

How Prevalent are Acts of Academic Dishonesty and Who are the Perpetrators when Cheating is defined by the Student Body?

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Abstract - *This study is a mixed method research which attempted to determine the prevalence and correlates of academic cheating when the students are privileged to define which acts would be classified as academically dishonest. The results of the study showed that some of the cheating behaviors identified in the literature are not recognized by students as dishonest. When students define what acts are cheating and what are not, roughly eight (8) out of every 10 students will be considered as having cheated at least once within an academic year. Furthermore, students have an average of six (6) cheating techniques under their disposal, three (3) of which are used in examinations, quizzes, and/or exercises and the other three (3) in papers and/or projects. The study also found that when the student-defined list of cheating behaviors is utilized, cheating is more frequently done in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises than in papers and/or projects. Finally, it was found that cheating have several variables with moderately strong significant correlations and all of these correlates can be appreciated coherently using Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior.*

Keywords: *Cheating, Planned Behavior, Academic Dishonesty, Prevalence, Correlates*

INTRODUCTION

In the study entitled *A Study on the Prevalence and Correlates of Academic Dishonesty in Four Undergraduate Degree Programs* [1], the author attempted to determine how prevalent academic dishonesty, or academic cheating, was among the undergraduate students of four degree programs which were chosen to represent four fields of knowledge: Social Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, Natural Sciences, and the Humanities. In addition to this, the study also determined student characteristics that are significantly correlated with their engagement in acts of academic dishonesty. The study arrived at the following general findings: First, more than 90% of the undergraduate students have committed an act of academic dishonesty at least once during a whole academic year. Second, academic dishonesty is generally more often committed on undergraduate papers and projects than on exercises, quizzes, and examinations. Furthermore, they engage in more types of academic dishonesty on papers and projects than on exercises, quizzes, and examinations. Third, the most prevalent form of academic dishonesty is the act of asking other students the questions and/or answers to

a quiz, exercise or exam that the other student has previously taken and one is about to take. And finally, students' perception that their classmates and peers are frequent cheaters and a history of cheating during high school are positively associated with their frequency of academic cheating. Meanwhile, students' belief that cheating is never justified has a negative association with academic cheating.

Even though the study was able to shed light on some aspects of academic dishonesty, its appreciation of cheating within the campus under study has limitations because it defined what academic dishonesty is and what acts constitute the phenomenon by relying on existing literature which was predominantly taken from studies in western countries. It did not consider whether or not this definition of academic dishonesty and the acts associated with the concept are congruent with what the students of a higher education institution in the Philippines believe. It is possible that the academically dishonest behaviors used in the study are not the behaviors which the students believe to be dishonest. After all, one of the problems that beset the studies on academic dishonesty is in coming up with a

universally acceptable definition of the concept of “academic dishonesty” or “academic cheating” [2]. As explained by Lambert, Hogan and Barton [3], there is a disagreement between researchers on how to define the concept: there are researchers who believe that the concept is limited to unethical behaviors that are intentionally committed, and there are also those who contend that the concept must encompass all behaviors, intentional or otherwise, that are in violation of the prescribed rules of the academe. Furthermore, there are researchers who do not define the concept but instead simply enumerate specific acts which they consider as associated with the concept. It must be noted that even within this group of researchers who simply give lists of acts considered academically dishonest; the contents of the lists differ in quantity.

Using a qualitative research design comprised of key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations, Quintos [4] found that students and faculty members perceive a number of behaviors as cheating. These behaviors which they consider as academically dishonest could be categorized into six categories namely, (1) Active Cheating, (2) Passive Cheating, (3) Use of unauthorized resources, (4) Plagiarism, (5) Impersonation, and (6) Fraud.

