Allied Dental and Dental Educators’ Perceptions of and Reporting Practices on Academic Dishonesty

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Abstract: Highly publicized reports and current research on cheating in dental schools and dental hygiene programs have created a resurgence of proactive measures in the deterrence of academic dishonesty. A majority of administrators and faculty members are of the opinion that cheating does occur at their schools and may have been personally involved with incidents of cheating through observation or student reporting. With the information age and the diverse makeup of today’s student body, there may be differences in what is considered academic dishonesty between students and educators. The purpose of this study was to elicit perceptions on those differences, ascertain the number of cheating incidents that educators personally witnessed or about which they received information, and determine how they resolved those incidents. Another aim of this study was to determine if having an honor code, adequate ethics training, honor pledges, dialogue in the classroom, and formal due process policy were related to the number of cheating incidents. Surveys were distributed at the educational program of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Section on Dental Hygiene Education at the 2009 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition. Results show the majority of these educators had had experience with cheating occurrences and believe that there are disparities between students and educators and among cultural groups in defining academic dishonesty. No differences or patterns emerged between academic integrity characteristics and occurrences or reports of cheating.

Disconcerting to educators are the many highly publicized reports on the pervasive nature of academic dishonesty, the multitude of commentaries on its burgeoning effects on the academic environment, and news of dental schools’ cheating scandals. One recent study of sixty-one U.S. and Canadian dental schools reported that, of the 423 faculty members who responded, 39.5 percent believe that serious cheating occurs in their schools. Dental administrators and educators are not just cognizant of the prevalence of academic dishonesty, but are becoming increasingly proactive in its prevention. Ethics training is being incorporated into the curriculum that is more reflective of practical dilemmas. A majority of dental schools and dental hygiene programs endorse an honor code and employ a due process policy in an effort to deter and define cheating behaviors, outline expectations of student responsibility, and protect institutional and individual rights. Many institutions require students to handwrite and sign an established honor pledge on all graded work in order to invest responsibility for their own work. Studies have suggested that lowered rates of academic misconduct occur at institutions that uphold and embrace an honor code. Furthermore, faculty members at honor code schools are more likely to abide by formal judicial policy than those at non-honor code schools; faculty members at non-honor code schools may prefer to personally deal with cheaters. Student perceptions about the climate of academic integrity may influence their decision to participate in misconduct. If students witness faculty members and administrators modeling integrity and emphasis is placed on the importance of accountability and veracity, students are more likely to accept those values and emulate that behavior. By incorporating discussions about expectations of student behavior in the classroom, revisiting the honor code, requiring students to sign an honor pledge prior to or after taking examinations, and following due process policy, educators are promoting academic integrity and modeling good character. However, higher education faculty members may be reluctant to report academic misconduct to the appropriate authority or, for a variety of reasons, feel that it is prudent to manage cheating behaviors independently. Some arguments for this course of action are that many faculty members sense a lack
of administrative support, have witnessed less severe punishments than warranted, fear litigation, do not want to tarnish the reputation of the school or themselves, and do not want to spend the time required on procedural processes. Additional concerns for educators may be that generational differences and multicultural differences are contributors to the moral confusion that exists in the academic environment. Numerous studies indicate that there are discrepancies on the definitions of dishonest behaviors between a younger, globally diverse student body and an older “boomer generation” group of administrators.

This study sought to determine the number of observed or reported cheating incidents in the classroom and clinic settings and the subsequent action taken in response, by the faculty member, one’s department, or the administration. In addition, this study elicited dental educators’ perceptions on cheating occurrences and perceptions on cultural and faculty-to-student differences in what constitutes cheating. Finally, the study sought to determine if having an honor code, honor pledges, an ethics curriculum, and open discussions of academic dishonesty relate to the prevalence of cheating incidents in which the respondent was personally involved. The results of this study may be an exercise in the sharing of useful information for dental and dental hygiene educators to utilize in reducing academic dishonesty.

Materials and Methods

A survey was developed and approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board of Baylor College of Dentistry. Distribution of the survey took place during the educational program of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Section on Dental Hygiene Education at the 2009 ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition in Phoenix, AZ. The attendees provided a convenience sample, and completion of the survey was voluntary and anonymous; therefore, no identifiers or representation of any population was confirmed. Of the 100 surveys that were available for attendees to pick up at the entrance to the meeting room, sixty-two were completed and turned in at the conclusion of the program (62 percent response rate), of which sixty were usable. The other thirty-eight surveys were not turned in to the instructed area.

