

## **Topic: Motivation and Academic Dishonesty at LREI**

### **Initial results and Conjectures**

This study is a fraction of what could be done on a larger scale across independent schools like LREI. The study focused on cheating and academic dishonesty solely within LREI and where the motivation to cheat comes from. My research question was: Why has there been an increase in academic dishonesty this year and what impacts a student's likelihood to cheat on schoolwork? My hypothesis was: Students at LREI are successful academically despite a dip in motivation/engagement and learning this year. In order to prevent from falling behind academically, students have cheated and committed to it across classes. Students are more likely to cheat or plagiarize if the assessment is very high-stakes or if they have low expectations of success due to a perceived lack of ability or knowledge of the material.

The study design used a descriptive survey approach and a document analysis. The sample size was around 200 subjects with a response rate of 25%. The study focused on drawing connections between race, gender, grade, extracurricular activity, and having a tutor or not. The major results of this study revealed that 95% of the respondents declared that cheating is, in fact, a common phenomenon at LREI; 70% of students also affirmed, that it is, actually, difficult to eradicate cheating in assignments at LREI because of the subtle ways it is encouraged; and 95% of students acknowledged that they cheat more on science and math classes than English and history. The results neglect to show how exactly it is that students but show that most have attempted to do so. It also illustrates that cheating, undeniably, is a very real issue of massive concern at LREI; accordingly, several recommendations to fight cheating can be identified and areas for further research can be identified as well. The findings of the study would potentially help in curriculum development and delivery approaches and for the improvement of the academic integrity policies, which would, in turn, limit the growing tendency by students, to seek shortcuts to good grades. If given more time this would be possible.

### **Introduction**

In this first part, I will be introducing the background information important to the study. I will be defining terms like academic dishonesty, looking at relevant outside studies, and describing the targeted problem along with the purpose of this study.

#### **I. Defining Terms**

There is no commonly accepted standard definition, of academic dishonesty (Schmelkin et al. 2008), but it usually refers to behaviors such as cheating on exams or homework tests, copying another student's homework and assignments, unauthorized cooperation with peers, and plagiarism (Arnett et al. 2002). Academic Dishonesty or cheating is a very complex phenomenon influenced by contextual, and social factors (including peers' opinions of you, students' own conception of right and wrong, avoiding discipline according to the academic dishonesty policy).

It has infested our education system very subtly. Academic dishonesty can be defined as the “*deliberate* behavior or action that interferes with or hinders the pursuit of knowledge and results in a misrepresentation of academic materials, taking credit or recognition for academic work (including papers, lab reports, quizzes, examination, etc.) that is not one’s own, or fabricating-data, records or tampering with a school’s documents” (UNESCO, 2003).

Webster’s New World Dictionary (1984), for example, defines cheating as “being dishonest or deceitful.” Cheating is defined by Teixeira and Rocha (2010) as “acts which cover areas identified as illegal, unethical, immoral or that go against the rules, either in the course or in the universities” and they also stated, that countries, where cheating is most-prevalent, are highly-corrupt-countries.

It is clear that cheating commonly occurs in any course given work like homework or projects, and that cheating in exams is much more problematic. It is obvious that cheating is an unethical custom that many if not most students participate in especially when faced with the risk of failing that test.

Failure is the main problem here. The feeling of failure is a painful experience that frightens almost every student across the nation, because of the severe effects of the failure.

The study wasn’t able to divulge exactly what the effect of failure is for students at LREI but it can be hypothesized that failing an assessment could push the student to engage in subsequent health-impairing behaviors, not meet requirements to graduate, or have less of a chance to be accepted into their “dream” college, and reductions in their extracurricular activities. A second survey conducted this year at LREI showed that students reported a wide range of adverse emotional reactions, with over 75% reporting that they felt depressed, worried, or embarrassed. About half of the students said that they felt “stupid” and “less proud” of themselves. Fewer students reported troubling reactions from their parents or their classmates. Students in high grades showed more extreme reactions to “failure”. The study overall also showed that a minuscule percentage of students actually *fail* exams and that students at LREI consider grades like *B+* or *B* an inadequate grade.

Armed with these fears of failure, some university students are often filled with apprehension of how they would answer the difficult questions, they assume will be asked (Peters, 2010). I was unable to identify whether this also occurred at LREI but was able to note how students with this mindset are often extrinsically motivated.

An extrinsically motivated student performs "in order to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," such as grades, stickers, or teacher approval (Lepper).

A student who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Mark Lepper 1988). At LREI, teachers note that this is the main goal for students but my main concern was whether this was actually being achieved.

