Academic Integrity of Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mixed Method Analysis

Ariel E. San Jose

ABSTRACT

This study explored the academic integrity of tertiary students during the pandemic. Sixty-six students and nine faculty members were participants in the study. Two adapted survey questionnaires and a validated researcher-made interview guide were used to obtain pertinent data. Quantitative results revealed that most students committed academic dishonesty; however, they considered those misconducts moderate cheating. Teachers observed that students committed cheating more than once; however, they only call students’ attention. Qualitative information showed that most students knew the importance of academic integrity; lack of time, procrastination, lack of comprehension, lack of study habits, having a job, low self-esteem, and the desire to get better marks were the reasons why students committed academic misconduct. Students suggested that the academic institution needs to initiate innovations and implement stricter sanctions on those who committed academic misconduct. A pledge of academic honesty was developed for students to commit to academic integrity.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, College Students, Pandemic, SPAMAST.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transition of the educational system from face-to-face to online modalities has threatened academic integrity. San Jose (2021) mentioned that cheating, copying, surrogacy, collusion, and other forms of dishonesty have increased during the pandemic. The problem of academic dishonesty is not new; however, it is an ongoing problem (Finn & Frone, 2004). Several works of literature have investigated and discovered interesting findings. Crown and Spiller (1998) found that academic dishonesty is serious among tertiary students. This finding was supported by Lupton and Chapman (2000) who unveiled that 55% of American students admitted cheating during their college years while Smyth and Davis (2004) found that 44% of students in vocational courses committed academic dishonesty. Recent studies by Brown and Choong (2005) and Yang (2012) revealed that 97% of students in both private and public academic institutions concealed that they committed academic dishonesty at least once. On the other hand, Davis et al. (1992) and Chang (1995) estimated that approximately 60-80 percent of students cheated by copying from notes while West et al. (2004) found that 74% cheated on their take-home exams.

Why do students commit academic dishonesty? According to Gerdeman (2000), academic dishonesty is influenced by personal character, peer pressure, teachers’ factors, and institutional policy. Lanier (2006) found that struggling students with their grades were most likely to cheat while those who felt they needed to maintain their scholarships are more likely to commit academic dishonesty. Rawwas et al. (2004) in their cross-cultural study of academic dishonesty found that those individuals with detached personalities, relativistic, non-religious, and opportunistic thought of academic dishonesty as an acceptable act. Nora and Zhang (2010) added that students with low self-efficacy are more likely to commit academic dishonesty. Interestingly, several authors found that males are most likely to cheat than females (Anitsal et al., 2009; Caruana et al., 2000; Lambert et al., 2003; Rawwas et al. 2004). On the other hand, Pulfrey et al. (2018) opined that students whose peers practice cheating are likely to accept academic dishonesty as collective cheating. Rowe (2004) observed that students who felt they were “distant” from their peers and teachers are more likely to engage in dishonesty. Hence, Deranek and Parther (2015); Stuber-McEwen et al. (2005) pointed out that online classes intensify the feeling of separation which led to academic misconduct. The idea is supported by Burgason et al., (2019) who found that online cheating increased as the gap between students and a physical classroom setting increased. Moreover, Holden et al. (2020) pointed out that cheating happens more often in virtual classes because students are more experienced in using online tools which are likely not detected by the teachers who are unfamiliar with online detection techniques. Unfortunately, Diego (2018) averred
that students cheat because teachers significantly undermined the students’ rates of academic dishonesty. Likewise, Vućković et al. (2020) mentioned that teachers are lenient on the academic dishonesty of students because they are not aware of the ethics of dishonesty. Lastly, Löfström et al. (2015) observed that educational institutions are convinced of the essence of academic integrity; however, they didn’t know how it should be taught, whether it can be taught, who should teach it, and how cases of misconduct should be handled. This observation supported the earlier findings of Gerdeman (2000) who stated that academic institutions exclusively rely on students’ handbooks which could not adequately communicate honesty policies.

In the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST), academic dishonesty is unnoticed especially on assignment requirements and theses outputs of students. It is unfortunate that the institution has no in place online detector or give sanctions. This study will assess the student's level of academic dishonesty engagement and whether they considered those acts of dishonesty. Thus, this study dwelled on the prevalence of academic dishonesty which would become the basis for the academic institution in crafting practical policies such as subscribing to plagiarism checkers or implementing sanctions for those who committed academic dishonesty.

