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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: A SAUDI STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Practices of academic dishonesty are prevalent on college campuses (Chen, 2009; O'Rourke, Barnes, Deaton, Fulks, Ryan, & Rettinger, 2010; Simkin, 2010). The pressure to excel, peer perception, and the lack of faculty enforcement are among several factors that lead students to cheat. Building on an initial multi campus 673 participant-survey results, circumstances of academic integrity among Saudi students at a Midwestern university are examined through in depth interviews. Findings revealed prevalence of academic misconduct behaviors among study participants. Academic misconduct behaviors ranged from simple utilization of cheating on tests to utilizing internet paper mills. Findings also showed a gap between students' moral beliefs and their moral actions (Gross, 2011). Most participants, though reporting several academic dishonesty behaviors as accepted practices, denounced cheating as opposed to their own cultural, religious, and ethical beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Occurring for several reasons with varying rates, types of cheating within a college setting may have no limits (Hendricks, Young-Jones, & Foutch, 2011). An observed increase of incidents of academic dishonesty from Middle Eastern international students on three adjacent Midwestern institutions raised a flag to faculty members. As a result an initial survey of academic integrity was adapted from the Dr. Donald McCabe of Rutgers University. After obtaining the proper approval of the Institutional Review Board, an electronic copy of the survey was circulated utilizing Patton's (2002) snowball sampling method through student international groups at 11 cities in the United States. Initially group administrators were concerned lest the result might influence the reputation of their members. However, they agreed to distribute the survey after a promise of keeping their group names anonymous. Out of 673 returned surveys, 501 were from Saudi students and 172 were from other Middle Eastern students from several nationalities including Kuwaiti, Libyan, Qatari, Egyptian, Jordanian, Algerian, Moroccan, Sudanese, Lebanese, Syrian, and Yamani in a descending order. Frequency results showed large difference between the Saudi students and the American national levels of academic dishonesty practices as reported by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2004). However, the comparison between students from countries other than Saudi Arabia and the national reported data did not show significant difference (See Table 1

for a summary of frequency data). The focus of this article is to explore the motives and circumstances surrounding Saudi students' increased reported academic dishonesty practices. An exploration qualitative study was developed to explore the reasons pertained to Saudi students' academic integrity behaviors, how they perceive, interpret, and justify these behaviors, and ways a university may be able to decrease these behaviors.

Table 1 Frequency Comparisons

Dishonest Academic Behaviors	Saudi	U.S.A.	Middle Eastern**
Unauthorized collaboration	48%	42%	44%
Copying a few sentences from an electronic source without referencing them	42%	36%	38%
Getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken the test	32%	15%	13%
Receiving substantial unpermitted help on an assignment	53%	24%	18%
Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography	15%	14%	15%

* Engagement once or more in Dishonest Academic Behaviors

**Non Saudi Middle Eastern Students

BACKGROUND

Over the last two decades, academic dishonesty has become an alarming phenomenon on college campuses (Carter & Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Fishbein, 1993). Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor's (1992) study on 6000 college students showed that between 46% and 79% of students reported that they have cheated at least once. Several forms of academic dishonesty can take place in the college classroom with its larger meaning. These forms may vary in their degree of severity and seriousness from copying from a nearby student answer sheet during a quiz to plagiarizing a paper from an internet website or collaborating on homework and inappropriate utilization of tutoring services (Levy & Rakovski, 2006). Faculty perceptions about cheating always varied from those of the students who usually denied the severity of the different forms of cheating (Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffen, 1994). Moreover, students consider some forms of academic dishonesty more serious than others. Consequently, students are more frequently engaged in behaviors that they consider less serious than other forms of cheating (Kidwell, Wozniak, & Laurel, 2003).

Types and Reasons of Academic Misconduct

Types of academic dishonesty can be classified according to several dimensions in regard to intentionality, seriousness of the misconduct from students' point of view, and the degree of student awareness of types and consequences of academic misconduct. Levy and Rakovski (2006) found that student regarded the following categories of misconduct as severe: stealing an exam, submitting another student's paper, knowingly allowing another student to use one's paper, copying an exam with or without the other student's knowledge, copying a paper, and using a cheat sheet. Students categorized copying homework; giving or receiving help on graded work; and plagiarizing from the internet as the least serious and the most frequently practiced (Levy & Rakovski, 2006).