When Broeckelman and Pollock [5] interviewed undergraduate and graduate students and faculty members at Ohio University on how they define the concept, many of their participants made use of two distinct words that fall under academic dishonesty: cheating and plagiarism. According to the participants of the study, the word ‘cheating’ is used to describe dishonest behaviors that are committed on tests, particularly in the form of ‘looking and copying answers from another’s test’, ‘making copies of tests to share with others by taking photographs of exams with cell phones’, and ‘passing notes with answers’. However, the term ‘cheating’ can also be used to describe dishonest behaviors that can be done on assignments such as reusing Microsoft Powerpoint presentations on more than one subject. Meanwhile, the term ‘plagiarism’ was defined by the participants as dishonest behaviors which are committed on written assignments or papers. When asked to identify specific behaviors which can be considered as plagiarism, the participants stated ‘cutting and pasting written material from the internet’, ‘turning in entire essays that were found online’, ‘turning in someone else’s work as one’s own’, ‘turning in the same paper

for separate assignments (self-plagiarism)’, and ‘failing to properly cite sources’ are the behaviors that can be considered as acts of plagiarism. This distinction of academic dishonesty on exams and on papers is similar to that reported in Schmelkin, Gilbert, Spencer, Pincus and Silva [6] wherein the students and faculty members also discussed the subject of academic dishonesty in a ‘Paper vs Exams’ manner.

On the subject of what acts are considered to be academically dishonest by the members of the academe, Carlo and Bodner’s study [7] made use of focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with students majoring in Chemistry in a university at New Jersey, USA. The focus of their study was to find out what dishonest behaviors Chemistry students commit in their laboratory classes and why they engage in the dishonest behaviors. The students identified the act of copying or obtaining answers from other students as academically dishonest. However, they contend that acts like asking hints and collaborating on assignments should not be considered as academically dishonest. On the former, they argued that there is nothing wrong with asking for hints since they are not asking for the actual answers. After all, they argued, what else should they do if they do not understand what needs to be done. As for the latter, they argued that there is nothing wrong with collaborating since in actual laboratory research, the researchers are supposed to be a team who collaborate their findings and insights with each other. In addition to these, the students also believed that sharing of data regarding the laboratory experiments is acceptable so long as the data analysis is done by the students themselves. The problem of whether to classify collaboration as academically dishonest or not is not isolated in the study of Carlo and Bodners. Other studies, including that of Broeckelman and Pollock [5] has found out that their student and faculty participants find it hard to decide whether collaborating should be considered dishonest or not due to the fact that both students and faculty members believe that group work or collaboration is a good pedagogical strategy.

There are also some situations wherein both students and faculty members are not sure if it can be construed as cheating. In Morris and Kilian’s study [8] they introduced various situations and asked students and faculty members from seven US universities whether or not such situations can be interpreted as acts of academic dishonesty. It was found out that on

three situations – (1) where the student did not take the initiative in asking for the questions and answers to an exam but was instead informed voluntarily by a friend and the student eventually made use of the acquired information, (2) where a group member in a group paper is unable to participate much in the writing of the paper due to heavy workload but is nonetheless presented as one of the writers, and (3) where a student makes minimal alteration to a paper he has once submitted to another class that requires a paper with the same topic – both the students and faculty members are undecided on whether the students in the situations are guilty of academic dishonesty.

Meanwhile, when it comes to computer-mediated courses, or those courses which are held online, students in Raines, Ricci and Brown's study [9] defined academic dishonesty as behaviors that are not in accordance and in violation of the prescribed code of conduct and policies of the university and of the professors. Going by this definition of academic dishonesty, they identified a number of behaviors that may be considered dishonest. This list includes the use of sources of information or materials which have been specifically instructed by the professor to not be used, the violation of the rules established on the syllabi of the professors, accomplishing an assignment or exercise in a manner that deviates from how the professor instructed the exercise of assignment to be done, deceiving professors by claiming a work as yours when it is not, getting answers to a test in advance, purchasing papers and passing them as one's own. Aside from these, the students also considered it dishonest when students, as they said it, 'use their own brains'. By this, what the participants of Raines, Ricci and Brown's study meant is that they considered it academically dishonest if the students use someone else's ideas or thoughts instead of relying on their own.

