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Academic integrity: attitudes and practices of students of a public university in Honduras

Miguel Landa-Blanco[1], Cindy Santos-Midence[2], Ana Landa Blanco[3]
National Autonomous University of Honduras

Abstract
Academic integrity should be a structural value for all higher education institutions. The present study describes the prevalence of, and attitudes towards, cheating, plagiarism and authorship misbehaviors in a sample of students from a public university in Honduras. This was conducted through a non-experimental quantitative methodology, using questionnaires. Results suggest that a considerable amount of the participants admitted they had either cheated on an assignment/test or helped someone else do it. Participants rated paying someone else to do one's test as the most severe of the listed academic misbehaviors, followed by plagiarism, granting undeserved authorship, and data fabrication. Respondents with prior cheating experience tend to be more indulgent when rating the severity of those acts. Most students reported they had been warned about cheating on tests, assignments and plagiarism. Comparisons are also made by student's sex and age. Results are discussed according to their implications for higher education institutions.

Keywords
Academic integrity, plagiarism, cheating, education, ethics.

[1] National Autonomous University of Honduras, miguel.landa@unah.edu.hn.
[2] Independent researcher, jurielmidence@gmail.com.
[3] National Autonomous University of Honduras, analanda85@gmail.com.

Theoretical Framework

A culture of academic integrity is one that promotes ethical behavior and aims to diminish ethical misconduct. This culture may be expressed through an ethical infrastructure, with institutional codes, policies, procedures, and committees (Tauginienė, et al. 2018).

Universities are trying to create an environment where knowledge flows in an accessible way for everybody. Academic integrity seeks to improve the university status by acknowledging originality and honest authorship. Therefore, it is necessary to foster a culture that promotes academic integrity, in which, students, professors and staff will have a systematic good practice approach (East and Donnelly 2012).

Academic integrity is one of the fundamental values of formal education (Bieliauskaitė 2014). It is vital in higher education contexts; therefore, many universities include a code of honor in their institutional normativity, thus promoting it and establishing sanctions to undermine unethical behavior (McHaney, Cronan and Douglas 2016). Despite the important role of academic integrity for both personal and institutional development, there is limited literature available on the subject.

On the other hand, academic dishonesty is defined as the use of unauthorized or fraudulent means to achieve a formal academic activity (Abdelfatah and Tabsh 2010). These misconducts include cheating in assignments, projects or exams, falsifying information, and selling assignments, among other behaviors. Dishonest acts negatively affect the educational quality of the institution (Bachore 2016).

Authorship also plays an important role in academic accountability. Nonetheless, there could exist unethical authorship attribution, for instance listing people with minimal or inexistent contributions as authors of works or studies; this is known as gift, guest or honorary authorship. On the other hand, excluding people who indeed deserved authorship credit reflects another ethical misconduct (Tauginienė, et al. 2018).

Passive cheating is committed when students allow their work to be copied by someone else (Desalegn and Berhan 2014). Contract cheating is when a student presents a work written by another person as if it were their own (Tauginienė, et al. 2018), therefore resorting to a third party to do the assignment (Morris 2018). Falsification refers to the manipulation of data or results to gain a specific benefit (Tauginienė, et al. 2018).

As it was mentioned, students can have different techniques to cheat when they are writing papers, taking exams, working in groups, or doing other assignments. Such conducts can be classified in three main areas: taking or receiving information from others, using prohibited materials or information, and avoiding the assessment process (Faucher and Caves 2009).

Some researchers report that the most frequent dishonest acts committed by university students include plagiarism, cheating on exams, and presenting an assignment made by someone else, among other similar behaviors (Bachore 2016). To gain a fundamental understanding of academic dishonesty it is important to study both the act and the attitudinal construction surrounding it.

In this sense, many students approve of cheating (Jones 2011). However, when they are asked to rate the severity of several academic misconducts, the highest rated acts were cheating on a test and on a final term paper (Miller and Izsak 2017); otherwise, allowing a friend to copy an assignment and the inclusion of references in a paper that the student has not read, were rated as less severe acts.