According to Callahan (2004), shifting values from idealism to materialism caused the increases in cheating incidents among students. According to the study conducted by Smith, Nolan, and Dai (1998), faculty believed that student cheating is more encouraged when students encounter a "moral dilemma." Researchers argue that one of the main reasons of today students' academic dishonesty is the social pressure demanding them to demonstrate productivity, performance, and speed (Blum, 2009; Rabi, Patton, Fjortoft, & Zgarrick, 2006). Likewise, Wowra (2007) argued that college students who choose to cheat in some form have higher value for their social impression than they attribute to maintaining their integrity. Anxiety about grades, compulsory achievements, and economic conditions may lead students towards sacrificing their integrity especially when the risk of being caught is foreseen to be minimal (Wowra, 2007).

Students who reported incidents of academic dishonesty blamed their college professors for failing to respond efficiently to cheating incidents that were obvious (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Hard, Conway, and Moran (2006) found that professors underestimating the amount of student academic dishonesty fail to integrate challenging measures to stop student academic misconduct. They also argued that tolerance of academic misconduct might increase the number of incidents in their classes.

Preventing Academic Misconduct

The intentional academic misconduct performed by the students on papers and written assignments falls under Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior. According to Ajzen (2002), a certain behavior is controlled by three main aspects. First, individuals decide to engage in certain behaviors based on their attitude toward that specific behavior. Second, perceptions of social pressures may decide whether individuals will perform a certain behavior or not. Third, individuals' control over the conditions of performing the behavior and its consequences is a determinant factor in the decision to engage in that behavior (Ajzen, 2002; Passow, Mayhew, Finelli, Harding, & Carpenter, 2006). Therefore, the prevention of academic misconduct needs to include these three dimensions. College administrators need to raise the ethical commitment of their students to decrease the frequency of cheating. To accomplish that, colleges choose different ways ranging from notifying students upon admission of the university honor code to

more concrete techniques like requiring students to sign an honor contract (McCabe & Trevino, 2002) or write an essay pledging to uphold to the honor code (Gomez, 2001).

Modifying the learning process to focus more on acquiring knowledge and skills more than accumulating grades may be another factor that alleviates the pressure on students to perform acts of academic misconduct. Hard et al. (2006) suggested raising the faculty members awareness of the dimensions of academic misconduct and its expected frequency as a way to prevent academic misconduct through increasing faculty numbers who work against it. Raising faculty awareness of the matter may urge faculty to take active measures to prevent academic misconduct. One of the most important in such measures is articulating their policy towards cheating and the consequences that students may face due to academic misconduct. Scholars also argued in favor of improving student learning and asserting its precedence over grades while accepting feedback about assignments in a non-intimidating learning environment (Gallant, 2008; Rabi et al., 2006).

Academic dishonesty is prevalent on American college campuses. Students choose to cheat due to social pressure and higher appreciation of grades over the importance of conformity to the ethical framework guided by personal integrity (Ajzen, 2002; Passow et al., 2006). Students who choose to cheat rationalize their behavior according to the perceived severity of different forms of academic dishonesty (Kidwell et al., 2003). Their behavior is also influenced by their knowledge of the consequences they may face if caught by the instructor (Callahan, 2004; Wowra, 2007). Articulation of the university honor code and actively informing students of university policies in response to academic misconduct may help reduce the frequency of student violations of the code (Gomez, 2001; McCabe & Trevino, 2002). In the classroom, instructors asserting their measures responding to cheating incidents may minimize the frequency of student academic misconduct (Hard et al., 2006; McCabe & Trevino, 2002). Moreover, shifting the goal of the educational process from accumulating high grades to acquiring knowledge and skills may lessen pressure on students and encourage them to abstain from cheating (Gallant, 2008; Rabi et al., 2006).

METHODS

As a qualitative study, the current study presents a more complex world view where participants have limits, opportunities and intermingling complications they have to reconsider while shaping their reactions and perceptions (Firestone, 1987). It is the orientation of the current study to explore, discover, and interpret the meaning produced during observations and interviews. The case study approach, usually more prominent and integrative of themes, is used to allow the data to drive the outcome instead of starting with hypotheses and trying to prove them (Yin, 2003). The products of field observations and interviews are the data sources for the proposed study. Interviews, one of the most powerful research techniques for human understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), are selected as a tool because of their effectiveness in

understanding feeling, emotions, and perceptions of participants regarding their complex experiences and the various factors involved with them. Each interview protocol included certain guidelines and rules for participant's responses (Sypher, Hummert, & Williams, 1994). Interview protocols for each group of participants, though varied, were crafted to assure that the contained response of the participant is addressing the intended research questions. They also provided chances for appropriate elaboration that expanded and widened the scope of the response to clarify ambiguities and reveal unsolicited, though valuable, aspects or experiences of the participants.

