students consistently self-report being involved in incidents of academic dishonesty (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012).

To better understand this problem, scholars in the US undertook numerous studies of correlated factors of academic misconduct from educational, managerial, psychosocial, and sociological perspectives (e.g., Bowers, 1964; Davis, 1993; Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; McCabe et al., 2012; Tibbetts & Myers, 1999; Vowell & Chen, 2004; Whitley, 1998). With rare exceptions, prior studies took a segmented rather than a holistic approach when studying student academic misconduct. In other words, they selected a few important factors that are hypothesized to be linked with academic misconduct (Whitley, 1998). While the first part of this chapter provided an overview of these findings, the authors agree with other scholars who acknowledged piece-meal strategies or initiatives derived from this segmented approach was ‘not the most effective way to manage the problem’ (Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2006).

Given that a paucity of studies exist that took a systematic approach to study academic cheating, the authors introduced a conceptual framework that can help readers holistically study college students’ academic misconduct. The authors then reviewed the findings from prior studies using this framework. The authors further utilized this framework to summarize multivariate analysis of a large sample of college students (n = 2,503) at both two-year and four-year institutions based on the Gallup Organization’s daily tracking survey. In particular, the authors examined how some of these important factors work together to explain or predict student academic misconduct/cheating among college students. In the end, the authors offer various suggestions for institutional initiatives and interventions that may be effective in light of the research findings.

**BACKGROUND**

**Defining Academic Dishonesty**

One important challenge when studying academic misconduct or cheating involved appropriately defining the term or terms used i.e., the authors used academic misconduct and academic cheating interchangeably throughout this chapter (Eve & Bromley, 1981; Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; McCabe et al., 2012; Schmelkin, Gilbert, Spencer, & Silva, 2008). Previously, researchers such as Brown and Emmett (2001) suspected that studies reporting a high cheating rate among college students simply defined the term too broadly. Indeed, the variation in some findings among cheating studies often derived from a definition of academic cheating that focuses only upon one particular behavior such as plagiarism (e.g., Karlins, Michaels, & Podlogar, 1988) versus a whole range of behaviors (e.g., McCabe et al., 2012). Determining how best to define the range of behaviors may also prove challenging. One study simply left this task to the university and thus defined cheating as ‘behaviors that undermine academic integrity because they do not comply with [faculty or university] rules, norms, or expectations’ (Bertram Gallant, 2008).

The authors contended that a more helpful approach is the one adopted by McCabe et al. (2012) who defined academic misconduct/cheating as student engagement in a list of specific behaviors generally understood as cheating. Therefore, in the second half of the chapter the authors adopted this approach by defining academic misconduct/cheating as occurring when a student engages in one of the following nine behaviors largely adopted from the McCabe et al.’s (2012) definition:
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