The survey included questions on respondents’ years of service in dental education and in what capacity. The characteristics of an honor code, honor pledge, due process policy, adequate ethics training, and open discussions in the classroom on the consequences of cheating were asked in yes or no questions. Respondents were asked if cheating had been personally witnessed or reported by another student in the classroom or clinic, what course of action was pursued for observed or reported incidents, and whether the cheating incidents were resolved independently, within his or her department, or by the administration. Respondents were asked to check all that applied. Questions also elicited subjects’ perceptions regarding the existence of cultural disparities and student disparities in what constitutes certain behaviors as cheating. Space was provided for comments. MINITAB Release 14.11.1 was used for frequencies and for a series of chi-square tests for independence to determine if any significant patterns emerged between academic integrity characteristics and observed or reported cheating.

Results

The sample included fifteen dental educators, thirty-four dental hygiene educators, ten directors or chairs of programs, and one academic dean. Sixty-five percent of the respondents (n=39) said they had served in that professional capacity for more than ten years; 13.3 percent (n=8) had from five to ten years and 21.7 percent (n=13) for less than five years. The average number of courses taught per academic calendar year was 3.5 (n=59), and the average number of hours of teaching in the clinic per week was less than ten hours (n=33), between ten and twenty hours (n=20), and over twenty hours (n=7).

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the represented institutions and the individuals’ teaching practices that respondents said contribute to the pursuit of academic integrity and the deterrence of academic dishonesty. A majority of the respondents reported that their institution has an honor code, an official due process policy, adequate ethics training in the curricula, and syllabi and classroom discussions that include behavioral expectations of students. A minority of respondents—18.3 percent (n=11)—said they require students to sign an honor pledge before taking an examination or a quiz.

Almost 100 percent of the respondents (n=58) reported believing that cheating occurs at their academic institution. The number of times the respondents personally witnessed cheating in the classroom and clinic setting and the number of times it was reported by students are shown in Table 2. Of the sixty
respondents submitting usable surveys, six reported never witnessing or hearing accounts of any type of cheating. Of the remaining fifty-four respondents, the majority (approximately 77 percent) reported that cheating had occurred less than five times in all three circumstances, and the remaining 23 percent reported incidents occurring five times or more. The respondents were asked to check all that apply for the manner in which these incidents were managed. The ninety responses were broken down as follows: 27.8 percent (n=25) resolved by self; 36.7 percent (n=33) resolved within the department; and 35.6 percent (n=32) reported to the administration. This reporting shows a fairly equal distribution of how cheating incidents were managed. Chi-square tests did not reveal statistically significant differences between frequency of academic integrity characteristics and frequency of occurrences or reports of academic dishonesty.

Only eight of the respondents included comments in the comments section. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, allowing subjects to express their opinions without identification in any particular group. Following are direct quotations, grouped by topic, from seven of those eight respondents.

**Cultural Differences**
- “I’ve learned that there are [cultural disparities], but I don’t understand why it should [be that way]. Dishonesty is dishonesty no matter what your background.”
- “I think that all cultures recognize what constitutes academic dishonesty, but some cultures approve academic dishonesty as a way to get ahead.”

**Generational Differences**
- “Student perception of honesty is very different today from what it used to be.”
- “When students have parents who have done everything for them, they expect that the world owes them whatever.”

**Other Comments**
- “I think ways of cheating are outdistancing us.”
- “Reason for not reporting cheating: student that reported incident was shunned by rest of class; student in another incident was made to feel as if she was lying or the ‘criminal’ in the situation by the faculty.”

### Table 1. Respondents who affirmed that their institution includes measures that foster academic integrity, by percentage and number of total respondents (N=60)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School has due process policy.</td>
<td>95.0%</td>
<td>(57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus contains student expectations.</td>
<td>85.0%</td>
<td>(51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School has honor code.</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
<td>(46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom discussion is conducted on consequences of cheating.</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate ethics training is provided.</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>(42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students sign honor pledge prior to exam or quiz.</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Note: Respondents were asked to check all that applied.*

### Table 2. Frequency of observed and reported incidents of cheating, by percentage and number of total respondents in each category (N=54)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident Type</th>
<th>1 to 4 Times (% and N)</th>
<th>5 to 10 Times (% and N)</th>
<th>More Than 10 Times (% and N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personally witnessed in classroom</td>
<td>72.2% (39)</td>
<td>25.9% (14)</td>
<td>1.9% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally witnessed in clinic†</td>
<td>74.1% (40)</td>
<td>14.8% (8)</td>
<td>5.6% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student reported cheating</td>
<td>77.8% (42)</td>
<td>18.5% (10)</td>
<td>3.7% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Three respondents said they never witnessed cheating in clinic.

