

Academic Dishonesty

Among Gifted and High-Achieving Students

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According to the Center for Academic Integrity (2007), up to 85% of students report that they engage in acts of academic dishonesty one or more times each year. Acts of academic dishonesty include plagiarism, phone texting answers during tests, using unauthorized notes during tests, and copying others' homework, labs, or tests. Gifted high school students are essentially absent in the research concerning academic integrity; however, over the past few years, educators of gifted students have noticed an increase in the occurrences of academic dishonesty among students in gifted classrooms (Abilock, 2009).

According to Abilock (2009), "In the discourse about honest work, gifted students have largely been ignored" (p. 12); however, due to the pressure of gaining a competitive advantage in applying to desirable universities and earning academic scholarships, gifted and high-achieving students may resort to résumé building (e.g., striving for high class rank, high GPA, and awards) rather than true learning. The struggle for increasing his class rank and maintaining a high GPA may result in the student resorting to dishonest behavior to obtain those goals. The student may rationalize the behavior by arguing that the end gain justifies the methods used. Gifted students may choose to engage in academic dishonesty not because they lack ability, but due to the stress associated with being identified as gifted and the high expectations of parents and the school community that result from that identification.

Even though the literature on academic dishonesty among gifted high school students is very limited, a vast amount of research exists concerning academic dishonesty on

college campuses and in the regular education high school classroom. This research may be analyzed to provide some insight into the motivation for gifted and high-achieving students to commit acts of academic dishonesty.

Research Literature on Academic Dishonesty

Psychologist and researcher Bernard Whitley (1998) referred to cheating among college students as a crisis in higher education. Rettinger and Kramer (2009) explored the causes of academic dishonesty among undergraduates at a small, private, religion-affiliated university. The researchers sampled 154 students of whom approximately one-half were women to determine associations between student attitudes and acts of cheating, create a model of cheating behavior, and tested the model using experimental vignettes. The participants responded to a survey that queried their experience with 17 common acts of academic dishonesty such as copying someone's exam during testing, using unauthorized notes on a test, copying someone's homework, plagiarizing papers, and assisting others by allowing them to copy one's own work or providing answers to a test. Based on responses to the surveys, the researchers reported the disturbing result that approximately 75% of the research participants confessed to having committed acts of cheating. The researchers extended the study to gain insight into the causes of cheating and discovered that "student motivation, neutralizing attitudes, and observations/perceptions of others' cheating" all encourage acts of academic dishonesty (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009,

p. 300). Motivation refers to whether the student is extrinsically or intrinsically motivated; the study revealed that students engaging in academic dishonesty were extrinsically motivated. Neutralizing attitudes refer to rationalizations such as “no one else is hurt if I cheat,” “I don’t have time to study because I’m working to pay for school,” and “the instructor doesn’t seem to care if I learn the material” (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009, p. 299). This research revealed the influence of a culture of cheating that was cultivated by students’ neutralizing attitudes; indeed, the most prevalent theme permeating the literature on academic dishonesty is neutralizing attitudes (Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999).

Murdock, Beauchamp, and Hinton (2008) reported that students attribute their teachers as a primary motivation to cheat. These researchers observed, “Poorer pedagogy is linked to more blame towards teachers for hypothetical and actual incidents of academic dishonesty” (Murdock et al., 2008, p. 483). They used data collected from three suburban high schools’ science and math classes to analyze the link between classroom environments, motivation, and dishonesty. The data represent 444 students from 48 different classrooms, approximately 57% female, 75% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% Asian, 2% Native American, and the remainder reported as “other.” In most cases of self-reported cheating, students externalized blame to the teacher, such as the “teacher was unfair” or the “teacher was not competent” (Murdock et al., 2008, p. 484). Murdock et al. also documented an important finding: “decreased cheating is associated with classrooms where the emphasis is on mastery, improvement and effort” (p. 486). When assessments transition from traditional to alternative forms,

such as performance or portfolio assessments, exam cheating was greatly reduced, and summative assessments provided more accurate reflections of students’ mastery and abilities.

