

## **Understanding the factors that reduce college student cheating: punishment or moral approbation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Classroom cheating has been highly researched and documented throughout the years. Studies have focused on why students cheat and how to minimize cheating. Punishment is the primary way educational institutions have addressed cheating behavior, and this study confirms that expected punishment is a strong deterrent to certain cheating behaviors. When students expect no or low punishment for certain cheating activities, they are more likely to participate in those activities. This paper also looks at students' moral approbation and explores the relationship to cheating behavior. Results show that students who score high on a moral approbation scale are less likely to participate in some cheating behaviors; however, they still report likeliness to cheat when they feel the activity is less serious and the expected punishment is low. While strong moral character is important in minimizing cheating, punishment is still necessary in maintaining the academic integrity of universities.

Keywords: ethical behavior, university cheating, moral approbation, cheating punishment

I would like to honor my friend and co-author Stuart Michelson for his contributions to this paper. Without his help, this research would not have been possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cheating in academic institutions is a serious problem that has been widely examined throughout the years. Many studies have attempted to explain which students are most likely to cheat, why students cheat and how universities can discourage cheating, but questions remain. What can be done to reduce cheating? Is cheating prevented by fear of punishment or is there an internal moral code in some students that make them less likely to cheat? This paper continues the research by examining the relationship between intention to cheat and expected punishment. The paper also investigates the relationship between cheating and moral approbation, the desire for moral approval both internal and externally from others (Ryan & Riordan (2000)). The paper also explores how moral approbation interacts with punishment as deterrent for cheating.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cheating behavior has been well documented and examined from many different angles. Understanding why students cheat has been studied extensively by authors like Burrus et al, (2013), Atmeh & Al-Khadash, (2008), Burrus et al, (2007), Anitsal et al, (2009), Klein et al, (2006) and Sheets & Waddill, (2009) and many more. Common characteristics are being male, having a low GPA and feeling alienated from the community.

One reason why cheating is so prevalent is that students define cheating differently from faculty and may not fully understand what activities are considered cheating. Burrus et al, (2007), Wotring & Bol (2011), Wotring (2007), and Stowe et al, (2009) have contributed research in this area. In general, students tend to view cheating as less serious than faculty, so behaviors that faculty perceive as cheating may not be seen as cheating in the eyes of the students.

Understanding how to reduce and prevent cheating is of utmost importance to faculty. Is the solution tied to creating a culture that better defines and discourages cheating or, perhaps, stronger punishment for cheaters? Honor codes may reduce cheating to some extent as shown by Carrell et al, (2008) who studied military academies with strong honor codes. Burrus, et al, (2013) find that when peers are expected to report cheating, it will reduce cheating behavior and that the best way to police cheating is to increase monitoring and reporting by fellow students. Honor codes are not a simple solution and seem to work best when there are presentations and frequent reminders from faculty. (Bing, et al, 2012, Ely, et al, 2013 and Caldwell 2010).

Expected punishment can be a deterrent to cheating as indicated by Megehee & Spake (2008). The authors study plagiarism by students in different formats from copying homework to buying papers online. They find likelihood of getting caught and the expected penalty for getting caught is a deterrent from cheating behavior for the most severe types of cheating. For lower levels of cheating, students expect to not be punished or only punished mildly, so punishment is less of a deterrent. LaSalle (2009) finds that cheating increases when perception of detection and expected punishment are low and that cheating declines when detection is high and punishment is harsh. Strategies such as signing honor statements or closely proctoring students can reduce cheating. Using data from international case competitions, Dbouk (2019) finds nearly 36% of students view cheating as positive or very positive. The most common justification for cheating was lack of surveillance and a perceived lack of punishment if caught.

Punishment can be a deterrent for students who are more likely to cheat, but overall personal integrity is the most important factor in reducing cheating. According to Miller et al,

(2011), students who have a strong goal of learning or high personal integrity will cheat less in all situations and punishment will have minimal impact. Students who do not cheat only due to expected punishment report higher levels of cheating in general.