A. Statement of the Problem

The main purpose of this mixed-method study was to assess the student's academic integrity during the pandemic. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of students’ engagement in academic dishonesty?
2. What is the level of seriousness the students think of their academic dishonesty?
3. What are the teachers’ observations and actions are done on students’ academic dishonesty?
4. What is the importance of academic integrity for students?
5. What are the reasons students commit academic dishonesty?
6. What suggestions students can offer to lessen academic dishonesty?

B. Significance of the Study

The following individuals or groups of individuals will benefit from this study.

College Administration. The results of this study would bring additional knowledge to the situation of academic integrity in the college. Such information would become the basis for intervention and innovation to formulate measures to maintain academic integrity in the college.

Teachers. The results of the study would give the teachers insights to act upon the suggestions of the students to minimize academic dishonesty.

Students. The results of the study would give the students insights that academic integrity is a serious matter in their studies. Hence, practice of honesty is essential.

Future Researchers. The results of the study would become their reference in the conduct of another study related to academic integrity. Moreover, it would give them the gap and the situations of academic integrity in the college.

C. Theoretical Lens

This study is founded on the principles of the Normative theory proposed by Slovic et al. (1977). This theory is concerned with recommending actions that are most closely aligned with the decision maker's views and values. This means that the individual’s demographic characteristics are involved in making decisions. According to Rettinger (2007), the Normative theory is more complex since it assumes that the decision-maker adjusts both the values and the probabilities of events. For Harp and Taietz (1965), cheating is thought to be a form of deviance. They added that the study of the norms to which the members of the system are directed, as well as subsequent deviation from the expectation of others, is part of a sociological idea. Chapman et al. (2004) mentioned that students are more inclined to commit academic deviance in scenarios involving friends.

In the context of this current study, the researcher assumed that students' age, economic status, exposures, coping mechanisms, personality, spirituality, and ethical standards influence students to commit academic misconduct.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study used the mixed method. The quantitative method was first used using the adapted questionnaire while the qualitative method used the structured interview questionnaires. Due to the Inter-agency Task Force COVID-19 protocols, the researcher gathered both the quantitative and qualitative data thru emails and group chats.

The quantitative method was appropriate for the study because it deals with objective measurements and numerical analysis (Apuke, 2017). On the other hand, the qualitative method gathers the participants' inner thoughts, personal insights, thoughts, and narratives (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014); to understand the participants’ human encounters with the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Rosenthal, 2016; San Jose et al., 2017); and triangulate with the quantitative data (San Jose, 2021).

B. Research Instruments

This study used three instruments in collecting the data. The first instrument was adapted from The Florida State University Academic Integrity Survey Questionnaire (2015) which was designed to gather teachers’ observations on students' academic dishonesty. The second instrument was adapted from McCabe et al. (1999) which assessed students’ engagement in academic dishonesty and the level of seriousness of the misbehavior. The third instrument was an interview guide which was designed to elicit the reasons why students commit academic dishonesty, determine the importance of academic integrity, and obtain suggestions to lessen academic integrity.
C. Research Participants

The participants of this study were 66 selected students. Also, 9 full-time and part-time teachers of the Institute of Human Service (IHS) of the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST). In compliance with the ethical consideration particularly confidentiality of data, the researcher opted not to reveal the sex disaggregate of the participants.

The student-respondents were chosen based on the following criteria: enrolled during the First Semester 2021-2022; took BS Criminology, BS Social Work, bachelor’s in public administration, and BS Development Communication; enrolled in the third or fourth year; used the flexible-learning modality; however, only those students who gave their consents and responded were considered.

On the other hand, the teacher-respondents were chosen based on the following criteria: had taught during the First Semester of 2021-2022; taught BS Criminology, BS Development Communication, BS Social Work, and Public Administration students; taught using the flexible learning modality and had full-time or part-time status.

D. Scope and Limitations

This study was only limited to those students under the Institute of Human Service. Moreover, this study did not deal with the students’ experiences of academic dishonesty. Likewise, this study was conducted during COVID 19 when the flexible-learning modality was utilized. With the limited number of participants, the researcher could not make generalize results for all students of the college. Instead, the findings were only true for those who participated in the study. However, an extended study may be conducted to verify the veracity of the results.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Level of Students’ Engagement in Academic Dishonesty

Results revealed that generally, all respondents admitted to having committed academic dishonesty. Specifically, based on the highest percentage, five statements obtained “never committed”; nine got “committed once”; and two gained “committed more than once.” The items with the highest percentage under the items which were committed more than once were:

- I helped my classmates in taking the online test or exam and I opened the online exam or quiz first to see the questions then I read the module to look for the answers; the least committed academic dishonesty items were: I asked my siblings, parents, or friends to do the task for me; I worked on the tasks with others even when the teachers asked for individual work; I copied few sentences from a book, magazine, or journal without citing the author.