Bishop, Drozd, Gosbin, and Valero's study [10] found that teachers and students share some of the acts believed to be dishonest by the participants of the other studies. In their study, majority of the respondents believed that purchasing essays and passing them as one's own, copy-pasting parts of an article or the whole article from the web, using a friend's paper and passing it off as one's own, and taking ideas and phrases from online sources are academically dishonest. In addition to these, the participants also believe that the use of unauthorized electronic devices during exams, giving a friend

answers to a test one has already taken and the friend is about to take are examples of acts that can be judged as dishonest. Meanwhile, Andrews, Smith, Henzi and Demps' [11] student and faculty respondents identified acts such as looking at other's papers during exams, doing another student's paper or exam in exchange for money or having another student do one's paper or exam in exchange for money, as well as the aforementioned use of electronic devices during class as acts of academic dishonesty.

Still on the topic of what cheating is and what acts constitute it, it must be noted that when students and faculty members identify specific acts of academic dishonesty, many of them believe that the acts vary in their degree of seriousness. For example, in the aforementioned study of Broeckelman and Pollock [5], majority of the students and faculty members believe that the act of plagiarism is much worse than cheating on tests, with one student indicating that the act of falsifying data for scientific papers as the worst of all. Furthermore, they identified three bases by which they would measure the degree of seriousness of an academically dishonest behavior: these are the amount of information taken (for example, the amount of information which students take from other sources without proper citation), the frequency by which the behaviors are committed by the students, and the intent (whether the academically dishonest behavior was done intentionally or by accident).

This limitation in the existing literature on academic dishonesty became the motivation for the conduct of this study. The conduct of this study was governed by the following research objectives:

1. Determine the prevalence of academic cheating among the students of the four degree programs when the students are privileged to define what constitutes academic cheating and what do not;
2. Determine the number of types of academically dishonest behaviors that students of the four degree programs engage in when the students are privileged to define what constitutes academic cheating and what do not;
3. Determine which between cheating on exams/quizzes/exercises and cheating on papers/projects is more often committed by the students of the four degree programs when the students are privileged to define what constitutes academic cheating and what do not; and

4. Identify the correlates of academic cheating when the students are privileged to define what constitutes academic cheating and what do not.

METHODS

Thirty-four college students of varying ages (ranging from 17 to 20), sex, and student classification from the Humanities, Social Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, and Natural Sciences were invited to participate in focus group discussions for this study. In the selection of the study participants, emphasis was given on covering the different year levels/classifications and sex of the students from the degree programs under study. This was under the rationale that different groups of students may have different lived experiences which might have consequently lead to differing appreciations of academic cheating. The participants were presented with the list of 32 academically dishonest behaviors used in the author's first study [1] and were asked to deliberate which among the 32 behaviors they consider as cheating and which they do not. The students were briefed that their participation in the focus group discussions are voluntary and they have the freedom to opt out should they see fit. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential sanctions it can incur in a higher education institution, the names of the student participants were withheld to protect their identity.

After the results of the student deliberations on the 32 behaviors were obtained, the behaviors which the students declared as non-academically dishonest were noted. The data obtained in the first study [1] was then re-analyzed using the newly deliberated, shorter list of academically dishonest behaviors. In order to measure the prevalence of cheating, a student is considered as part of the set of academically dishonest cases when he or she reported to have engaged in the behavior at least once during the academic year under study. Similar to the original study, a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to determine which between cheating on exams, quizzes and/or exercises and cheating on papers and/or projects was more often committed by students. Spearman Rho Correlation tests were conducted to determine significant correlations between students' characteristics and their engagement in acts of academic dishonesty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the findings of the focus group discussions on what acts are considered cheating, the behaviours

listed in the questionnaire used in the survey research which the students did not identify as forms of academic dishonesty can be identified. These are as follows:

1. *Noticing someone else cheating in an exam, quiz or exercise and not reporting it.*

This is considered by students as a manifestation of apathy, but not a form of cheating. They reasoned out that it is no longer their business to tell on their classmates, especially when doing so could bear the stigma of being labeled as a "sipsip" (brown-noser) or "sumbungero" (tattle tale).