Cheating can be related to a series of internal and external elements. However, there is opportunity to control or decrease this practice (David 2015). The factors that students report as motives to justify academic misconduct include lack of knowledge, and the perceived need of requiring more assistance, external situations beyond the student's control, maintaining good social relationships with partners, and lack of time (Perry 2010). It's also worth mentioning that students who cheated in high school were more likely to cheat in their undergraduate courses (Desalegn and Berhan 2014).

Knowing about the dynamic of these academic misconducts allows the institutions to create specific strategies aimed to reduce such unwanted behaviors. Otherwise, the students could be repeating this pattern in their future work environments (Ellahi, Mushtaq and Bashir Khan 2013).

Experimental research suggests that the inclusion of moral reminders decreased the occurrence of cheating (Grym and Liljander 2016). Another factor that might reduce the chance of a student cheating is the perceived teacher's enthusiasm. This has an inverse direct effect on the student's cheating behavior (Orosz, et al. 2015). Also, being aware of the long-term consequences of academic dishonesty could discourage students from pursuing it (Orosz, et al. 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Considering the previously stated information, the present study aims to explore behaviors and attitudes related to the academic integrity of undergraduate students of a public university in Honduras, specifically by determining the prevalence and attitudes regarding cheating, plagiarism and authorship, as well as the relationship between prior cheating experiences and the attitudes towards these misconducts. Additionally, we want to determine if warnings against cheating influence the perception of the severity of this behavior.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The current study had a quantitative approach, with a non-experimental design. In practice this implies variables were measured without any manipulation in their surrounding conditions.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using an online survey; taking into account that academic misconduct might be considered a sensitive question, this type of self-administered survey may provide more privacy to the respondent than other techniques (Höglinger, Jann and Diekmann 2016). The questionnaire was created by the authors of the present study. It included demographic questions (sex and age), seventeen factual questions about academic integrity (for example: “have you ever cheated on a test?”). It also included seven attitudinal items (for example: “what is your opinion about cheating on test?”), rated on a severity scale with scores from 0 (not an offense at all) to 5 (a grave offense). These items had an acceptable internal reliability coefficient, α=.81, 95% CI [.78, .83]. Table 1 shows the inter-item correlations between the scores. Results suggest that all items are positively and significantly correlated with each other (p<.001).

Table 1: *Relationship between the perceived severity of academic misbehavior items*

Variable 1	Variable 2	Spearman's *rho*	*P*
Cheating on a test	Cheating on an assignment	.56 [.51, .61]	< .001***
	Paying someone else to do a test for you	.39 [.33,.45]	< .001***
	Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	.38 [.31, 44]	< .001***
	Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	.31 [.24, .37]	< .001***
	Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	.41 [.34, .47]	< .001***
	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.33 [.27, .40]	< .001***
Cheating on an assignment	Paying someone else to do a test for you	.23 [.16, .30]	< .001***
	Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	.47 [.41, .53]	< .001***
	Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	.32 [.26, .39]	< .001***
	Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	.38 [.31, .44]	< .001***
	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.35 [.28, .41]	< .001***
Paying someone else to do a test for you	Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	.43 [.37, .49]	< .001***
	Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	.31 [.24, .37]	< .001***
	Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	.35 [.29, .41]	< .001***
	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.30 [.23, .36]	< .001***
Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	.39 [.33, .45]	< .001***
	Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	.44 [.38, .49]	< .001***
	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.33 [.26, .39]	< .001***
Using someone else's work, without properly citing the author	Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	.54 [.48, .59]	< .001***
	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.31 [.24, .38]	< .001***
Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	Listing as an author someone who did not work	.38 [.32, .44]	< .001***

Note. Intervals for Spearman's *rho* were built at a 95% confidence level.