Bisping, Patron, and Roskelley (2008) explored the role of student perceptions in academic misconduct by collecting data from 262 students in introductory economics courses at a mid-sized university. These researchers discovered that students’ own definitions of misconduct are an essential part of the decision to engage in cheating. If a student does not define an act as cheating, he or she is more likely to engage in that activity. Bisping et al. (2008) concluded that a vital first step in minimizing cheating is to educate students as to what constitutes academic dishonesty, and the researchers caution educators not to “take for granted that students possess this knowledge” (p. 19).

Stephen Dowd (1992) reported that lack of effective teacher response to cheating serves to cultivate students’ decisions to engage in academic dishonesty. Consistent with Bisping’s et al. (2008) cautionary statements, Dowd also found that faculty and colleges must teach students how and why not to cheat. One major contributor to students’ confusion about what constitutes academic dishonesty is the easy accessibility of digital media and web-based information. Schrimsher, Northrup, and Alverson (2009) discovered that many students’ acts of plagiarism can be attributed to students’ belief that Internet information is public and free from intellectual property rights, and students do not consider failure to cite Internet sources as plagiarism. Hongyan, Guofang, and Yong (2008) reported similar student beliefs about Internet use in their research on digital cheating.

Witnessing or having direct knowledge of others’ cheating is an effective

predictor of academic dishonesty, but the definitive cause of dishonesty is uncertain. The question remains: What drives students, particularly capable students, to resort to cheating? The prevalence of academic dishonesty is well established, but the factors contributing to cheating behaviors are not as consistently established in the literature. Research on the prevalence and causes of cheating among gifted and high-achieving learners is very limited, but the existing literature suggests that educators of these students are witnessing a rise in academic dishonesty among the gifted community, necessitating a discourse concerning guiding the gifted to do honest work.

Research Method

Description of Context

The research was conducted at a high school that included grades 9–12 located in a quickly transitioning rural-to-suburban setting in a Southern state. Since opening 20 years ago, the school has transitioned from a homogenous group of approximately 1,000 students to a diverse, heterogeneous group of more than 1,700 students. Over the last 5 years, the school has experienced a significant increase in the Hispanic, Asian, African American, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European student populations. According to the 2008 improvement plan for this school, per capita income for the district is less than \$20,000 annually, and approximately 20% of adults in the district have not earned a high school education. The number of free and reduced meals served during the school’s early years was approximately 6%; the current number of free and reduced meals is approaching 20%. In spite of significant demographic changes, the school has continued to perform within the top 10% of the state and

has enjoyed continuous improvement in pass rates on state standardized tests. The school's rigorous academic program for advanced placement offers more AP courses than any other high school in the district. The school boasts top ranking in the academic arena and SAT scores consistently above state and national averages, and has been named one of the top 1,000 schools in the United States by *Newsweek Magazine* for the past 4 years.

The school climate is permeated with high expectations for success among the student body and the faculty; however, these high expectations may be translated into significant stress on the part of students and faculty to meet ever-increasing academic goals in a changing environment that is counter to those expectations: increasing class sizes, reducing budget for resources, declining student socioeconomic status, and declining parental support.

Description of Participants/ Audience

The students who participated in the study ranged in age from 14 to 18 and were enrolled in AP and honors science and math classes. These students had been identified as gifted or high achieving. To maintain anonymity of participants and maximize honesty in self-reporting, demographic data for student responders were not reported; however, the overall demographics of the honors and AP program at the school consisted of 80% Caucasian students, 15% African American, 3% Hispanic, and the remaining 2% Asian. Sixty percent of the population is male.

