

Academic Misconduct: A Student Perspective*

W. M. JORDAN

Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA 71272, U.S.A.

Academic misconduct (or cheating) is an important issue in the university community. If the integrity of the university's degree is to be maintained, then cheating must be kept to a minimum. If the college is to produce ethical engineers, they need to learn to work ethically as students. This paper presents the results of three years of surveys of the engineering student body at Louisiana Tech University. Student opinions (and definitions) of cheating are different from those of the faculty. They need to be taken into consideration whenever faculty try to uphold standards of correct behavior.

INTRODUCTION

ACADEMIC misconduct (or cheating) is an important issue in the university community. If the integrity of the university's degree is to be maintained, then cheating must be kept to a minimum. If the college is to produce ethical engineers, they need to learn to work ethically as students. This study grew out of a course the author teaches at Louisiana Tech University. All students in the College of Engineering are required to take a one semester hour course entitled: 'Engineering Ethics and Professionalism.' The author has been in charge of this course the last three years. Students take this course during their junior or senior years. This course deals with several issues related to ethics and professionalism.

One of the issues discussed in this class has been: 'Preparing to Become an Ethical Engineer by Being an Ethical Student.' In this particular seminar we discuss the issue of academic misconduct. As part of this seminar, we have tried to define academic misconduct. During the teaching of this course, the author discovered that many student definitions of cheating are very different from most faculty member definitions.

If we are to minimize cheating, then we need to understand the students' perspectives on this important issue. Surveys have been taken over a three-year period in an effort to determine the engineering students' perspectives on cheating. This paper includes an analysis of student opinions about cheating. Student opinions and actions on this issue have implications on how engineering is taught in our public universities. They also have implications as to how engineering ethics should be taught in our universities.

PROCEDURE

To help determine student opinions on this issue, surveys have been taken of the students in this class during the last three years. The surveys have been taken using a computer-graded answer sheet. The students did not put any identifying marks on the answer sheet so individual privacy could be maintained. This class is taught three quarters per year, and the survey was taken during at least two quarters each year. This survey represents the opinions of more than two thirds of the juniors and seniors in Louisiana Tech University's College of Engineering.

No multiple choice survey can represent all of the attitudes that could be expressed on this issue. Therefore, the students have been required to write a short (2-4 page) paper on this subject. They are required to discuss the significance of cheating in our college and to provide their own definition of cheating. Some of their explanations have been incorporated into the text of this paper.

At another point in the class, the students are presented with several ethical systems and required to write a short paper describing their own personal ethical system. There are many different ways to describe various ethical systems. Each philosopher appears to have his own list of systems [1-8]. To provide a common starting point, the students read the first chapter from *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, by Norman Geisler [1]. Geisler's categorization of ethical systems is not the only one that could have been chosen. However, it is a reasonable approach, and is the one chosen for this class. The students are then required to develop their own personal ethical system. They are free to adopt one of Geisler's systems, a mixture of several of his systems, or reject all his systems and develop one of their own.

* Paper accepted 8 July 1990.

STUDENTS PERSONAL ETHICAL SYSTEMS

A person's view of ultimate reality will affect the choices he makes. Therefore, it is important to consider the beliefs of engineering students at Louisiana Tech University. Following the outline in Geisler [1], the students are presented with the following six ethical systems:

1. Antinomian—believes there are no standards in the world.
2. Generalism—believes there are general standards of behavior, but does not believe there are absolute standards.
3. Situationism—believes that ethical systems should be based on deciding what is right in a given situation. This system believes all decisions should be based upon the one absolute standard that exists (usually called love). This follows the writings of Joseph Fletcher and his followers.
4. Non-conflicting absolutes—believes there is more than one absolute standard, and there are no conflicts between any of the standards.
5. Conflicting absolutes—believes there is more than one absolute standard, which may conflict in some difficult situations. If this occurs, the person should choose to do the 'lesser evil.'
6. Hierarchicalism—believes there is more than one absolute standard which may conflict in some difficult situations. If this occurs, the person should obey the standard that has higher intrinsic value.