****p<.001*

Sample

The study´s population consisted of 55,084 undergraduate students enrolled in the programs offered by the university. At a 99% confidence level, and a margin of error of 4.8%, this resulted in a suggested sample size of 713 participants. The selection of the respondents was made through a convenience, non-probabilistic approach.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to answering the questionnaire, potential respondents were presented with an informed consent form. This form stated the purpose of the study, describing the role of the respondent and their freedom to participate in the survey, the anonymity of the answers and the researchers' contact information. Only subjects who agreed with the informed consent were authorized to start the questionnaire.

Results

To have a clear understanding of the prevalence of specific academic misconducts, we present a statistical description of the study's variables. From a contemplative standpoint most students (95.23%) have seen a classmate cheat on either an assignment or an evaluation such as a quiz or test (90.74%).

Also, 90.32% of the students reported they have allowed somebody else to use their assignment to cheat, in contrast to the 69% that has helped someone cheat during an exam. Additionally, 76.30% of the sample admits they have cheated on an assignment and 55.26% admit they have done so on a test. Less frequent behaviors include data fabrication (27.77%), asking somebody else to do one's assignment (24.40%), and requesting an undeserved authorship (14.31%). Table 2 provides the prevalence of all the academic misbehaviors included in the present study.

Table 2: *Prevalence of academic misconducts in university students*

Item	Yes	No
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Seen a classmate cheat by using somebody else's assignment	679 (95.23%)	34 (4.77%)
Seen a classmate cheating during either a quiz or test	647 (90.74%)	66 (9.26%)
Allowed someone else to cheat from your assignment	644 (90.32%)	69 (9.68%)
Copied someone else's assignment	544 (76.30%)	169 (23.70%)
Allowed someone else to use your work as a cheat during an exam	492 (69.00%)	221 (31.00%)

Cheated on either a quiz or a test	394 (55.26%)	319 (44.74%)
Given authorship in an assignment to someone who has not worked on it	378 (53.02%)	335 (46.98%)
Asked someone else to do a quiz or test for you	37 (5.19%)	676 (94.81%)
Bought a test or assignment	37 (5.19%)	676 (94.81)
Lied to a teacher for them to your assignment	287 (40.25%)	426 (59.75%)
Copied another author's work, without citing them	269 (37.73%)	444 (62.27%)
Fabricated or falsified data for an assignment	198 (27.77%)	515 (72.23%)
Asked someone else to do an assignment for you	174 (24.40%)	539 (75.60%)
Requested someone to list you as an author, although you did not work on the assignment	102 (14.31%)	611 (85.69%)

Note. Total sample size equals 713 students.

As for the subjective judgement regarding the severity of specific misconducts, the gravest rated offense was paying someone else to do one's test (*M*=4.62, *SD*=0.87), followed by plagiarism (*M*=4.09, *SD*=1.17), listing an author who did not work on the assignment (*M*=4.01, *SD*=1.27), and fabricating data (*M*=3.96, *SD*=1.20). More indulgent scores were granted to paying for an assignment (*M*=3.88, *SD*=1.33), cheating on a test (*M*=3.82, *SD*=1.18), and cheating on an assignment (*M*=3.02, *SD*=1.40), see Table 3.

Table 3: *Statistical description of severity scores for academic misconducts*

Item	Mean	*SD*
Paying someone else to do a test for you	4.62	0.87
Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	4.09	1.17
Listing as an author someone who did not work	4.01	1.27
Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	3.96	1.20
Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	3.88	1.33
Cheating on a test	3.82	1.18
Cheating on an assignment	3.02	1.40

Note. Scores range from 0 (not an offense at all) to 5 (a grave offense).

Prior Experience Cheating on a Quiz or Test

The results show that those students with prior experience of cheating on a test or quiz tend to evaluate academically dishonest acts as less severe than those who report no prior cheating experience, see Table 4. This difference is particularly notable in the respondent's perception of gravity regarding cheating on a test (p<.001) and paying someone else to do one's assignment (p<.001). Therefore, results suggest that people

with prior cheating experience (on tests or quizzes) are more indulgent when judging the severity of dishonest academic behaviors.

