

*Is it Cheating if Nobody's Watching?  
Conflicting Beliefs about Dishonesty in Online Learning*

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses part of an extensive study investigating faculty and student perceptions of academic integrity in online courses. This analysis compares the quantitative responses to the qualitative responses of a survey sent to three institutions asking 1800 faculty and students their beliefs about cheating in online courses. The conclusions drawn from this analysis of the qualitative data and a comparison to the previous analysis of the quantitative data is that faculty and students report the possibility for cheating in online courses at different rates. This phenomenon may be due to either a propensity for faculty to over report or for students to under report the extent to which cheating is occurring in online courses. Regardless, there is a conflicting belief about academic integrity between faculty and students interacting in an online course.

Keywords: academic honesty, distance learning, online courses, cheating, integrity

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## **Introduction**

With a myriad of mobile technology in the hands of students and the academic pressure to succeed in college, the availability of online information lures students into believing they are not cheating if they can find, rather than know, the answer. Globally, institutions are afflicted with academic dishonesty among their student body (Bowers, 1964, Diekhoff et al., 1996, Hinman, 2002, King, Guyette, & Pitrowski, 2009, and McCabe, 2002). As institutions move more of their courses online, students are no longer in close vicinity to their instructors or classmates. “Whether judged positively or the contrary, institutions of higher education have been impacted by the adoption of internet technologies” (Tanner & Piper, 2010 p. 1457). The conversation about enforcement of academic values and honesty is not new to the digital era. (Diekhoff et al., 1996, Jordan, 2001, and McCabe et al., 1999). Research continues to show evidence that academic dishonesty in online classes is no more prevalent than in traditional face-to-face education (Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet’s, 2006). However, with the movement towards campuses encouraging mobile technology and courses being designed for hybrid and/or online delivery, the internet has given students an extensive and unrestricted opportunity to cheat (Bedford, Gregg, & Clinton, 2009, Brock, 2008, Rowe, 2004, Tanner & Piper, 2010). Academic integrity, especially in the online environment, continues to be a concern for universities (Bowers, 1964, King, Guyette & Pitrowski, 2009, Kitahara & Westfall, 2007 and McCabe, 2002).

Brock’s (2008) idea of moral relativity may be what is necessary to understand the temptations students are experiencing. He suggests that academic integrity and honesty do not have clear boundaries and, in certain situations or circumstances, “students believe that cheating and plagiarizing can be...acceptable” (p. 2). Moral relativity in virtual environments only adds to the frustration faculty experience when teaching online courses. There is more temptation to cheat in online courses primarily because the student is more distant from the instructor and secondary, many students taking online courses are busy in careers and are not invested in the integrity of the distance-learning programs as they would be in traditional face-to-face programs (Rowe, 2004). In the virtual environment, students seem to have a technological advantage because many faculty and administrators are still unaware of the possibilities for cheating online (Rowe, 2004 and Rogers, 2006). This difference in the belief about online cheating was the stimulation for this research study.

The purpose of the study was to uncover the beliefs about academic integrity, specifically academic honesty, with respect to online courses and compare the faculty and student perceptions. The objectives were to determine if and why students felt that it was easier to cheat in a distance learning course than a traditional face-to-face course.

## **Methodology**

Three public institutions of higher education were sites for recruiting participation in our survey. The participants were either students (undergraduate and graduate) or faculty (full and part-time). The institutions are public four-year universities. The smallest university is a regional commuter campus in the southeastern part of the United States with an enrollment of 5400 students and approximately 500 full and

part-time faculty. The second and largest university is also in the southern part of the country and considered a top-tier research university with a student enrollment of 18,000 and approximately 1200 full and part-time faculty. The third university is located in the south central Midwest part of the country with a student enrollment of 17,000 and approximately 1400 full and part-time faculty offering degrees in more than 100 areas as well as master and doctoral programs in most programs. The universities offer traditional, hybrid and online courses.

A cross-sectional online survey was developed to incorporate the measurement variables for the constructs conceptualizing student and faculty beliefs about academic honesty with respect to online courses. Questions were structured in the format of multiple answers, Likert-scales, and open-ended comments for the purpose of comparing student and faculty responses. The surveys were developed and disseminated via survey monkey, an online tool that allows for the self-administration of surveys and data collection.