In trying to understand more about moral intentions and moral behavior, Ryan & Riordan (2000) develop a measurement for desired moral approbation which focuses on people who follow through on their moral intentions. They look at both internal motivations and external reasons for acting morally. Their results indicate that desired moral approbation is due to external factors, like wanting praise and avoiding blame, and internal moral approval from self.

This paper will continue this discovery into punishment as a deterrent as a preventative measure. It will also analyze how a student's own moral character might act as a strong deterrent to cheating. The research methodology and data characteristics are presented in the next section, followed by results and conclusions.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

Students at two different universities in the south were given a survey that asked about specific cheating behaviors and their intention to participate in these behaviors. They survey also asked students if they expected punishments for these cheating behaviors, and if those punishments provided a deterrent for cheating. The survey also contained questions designed to measure moral approbation.

The moral approbation questions were selected from Ryan & Riordan (2000). Questions are chosen to measure both internal and external factors impacting moral behavior. Students were asked to answer the following questions on a scale of 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. The scores were then combined into a composite MA score.

- I want others to view my decisions as ethical
- I always do what's right and don't need ethics to guide me.
- I do what I think is right ethically, no matter what anyone else thinks
- Many people put too much emphasis on ethics in decision-making
- I feel upset when others think that I have done the wrong thing ethically
- If I were a manager and I had to make a decision on building a very profitable manufacturing plant that pollutes, I would choose to maximize company profits and build the plant.

All responses were anonymous and were untraceable to any individual student. The survey received appropriate approval from the university research review board and was given to 300 students in 2018 and 2019. Since the surveys were given in-person, limited demographic data was collected due to the sensitivity of the topic and to encourage honesty by minimizing traceability to a particular student.

## **RESULTS**

To better understand the different methods that students use for cheating, Table 1 (Appendix) shows specific cheating activities and how often students admit to these activities. The scores go from 1 which is never to 5 which is always. The most common cheating behaviors are asking students who have already taken an exam for details (mean = 2.93) and copying homework when specifically instructed to work independently (mean = 2.22). The least common activity is borrowing someone else's work and turning it in as their own (mean = 1.07). All

activities have a mean less than 3, which indicates that even the most common activities are not being done frequently.

Punishment is used as a deterrent for cheating. Table 2 (Appendix) assesses how students view punishments for the specific cheating activities. For expected punishment the scale is 1-None to 5-Most Severe. In looking at expected punishment, the lowest means are for the same two activities students admit to doing the most: asking for exam details (mean = 1.56) and copying homework when instructed to work alone (mean = 2.41). The highest is for borrowing someone else's work and using as their own (mean = 4.03).

Table 2 (Appendix) also looks at whether or not the expected punishment is a deterrent to cheating. The scale for deterrent is 1-Not a deterrent to 5-Very strong deterrent when measuring the strength of the deterrent. There is also a choice coded as 6 which is the punishment is irrelevant, I would never do the activity anyway. The lower mean indicates the expected punishment is not much of a deterrent to cheating. Asking for test details has the lowest mean of 2.34, which means that students do this activity because they do not expect a severe punishment and that punishment is not much of a deterrent. Sharing homework when expected to work alone has the next lowest mean of 3.29. The expected punishment for this activity is also not much of a deterrent. The highest mean (4.85) is borrowing another's work and using as their own. The expected punishment is high and is a strong deterrent to this activity. Students who answer that the punishment is irrelevant will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

To better understand the relationship between intention to cheat and expected punishment, correlations are presented in Table 3 (Appendix). All correlations are negative and significant at the .05 level. This indicates that students' intention to cheat is inversely related to the severity of expected punishment if caught doing the activity. As expected, punishment appears to be a strong deterrent to cheating.

Expected punishment may not be the only deterrent to cheating activities. Some people have strong internal moral codes, moral approbation, which means that they are less likely to participate in unethical behaviors. Table 4 (Appendix) uses the composite MA score discussed previously and correlates it to cheating actions. Negative correlations indicate that higher MA scores results in lower cheating activity. All of the correlations are negative and significant for previous cheating activities. Students with strong moral character have been less likely to have cheated in the past. When looking at intention to cheat, all correlations are negative, but not all are significant. Overall, there is evidence that strong moral approbation is related to lower cheating. For these students, expected punishment may not be as important to prevent cheating as it is for students with lower moral approbation.