Table 4: *Severity ratings compared between students with and without prior cheating experience on tests or quizzes*

Attitudinal item	Group	Mean	*SD*	*W*	*p*	r_{rb}
Cheating on a test	No	4.2	0.99	82,809.5	< .001***	.32
	Yes	3.52	1.24			
Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	No	4.07	1.25	72,354	< .001***	.15
	Yes	3.73	1.37			
Cheating on an assignment	No	3.19	1.37	71,339.5	<.01**	.14
	Yes	2.87	1.4			
Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	No	4.11	1.1	70,247.5	<.01**	.12
	Yes	3.84	1.26			
Paying someone else to do a test for you	No	4.72	0.69	68,280.5	<.01**	.09
	Yes	4.54	0.98			
Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	No	4.2	1.09	68,147.5	.03*	.08
	Yes	4.01	1.23			
Listing as an author someone who did not work	No	4.07	1.23	65,462.5	0.30	.04
	Yes	3.97	1.3			

Note. Sample size for respondents with no experience cheating on a test or quiz is of 319 subjects; on the other hand, the number of participants reporting prior cheating experience on a test or quiz is of 394 subjects. Due to a violation of the normality assumption in the Shapiro-Wilks test (p<.001), the difference is estimated by using the Mann-Whitney U test. Effect size is calculated by the rank-biserial correlation (r_{rb}).
**p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001*

Prior Experience Cheating on an Assignment

When comparing the attitudinal evaluation regarding specific dishonest academic acts, those subjects with prior experience cheating on assignments tend to be more indulgent when judging the severity of the misconducts, when compared to those without such experience, see Table 5. As expected, this difference is particularly notable when evaluating cheating on assignments (p<.001) and paying someone to do one's assignment (p<.001).

Table 5: *Compared severity ratings between students with and without prior cheating experience on assignments*

Attitudinal ítem	Group	Mean	*SD*	*W*	*P*	r_{rb}
Cheating on an assignment	No	3.6	1.33	60456.5	< .001***	.32
	Yes	2.83	1.37			
Paying someone else to do an assignment for you	No	4.22	1.14	54808	< .001***	.19
	Yes	3.78	1.36			
Using someone else's work without properly citing the author	No	4.34	1.01	52480.5	<.01**	.14
	Yes	4.02	1.21			
Fabricating data in order to complete an assignment	No	4.15	1.07	50949.5	.02*	.11
	Yes	3.9	1.23			
Listing as an author someone who did not work	No	4.17	1.24	50864	.02*	.11
	Yes	3.96	1.27			
Cheating on a test	No	4.02	1.07	51132	.02*	.11
	Yes	3.76	1.21			
Paying someone else to do a test for you	No	4.77	0.64	50382.5	.01**	.10
	Yes	4.57	0.92			

Note. Sample size for respondents with no experience cheating on an assignment is of 169 subjects; on the other hand, the number of participants reporting prior cheating experience on an assignment is 544 subjects. Due to a violation of the normality assumption in the Shapiro-Wilks test (p<.001), the difference is estimated by using the Mann-Whitney U test and the effect size is calculated by the rank-biserial correlation (r_{rb}).
*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001

Use of Warnings to Discourage Academic Dishonesty

Of the total sample, 84.57% have been warned in their classes against cheating on tests. This percentage is lower as regards assignments (78.96%) and plagiarism (73.49%). When comparing the severity with which respondents judge plagiarism, results indicate that there is no statistical significant difference between those who have been warned in their classes about plagiarism (M=4.14, SD=1.15) and those who have not (M=3.97, SD=1.22), W=45,517, p=.07, r_{rb}=-.08. Similarly, having received a warning is not associated with committing plagiarism $X^2(1, n=713) = 0.99$, p=.32, φ=.04

Furthermore, students who have been warned in their courses against cheating on a test (M=3.85, SD=1.15), show similar results in severity ratings to those who have not received any warnings (M=3.68, SD=1.33), W=31,490.50, p=.38, r_{rb}=-.05. However, the

association between having received a warning and cheating on a test is statistically significant $X^2(1, n=713) = 7.11$, $p=.01$, $\varphi=.10$.