2. *Listing unread sources in a paper's bibliography*

The students reasoned out that they have either read parts of the book, or have read articles which cited that the source of the information was the book.

3. *Reading condensed/abridged versions of a novel, play, etc. or watching a movie based on the book rather than reading the assigned full-length version*

This was perceived by some students as just "being more efficient".

4. *Going to Wikipedia.com or some other site to read the summary of a book or a movie you are supposed to read or watch and make a review of.*

This was also perceived by some students as just "being more efficient".

5. *Asking and/or taking ideas from others and using them without giving credit.*

For some students, this is merely a form of help that does not necessitate a citation all the time because in several cases, it is done informally between friends/classmates.

6. *Turning in the same paper in two different classes without making sure that it is alright with the teachers.*

This is considered to be a minor case for several students especially since the courses concerned are not major courses

7. *Working with a group in a paper that was assigned as individual work.*

For the student participants, as long as each student contributed and exerted effort in the “study session”, it is a practice that should be allowable. Even some of the faculty members are in agreement with this.

If these are taken out of the list of behaviours considered as academically dishonest, then the number of students who have cheated at least once in the study would be as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of students per degree program who have committed an act of academic dishonesty at least once using the revised list of cheating behaviours (n=237).

| | Exams, Quizzes, And/Or Exercises | Papers And/Or Projects | Overall |
|----------------------|---|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Social Science | 95% | 85% | 96% |
| Humanities | 86% | 80% | 95% |
| Natural Science | 86% | 86% | 97% |
| Mathematical Science | 88% | 63% | 95% |
| Overall | 88% | 80% | 96% |

In the author’s first study [1], it was found that 92% of the students have cheated at least once in exams/ quizzes, and/or exercises and 93% have cheated at least once in papers and/or projects. These findings are further nuanced when the prevalence is checked by degree program: It was found that cheating in exams, quizzes and/or exercises was most prevalent among the students of the Social Sciences (95%), followed by those from the Humanities (94%), the Natural Sciences (91%), and finally, the Mathematical Sciences (88%). When it comes to cheating on papers and/or projects, on the other hand, cheating was found to be most prevalent in the student body of the Social Sciences (98%), followed by those from the Humanities and the Natural Sciences (both 94%), and finally, those from the Mathematical Sciences (85%). Overall, this results to 98% of students from the Humanities and the Social Sciences, 97% of the students from the Natural Sciences, and 95% of the students from the Mathematical Sciences having cheated at least once.

The reduction in the behaviours recognized as academically dishonest has resulted to significant decreases in the proportion of students who have been

reported to have cheated at least once. When it comes to cheating on exams, quizzes, and/or exercises, this study found that when the list of student-defined cheating behaviors is used, the prevalence of cheating is reduced for the Humanities (from 94% down to 86%) and the Natural Sciences (from 91% down to 86%). However, there was no observed reduction in the prevalence of cheating in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises among the student bodies of the Social Sciences and the Mathematical Sciences. More substantial reductions in prevalence is observed in the prevalence of cheating in papers and/or projects. The student body of the Social Sciences, which had a 98% prevalence in the previous study, now has a reduced prevalence of 85%. The same pattern is found among those from the Humanities (from 94% down to 80%), the Natural Sciences (from 94% down to 86%), and the Mathematical Sciences (from 85% down to 63%). All in all, this result in the reduction of the prevalence of cheating in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises from 92% down to 88% and the prevalence of cheating in papers and/or projects from 93% down to 80%.

Though the decreases are significant when the analysis is divided into cheating on exams, quizzes, and/or exercises and papers and/or projects, it is worth noting, however, that the differences in overall proportions of student engagement in cheating per degree program are very minimal still. Moreover, the overall proportion of students per degree program who have reported to have done at least one recognized cheating behaviour remain almost the same (from 97% down to 96%), though the Natural Science degree program has now overtaken the Social Sciences as the degree program with the highest proportion of self-reported cheating in papers and/or projects.