There were 243 faculty and 1649 students that responded to the larger survey. For this research paper, which is a subpart of the larger study, the qualitative data was examined by focusing on responses given to the open-ended student question "Is it easier to cheat in a distance learning course?" There were 644 student responses to this question and 541 of those responses were able to be coded into one of three categories: Lack of Supervision, Unclear Boundaries and Open Source. Each of the three categories corresponded to one of the relationships between faculty and student definitions of cheating suggested by the study's quantitative data. The coding was performed by one of the researchers and the responses were grouped into one of these three categories. This qualitative analysis compares the open-ended responses to the earlier quantitative analysis (Tanner & Piper, 2010) which is summarized in the background section.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. When using an online survey distribution tool, the participants are expected to have email in order to receive the invitation to participate, as well as access to the specific domain housing the survey instrument. Response rates for online surveys are usually lower than traditional postal mail or telephone interviews. However, this sample was one of convenience and purposive in that the researchers were affiliated with the institutions chosen for participant selection and the population selected from the institutions were only faculty and students rather than the entire populations of the institutions. All students and faculty at each participating institution had regular internet and email access. This can be problematic in that internet based sampling is not representative of general populations. However, it is rare that university communities are not fully integrating the expectation of primarily email correspondence.

Two different survey instruments were used to collect data. Students were asked questions similar to, but not exactly the same, as the questions asked of the faculty. Faculty were asked about their experiences with cheating in their online courses; whereas, students were asked if they knew of someone who cheated in an online course. Data sets for faculty responses and student responses were kept separated for the analysis. Responses to similar questions were compared using descriptive

statistics and one-way analysis of variance (Tanner & Piper, 2010). The separate analyses were compared, but no causal or correlation statistics were run with aggregated data due to the differences between instruments (Tanner & Piper, 2010).

It was not possible to control for duplicate responses due to the nature of the questioning around cheating and the ethics review board recommendations. The researchers were not permitted to limit the number of responses per internet protocol (IP) address or require individual passwords in order to ensure anonymity of participants (Tanner & Piper, 2010). The researchers realize that the sensitivity of the topic of cheating may discourage the honesty of the student responses out of fear of being caught or incriminated. However, the response rate of 18% for each group of participants (faculty and students) was similar among the participating institutions (Tanner & Piper, 2010).

## **Background**

Previous analysis of this research data (Tanner & Piper, 2010) showed that students perceive it is easier to cheat in an online course vs. a traditional face-to-face course for the following most commonly cited reasons: (1) lack of proctoring, supervision, being watched or monitored makes it easy to cheat and difficult for instructor to catch cheating; (2) unlimited test time allows one to look up answers to the test online or via cell phone, texting or emailing a classmate; (3) all course materials can be laid out for reference and one can also work with a classmate at the same time and not get caught; and (4) one classmate can take the test and email or text answers to others.

Based on the previous analysis of this research data (Tanner & Piper, 2010), the research results indicated that dishonesty exists; and the temptation and occurrences of cheating occurs most frequently on tests and quizzes, then homework assignments, and finally, major papers. Both faculty and students were equally divided on whether or not instructors can control academic dishonesty and the difficulty of enforcing academic honesty. The findings suggest that faculty perceive cheating to be occurring at a higher rate in online courses than in traditional courses. However, the study also indicates that students consider cheating to be occurring at a lower rate in online courses than faculty assume. The somewhat contradictory nature of these two findings is reflected in much of the literature surrounding academic honesty in online courses. A number of studies, such as Lanier (2006), Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, and Davis (2000) and King, Guyette, and Piotrowski (2009), indicated that both faculty and students consider cheating in online courses to be easier and more prevalent than cheating in traditional courses. However, other studies indicated a divergence between faculty and student perceptions of cheating with Grijalva et al (2006) suggesting students considered there was no difference between the amount of cheating in online and traditional courses. Complicating the matter even more, studies by Stuber-McEwen, Wiseley, and Hoggatti (2009) and Watson and Sottie (2010) suggested students believe less cheating occurs in online classes.