Also, results suggest that students who have been warned against cheating on assignments ($M=3.13$, $SD=1.34$) tend to judge this type of cheating as more severe than students who have not been warned ($M=2.59$, $SD=1.53$), $W=34{,}110$, $p<.001$, $r_{rb}=-.19$. Yet there is no association between having received a warning and cheating on an assignment $X^2(1, n=713) = 0.30$, $p=.01$, $\varphi =.02$.

Sex, Age and Academic Misconducts

The results show there is a significant association between the students' sex and specific academic misbehaviors, such as copying someone else's assignment, requesting undeserved authorship, asking someone to do one's assignment and lying to a teacher in order for them to accept an assignment, see Table 6.

Table 6: *Association between academic misconducts and the student's sex*

Item	X^2	p	φ
Requested someone to list you as an author, although you did not work on the assignment	17.68	<.001	.16
Asked someone else to do an assignment for you	9.89	<.01	.12
Lied to a teacher for them to accept your assignment	6.65	.01	.10
Copied someone else's assignment	4.08	.04	.08
Allowed someone else to use your work as a cheat during an exam	3.21	.07	.07
Seen a classmate cheating during either a quiz or test	2.27	.13	.06
Fabricated or falsified data for an assignment	1.83	.18	.05
Cheated on either a quiz or test	0.95	.33	.04
Given authorship in an assignment to someone who has not worked on it	0.92	.34	.04
Asked someone else to do a quiz or test for you	1.03	.31	.04
Bought a test or assignment	1.03	.31	.04
Seen a classmate cheat by using somebody else's assignment	0.51	.48	.03
Copied another author's work without citing them	0.8	.37	.03
Allowed someone else to cheat from your assignment	0.43	.52	.02

Note. Degrees of freedom for all chi-square test included in the table equals 1; effect size is calculated by the phi coefficient (φ).

Age and Academic Misconducts

For most indicators, the average age of students who have committed academic misbehaviors is lower than the age of students who have not. This is statistically significant for: cheating on a test or quiz (p=.03), copying an assignment (p<.001), allowing someone to cheat from one's assignment (p=.01), requesting undeserved authorship in an assignment (p<.01), asking someone else to do one´s quiz/test (p<.001) and fabricating/falsifying data (p=.03), see Table 7.

Table 7: *Age and academic misconducts*

Item	Mean (*SD*)		*W*	*P*	r_{rb}
	No	Yes			
Asked someone else to do a quiz or test for you	22.91 (5.08)	21.03 (4.94)	16,781.50	<.001	.34
Requested someone to list you as an author, although you did not work on the assignment	23.03 (5.21)	21.49 (4.04)	37,366	<.01	.20
Allowed someone else to cheat from your assignment	24.74 (6.47)	22.60 (4.88)	26,505	.01	.19
Seen a classmate cheat by using somebody else's assignment	24.76 (6.54)	22.71 (4.99)	13,613.50	.08	.18
Copied someone else's assignment	24.17 (6.35)	22.39 (4.55)	53,918	<.001	.17
Fabricated or falsified data for an assignment	23.17 (5.49)	21.88 (3.70)	56,460.50	.03	.11
Cheated on either a quiz or test	23.53 (5.99)	22.23 (4.13)	68,711.50	.03	.09
Bought a test or assignment	22.88 (5.18)	21.43 (2.48)	13,614	.36	.09
Asked someone else to do an assignment for you	23.01 (5.29)	22.20 (4.35)	50,336	.14	.07
Allowed someone else to use your work as a cheat during an exam	23.35 (5.67)	22.57 (4.79)	56,976.50	.30	.05
Lied to a teacher for them to accept your assignment	22.99 (5.21)	22.54 (4.89)	63,990.50	.29	.05
Seen a classmate cheating during either a quiz or test	23.94 (6.58)	22.69 (4.90)	22,079.50	.65	.03
Given authorship in an assignment to someone who has not worked on it	23.16 (5.58)	22.50 (4.59)	65,192.50	.49	.03
Copied another author's work without citing them	22.75 (4.80)	22.91 (5.53)	61,077.59	.61	.02

Note. Between group comparisons are made with the Mann-Whitney U test due to a violation in the assumption of normality. Effect size is calculated by the rank-biserial correlation (r_{rb}).