One of the most influential contextual factors for cheating is the extent to which students perceive that their peers cheat (McCabe et al. 2012), that is how normalized such behavior has become at school. Previous research has shown that schools with a strong focus on competition and achievement tend to invoke an increased amount of cheating among students (Anderman and Koenka 2017; Anderman and Midgley 2004), whereas schools that emphasize the value of learning itself tend to display a lower amount of cheating (Miller et al. 2007). 90 percent of respondents of the study voiced that there weren't influenced by the fact that their peers also cheat. Is the normalization of cheating completely nonexistent at LREI or ever so present but not a significant enough reason to cheat for students at LREI?

## II. Relevant outside studies

According to a New York Times article in June of 2021, "Dartmouth charged 17 students with cheating based on a review of certain online activity data on Canvas — a popular learning management system where professors post assignments and students submit their work — during remote exams. The school quickly dropped seven of the cases after at least two students argued that administrators had mistaken automated Canvas activity for human cheating".

Academic dishonesty has gained a substantial amount of attention from both, the educational community and media, which is most likely due to the fact that the "punishments" for cheating have become increasingly more strict. Students cheating at the undergraduate university level have been the subject of numerous studies and discussion forums, particularly in the last 70 years (Boehm 2009). Dartmouth is one of the many examples of these cases.

Research I have examined hypothesizes:

- Cheating is a significant problem in schools and colleges
- Male students tend to cheat more than females
- Cheating is more probable to occur in large and often crowded classrooms
- Very-few-students are caught cheating and very little has been done, by universities and individual lecturers, to **prevent** cheating
- Stress, desire for good grades, and time pressure are the main reasons for cheating
- Students of lower academic success cheat more than students of higher academic success
- Today between 75 and 98 percent of college students surveyed each year report having cheated in high school

- School administrators and academicians perceive that cheating in examinations or academic-dishonesty is a serious offense

### III. The problem and purpose of the study

Cheating is deeply rooted in our everyday life. The “consequences” of the most common forms of cheating can range from self-harm to a trillion dollars annually. Cheating can be infidelity or business fraud or looking over at your classmate’s answers. Cheating in an academic setting is often addressed with excuses from students ranging from unpreparedness for the exams, social problems at home, illness, and theft of essential reading materials or death in the family.

"Someone who has cheated a lot in high school and been able to get away with it might suffer greatly when they get to college, by not knowing what they don't know," Andrews, a former high school principal notes.

In terms of a progressive high school like LREI, I see cheating as putting a hold on progress. Learning tends to build on itself. You learn the basics first so that you can apply those basics in more complicated problems later. If you don’t know the basics, then you will have to continue to cheat, or start over learning the material from scratch. Every time you cheat, you’re not learning skills and lessons that could be important later on. School is supposed to be about learning. Cheating hurts yourself because you aren’t learning anything when you do it. You won’t know the information you go to school to learn; meaning you wasted your time, your teacher’s time, and have hindered your ability to become more intelligent.

Cheating is also an extremely addictive habit, and after it starts, it usually has a trend to continue (under particular circumstances) through the entire lifetime of the cheater. Bowers (1964), in his *Journal of Education and Practice* study found that 64% of students, who cheated in high school also cheated in college, and found a strong relationship between cheating in high school and cheating in university. Research has also shown that students, who cheat in college, are more likely to shoplift (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), cheat on income taxes (Fass, 1990), abuse harmful substances (Blankenship & Whitley, 2004), cheat in graduate and professional-schooling (Baldwin, 1996), and engage in unethical workplace behavior (Ogilby, 1995; Sims, 1993).

## Results of the study

Q1. If an assignment is difficult, I am willing to bend the rules (i.e. copy from a friend, the Internet, having a tutor or other person complete the assignment for me, etc.) to get it done: In this question, 35% of the students agreed that they would consider cheating, if they encountered a difficult assignment, while 65% disagreed with the fact that difficult assignments may cause students to cheat.

Q2. Cheating or bending the rules is effective since most people who do so often pass their assignments without getting caught: 75% of students agreed, that cheating, is effective since most people do not get caught. 25% attributed that this is not the case.

Q3. I cheat or bend the rules on assignments because I lack the necessary confidence in myself: Here, only 20% of the students agreed to the fact they might cheat due to a lack of confidence. Students commented that they may have misinterpreted the meaning behind this question. It should be that noted that the question wasn't meant to see whether a student was lazy or not. The remaining 80%, disagreed with the statement.

Although students, who commit academic dishonesty, may blame this on their lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem, they should realize these are merely excuses; and their behavior will not be justified or excused because of this excuse.

Q5. I cheat more on Math / Science assignments more than English / History: In this question majority of those sampled, 91.9%, agreed that cheating occurs more in Math / Science assignments. The reasoning behind this may be that it is easier to cheat in these classes or the style of teaching in these classes may be a factor.

Q6. Cheating is very common in our school: In this question, almost 87 percent felt that cheating was a common phenomenon at LREI. The remaining 13 percent may be students who are primarily academically honest but a further examination of each survey shows the opposite.