Results of the student personal ethical systems are shown in Table 1. The engineering students at Louisiana Tech University are very traditional in their ethical belief systems. Table 1 shows 65% of our students believe in systems with some form of absolute standards. From an analysis of their papers, many of these students believe in absolute standards because of their conservative Protestant Christian background. Louisiana Tech University is in a very conservative portion of the United States. Many of the students come from such a

Table 1. Ethical Systems Survey—College of Engineering Students, Louisiana Tech University, 1987-1990

Position	Percent of Students
Antinomian	1
Generalism	14
Situationism	13
Non-conflicting Absolutes	10
Conflicting Absolutes (Lesser of 2 evils)	20
Conflicting Absolutes (Hierarchicalism)	35
Personal positions different from the above	7
Number of students	261

background. Some of the students defended their ethical position by quoting from the Bible. Some of the Middle-Eastern students apparently believe in absolute standards based on their Islamic background. Generalism and situation ethics, more popular in our society at large, are supported by only 27% of the students. Only 1% of the students do not believe in any standards. Seven percent of the students have developed a personal ethical system that does not fit into any of the models they have been given.

STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEFINITION OF CHEATING

Louisiana Tech University has a definition of academic misconduct that appears in the university bulletin [9]:

Academic misconduct at the University is determined by the faculty member under whom such misconduct occurs. The penalty for cheating and other forms of misconduct is also determined by the faculty member. This penalty may be an "F" in the course, but lesser penalties may be given at the discretion of the faculty member.

The College of Engineering has amplified this statement:

Students in the College of Engineering are preparing to enter a profession which demands high ethical standards of its members. Honesty and high ethical standards are demanded of these students and all others taking courses conducted in the College of Engineering. It is the student's right and responsibility to discourage and report academic misconduct. The failure to do so is a breach of ethical standards. Academic misconduct is a serious breach of ethics in academic activities, such as examinations, reports and homework. It may occur in any of the following forms:

1. Giving or receiving unauthorized aid;
2. Stealing or plagiarizing the substance, work or ideas of others;
3. Lying, using evasive statements or concealing the truth behind technicalities.

The definition of 'unauthorized aid' is left to each faculty member. For example, some faculty consider homework to be short exams and do not want the students to work together. Other faculty use homework to reinforce the lecture and encourage the students to work together. Table 2 presents the results of 8 questions about a definition of cheating. The results of question #8 show many students have no problem with differing definitions of cheating. They recognize different classes have different needs and should be judged accordingly.

Table 2 shows large majorities of the students think it is fair to work together on homework, lab reports, computer programs, projects, and oral

Table 2. Definition of Cheating—College of Engineering Students,
Louisiana Tech University, 1987–1990

Question	Answer	Percent
1. Do you sometimes do something a professor might think is cheating but you honestly feel is acceptable cooperation?	Never	21
	Sometimes	66
	Frequently	11
	Almost always	2
2. Is it fair for students to work together on homework?	Yes	62
	Depends on class	23
	Depends on assignment	12
3. Is it fair for students to copy another's homework?	No	3
	Yes	5
	Depends on class	10
4. Is it fair for students to work together on lab reports?	Depends on assignment	14
	No	71
	Yes	51
5. Is it fair for students to work together on computer programs?	Depends on class	31
	Depends on assignment	12
	No	6
6. Is it fair for students to work together on projects?	Yes	43
	Depends on class	26
	Depends on assignment	20
7. Is it fair for students to work together to prepare oral presentations?	No	11
	Yes	53
	Depends on class	30
8. Should all professors have the same standard as to the definition of cheating?	Depends on assignment	12
	No	5
	Yes	64
Number of students surveyed: 259	Depends on class	25
	Depends on assignment	4
	No	7
	Yes	35
	Don't know	17
	No—each class different	48

reports. The students make a distinction between working together and copying, with 71% of the students disapproving the copying of homework.

The results from question #1 show how wide is the difference between student and faculty opinions on the definition of cheating. Most students (79%) admit that they have done something a professor defines to be unacceptable, but they still believe is acceptable. If students do not think something is cheating, many will do it irrespective of whether or not their professor approves.

STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHEATING

Table 3 shows the results of the student opinions about the significance of cheating. These results show that 70% of the students have cheated while in college. A majority of the students (56%) have done so more than once. The students were using their own definition of cheating in answering this question. When the results of question #1 about the definition of cheating is considered, perhaps even more of the students may have cheated. This is because 79% of the students admitted doing

actions they knew the professor would not approve.

When asked if they knew of someone who had cheated, 92% of the students replied 'yes'. Most of the students believe that non-engineers cheat more than they do (question #11). If this is true, it means the situation in other curricula may be at a disastrous level.