## **Analysis**

Further analysis of the study's quantitative results suggests three possible scenarios for explaining the discrepancy between student and faculty perceptions of academic honesty in online courses. These scenarios are based on the assumption that mutual

understandings between faculty and students regarding academic integrity are more problematic in online courses due to the lack of face-to-face interpersonal contact and to the open source nature of digital information (Scanlon & Issroff 2005). The first scenario suggests students and faculty may perceive different levels of cheating occurring in online courses because students tend to underreport personal acts of dishonesty while faculty over report cheating due to the fact they are more acutely aware than students of the potential for the relatively un-policed nature of online courses to encourage student cheating. In this scenario, a stable, shared definition of what is and what is not academic dishonesty skew reported faculty and student perceptions of the amount of cheating occurring in online courses in opposite directions due to different levels of willingness to acknowledge the possibilities for cheating. Studies such as Trenholm (2006) and Sanders, Wenzel, and Stivason (2008), which emphasize increased monitoring of online courses as the primary remedy to cheating, support this scenario in that the call for increased monitoring at least tacitly assumes a shared definition of cheating between faculty and students.

The second scenario for explaining discrepancies between faculty and student perceptions of academic honesty in online courses centers on the confusion which may occur as the result of shifting definitions of the distinction between collusion and collaboration. Because the distinction between these two concepts is not absolute and can vary from teacher to teacher and thus from course to course, students may occasionally incorrectly assume certain behaviors are collaborative as opposed to collisional. In such cases, students would once again tend to report fewer instances of cheating than faculty. Such a scenario also assumes a stable definition of academic honesty. However, in this case, the definition is conceptually, but not operationally, shared; faculty and students simply interpret similar behaviors in different manners. Studies such as Barrett and Cox (2005), Turner (2005), and Jakes (2009) support this scenario in that they indicate web-based courses either create or enhance confusion regarding exactly which behaviors should be considered collaboration as opposed to collusion. Such studies' prescriptions for maintaining academic integrity in online courses emphasizes such techniques as creating assignments that are inherently collaborative, and specifically identifying for students the few circumstances in which collaboration is not permitted, i.e. where collaboration will be considered collusion.

The third scenario for explaining the study's findings of student and faculty's perceptions of academic honesty in online courses envisions a generational redefinition of the concepts surrounding intellectual property. Such a redefinition is created by the possibilities digitalization provides for the open sourcing of information (Evans, 2009). In this scenario, the operating assumption is students report less cheating in online courses than faculty because students' views on ownership of information, particularly digital information accessed online, are fundamentally different than the views of faculty. Students, due to their more open-source orientation to digital information, are assumed to have a far less restrictive notion of the possibilities for legitimately accessing and sharing information online. Moreover, not only is their view less restrictive where compared to faculty views, it is also less restrictive than their own views of non-online information. In much the same way students tend to make more of an ethical distinction than faculty between downloading a pirated cd than shoplifting the same cd, students from this point of view see information mediated through the internet as significantly more open to common use than information obtained in other manners. Such a student open source

perspective on digital information translates in online courses as a far less restrictive notion of academic honesty than faculty typically have. Thus, in this third scenario, the discrepancies between faculty and student perceptions are explained by the fact that faculty and students approach open source resources in online courses with significantly different definitions of cheating.

The three scenarios presented range from a completely shared definition of what is and what is not cheating (lack of supervision) in the first scenario to a conceptually shared but, somewhat operationally, fuzzy definition (unclear boundaries) in the second scenario to a final scenario in which faculty and students operate under different conceptions of academic honesty with respect to open source information (open source). Because of the variation in alignment between student and faculty conceptions of cheating the three scenarios represent, each scenario calls for fundamentally different actions for successful amelioration. The first scenario, for instance, would simply call for a higher level of monitoring students, while the second and third scenarios would require clarification and negotiation of a shared definition of academic honesty, respectively. Successfully coping with cheating in online courses is dependent on which of the possible scenarios suggested by the study's quantitative data is most likely.

In order to establish the relative likelihood of each of the possible scenarios arising out of the study's quantitative data, an element of the study's qualitative data was examined. This element focused on responses given to the open-ended student question:

[Is it] easier to cheat in a distance learning course?