Out of the 15 items, nine items were committed once. This result implies that most college students committed academic dishonesty for several reasons. They do misconducts with friends and when they wanted to have better grades in the examination.

Moreover, this finding corroborates with other research. In Saudi Arabia, students justified some of their academic dishonesty as “assisting” their peers (Nuridin, 2019); and they are pressured to do it (Yusliza et al., 2020). In Japan, students justified their academic misconduct because their actions are less deterred by the fear of punishment (Aljurf et al., 2020). While Hendy et al. (2021) said that students are ready to make academic misconduct to help the weak students and their desire to build relationships with them. Moreover, the opening of the online exam to know the questions and look for answers in the module implies the unpreparedness of the students. Hussain (2021) mentioned that this type of academic dishonesty is a rampant practice among students. In this study, it was observed that students justified this misconduct by the lack of internet connectivity or electric current interruption.

B. seriousness the Students Think of their Academic Dishonesty

Based on percentage, seven statements were considered moderate cheating, six were not cheating, and two as serious cheating. The two considered serious cheating items were:

- I copied a few sentences from a book, magazine, or journal without citing the author and I copied a few sentences from a site on the internet without citing the author.

This implies that students didn’t know proper citations and techniques in writing the review of related literature. Landau et al. (2002) found that several students who incorrectly credit a source do so due to a lack of expertise, as they are unaware of the necessary citation criteria. But Greenberger et al. (2016) observed that even if students see that copying without citation is a serious act of academic dishonesty, they unknowingly engage in such practice because they lack the abilities of proper paraphrasing or summarizing skills.

On the other hand, the six items considered not cheating by the respondents were:

- I helped my classmates in taking the online test or exam; I copied the output of my classmates; the teacher wouldn’t notice it; I asked my siblings, parents, or friends to do the task for me; I worked on the tasks with others even when the teachers asked for individual work; I took pictures of the test or exam with a mobile phone or screenshots of information during a test.

This implies that cheating most likely happens when peers are involved and out of laziness and mediocrity.

Interestingly, some students also believed that some statements were trivial cheating. The statement, I texted or message my classmates to obtain or share my answers in a test or exam, obtained the highest percentage. This indicates that students have practiced that “one for all, all for one” dogma. They were ready to commit misconduct for as long as their peers are involved. In a particular scenario, Stoesz et al. (2018) believed that students feel the pressure of belongingness. The student's desire to help their peers overweighs the consequences of misbehavior.
C. Teachers’ Observations on Students’ Academic Dishonesty

Generally, the teachers believed that all students committed academic dishonesty more often. Of the 20 statements, 17 obtained “more than once.” Of which, the statements, “students copy few sentences from a book, website, or journal without citing the author and students use excuse to obtain an extension on a due date,” gained 100 %. Hence, copying without proper citation is the most rampant misconduct committed by students. Fazilatfar et al. (2018) relate this problem to students’ confusion about how to cite. The researcher observed that even the teachers lack the ability to cite properly. Their background and understanding of proper citation were limited because they were not taught to learn such when they were in college. The researcher’s observation has become the norm in the academe and coincides with the theory used in this study. The teacher’s lack of knowledge of appropriate citations contributes to their leniency in checking the outputs of their students.

Moreover, the statement, “using digital technology such as text messaging, students get unpermitted help from someone during a test or examination,” obtained the highest percentage under “committed once” by the students. Likewise, the statement, “students submit the same paper in more than one course,” gained the highest percentage under the “never” committed.

D. Teachers’ Action on Students’ Academic Integrity

Generally, although the students committed academic dishonesty, the teachers did not fail the students. Moreover, the teachers took action by calling the attention of the students. However, the statements, “students delay in taking the examination and students use excuse to obtain an extension on a due date,” were allowed by some teachers as consideration to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher believed that calling the attention of the students and not giving sanctions cultivates the commission of academic dishonesty more. McCabe et al. (2006) opined that if faculty members take no concrete action on students’ academic misconduct, students can only believe that dishonesty is going to be commonplace in the academe. Burke and Sanney (2018) pointed out that students are likely to do academic misconduct and believe in the acceptability of dishonesty when teachers consider their emotional reasons. The researcher assumed that an individual’s personality somehow influences academic dishonesty.

