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# University Students' Perceptions of Academic Cheating: Triangulating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

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## Background

- Although universally condemned, **academic cheating** occurs more frequently than expected:
  - *Seventy-four percent* of college students had observed cheating and *45%* of them admitted to cheating (Smyth & Davis, 2004).
- In higher education, academic cheating has received much attention because:
  - *It distorts the assessment of learning*, thus reducing the overall efficiency of the nation's educational systems (Magnus et al., 2002);
  - *It indicates a defiance of the values* that are essential to good citizenship (West et al., 2004), and predicts future in workplace (Lawson, 2004).



## Literature Review

- In the literature, researchers have investigated academic cheating from **several perspectives**,
  - *Environmental factors, e.g.*,
    - Cheating is a product of changing values rather than “a willful wrongheadedness on the part of students” (Gross, 2011, p. 435).
    - “In this climate what counts most are numbers and results, and those who get results, those who make the grade, *regardless of how they go about doing it*, reap the benefits” (Willen, 2004, p. 56).
    - Replace behavior motive—when students see peers become *successful* through cheating, they are more likely to do so (Zhou & Zhou, 2007).



## Literature Review

- In the literature, researchers have investigated academic cheating from **several perspectives**:
  - *Personal factors, e.g.*,
    - Personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness, excitement seeking)
    - Attitudes (e.g., intellectual attitudes, idealism)
    - Academic self-perception (e.g., academic self-efficacy)
    - Demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age)
  - *Practices in deterring cheating*:
    - None of the top-ranking countermeasures (e.g., scrambling test questions, small class sizes, using different proctors) appear related to the implementation of honor code reporting, a practice for which faculty and students are required to report violations of academic integrity according to an honor code (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 2009).



## Literature Review

- The literature also revealed **ambiguity and inconsistency** the way that policy-makers, faculty, and students define, perceive, and interpret academic cheating.
  - *In higher education institutions where honor codes are present, there are normally written guidelines and codes for practice, but **most students do not get to read these guidelines** (Owunwanne et al., 2010).*
  - *With the rapid development of information technology, students today have easy access to others' intellectual properties and **may be unable to tell plagiarism from reasonable citations** (Owunwanne et al., 2010).*



## Literature Review

- In summary:
  - *It is unknown whether academic cheating has been **well defined and communicated** to the students.*
  - *The results of previous studies have been mixed, leaving the field **without a clear framework** for understanding and approaching academic cheating.*
  - *Much of the empirical research on academic cheating has been quantitative. There is **a critical need for qualitative inquiries** to unravel the complexity of this topic.*



## Research Questions

- How do university students perceive academic cheating?  
What are their concerns regarding it?
- Do students perceive academic cheating differently according to their demographic background?
- What are the implications of students' perceptions of academic cheating on institutional practices for deterring cheating?



## Research Design

- The current study adopted a **convergent parallel mixed methods** design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011), with both quantitative and qualitative data collected using one survey questionnaire.
  - *Age, gender, ethnicity, current estimated GPA, and classification*
  - *Pre-college cheating behaviors were measured using seven 5-point Likert-type items*
  - *An open-ended question “what do you think of cheating?”*