When looking at whether or not punishment was a deterrent to cheating, there was an option for students that said the punishment was irrelevant, they would never do that activity anyway. These were scored as a 6 in the data analysis. To further explore students who answered that expected punishment was irrelevant (score 6), those students are analyzed separately from other students.

Table 5 (Appendix) details the number and percentage of students who indicated they would never participate in the specific activities (score 6). The highest percentage is associated with borrowing someone else's work and turning it in as their own. Forty one percent of students say they would never do this irrelevant of expected punishment. This is also the activity with the highest expected punishment. On the lowest end, only 8% of students say they would never ask someone who has taken an exam for details irrelevant of punishment. This is also the activity with the lowest expected punishment.

Higher moral approbation can also be associated with how students view punishments associated with cheating. Table 6 (Appendix) separates out students who indicated punishment was a deterrent to cheating (score 1-5) from students who indicated punishment was irrelevant (score 6). Column 1, excludes students who indicated punishment was irrelevant (score 6). Positive correlations mean that students with higher MA would also indicate a higher likelihood that the expected punishment is a deterrent. The correlations between moral approbation and punishment as a deterrent are mostly insignificant. There appears to be little connection to how moral approbation relates to punishment as a deterrent to cheating. Only asking someone for exam details has a significant relationship between MA and punishment as a deterrent. This means students with higher MA are more likely to believe the expected punishment is a deterrent to doing this activity.

The second column in Table 6 (Appendix) looks only at students who indicated punishment was irrelevant, they would never do the activity anyway (score 6). Positive correlations mean that students with higher MA are more likely to answer 6 to this question. Students with higher moral approbation are more likely to say they would never obtain a copy of an exam before taking it, look at another student's paper during an exam or lie to a professor about illness no matter the punishment. In this case, high moral approbation is related to lower cheating activity.

To further understand the relationship between moral approbation and punishment, the students were once again grouped into those who answered 1-5 as to whether punishment was a deterrent and those who answered 6, punishment was irrelevant. Table 7 compares the average composite MA score for the two groups for each cheating activity. Overall, for every activity, students who answered 6 (punishment irrelevant) had higher average MA score. For several activities, MA is significantly higher for students who answered 6 vs those who indicated punishment was some deterrent to cheating. The two activities where the difference is not significant are asking someone for exam details and sharing homework when instructed to work independently. These are the activities students report they are most likely to engage in and have the lowest expected punishment.

These results suggest for those students with higher internal moral character, punishments are not needed to deter cheating, especially in higher risk activities. Their own moral compass prevents them from participating in these activities. For students with lower moral approbation, punishment is a necessary deterrent to keep them from cheating. For activities that have lower risk of punishment, MA is not significant, indicating that students will likely continue doing these activities unless there are stronger punishments.

## CONCLUSIONS

Classroom cheating is a problem that has been highly documented over the years. Many studies have looked at the issue from different angles. Finding ways to minimize cheating helps all students by maintaining the integrity of their education. This study finds that students cheat less when they feel the punishment for getting caught is strong. When students report that the punishment is expected to be minor, they are more likely to participate in the cheating activity.

For some students; however, punishment is not the primary reason to avoid certain cheating behaviors. Students who have strong moral approbation are less likely to cheat overall. For these students, their own internal mechanisms and the desire to be seen as a moral person prevent them from participating in some cheating activities. This is not true for all cheating

activities, especially those that are viewed as having lesser repercussions for students. The results suggest that even for students with strong moral approbation, expected punishments are needed to prevent them from cheating.

This study provides evidence for faculty to clearly communicate and carry out penalties for cheating if they want to reduce cheating in their courses. Since this data was collected in-person, pre-Covid, an area for further research could include post-Covid updates. With colleges and universities adding more online courses, this could impact the amount of cheating, the ways in which students cheat and the penalties for cheating.