E. Themes and Core Ideas on the Importance of Academic Integrity

1) Realization of the value of academic integrity

Generally, the students realized that academic integrity promotes honesty. This implies that the students knew very well the meaning and importance of academic integrity. This result corroborates the study of Bretag et al. (2014) among students in six Australian universities. They found the majority of the students expressed good awareness and understanding of their institution’s academic integrity policy. It is necessary according to Gerdeman (2000) that institutional environments have well-defined and articulated policies on academic dishonesty and its consequences to maintain academic integrity.

Few others understood that academic integrity ensured someone’s accountability, stimulated self-autonomy, and recognized the accomplishment of other individuals. This implies that the students were aware of the fundamental significance of academic integrity. If students have academic integrity, they can depend on and support their assignments to whatever scrutiny. Moreover, if students were honest about their academic outputs, it was assumed that they were independent and self-efficient. As mentioned by Landa-Blanco et al. (2020), the lack of self-esteem among students greatly influenced their misbehavior and decision-making. Likewise, students’ attitudes towards disloyalty and cheating (Abdaoui, 2018). Further, academic integrity promotes recognition of others’ work. Hence, if students had no respect for others’ achievements, they would not bother recognizing them.

2) Consideration in committing academic dishonesty

Typically, the students found that the lack of time to study was one of the reasons why many students indulged in academic dishonesty. This implies that students were busy with other things aside from their studies. It was observed by the researcher that most of the respondents were working and married. Thus, the students’ time and attention were divided between their job and studies. This result coincided with Verhoef and Coetsier (2021), Landa-Blanco et al. (2020), and Karanauskiene et al. (2020) that students committed academic dishonesty due to their lack of time management.

It can be noted that during COVID-19, a flexible learning modality was adopted. Hence, students stayed at home and made home and self-study. This situation was new to Filipino students because, during the face-to-face, only computer-oriented academic institutions implemented online classes. The COVID-19 pandemic situation forced many unprepared students into independent and self-isolated learning. Schlenz et al. (2020) were convinced that online learning was time-consuming not only for the students but also for the teachers.

Variantly, other students found becoming indolent, lacking comprehension of the tasks to be done, lacking routine study time, having work, lacking self-esteem, and wanting to have better marks pushed those students to commit academic dishonesty. These imply that students have their reasons why they indulged in academic dishonesty. Gresham and Tackett (2020) pointed out that procrastination is linked to academic dishonesty, performance anxiety, and low academic self-efficacy among students. While Amelia and Usman (2020) reiterated that academic procrastination has a huge influence on students’ cheating behavior. However, in a recent study conducted by Oktaria et al. (2021) among Indonesian undergraduate medical students, they found that there was no significant relationship between academic procrastination with academic dishonesty. With these contradicting results, the researcher assumed that the link between procrastination and academic dishonesty may be dependent on the course the students were taking.
Understanding the tasks to be done may also contribute to academic dishonesty. Unclear instruction on assignments, homework, quizzes, and examinations may lead to students' collusion and cheating. The researcher found this scenario very common during the COVID-19 online learning modality. Instead of asking the teachers to clarify the instructions, students would prefer to ask their peers as a result of collusion happened. However, this researcher's observation contradicted Ives and Nehrkorn (2019) who mentioned that instructions did not affect those students who have the intention of committing academic dishonesty because they were insensitive to academic misconduct.

3) Suggestions to lesson academic dishonesty

Generally, the students believed that promoting academic integrity in academic institutions could somehow lessen if not eradicate academic dishonesty. However, as to how it should be done, the students did not make any specific suggestions. The researcher assumed that the students gave the academic institution the choice of what to do to promote academic integrity in the college.

Few other students suggested that specific strategies could lessen students’ academic dishonesty like the practice of reading, zero tolerance for plagiarized or colluded outputs, and clear instruction on how the tasks were to be done. The suggestion to practice reading implies that most of the students have no reading habits. Figuracion andOrmilla (2021) found that reading habits have been disregarded by many young and old Filipino students due to the huge influence of different technology. With regards to the suggestion of zero tolerance for plagiarized or colluded outputs, it implies that students committed this dishonesty, however, no sanctions have been given against them by their teachers. The researcher’s believed that students are more inclined to cheat if they believed their teachers are unconcerned and permissive of their actions. Lastly, the suggestion to have clear instructions for the given task, implies that there are teachers who do not make clear instructions on the tasks they give to their students. Worku et al. (2020) reported that unclear instructions from teachers constitute academic misconduct among students.

