

Do Honor Codes Make a Difference to Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Cheating?

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ABSTRACT

There have been a plethora of studies outlining the various factors (such as gender, religious affiliations, age, major, etc.) which may affect undergraduate student cheating. Several recent studies suggest that there are two main theories that explain why students cheat: the social network analysis component of contagion theory and cost/benefit analysis within economic theory. One of the ways colleges and universities have attempted to address the issue of cheating is through the use of an honor code. It has been suggested that the problem of cheating can be mitigated by promoting academic integrity as the social norm. The use and enforcement of an honor code would address the two main theories of why students cheat by emphasizing that students in their peer group do not condone cheating, specifying what constitutes cheating and establishing punishments involved in getting caught.

Based on this previous research, we wanted to see if students believed that 1) having an honor code made a difference to students' perceptions of cheating and 2) the perception of the enforcement of that honor code made a difference. Using methodology and survey questionnaires similar to previous research studies, in fall 2009, 434 students from a south Midwestern large comprehensive university and a mid-western small private liberal arts college completed a questionnaire asking their perceptions of cheating at their institution. The questionnaires used a 1-5 Likert scale on whether or not the student felt it was okay to cheat for a specific example such as plagiarizing or copying homework. The lower the overall score the less likely the student felt it was okay to cheat. For the first part of our research question, we asked the respondents using a 1-5 Likert scale if they knew the consequences of cheating at their institution. Those students who strongly agreed that they were aware of the consequences of cheating (4 or 5 on the Likert scale) had significantly lower overall cheating scores (p-value .000) than those who did not agree with this statement (1 or 2 on the Likert scale). Therefore it would appear that if the consequences of cheating are strongly known, students are less likely to think it is okay to cheat (social analysis theory). For the second part of our research question, we asked the respondents using a 1-5 Likert scale if they felt the consequences of cheating are

strongly enforced. Those students who strongly agreed that the consequences of cheating were enforced (4 or 5 on the Likert scale) had significantly lower overall cheating scores (p-value .000) than those who did not agree with this statement (1 or 2 on the Likert scale). Therefore it would appear that the consequences of cheating must be thought to be strongly enforced in order to be effective (cost/benefit analysis theory).

This research suggests that it is simply not enough for academic institutions to have an honor code. Academic institutions must clearly communicate to the students the consequences of cheating and the consequences of cheating must be strongly enforced.