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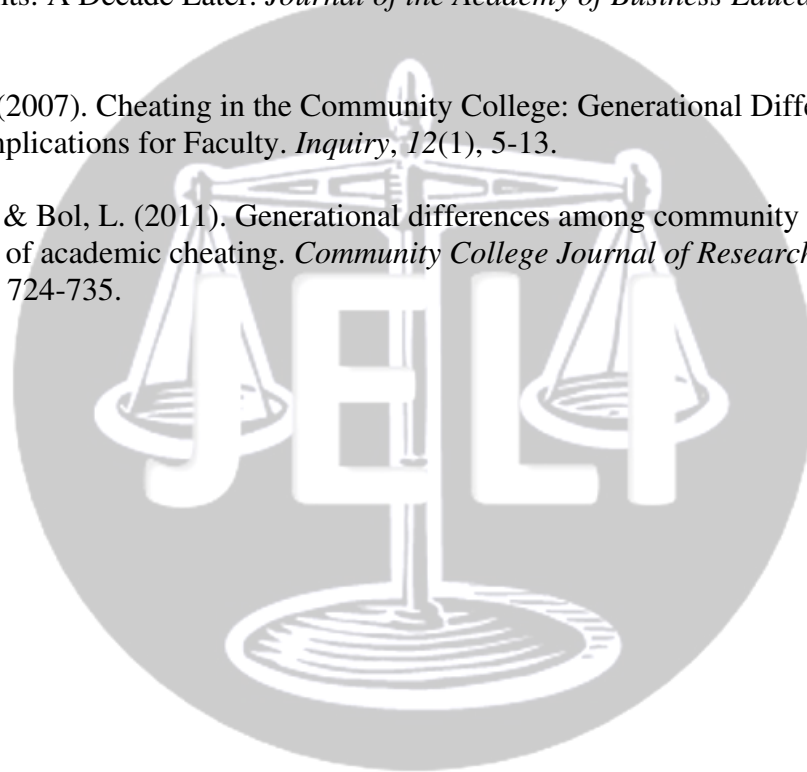
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**APPENDIX**

Tables in this section are based on tables in Stowe, et al (2018) and Stowe, et al (2009). All of the cheating activities mentioned in this paper are worded similarly to the tables in those studies.

Table 1

*Comparison of Means for Cheating activities*

	I have participated in the following activities in the past		I intend to participate in the following activities	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	296	2.93	298	3.07
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	296	1.47	298	1.69
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	295	1.57	298	1.48
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	296	1.40	299	1.45
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	295	2.22	298	2.14
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	297	1.59	299	1.56
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	297	1.07	299	1.08

Scale: 1-Never, 2-Seldom, 3-Sometimes, 4, Often, 5-Very Often

Table 2

*Means for Expected Punishment and Punishment Deterrent*

	Expected severity of punishment for each activity		The expected punishment acts as a deterrent	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	296	1.56	284	2.34
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	294	3.45	283	4.32
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	295	2.83	284	3.82
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	296	2.47	284	3.70
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	293	2.41	283	3.29
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	295	3.01	285	4.29
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	295	4.03	285	4.85

Scale for Expected Punishment: 1-None, 2-Moderate, 3-Severe, 4-Very Severe, 5-Most Severe

Scale for Deterrent: 1-Not a deterrent, 2-Minimal, 3-Moderate, 4-Strong, 5-Very strong, 6-Irrelevant, would never do