Discussion

This study reveals that a great percentage of students reported they have cheated in different ways. Among the most common they mentioned allowing someone else to use their assignment or quiz/test as a cheat. The least frequent actions included data fabrication and asking someone else to do own's assignment.

In a study regarding academic cheating in college students (David 2015), similar results were found. The undergraduates reported that the most frequent behaviors were allowing or helping others to cheat, using a leaflet during exams, plagiarism and receiving more help than can be considered acceptable. On the other hand, among the less practiced behaviors were the purchase of finished documents or presenting papers made by someone else as their own.

The results show that the severity of academically dishonest acts tends to be perceived in a more tolerant way when students have prior experience cheating on quizzes, tests or assignments. Complementarily, other studies have found a relationship between rationalization and academic dishonesty; previous successful misbehaviors give confidence to the student to repeat the same conduct expecting to succeed once again (Ellahi, Mushtaq and Bashir Khan 2013).

Self-esteem and self-efficacy also play an important role in the individual's decision making. People who perceive that the outcome of their actions has to do with themselves the most, have more control over their own decisions and try to decrease their improper behavior (David 2015). Nonetheless, more research is needed in order for the role that self-esteem and self-efficacy play on academic misbehaviors in the context of Honduran higher education to be determined.

The lack of motivation, alienation or deadline pressure can induce the individual to appropriate others' ideas and present them as their own, rationalizing academic dishonesty in order to avoid failure (Ellahi, Mushtaq and Bashir Khan 2013). Correspondingly, in another study regarding perceptions of academic dishonesty, the participants considered lack of time as the leading reason for cheating on their assignments or exams. However, they also mentioned the absence of commitment, complexity of the assignment, deficiencies of their academic education, and the unwillingness to work (Tabsh, Abdelfatah and El Kadi 2017).

Another study found that the intentions to cheat were less common on older students. This is partly attributed to the age and maturity of the individuals (Stone and Kisamore 2008). This is consistent with our findings, in which academic misbehaviors were more frequent in younger students. In addition, Bultas, Schmuke, Davis and Palmer (2017) suggest that, as students are promoted through the educational system, they become less tolerant of cheating.

Furthermore, David (2015) found that when the student belongs to a group which perceives cheating as a common practice, the individual tends to repeat this behavior more frequently. Moreover, the study conducted by Ellahi, Mushtaq and Bashir Khan (2013) also mentions the relevance of peer relationships and its role on academic dishonesty. A successful misconduct committed by a peer becomes an example that other students could follow, which normalizes this behavior. Thus, academic integrity can be considered a learned skill, which implies an opportunity to teach and model ethical behavior to students (Jones 2011). All faculty members must be committed to the responsibility of leading students on an honest path (Ellahi, Mushtaq and Bashir Khan 2013). To prevent or decrease academic dishonesty it is necessary to create policies and procedures using all faculty and available resources to promote integrity among the students (Faucher and Caves 2009).

The findings of the current study may prove useful in the design of institutional academic policies. Considering the high prevalence of dishonest academic behaviors, institutions should prioritize prevention, detection, and correction of these conducts. Besides the creation of an ethics committee, universities should also establish academic integrity as a research focus.

Our study's limitations include the use of a non-probabilistic sampling selection method, affecting the generalization capability of the results. Additionally, students may be unwilling to truthfully report academic misbehaviors, which may result in underreporting information. Future research could benefit from exploring the factors that influence academic misbehaviors, not only through statistical modeling, but also by implementing qualitative techniques that allow a multi-method triangulation and the use of implicit attitude testing. Further research may also include other institutional actors, such as teachers, members of ethics committees, university authorities and postgraduate students.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no competing interests.

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Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, MLB, upon reasonable request.

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