Procedures

Building on the results of the aforementioned survey, the primary data source for this study originates in open-ended interviews with each of the 13 key participants. Participants responded to a topical interview protocol eliciting their feelings about academic honesty, beliefs about cheating and possible practices of academic dishonesty at Riverside State University (a pseudonym) during the academic year 2011/2012. Using a pseudonym list of participant names, the responses were recorded and transcribed. Data were coded and categorized within an emergent framework of relevant themes to examine the intricate relationships that shape the situation of Saudi students at Riverside State University (RSU) and the impact of campus environment, recruitment circumstances, administrative procedures, and academic practices on their practices and perceptions of academic dishonesty behaviors.

Conducting several exploratory discussions with faculty about the topic, the issue proved to be worth of a deliberate and structured research endeavor. After obtaining an Institutional Review Board approval to observe student activities and to interview students, faculty members, and administrators in an effort to reveal the different aspects of the issue, the current exploratory study revealed the different constructs central to the case of these students. The exploratory discussions helped structuring the interview protocols to explore the themes related to academic integrity beliefs, practices, and justifications of Saudi students pursuing degrees at RSU.

Interview Language

Although the interviews were conducted in English and the participants were asked to respond in English, most of the participants fluctuated in their responses between English and Arabic, their mother tongue, due to their level of English language proficiency. Some of the participants inquired if they can use Arabic instead of English. The suggestion was to use Arabic if they feel more comfortable in using it than English. As a native speaker of Arabic, I translated the interviewees' Arabic responses to English. The accuracy of the translations were later verified by a fellow researcher who has proficiency in both English and Arabic.

FINDINGS

Overwhelmed by the amount of work expected from them to keep up the good grades and accomplish their goals, some Saudi participants sought external help away from regular

university resources. Hanan tells how she needed tutoring to succeed in her classes. She recollects,

I find it very difficult for someone like me to come and study here. I think the 500 on TOEFL they required us to have before admission is not enough score. ... I had a lot of troubles in my first year. I had to get a tutor from the English Institute here to help me get some skills in reading and how to organize my papers and even respond to questions in my exams.

Like Hanan, Jihad had to get a tutor to help him during his English language year. Telling how the studying at ELI got harder in his first year, he says, "Studying was not that hard at the beginning of the year because they think that we do not know any English." However, he needed to use an extra help as the difficulty of assignments and instructional material increased. "Later in the year, things got harder and harder. I could barely pass my quizzes. I had to get a tutor that helped me with both my assignments and my studies," He reflects.

Although the role of the tutor seemed traditional at the beginning of Jihad's study of English, that role changed with larger assignments.

He used to take a copy of my syllabus and the textbooks. ... we met three times a week. In each meeting, he would go over the important points in the next week's lessons. He also gave me notes about the chapters we are going to cover in class. If there were any assignments due, he would give me an outline of the assignment I should write. Then I would start writing the assignment on my own. ... After that, he would revise them for me and make the paper looks really good to submit to my professor. This was what he suggested for me. But in a few large assignments, I left the whole job for him because I was not able to do them at all.

Later, when Jihad started his academic program, he utilized the service of another person who "is really easy going but he does not explain things. They say he is very busy. He gives you your papers written and if you need them summarized, he can give you that too. But he has to know in advance like three weeks before you get the paper".

Rabie tells two incidents when he had to get help from the internet. He says,

During my second semester, I was asked to write a research paper about one of the class topics. I found a similar paper on the internet. ... I used many sections of that paper in my assignment. I knew that was not right but I did not take it that serious because I did that in other classes too and still got good grades on the assignments. ... She told me that she should have sent me to the Legal Affairs Department but she will forgive me as it is my first time to do it on the condition that I redo the assignment.

Although Rabie admits knowing that this was not right, he argues that it passes in other classes. His simple inference is that this should have passed in that class as well. He continues to tell his experience with the University Writing Lab, “Another professor sent me to the writing lab when I submitted my first reflection paper on the reading. But you know the Writing Lab did not offer that great help. They wanted me to submit a nearly correct paper to revise for me.” Because he did not get what he expected from the Writing Lab, he tried and found another way to satisfy his needs when it comes to writing papers,

But I did not know how to do it from the beginning. It was not until I knew that Syrian guy. He helps me a lot with my papers. ... I give him the assignment, and what I want to write about and if the professor has gave me some directions and he does the paper for me. ... He also gives me a summary of what is included in the paper if I have to talk about it.