The amount of cheating is not uniform throughout the college. The students believe that some professors have much more cheating occurring under them than do others (question #12). Some faculty are known not to check student work very carefully and the students know that their chance of being caught is very low.

Most of the students stated their record of cheating (or honesty) is in accord with their personal ethical system (question #15 on Table 3). However, when 82% of the students state they are living a consistent life (question #15) and from 70% (question #9) to 79% (question #1) of the students have admitted to cheating, then something is clearly wrong.

In evaluating the students' written paper response on this subject, most student responses fall into one of two broad groups. One group of

Table 3. Significance of Cheating—College of Engineering Students, Louisiana Tech University, 1987–1990

Question	Answer	Percent
9. Have you ever cheated while in college?	Never	30
	Once	14
	Few times	51
	Frequently	2
	Often as needed	3
10. Do you know someone who has cheated at our university?	No	8
	One	7
	Several	55
	Many	30
11. Do engineering students, when compared to other majors	Cheat less	60
	Cheat same	34
	Cheat more	6
12. Do some professors have more cheating in their classes than others do?	Yes	95
	No	5
13. Reason for yes in question # 12	Harder tests	12
	Grades harder	7
	Too high definition of what cheating is	13
	Students know they will not be caught	32
	Other	36
14. Whom is hurt most by cheating?	Cheater	44
	Other students	5
	University	1
	Engineering profession	3
	All of above	47
15. Is your record of cheating (or not cheating) in accord with your personal ethical system?	Always	34
	Most of time	48
	Sometimes	12
	Rarely	2
	Never	4

Number of students surveyed: 259

student papers states they have never seen any cheating occurring. This is probably from the group of students who have made their own (weaker) definition of the cheating standard. Another group states that almost everyone is cheating. This is probably from a group that accepts (to some extent) the more rigorous faculty definition of cheating.

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROPER RESPONSE TO CHEATING

The students' response to cheating is shown in Table 4. Most students will not report academic misconduct committed by others. On question #16, 43% of the students said they would never report a case of misconduct. Only 3% of the students said they would always report it. When given the chance to warn the guilty student, 57% of the students said they would never do it. Only 7% of the students said they would warn a guilty student. Apparently the students' commitment to each other is much greater than a commitment to rid the college of cheating.

The most common motive for cheating is to get a

better grade (questions #18 and 19). Other popular reasons were the professor is unfairly hard and they do not have time to study.

Even though they would not report another student, many students agree guilty students should be punished (question #20). This leaves open the question of how the faculty members will discover cheating if they get no cooperation from the students. For cheating on work other than exams, a penalty of a zero on the assignment is relatively common. The students were willing to accept that level of punishment. Depending on the value of the assignment, a grade of zero may sometimes also result in a lowering of the students' final grade.

CORRELATIONS OF STUDENT RESPONSES

Table 5 shows a correlation between the student responses to question #9 and question #1. Question #9 is: Have you ever cheated while in college? Question #1 is: Have you done something a professor thinks is cheating but you think is acceptable cooperation? Also included in these

Table 4. Response to Cheating—College of Engineering Students, Louisiana Tech University, 1987-1990

Question	Answer	Percent
16. Do you feel obligated to report someone you know has cheated?	Never	43
	Sometimes	53
	Always	3
	Only if it lowers the curve	1
17. Do you warn someone whom you know has cheated?	No	57
	Only if not my friend	2
	Depends on situation	34
	Yes	7
18. If you have cheated what was your motive?	Get better grade	45
	Professor is unfair	20
	Not have time to study	34
	Cheating easier than studying	1
19. Other students motive for cheating?	Get better grade	60
	Professor is unfair	3
	Not have time to study	15
	Cheating easier than studying	22
220. Proper penalty for someone who is guilty of cheating?	Reprimand	8
	Zero on assignment	47
	'F' in class	33
	Dismissed from class	9
	Dismissed from university	4
Number of students surveyed: 259		

Table 5. Correlating Responses to Questions about Cheating—College of Engineering Students, Louisiana Tech University, 1989-1990

	Never	Once	Few times	Frequently	Often as needed
9. Have you ever cheated while in college?	39	27	30	1	3
1. Do you sometimes do something a professor might think is cheating but you honestly feel is acceptable cooperation?	Never	30	21	5	0
	Sometimes	48	74	76	0
	Frequently	18	0	19	0
	Almost always	4	5	0	100
Grade Point Average (based on students survey responses)	3.12	2.91	2.94	2.75	2.75
Based upon					
A = 4					
B = 3					
C = 2					
D = 1					
F = 0					
Number of students responding in each category	27	19	21	1	2

correlations are the grade point averages reported by the students on the surveys.