Table 2. Average number of types of academically dishonest behaviours committed by students per degree program using the revised list of cheating behaviours (n=237).

| | Exams, Quizzes, And/Or Exercises | Papers And/Or Projects | Overall |
|----------------------|---|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Social Science | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Humanities | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Natural Science | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Mathematical Science | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Overall | 3 | 3 | 6 |

Table 3. Results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test comparing which between cheating on examinations, quizzes, and/or exercises and cheating on papers and/or projects is more often committed among the four degree programs using the revised list of cheating behaviours

| | Social Science | Humanities | Natural Science | Mathematical Science | Overall |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------|
| CH.PAPER<CH.EXAM | 29 | 37 | 35 | 29 | 130 |
| CH.PAPER>CH.EXAM | 17 | 15 | 32 | 7 | 71 |
| CH.PAPER=CH.EXAM | 9 | 12 | 10 | 5 | 36 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) | .070 | .003* | .640 | .001* | .001* |

*significant at $\alpha=5\%$

This reduction in the behaviours recognized as cheating behaviours would also result in changes in some other significant areas of the findings, particularly in the number of cheating techniques used by students per degree program and the comparison on frequency of cheating between exams, quizzes, and/or exercises and papers and/or projects. These are summarized in Table 2.

The previous study found that overall, the student population engaged in 9 types of cheating – 4 techniques manifested in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises and 5 in papers and/or projects. When analyzed per degree program, the findings indicated that those from the Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Mathematical Sciences all engaged in 4 types of cheating in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises while those from the Humanities engaged in 3 types. Furthermore, those from the Social Sciences and Natural Sciences engaged in 6 types of cheating techniques in papers and/or projects compared to 5 types among those from the Mathematical Sciences and 4 types from those in the Humanities. While there is a generally observable decrease in techniques used if only the new list of cheating behaviours are used, the decrease in techniques is most notable in the papers and/or projects. This also translates to an overall observable decrease in techniques utilized by

students (a reduction of 2 to 4 cheating techniques overall). This decrease is most pronounced among the Natural Science students.

On the question of which between cheating in exams, quizzes and exercises and cheating on papers and projects is more frequently committed by the students of the four degree programs, the following results have been shown in Table 3.

There is a notable change in the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test after revising the list of cheating behaviours. Owing primarily to the removal of several cheating behaviours under the paper and project category, the frequency of cheating is now higher in exams, quizzes, and or exercises, albeit this is only significant in the Humanities and Mathematical Science student bodies and overall. This is a complete opposite of the initial study's results regarding this research question.

The final point that needs to be re-analysed given the revised set of academically dishonest behaviours are the correlates of academic cheating. There have been several notable changes in the correlation coefficients obtained from the data analysis. In particular, it was found that the variables with moderately strong associations with cheating have increased in number. These are shown on Table 4.

Table 4. Significant moderately strong correlates of academic dishonesty using the revised list of cheating behaviours.

| -Variables | Correlation Coefficients | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------|
| | Cheating On Exams | Cheating On Papers |
| Frequency of academic dishonesty during high school | .333 | .274 |
| Student's perception on frequency of classmates' and peers' cheating | .283 | .279 |
| Attitude that cheating is never justified | -.382 | -.168 |
| Attitude that cheating harms no one | .390 | |
| Attitude that cheating is okay if friends ask | .453 | |
| Attitude that cheating is okay in order to keep scholarship | .346 | |
| Attitude that cheating is okay to stay in school | .371 | |
| Attitude that cheating is okay to pass the course | .404 | |
| Attitude that cheating is okay to graduate | .412 | |

*significant at $\alpha=5\%$

There is a significant change in the variables that have a moderately strong correlation with academic dishonesty. The three variables which were found to be moderately correlated with cheating before has retained their significance, albeit the frequency of cheating in high school has decreased in its strength of correlation when it comes to cheating on papers, and the perception of frequency of cheating amongst classmates and peers have weakened in correlation for both categories of cheating.