Procedure

The research was conducted with the use of a two-part survey instrument delineating cheating behaviors and asking students to respond to each

behavior with the rate of frequency that the student may have engaged or witnessed the behavior. Answer choices ranged from *never* to *more than five times*. The second part of the survey provided possible motivations for cheating and asked students to rate these factors from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The selection of cheating behaviors and motivations was developed from the literature and an informal survey of students' and colleagues' experiences. The survey was administered via a web-based application that allowed students to access the survey from a school computer. The survey form was developed using the Google Docs (docs.google.com) application that provides survey templates that can be modified to fit the goals of the research. The survey developer must establish an account with Google and access the Documents feature of the account. This feature allowed users to upload and share documents with colleagues or create survey templates like the one used in this research. These documents are accessible via any computer. Once an account is established, the Google Docs account website hosts the survey form and provides an Internet address (URL) to the account holder. This Internet address can be provided directly to the survey taker, or in the case of this research, linked from the researcher's own website. The survey taker simply accesses the researcher's website, clicks on the survey link, and

Table 1
Cheating Behaviors and Rate of Occurrence

Behavior	% Reporting the Behavior
Used unauthorized notes on an exam (whether in-class or take-home)	63
Copied on an exam (whether in-class or take-home)	60
Gave/allowed to copy answers on exam	75
Turned in plagiarized paper	11
Used uncited source	15
Padded bibliography	34
Copied homework	90
Allowed someone to copy homework	89
Had someone do homework	29
Worked together when it wasn't allowed	76
Invented data	53
Gave info to later section	79
Got info from earlier section	75

an interactive survey form loads. When the participant accesses and completes the survey, the Google Docs application stores the responses in a corresponding spreadsheet that is maintained on the site of the account holder and is only accessible by the account holder. As subsequent participants complete the survey, the spreadsheet is automatically updated. A sample of the survey form and spreadsheet are provided in the Appendix.

The researcher received permission to post the survey link on the school website, and teachers were recruited to administer the survey in their classrooms. The students completed the surveys at school and were reassured that their responses were completely anonymous. Participants were recruited by contacting teachers of honors and AP classes at the high school where the research was conducted and asking them to allow students to complete the survey in their classes. Teachers were cautioned to reassure students of their anonymity and to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere concerning the survey contents. Students were

Table 2
Motivations for Cheating

Academic Reasons	% of Students in Agreement
Driven by high GPA	57
Maintain HOPE eligibility (a GPA-based scholarship program)	52
More competitive for college admission	45
Too many tests on one day	60
School workload too heavy	68
Easier than studying	37
Others' cheating puts me at disadvantage	22
My teachers' demands are unreasonable	30
The material is not important	26
Need to excel at any cost	32
Teacher did not adequately explain material	60
I don't have the ability to do well in the class without cheating	4
Nonacademic Reasons	
Pressure from parents	42
Job leaves no time for study	27
Illness prevents adequate preparation	15
GPA for athletic qualification	28
Unfair teachers	34
Overly harsh grading	34
Unfair tests designed to fail students	28
Unreasonable workload in course	45
Lack of effort	47
Did not attend class	17
Did not study, do reading	47
Helping a friend	67
Loyalty to a group (friends, sports team)	47
Neutralizing Attitudes	
Unexpected opportunity arose	44
Instructor left room during exam	39
Instructor wasn't watching carefully	44
Other students didn't cover their paper	29
Others do it	19
No one ever really gets punished/caught	24

allowed to respond concerning their own behavior or witnessed behavior to encourage honest responses (i.e., the student might be hesitant to confess to personal academic dishonesty but would be willing to confess to witnessing the behavior). Participation in the survey was voluntary, and 89 students responded. Because the survey was web-based, the data were automati-

cally stored on the Google Docs website for access by the investigator.

The survey listed different cheating behaviors and asked students to respond from *never to more than five times* as to whether they had committed or witnessed the behavior during the previous semester. Following the behavior questions, students were asked to consider possible motivations for the behavior and rate them from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The motivations included academic reasons, such as inability to study due to an afterschool job, and neutralizing attitudes, such as "others do it." Each student then anonymously submitted

the electronic survey through the website, and the data was transferred to the spreadsheet.