Q7. Only those who cheat have high grades in examinations: A considerable number of respondents, 94%, disagreed that only students who cheat get high grades.

Q7. Cheating is not necessary if a person has adequately prepared before the exam: The majority of respondents, 89%, agreed that with adequate preparation there is no need to cheat in exams. The remaining 11% disagreed, and, therefore, it might be safe to assume, that some students still see cheating as the additional step to better their grades.

Q8. I cheat because my peers or classmates also cheat on assignments: A whopping 95% disagreed with the fact that one reason for cheating is that it is a norm at LREI.

Q9. My parents are ok with me cheating on assignments: Only 7% agreed, the remaining 93% of respondents disagreed. Although all parents want their children to do well in school, they may not support the idea of cheating to get good grades. This suggests that most students at LREI have good role models and morals.

Q10. I have never been caught cheating by an adult or teacher: The results for this question were interesting with almost 75% noting they have never been caught while 25% noting they have.

Q11. If I've been caught I've still attempted to cheat again: What makes these consecutive questions interesting is that of those sampled around 30 percent responded to this question noting "no, not at all" have attempted to cheat again. This suggests that the current policy for academic dishonesty is working but on a larger scale the results may shift.

Q12. If I do not cheat or bend the rules, those who do so on the same assignment will have an advantage over me: 58% agreed, the remaining 42% of respondents disagreed.

Behavioral psychologists believe that behaviors, whether desirable or undesirable, are mostly learned. Behaviors, that bring satisfaction, tend to be repeated, whereas those that bring dissatisfaction tend to be discontinued. Therefore, when some students work hard and fail in examinations, may be due to unfavorable environmental conditions, they may not want to go through that process again, because it is not rewarding. Having seen how their fellow students performed better via cheating during examinations, they also learn the undesirable behavior and thus, get involved in academic dishonesty.

Q13. Cheating or bending the rules is the only way out if a lot of work is expected to be done in a short period of time: Only 17% agreed, the remaining 83% of respondents disagreed. These results may reflect the ease of acquiring an extension at LREI.

Q14. I am willing to do assessments for another person or do someone's work: Only 75% agreed, the remaining 25% of respondents disagreed. It is common at LREI for students to reach out to their friends or peers for "help" on assignments. Students commented that they may choose to have somebody with better knowledge of a particular subject give them the answers or help them through an assignment.

Q15. Some classes unconsciously encourage cheating in assignments (take-home quizzes, open book, etc.): 70% agreed, the remaining 30% of respondents disagreed.

Q16. I do not feel guilty about cheating or bending the rules if the teacher does not teach properly (too much material is covered in too short a time, unfair or overly difficult assignments..etc.): 93% of students agreed with this fact, while 7% disagreed. This fact scares me personally as this represents an imbalance in morals for most students.

Comparing: I was unable to see any noteworthy connection between race, gender, having a tutor or not, extracurricular activity, and grade. I did notice that having a tutor or not does not impact whether you cheat as all students with tutors noted that they still cheated.

Faults in the survey: Compared to the overall sample size I only received around 25 percent of respondents. The scale or rating for each question confused many people. The survey disproportionately consisted of white respondents. Some questions that would've shed light on my research question were left out or unanswered.

## **Conclusion**

In interviewing, discussing, and surveying with students at LREI I have concluded that the reasons for cheating in assignments and tests are as follows: time pressure; laziness; competition with others; coping with stress; level of difficulty; chances of getting caught are minimal; punishment is not serious; improving one's grades; peer-Pressure; fear of failure; "Everybody does it"; a disinterest in the class; parents' pressure; taking a chance; teacher does not care; vigilance in the classroom is low; high-course-load, and not understanding questions. Some

One teacher, that chooses to remain anonymous, noted that in the school they worked for they concerned only about performance and that a lack of effective study habits were the main reason why students were so blatantly cheating. After reviewing my responses, they noted that they couldn't really tell how or why students participated in academic dishonesty at LREI.

The question "Why do students cheat?" really interested researchers and academicians for decades; they typically divided reasons for cheating into three categories: psychological (Roth & McCabe, 1995), demographic (Stern & Havlicek, 1986), and situational (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). Of these three, research indicates that psychological factors appear to play the most important role in students cheating. According to Cizek (1999), main students' responses on the question are (a) competition for good grades, (b) inadequate time to study for exams, (c) unfair or overly difficult assignments, and (d) a lack of interest in the course and material.

Cheating seems like a very easy option for some students because they feel that the risk of detection is often minimal and that it is not their fault, etc. Cheating is underestimated in LREI, and that can further encourage students to cheat and get away with it. What we must think about for the future is what is at cost when cheating and why is it wrong? I would like to answer this

question and also provide recommendations for how to change the norm of cheating in schools in the United States next year.

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