Of the 644 student responses to this question, 84 percent (541 categorized responses) were able to be coded into one of the three categories: Lack of Supervision, Unclear Boundaries and Open Source. Each of the three categories corresponded to one of the scenarios between faculty and student definitions of cheating previously explained. Of the 541 categorized responses 273, or 51 per cent, were identified as belonging to Scenario 1 *Lack of Supervision* - the category corresponding to a shared, common definition of cheating between students and faculty (see Figure 1) which included directly quoted responses such as:

- No one is watching.
- No one is there to prevent you from taking a test collaboratively.
- There is no direct face-to-face interaction with instructor to develop rapport and respect.
- No one is there to prevent you from using books, notes, and the internet.
- I have a relative whose wife took all his tests for him.
- There is no one to hold you accountable, and it is very difficult for professors to catch cheaters and even harder for them to prove academic dishonesty if they suspect it.
- There is no way to monitor it and there are more opportunities for cheating to occur.

- If no one is watching you take the exam, there is little chance you will get caught looking up the answers.
- There is less oversight in distance learning courses.
- Testing is often not proctored or monitored. Some students may use resources that are supposed to be forbidden.

Such responses agreed with the near universal faculty view, evidenced by the study's quantitative data, that cheating, or at the least the opportunity for cheating, was more prevalent in online courses due to the inherent difficulties of monitoring student behavior in such courses.

Responses coded into the Scenario 2 *Unclear Boundaries* totaled 169, or 31 percent of the total responses coded, assumed a shared general concept of cheating, but also indicated some confusion as to the application of the shared definition in certain specific instances. Sample of directly quoted comments include:

- Most of the time professors don't define cheating.
- The boundaries of what is and what is not cheating become blurred.
- Students are encouraged to seek input from others.
- Cheating in distance learning classes is no different than if we were given the same 'take home' assignment in a traditional classroom setting.
- Groups can collaborate.
- Depends upon the rules, guidelines and preventative measures put in place.
- If it is an online course and you are doing it on your own time, then anything is fair game.
- It can hardly be called cheating when it's distance learning – if the time and resources are available, they'll be utilized.
- Not sure what you could define as cheating in an online class.
- I have never been monitored during distance learning courses so I am allowed any sources I choose.
- There is not a barrier to prevent students from doing assignments/tests together.
- Just because teachers don't specifically say, "Don't use the internet to help. Don't call other people." Without those restrictions, people think it is okay.
- Humans need and use references every day so it's not a big deal as long as the comprehension is there.

Responses in this category suggested that students share a similar definition of academic honesty with faculty, but are often uncertain in online classes if certain specific behaviors are ultimately considered fair or foul in regard to the shared definition of academic honesty.

Scenario 3 *Open Source* accounted for 18 per cent (99 out of 541 responses) of the student responses and suggested students and faculty operate from significantly different definitions of academic honesty as it relates to online courses. This category of responses relates to the third scenario for explaining discrepancies in using open

source resources between faculty and student perceptions of cheating in online courses. Directly quoted responses in this category include:

- Most of the work is done and submitted online and a student can give anyone their sign-in information, look-up answers on the internet, or have help from an additional person.
- Data can be looked up in real-time and applied immediately without knowledge from a professor.
- I know of some people who will have a second window up on their computer to search for answers while taking an online test.
- Able to use a book, family member, friend, or the internet on exams, papers, and projects.
- Because if it's taken on the internet there's no stopping anyone to look on google for the answer or to ask someone sitting next to them the answer to a question.
- You can look up material on the internet that you would not originally know during a test.
- Because you have the book right in front of you and can look at class notes.
- You have more resources around you that tempt students more than a traditional structured class room would be in a traditional course.
- Because you can look up everything online. Even with things like Respondus Lockdown, it is simple to bypass or use another computer.

Responses in this category implied that students, due to generational differences toward the open sourcing of information made possible by digitalization, operate in online courses with a fundamentally different view of intellectual property and, by extension, a fundamentally different set of assumptions about academic honesty in online courses than faculty.