Data and Analyses

The students' results on cheating behaviors are provided in Table 1. Unlike the research findings discussed

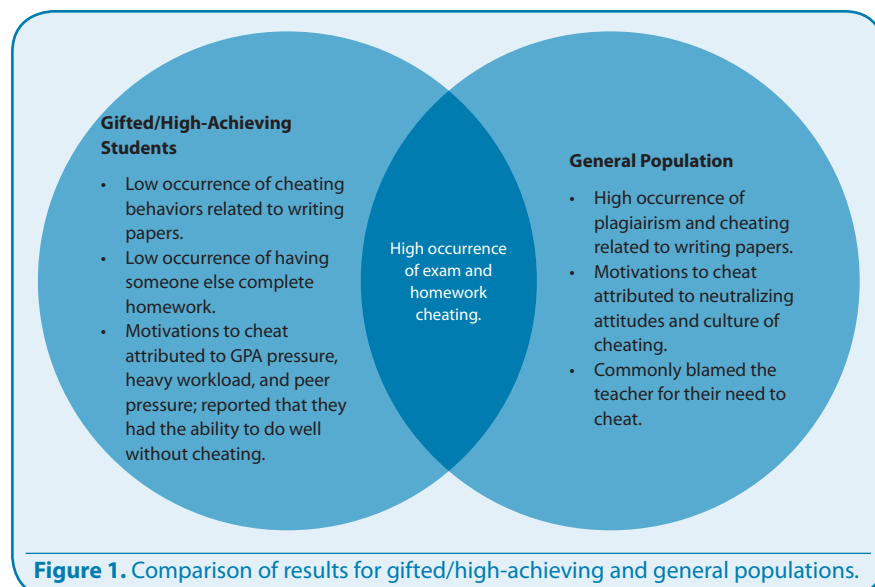
in the literature review, data from the gifted and high-achieving students in this study reveal a relatively small occurrence of plagiarism and cheating behaviors relative to writing papers. Likewise, the reported occurrence of "had someone do homework" was somewhat low (29%). Exam and homework cheating were the most prevalent forms of academic dishonesty, with more than 75% of respondents reporting these behaviors. Exam cheating behaviors include using unauthorized notes, copying and/or giving answers, and providing information to other course sections about the test contents. Of these behaviors, the most prevalent (75%) involved allowing others to copy one's answers on an exam. Consistent with Whitley's (1998) declaration of academic dishonesty as a crisis in education, the data in this study revealed that homework cheating was rampant, with 90% of participants reporting copying others' homework. One could infer that the failure to complete homework assignments honestly is contributing to the students' lack of preparedness for exams and the subsequent cheating behavior while taking the exams. Other motivations for cheating are examined in Table 2, and a comparison of these results to the general population as discussed in the literature review is provided in Figure 1.

Unlike the findings in the research by Rettinger and Kramer (2009), Haines et al. (1986), and Pulvers and Diekhoff (1999), neutralizing attitudes was not found to be an important contributing factor to cheating (importance was defined as $\geq 50\%$ of respondents in agreement). None of the motivations related to neutralizing attitudes approached 50% of respondents in agreement. The most prevalent motivations were the desire to maintain a high GPA (57%), the demands of a heavy workload (68%),

and desire to help a friend (67%). The students' responses did not agree that the workload in any individual course was too demanding, but agreed that the overall course load work requirements were too heavy. Interestingly, 81% of the students disagreed with the statement, "I don't have the ability to do well in the class without cheating," so most feel they are capable of doing well, but resort to cheating due to grade point pressure, peer pressure, and heavy workload demands. Sixty percent reported that the teacher did not explain the material well; however, this attribution may be due to the students' failure to realize that homework is generally the teachers' method of preparing students for exams (particularly in science and math classes), and 90% of students reported academic dishonesty on homework. With the exception of the attribution of the teacher's failure to adequately explain the material, an apparent difference between motivations to cheat reported by the gifted students in this study versus regular academic students in other research is the placement of responsibility for cheating. The students in this study admitted that they were succumbing to GPA, peer pressure, and heavy workload demands whereas other researchers reported the prevalence of neutralizing attitudes as the primary motivation to cheat (Haines et al., 1986; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009).

Conclusion

Academic dishonesty was prevalent among gifted and high-achieving students in this study, with the primary incidents of cheating occurring on homework assignments and exams. Students attributed their motivation for cheating to GPA pressure, peer pressure, and the demands of a heavy workload. These gifted and high-achieving stu-



dents reported that they were capable of being successful without cheating, but succumbed to academic dishonesty due to the external factors.