Rabie’s approach was not different from other Saudi participants. Fadila, having some other Saudi students in her program, uses passed over class material to help her get better grades. She says, “I tried to use my friends’ class material as a great help in the classes that has the same professor.” She reflects on how this helped,

In the first classes of the master program, I had so much trouble writing the papers that was required. I got D’s and C’s on my first papers. ... Then, my husband got me the folders of his friends’ wives, the ones that had the program before. I followed their assignments and papers.

Fadila knows about university rules concerning plagiarism. She tells how she avoids getting into trouble because of using other students’ assignments. She says, “I used their papers but changed a little in each paper because my husband told me that if the professors know they can fail me the course and may be the whole program.”

Feras talks about how he and other Saudi students in his program found a student who graduated from the same program to help them with reading, papers, and quizzes.

The topics we study are usually new to me. ... I have three Saudi who are in the same program with me. One of us knows a student who finished the program two years ago and he did not find a job. This guy helps us a lot. ... He offers to write us papers... and summarize the chapters that we are quizzed in for us.

Responding to a question about what they do when they are required to present in their classes, Feras said, “When one of us has a presentation about a paper, he gives us an outline for the presentation.” The help even was extended to quizzes. Feras declared, “He offers to... summarize the chapters that we are quizzed in for us. His summaries really helped me to pass quizzes.” Feras explains how they managed to survive classes with final exams without doing much of the reading that is required throughout the year. “In the classes that have tests, he

summarizes the books for us and then we study the summary before the tests. This worked so far.” He says. John’s help extended to reach group work on class projects as well.

In class projects, we try to be together so it is easier for us to work together. ... It was only one class where I had to do group work with other students in the class. But it worked OK. I discussed my role with my group. ... And with the help of John, I finished my part and he told me that I can offer them to revise the paper and submit it. He is very good in MLA and he does the works cited very well.

Fadila speaks about another person that helps her doing her assignments as well. But she uses this service only in classes that she does not have the material.

The courses that had a different professor were another problem that we were also able to solve. We had this [man] who does papers for us and takes a sum of money –not much – he takes a \$100 for each paper and an extra 25 if we need him to summarize the paper for a presentation in the class. ... He is very good and since the time we knew him; I have been getting A’s on all my papers.

Fadila opines the external help she is getting as an acceptable behavior in her opinion. She argues, “I know this is wrong but this will not influence me when I go back to my country. I cannot fail here. It will be a scandal if this happens. I have to get that degree no matter what. I do not need what they teach us here as I need the degree itself.” However, she admits that she was afraid at the beginning of jeopardizing her chances of success at RSU. She says, “I know this is wrong but this will not influence me when I go back to my country. I cannot fail here. It will be a scandal if this happens. I have to get that degree no matter what. I do not need what they teach us here as I need the degree itself.”

When asked if she considers this as cheating, Fadila argues, “Not that much. I think I can do whatever I can to get my degree. ...I am not copying someone’s answers on a test. ... I am not going to get the grades of anybody else.” She claims that as long as she is not taking something that belongs to someone else she is not cheating, “I am not going to get the job they are supposed to get. I will have my degree and leave to my country.” Likewise, Rabie and Feras did not admit that this could be considered cheating. They both argued about that they are not using some other student’s work to get credit. Feras argues,

It is cheating only when you take another student’s answers and copy them... I do not do that... I submit papers that are not written by other students ... I know that is not right because I cannot tell the professor that I do that but I am not taking anyone’s right here.

DISCUSSION

Except for one participant, all Saudi participants reported incidents of academic dishonesty as an acceptable norm for survival in their American college endeavor. The academic dishonesty incidents they reported included copying from the internet, using other students' papers as their own, and receiving help on assignments. These practices, although rated by American students as the least serious form of cheating and therefore the most frequently practiced (Levy & Rakovski, 2006), appeared to be a common practice among the Saudi study participants. The concept of cheating appeared to be blurred when they reported these incidents. Their first argument mainly focused on the stress they suffer because of their inevitable failure without these forms of external help let alone their cultural challenges (Razek & Coyner, 2012). As Nolan and Dai (1998) found, the stress they suffer from lest they lose their scholarship or return home without their respective degrees places them in the shift to materialism as suggested by Callahan (2004). Saudi participants reported increased incidents of academic misconduct which may be a direct result of the collective cultural framework they belong to (Triandis & Trafimow, 2001). This cultural framework directs them to value their social impression higher than maintaining their academic integrity (Wowra, 2007).