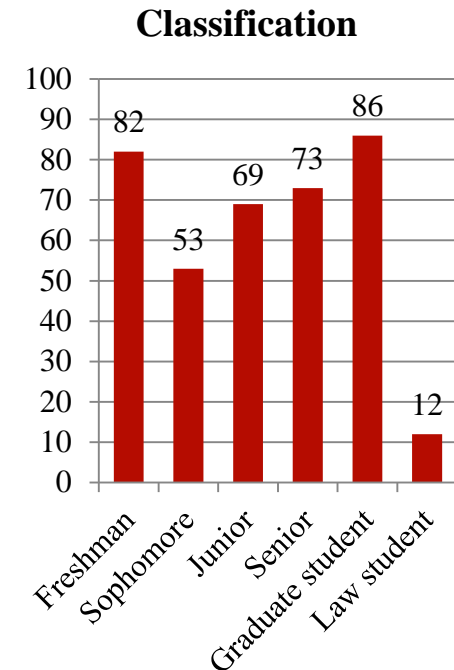
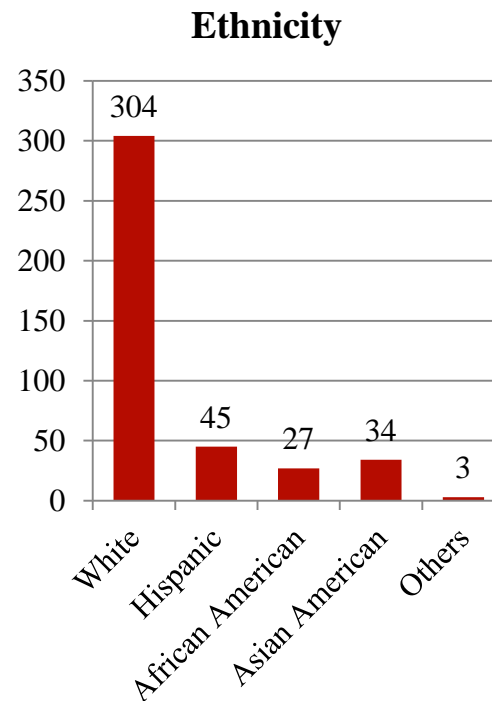
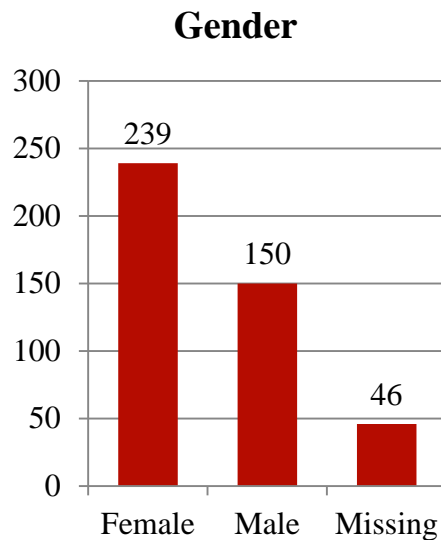




# METHOD

## Participants

- This study was conducted at a large, private university located in the southern region of the United States.
- A total of **435 students** completed the questionnaire.





## Quantitative Findings

- Pre-college cheating
  - *Good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .86$*
  - *The multiple regression for predicting pre-college cheating was significant, adjusted  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(2,377) = 8.37$ ,  $p < .001$*
  - *Male:  $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .001$*
  - *Non-White:  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$*
  - *Graduate students were more likely to respond than undergraduate students,  $\chi^2(1, N = 375) = 12.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .18$ , standardized residual = +2.8*



## Qualitative Findings

- **Five themes** emerged from the qualitative data:
  - *cheating has flexible definitions*
  - *cheating is influenced by the environment*
  - *cheating is a moral transgression*
  - *cheating can be justified by ambiguous means*
  - *cheating comes from conscious decisions.*



## Mixed Methods Findings

- Given that some participants endorsed multiple themes based on the qualitative findings (four out of a total 52, 7.7%), their endorsement to each theme was dummy coded for two-way chi-square analyses
  - *Students did not endorse themes differently according to their gender or classification.*
  - *Non-White students appeared to be more likely to endorse the theme cheating as an ambiguous justification,  $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = 8.28, p < .01, \phi = .40$ , standardized residual = +2.3.*



## Discussion

### ■ Findings

- *The qualitative findings may enrich previous research which focused on either **environmental** (e.g., Gross, 2011; Willen, 2004) and **personal** factors (e.g., de Bruin & Rudnick, 2007; Elias, 2009; Saulsbury, Brown, Heyliger, & Beale, 2011) for academic cheating.*
- *The quantitative findings corroborate Elias (2009) and Saulsbury et al. (2011) that male, undergraduate students seem to either perceive cheating as less unethical or engage in more cheating behaviors, **it is important to note that self-reports of cheating do not accurately account for all of the cheating that occurs** as some students do not report their cheating behaviors or may not have a clear conception of what cheating means.*
- *The justifications and perceptions seemed to spawn from **the goal structure** of the student.*



## Discussion

### ■ Implications

- *Providing students with alternative goals to focus on (e.g., mastery), explicitly defining academic cheating, and enforcing regulations on academic cheating (or at least failing to reinforce the behavior), students might turn from unethical academic behaviors for more adaptive strategies.*
- *No participant mentioned **honor code reporting**, adding to the skepticism of the effectiveness of this practice.*
- *Additionally, knowing that graduate students are more likely to respond to questions about academic cheating than undergraduate students suggests that **undergraduate students may feel uncomfortable talking about academic cheating, that they do not have a clear conceptualization of academic misconduct, or a combination of the two.***