These correlations are based only on the surveys taken during 1989-90. Therefore, the percentage responses to the questions are slightly different from those presented in the earlier tables. There is a correlation between the answers to the cheating question and the student answers to the question about activities professors view as unacceptable.

Thirty per cent of the students who say they have never cheated also claim to have never done anything a professor might think is ethically unacceptable. For those students who admitted to cheating once, this percentage drops to 21%. For those who have cheated a few times, only 5% say they have never done anything a professor would not like. (The 50% response for 'often as needed' should be ignored for it represents the opinion of

only one student.) This shows the less frequently a student cheats, the higher may be his definition of cheating.

Once again, these results show the students willingness to define cheating differently from the professor, and then live up only to their own standard. As shown in Table 5, 70% of those who claimed to have never cheated still admitted they have done things the professor had said were ethically unacceptable. Based on the students' own responses in Table 5 it appears that only 12% of the students in 1989-90 have really never cheated. (This was calculated by multiplying the 30% number from question #1 times the 39% in question number 9.)

There is also a correlation between grade point average and the frequency of cheating. The people who claim to have never cheated have the highest grade point average, and those who claim to frequently cheat have the lowest grade point average.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The most unpleasant results of these surveys were those of question #1 in Table 2. The administration and faculty work hard to define precisely what is permissible. However, if students do not like the faculty member's definition of cheating, many will create their own definition. This means that many students are doing what faculty members regard as cheating, and are doing this with a clean conscience.

These results have severe implications as to how engineering is taught in the university. Some faculty may be fooling themselves if they think that the students are really obeying the rules they have put down. As a personal example, the author used to be one of the faculty who insisted that the students not work together on homework. These results show many students will work together even if they are told not to do so. Therefore, this author has changed his strategy on homework. The earlier approach penalized the most ethical students (who were not working with others), while it benefited most of the students who did break the rules (and work together). He no longer tells the students not to work together and has made homework of less value in determining the student's final grade.

Cheating is not spread uniformly throughout the college, and this shows the need for greater vigilance by some faculty. Perhaps greater communication among faculty about students who have cheated would result in those students being more closely monitored. This would make it less likely that they would continue getting away with cheating.

The results from Table 4 are very disappointing to the author. Even students who do not cheat are unwilling to report their colleagues who do.

The results from Table 5 show a correlation between grades and the frequency of cheating. Those with higher grades cheat less frequently than those with lower grades. This is not a surprising result. The most motivated students are usually the ones with the higher grades. They are interested in gaining new knowledge, not just in getting a good grade. They have less of a motive to cheat (for their grades will already be relatively high). The less motivated students are usually in the lower grade range. Many of them are interested only in passing a course, and not in learning a significant amount of material.

There is also a correlation between the amount of cheating a student does, and how frequently he admits to doing something a professor thinks as unethical. When 70% of those who claim to have never cheated have done things professors think is cheating, then the situation is very serious indeed.

One suggestion for future work is to expand the question about cheating to include on what types of assignment have the students cheated. While 70% of the students have admitted to cheating, much of this may be on homework and reports. The amount of cheating on exams may be less.

One caution in interpreting these results must be made. The students at Louisiana Tech University are very conservative, as shown in their choice of basic ethical viewpoints. For example, 65% of our students believe in some set of absolute standards. It is therefore quite likely that the students here cheat less frequently than do the students in other areas of the world where a lower percentage of the people believe in absolute standards. The amount of cheating by engineering students at Louisiana Tech University is disturbingly high. This implies it might be even worse at other universities.

REFERENCES

1. N. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, pp. 13-19, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI (1971).
2. A. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL (1984).
3. M. Martin and R. Schinzinger, *Ethics in Engineering*, Second Edition, McGraw-Hill, New York (1989).
4. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Macmillan, New York (1979).
5. J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia (1966).
6. V. Barry, *Applying Ethics: A Text with Readings*, Second Edition, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA (1985).
7. J. Gould, Editor, *Classic Philosophical Questions*, Fifth Edition, Charles Merrill, Columbus, OH (1985).
8. E. Miller, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill, New York (1987).
9. *Louisiana Tech University Bulletin 1989-1990*, pp. 16, 77-78, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA (1989).