Resonating with the arguments of Gallant (2008) and Rabi et al. (2006), Saudi participants reporting incidents of academic misconduct mentioned how grades are more important for them than learning and the precedence of obtaining the degree over acquiring the knowledge and skills matching to their respective degrees. Students in the study also reported how their advisors, instructors, and most important, the scholarship administrators put high values on grades and assignment scores which correspond with their reported tendency for cheating on assignments one way or another (Blum, 2009; Wowra, 2007). In this respect, instructors and college administrators need to exert intentional efforts in asserting the value of acquiring the cognitive skills and put more weight to the learning process as an essential component of the educational process (Gallant, 2008; Rabi et al., 2006). Another technique may target the Saudi students' attitude toward the importance of learning and the acquisition of content knowledge and work skills during orientation programs and college success seminars, which may reduce their tendency to cheat on assignments.

The Saudi participants' other justification of cheating was about the definition of cheating. Participants reported that as long as they do not take something that belongs to another student, they do not consider themselves cheating. Educating the Saudi students upon arrival about the different forms of academic dishonesty as detailed by the university honor code may establish the common concepts of what are the accepted forms of practice and what are not. Such delineation can be asserted through different techniques like writing an essay on the university honor code (Gomez, 2001) or signing an integrity contract (McCabe & Trevino, 2002). Another strategy can target raising the faculty awareness of the increased frequency of students' academic misconduct (Hard et al., 2006). This will encourage faculty to articulate their

policies toward academic misconduct and it stated consequences for students. Faculty awareness will also increase the number of faculty working against academic misconduct.

College professor and administrators might be able to reduce the frequency of Saudi students' engagement in academic dishonest behaviors through a three faceted plan that need to be simultaneous. First they may raise students' ethical awareness to decrease the frequency of cheating (Gomez, 2001; McCabe & Trevino, 2002). Second, because students choose to cheat due to social pressure, institutional endeavor to alleviate these pressures through providing peer support, more learning support systems especially for international students, and progress check points along the academic courses may decrease the amount of academic pressure they suffer and may also decrease their fear of failure alleviating their social threats (Ajzen, 2002; Passow et al., 2006). Third, professors and instructor should focus more on students' acquiring knowledge and skills more than accumulating grades as the main goal of the educational process (Gallant, 2008; Hard et al., 2006; Rabi et al., 2006). More specific to the case of paper trade, professors are encouraged to keep writing samples for each student. Professors also may require draft submission that shows students' thought processes. Another beneficial strategy is in-class "work on assignments" segments where students are assisted by instructor and peers.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies, which dealt with academic integrity issues, rarely targeted international students as a group (Bailey & Bailey, 2011; Duff, Rogers, & Harris, 2006; Grimes, 2004; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Teixeira & Rocha, 2010). Although the results of these studies cannot be undermined, the case of the noticeable increase of academic dishonesty among Saudi students in the United States deserved a more focused attention. The current study showed that academic dishonesty behaviors are more prevalent among Saudi Students when compared to national U.S. reported rates and also when compared to other Middle Eastern students on their colleges and universities. The study suggested some strategies to reduce the frequency of academic dishonesty among Saudi students including: Raising ethical awareness, focusing more on the developmental objective of learning, employing more collaborative learning experiences, and utilizing periodic evaluations against well-articulated objectives especially when coupled with an academic awareness of their case.

The present study had three limitations that restricted its findings. First: the small sample size of key participants limited the degree of generalization of the findings. Second, the geographic location of RSU may have had its influence on the case. In other words, Saudi students may behave, perform, and react differently if they are at an institution located on a coastal state where the student body is usually more diverse. Third, the qualitative approach, though revealing in-depth rich aspects of the case, is very specific to the case studied and cannot be utilized to speak about the whole group of the Saudi students.

Future studies may target a larger sample size of Saudi students to produce more inclusive results. A quantitative approach may be a suitable technique to studying the characteristics of a larger number of Saudi students. A collaborative multi institutional study would reveal valuable findings about Saudi students as a fast growing group on American campuses.

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