The power of attitudes as a determinant of student behaviour is made more salient here than before, as seven variables pertaining to attitudes on cheating have been found to be significant, six of which are significantly correlated only with cheating on exams and one remaining as a significant correlate cheating both on exams and papers. It is however noticeable that the attitude that cheating is never justified has weakened in its correlation, particularly in cheating on papers. Nevertheless, it remains to be the most powerful negative correlate of cheating in the study's set of variables. It is also worth noting that some of the attitude variables found to be significantly correlated, such as the attitudes that cheating is okay to graduate, pass the course, and when friends ask, are reasons which the participants in the qualitative study have identified as actual reasons for engagement in academically dishonest behaviours.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study makes salient the importance of knowing the perceptions of the stakeholders when it comes to understanding a social problem: Using the students' own social construction of what behaviours should be classified as cheating and which are not, this study presents a new perspective on the results of the first study on cheating[1]. In particular, this study showed that when students are given the chance to define cheating, the reported prevalence of cheating and the number of types of cheating techniques utilized by the students are decreased. Of greater importance is the finding that when the student-defined cheating behaviors are utilized, then the statistical analyses would show that cheating is more prevalent in exams, quizzes, and/or exercises than in papers and/or projects instead of the other way around which was reported in the previous study. Finally, the findings of this study made salient new variables with moderately strong associations with academic cheating. The set of variables with moderately strong associations with academic cheating bring to mind Ajzen's Theory of Planned

Behavior [12] as a useful guide in interpreting the correlational results of the study. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, a person's behavior is a by-product of three factors: (1) their attitudes, (2) the subjective norms, and (3) their perceived behavioral control. By attitudes, the theory posits that a person must have a positive attitude towards the behavior. Furthermore, the theory posits that the person must believe that the action to be taken is in line with the subjective norms of the context wherewith the action will be done. Finally, the person must perceive that he or she has the capability to commit the act. When the three factors are in agreement, then the person will have the intention to commit the behavior. When the correlates are analyzed from this theoretical framework, the resulting conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

The different attitudinal statements which were found to have moderately strong correlations with academic cheating form the ATTITUDES block of variables in the theory. The perception that their classmates and peers are also cheating gives an impression that while cheating might be ideally undesirable, the actual normative culture of the campus is lax or might even be favorable towards cheating – hence the prevalence of cheating among its student body. When both the student's attitudes and the perceived norms of the campus are in favor of cheating, then the student will have the intention of cheating. This intention is further strengthened and translated into action when the student has the capability to cheat. This is where the student's cheating history during high school comes in: their cheating experience has given them the skills necessary to pull off the cheating behavior without getting caught.

What does this mean for the academe? This has two important implications: first, the academe's appreciation of what acts constitute academic dishonesty may not be perfectly synchronized with the appreciation of students. This is a possible by-product of weak socialization in the matter which can be rectified by orientations and written guidelines provided to the students, and even the other major stakeholder – the faculty – on what are the specific acts of cheating that are prohibited within the institutions of learning. Second, it must be noted that even though weak socialization on what acts are undesirable and classified as cheating is part of the problem, it cannot be denied that students still engage in acts of academic cheating despite fully knowing that they are deviant acts within the academe.