San Jose (2021) mentioned that academic integrity is an interdisciplinary notion that serves as the foundation for all aspects of education at all levels. He emphasized that when discussing academic reputation and how to avoid these actions, the discourse appears to focus on theft, plagiarism, dishonesty, fraud, and other forms of academic malpractice. To avoid these, the positive qualities of honesty, confidence, fairness, respect, accountability, and bravery as fundamentally motivated drivers of ethical academic practice should be emphasized by the academy among its clientele. Academic integrity is more than a student issue; it requires commitment from all members of the academic community, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, professors, current academics, and administrators. For Scanlan (2006), an institutional plan that can create an institutional culture of academic integrity should be established and implemented. It should however be combined with measures to prevent and detect academic misconduct, as well as fair sanctions for those who committed dishonesty.

F. Convergence

Paradoxically, the qualitative information revealed that the students understand the importance of academic integrity; however, the quantitative data showed that most of the students have committed academic dishonesty. Moreover, the qualitative information shows the specific reasons why students indulge in academic misconduct. These reasons were lack of time, procrastination, lack of comprehension of the tasks, lack of study habits, job, and low self-esteem. The students believed that those academic misconducts they committed are justified as moderate cheating because they are helping their peers. On the other hand, the teachers observed that students committed dishonesty more than once, contrary to students’ responses of once. Despite the teachers’ observation, none of the students failed; instead, the teachers only call their attention. Students suggested that academic institutions need to promote academic integrity, use specific teaching strategies, and give necessary sanctions to those who committed academic misconduct.

IV. Conclusion

The researcher’s assumptions that personality, spirituality, and ethical standards may influence the commission of academic dishonesty are seen in the results of this study. Results revealed that despite the students’ knowledge of the relevance of academic integrity in their studies; generally most of them admitted to having committed academic dishonesty. This is an indication of low ethical standards on the part of the students. Hence, values re-orientation and establishment of code-of-conduct are necessary for these students to develop honesty. It is also revealed that the majority of the students committed dishonesty once but considered those commissions as moderate cheating because they help other students. This justification of the students’ actions indicates their lack of strong morality. An issue that needs to be addressed by the academe. Moreover, albeit teachers observe that students committed academic dishonesty, their action is only to call the attention of those students. The lenient actions of the teachers signal their permissive personality to students’ misbehavior. Nevertheless, few students suggested that the academic institution needs to promote academic integrity and put stricter sanctions on those who commit dishonesty.

V. Recommendation

Based on the results of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

For the school administration, to lessen academic dishonesty among students, innovative software to detect students’ plagiarize may be purchased. Moreover, the crafting of an academic integrity code may be established. Likewise, regular value re-orientation may be done. Lastly, an institutional academic disciplinary board may be established to focus on academic dishonesty concerns.

The teachers, need to innovate assessment strategies that could minimize academic integrity among students. Strategies such as performance and outcomes are based
instead on traditional paper and pen quizzes and exams. Moreover, they should attend seminars and workshops on literature review techniques to enhance their knowledge and skills. Likewise, they should impose a zero plagiarism policy and sanctions on those who committed academic misconduct.

The students should realize that academic dishonesty is by all means unethical. Hence, they need to discipline themselves and consider all academic activities essential; thus, there should no room for mediocrity.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that he has not any conflict of interest in the conduct of this study.

**REFERENCES**


Brill.


Rettiger, D. A. (2007). Applying decision theory to academic integrity decisions. *In Psychology of academic cheating (pp. 141-167).*

Academic Press.


Worku, D., Dejenie, M., & Getahun, K. Prevalence, Forms, Contributing Factors, and Consequences of Academic Cheating among Public Second Cycle Primary School Students: In Mersa City Administration, Amhara Region, Ethiopia.


**Ariel E. San Jose, Ph.D.** is an associate professor of linguistics and literature at the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology, Malita, Davao Occidental, Philippines. He is designated as the Director of the college. Mr. San Jose has published several research articles focusing on special needs (hard of hearing and mute), dyslexia, language acquisition and learning, and many more.