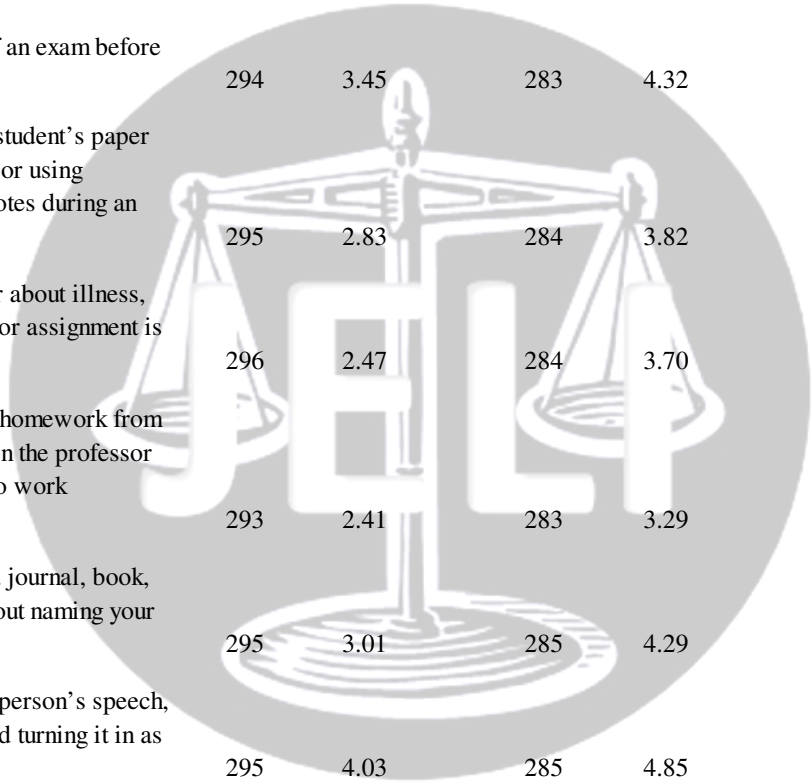


Table 3

Correlation between Intent to Cheat and Severity of Punishment

	Expected severity of punishment for each activity
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	-0.301 **
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	-0.200 **
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	-0.141 *
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	-0.220 **
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	-0.240 **
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	-0.311 **
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	-0.126 *

\* Significant at .05 level

\*\* Significant at .01 level

Table 4

*Correlation between Moral Approbation and Cheating Activities*

	I have participated in the following activities in the past	I intend to participate in the following activities
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	-0.186 **	-0.212 **
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	-0.267 **	-0.105
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	-0.212 **	-0.321 **
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	-0.139 *	-0.198 **
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	-0.173 **	-0.199 **
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	-0.152 *	-0.064
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	-0.160 **	-0.088

\* Significant at .05 level

\*\* Significant at .01 level

Table 5

*Respondents who Indicated Punishment is Irrelevant*

	Number of respondents who would never do the activity	Percent who would never do the activity
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	23	8%
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	102	34%
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	70	23%
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	89	30%
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	49	16%
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	92	31%
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	123	41%

Table 6

*Correlation between Moral Approbation and Punishment as a Deterrent*

	Excludes students who answer the punishment is irrelevant (score 6)	Includes only students who say punishment is irrelevant (score 6)
Asking someone who has already taken an exam for details	0.166 *	0.036
Obtaining a copy of an exam before taking it in class	-0.020	0.163 **
Looking at another student's paper or computer screen or using unauthorized crib notes during an exam	0.055	0.159 **
Lying to a professor about illness, etc., when an exam or assignment is due	0.048	0.117 *
Copying or sharing homework from another student when the professor has instructed you to work independently.	0.102	0.090
Using words from a journal, book, web site, etc., without naming your source	0.039	0.106
Borrowing another person's speech, report or project and turning it in as your own	-0.007	0.106

\* Significant at .05 level

\*\* Significant at .01 level

Table 7

T-test of 7 Punishment as Deterrent grouped by non-6 (1) vs 6's (2)

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
<b>Exam details</b>						
MA	1	264	21.13	3.11	0.19	
	2	22	21.55	3.04	0.65	
<b>Copy of exam</b>						
MA	1	192	20.81	3.09	0.22	***
	2	94	21.88	3.02	0.31	
<b>Looking at other exam</b>						
MA	1	218	20.89	3.10	0.21	***
	2	68	22.04	2.97	0.36	
<b>Lying to professor</b>						
MA	1	204	20.93	3.16	0.22	**
	2	82	21.73	2.92	0.32	
<b>Copying or sharing</b>						
MA	1	239	21.04	3.11	0.20	
	2	47	21.79	3.05	0.44	
<b>Plagiarism</b>						
MA	1	197	20.94	3.12	0.22	*
	2	89	21.65	3.04	0.32	
<b>Using others' material</b>						
MA	1	170	20.89	3.19	0.24	*
	2	116	21.56	2.94	0.27	

\* Significant at .10 level

\*\* Significant at .05 level

\*\*\* Significant at .01 level