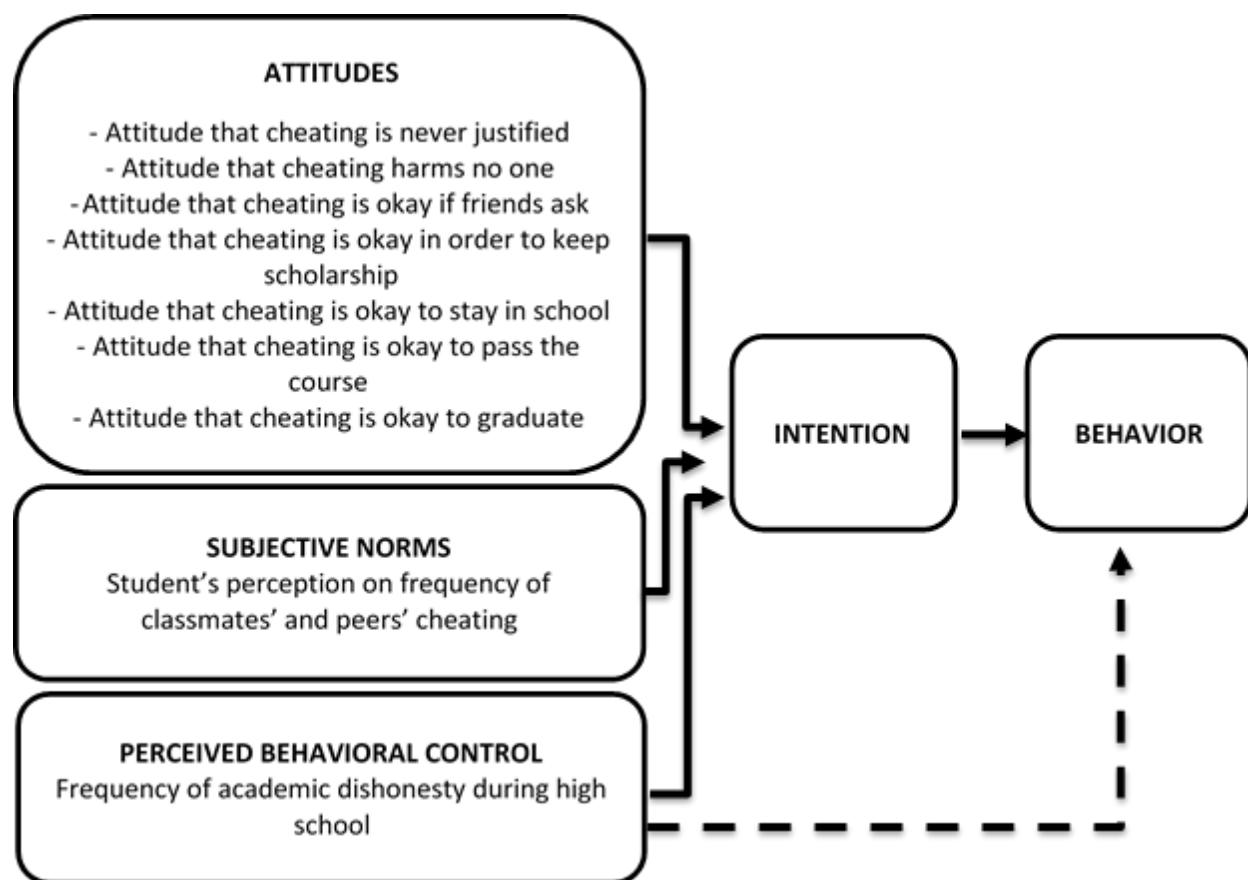


Figure 1. Results of the Correlational Tests on Academic Cheating when analyzed using the Theory of Planned Behavior

To combat this, the course of action must deal with the three factors identified above: attitudes, subjective norms, and history of cheating. Value orientation on the undesirability and short- and long-term implications of cheating practices must be provided to the student body. The academe must also take steps to show that the normative culture of the campus is firmly against cheating. A possible method to implement this is through the proliferation of written reminders about the campus' stance against cheating in student handbooks as well as in the classrooms. This can be enhanced by a demonstration of the student disciplinary office of its commitment to pursuing sanctions against those caught cheating. This is because the capability of the normative culture to compel the conformity of the students might be limited if sanctions are not in place, or not seen to be applied. Finally, to combat their behavioral capability to cheat, we must look to our fellow educators at the

primary and secondary education level – those in higher education institutions only meet the students after they have spent years and developed skills for roughly 10 to 12 years of schooling at the earlier levels. By then, their attitudes and toward cheating and the skills to pull off the behavior successfully are already well-developed. If we want to curb the problem, we must nip it in the bud: prevent them from knowing how to cheat at the basic education level.

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