The disturbing occurrence of 90% of students engaged in academic dishonesty on homework assignments warrants closer examination of the value of homework as it is currently administered. The use of homework services such as WebAssign (<http://webassign.net>) or Quest Learning and Assessment System (<https://quest.cns.utexas.edu>) that design unique homework assignments for each student would address the occurrence of homework cheating but not the motivation for cheating. Peer pressure to cheat on exams could be alleviated by developing multiple versions of the same exam and diligence on the part of the instructor during exam administration. Where appropriate, alternative assessments, such as performance or portfolio assessments, could be developed and substituted for traditional exams. Additionally, the Center for Academic Integrity (2007) provided information and resources for establishing and nurturing a climate of integrity for kindergarten through college-level settings.

The results of this study indicate that an overwhelming desire to achieve coupled with an aggressive course load produce conditions conducive to an environment of academic dishonesty. Gifted and high-achieving students are often enrolled in multiple honors, accelerated, and AP courses and are involved in extracurricular activities as well. The attribution of heavy workload and GPA pressure as motivations for cheating indicates the pressing need to counsel these students (and their parents) in establishing balance between academic load and extracurricular involvement. The existing literature documents that students may have different definitions or misunderstandings of academic dishonesty (Bisping et al., 2008; Dowd, 1992; Hongyan et al., 2008; Schrimsher et al., 2009). Compensating actions on the part of educators (use of homework servers and alternative assessments) reduce the occurrence of the behavior but don't eliminate the cause. This study and existing research reveal that open dialog and discourse on expected academic behavior and student/family counseling on balancing academic and extracurricular commitments are essential in reducing undue stress and guiding the gifted to do honest work. **GCT**

Appendix

Survey Instrument and Spreadsheet Sample

Sample Page From Survey

Behavior and Motivation Survey

Please indicate whether you have engaged in any of the following behaviors or if you have witnessed any of the following behaviors during the last semester. Please respond by selecting the appropriate rate of occurrence (whether you performed the behavior or witnessed the behavior) from "never" to "More than five times." Your answers are completely anonymous.

* Required

Used unauthorized notes on an exam (whether a take-home exam or in-class exam). *

Never.

Copied on take-home exam. *

If you never had a take-home exam, choose "Not Applicable."

Never.

Copied on in-class exam. *

Never.

Gave answers or allowed someone to copy answers on exam. *

Never.

Turned in plagiarized paper. *

Never.

Used uncited online source as my own work. *

Never.

Used uncited printed source as my own work. *

Never.

Padded bibliography. *

(Check answer that most closely reads)

Sample Page From Spreadsheet

Timestamp	Used unauthorized notes on an exam (whether a take-home exam or in-class exam)	Copied on take-home exam	Copied on in-class exam
1/8/2010 11:38:19	Never.	Never.	Never.
1/8/2010 13:46:31	Only once.	More than once, but less than five times.	Five times.
1/15/2010 9:52:51	Never	Not applicable.	Only once.
1/15/2010 9:59:21	More than once, but less than five times.	Never.	Never.
1/19/2010 7:31:57	Only once.	More than once, but less than five times.	Only once.
1/26/2010 9:20:22	More than five times.	Never.	More than five times.
1/26/2010 9:20:30	More than once, but less than five times.	Only once.	More than five times.
1/26/2010 9:21:52	More than once, but less than five times.	More than once, but less than five times.	More than once, but less than five times.
1/26/2010 9:21:59	Never.	Never.	Never.
1/26/2010 9:22:23	More than once, but less than five times.	Not applicable.	More than once, but less than five times.
1/26/2010 9:22:26	Never.	Not applicable.	Never.
1/26/2010 9:22:30	More than once, but less than five times.	More than once, but less than five times.	More than five times.
1/26/2010 9:22:34	More than once, but less than five times.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
1/26/2010 9:22:54	Only once.	Not applicable.	Never.
1/26/2010 9:23:12	More than once, but less than five times.	More than once, but less than five times.	Five times.
1/26/2010 9:23:27	Only once.	Never.	More than once, but less than five times.
1/26/2010 9:23:33	More than once, but less than five times.	Not applicable.	More than five times.

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