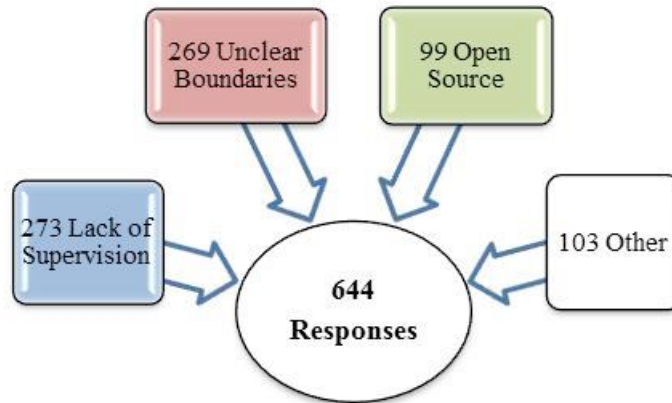
Responses coded into the *Other* category totaled 103, or 16 per cent of the total responses, dwelled on a myriad set of responses having to do with ethical beliefs about cheating, instructor techniques used to prevent cheating, and students' perceptions of their instructor's ability to design and administer distance learning assignments and tests. Samples of quoted comments from this category include:

- If someone has integrity issues and is going to cheat, it doesn't matter if it's in a classroom or not.
- There are time limits set on tests to make looking up information a little more difficult.
- Teachers don't know how to use their own computers and make it easy to cheat. For example, Art History – place pictures on test to identify, but pictures are file named with what they are so it's easy to get points on test.
- Most of my teachers allow open book and make the questions more difficult.
- The instructor cannot control whether or not you use outside resources.
- If there is not a camera on the person taking an online test, someone else could complete the test.
- Somebody else has already taken it usually, & can tell other people what's on it. I knew one time that someone even put a digital recorder in their shirt, went



into a testing center and quietly read every question to himself & then gave the recording of the final exam to their friend.

- A few years ago, yes, it would have been extremely easy. Now, it would be slightly less so, due to the advent of things like Turnitin, though I question their effectiveness, because effectiveness of a program like that is based on volume of samples available, and I seriously doubt that the volume is sufficient to truly do what they claim to do.



**Figure 1:** Why Students Cheat in Online Courses

## Conclusions

Public institutions are being pressured to compete with for-profit virtual campuses by offering more online courses and degrees. There are critical challenges and barriers to any online course or program (Tanner, 2007 and Yang & Cornelious, 2005). The challenge of upholding high academic standards, specifically academic honesty, becomes arduous. Faculty and students know and admit that cheating is occurring in online courses (Tanner & Piper, 2010, Piper & Tanner, 2011 and Tanner, Hartsell, & Piper, 2012). However, faculty are at a distinct disadvantage as there is still a “generational digital literacy divide” (Tanner, 2007, p. 126).

Based on analysis of student answers in the qualitative part of the study, it would appear that a primary question raised by the findings of the study’s quantitative data “Does dishonesty exist in online courses?” is definitively answered in the positive. The fact that responses coded into Scenario 1 *Lack of Supervision*, the category most suggestive of a common definition of cheating among students and faculty, were almost the same in percentage as the responses coded into Scenario 2 *Unclear Boundaries* and Scenario 3 *Open Source* combined, assumes that online courses are exposing a digital divide between faculty and students over the parameters of academic honesty. Moreover, the fact that both Scenario 1 *Lack of Supervision* and Scenario 2 *Unclear Boundaries* presuppose a common definition of academic honesty only serves to further advance the assumption of a shared definition. Because the distinction between Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 rests on how a shared definition of academic honesty is operationally applied in different circumstances, not on different concepts of academic honesty, it would require that responses coded into Scenario 3

be greater than responses coded into Scenarios 1 and 2 combined before it could be stated that a majority of responses indicated students and faculty operate from different notions of what constitutes cheating in online courses. Thus, at least based on the study's student responses, if digitalization and the open-access to information it provides is indeed forcing, as Pfannenstiel suggested (2010), a generational redefinition of the concept of individual versus community ownership of intellectual property, such a redefinition has yet to create a fundamental divide between faculty and student definitions of academic honesty.

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