Note: Respondents were asked to check all that applied.
• “I try to promote professional integrity and personal accountability in preference to punishing or threatening negative behaviors.”

Discussion

This survey was distributed and collected during a national meeting of dental and dental hygiene educators at a presentation entitled “Academic Integrity.” Over 100 professionals attended the presentation, but only 100 surveys were available for distribution. Surveys that were returned totaled sixty; of those, sixty were usable. The remaining thirty-eight surveys were not returned. This survey was anonymous. It was not designed to obtain any information that would identify the respondents by race, gender, religion, or cultural background.

The results of this survey are comparable to those of other studies regarding dental educators’ views about the occurrence of cheating at their schools and their reporting practices regarding incidents of academic dishonesty. Our study found that episodes of cheating are being observed by educators and that 28 percent of cheating incidents were managed independently by the faculty member observing the incident. Unfortunately, this study did not determine the reasons for not reporting those incidents. The reputation of the school or the instructor and fear of student retribution may be considerations that influence faculty members not to inform the appropriate authority. Another reason might be that consequences explicitly outlined in the syllabus state that a “zero” would be given on the assignment or exam in the event of cheating, so the educator might think there was no reason to report the incident outside the classroom. It is feasible that, in some instances, managing the situation personally was used as a teaching moment—for example, with a student who legitimately did not understand his or her behavior to be cheating. At least one-third of cheating incidents observed by or reported to the respondents in our study were reported to the administrative authority. It is unknown why those occurrences were reported or if due process was fulfilled.

Although this study did not provide any insight into the cultural competence or training, if any, of the respondents, the comments made illustrate that cultural differences and perhaps a lack of cultural understanding are some of the challenges that today’s educators may face in a globalized classroom. Our study did find that the majority of responding educators believe there are differences between students and faculty and among cultures in what comprises cheating, which is consistent with the literature. This disconnect on the part of educators with current...

Definition of Cheating

Figure 1. Respondents’ belief that their students’ definition of cheating is equivalent to their own (N=60)
student values needs to be addressed. It is imperative for instructors to ensure that students understand, accept, and abide by the ethical principles that are expected of them, regardless of their background. A measurable tool of the individual’s moral compass during an initial, preadmission process may help to discern a future student’s value system. This information could then be used in the development of the ethics curriculum.

An honor code is intended to provide students with a clear understanding of what constitutes cheating behaviors.11 Faculty members can use the syllabus and open classroom forums to expand further on specific definitions of cheating and ensuing consequences. Having the students sign an honor pledge for all graded work, including a statement that no assistance or cheating has transpired in the completion of the work, may reinforce to the students that the faculty is committed to providing an environment of integrity and accountability. In our study, less than 20 percent of the respondents said they utilize signing an honor pledge prior to taking exams or quizzes as a technique to deter cheating.

Limitations and Future Research Needs

A limitation of this study was that the results were only reported by frequencies. This was our first use of the survey, and it was determined to be not specific enough in the lower range reporting options. Therefore, a revised instrument should be developed for future research. Since the survey was anonymous, it was impossible to distinguish how many different schools were included because more than one respondent could be from the same educational institution. Therefore, the number of schools with an honor code or due process policy may be overstated. Although the convenience sample was small, it may have provided a geographically diverse sampling since the meeting was attended by ADEA members from across the United States. Because the audience was attending a session on academic integrity, this may have influenced their responses on the survey. Regarding the different reporting practices of the respondents, the reasons why those actions were pursued are not known, nor are the resolutions of the cheating incidents. Further research is needed to determine why educators choose to report or not report, how cheating incidents are resolved, and if the outcomes match what is stated in a due process policy. Ways to unite a multicultural student body and the educators on what constitutes academic dishonesty should be addressed further. A larger, random sample across the United States would lend more strength to this type of study.

Conclusions

The findings of this study are comparable to other research findings in that the prevalence of academic dishonesty is known and is personally experienced by dental educators. Instructors manage cheating incidents differently; perhaps the decision to report or not depends on the situation and on the attitudes of the faculty member and of the student. The question remains of how to align the value system of these educators with the current value systems of today’s students.

Acknowledgments

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REFERENCES