Academic dishonesty among international students in higher education

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Krishna Bista
Morgan State University
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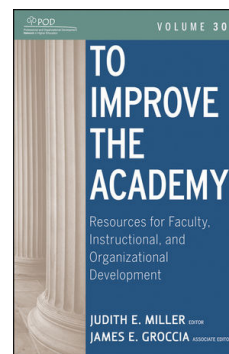
ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Krishna K. Bista, Arkansas State University

University instructors address and want to eschew student academic misconduct. These educators presume that students understand fully what cheating and plagiarism are. However, analyzing this complex and dynamic issue is difficult. This study investigated the perceptions of international undergraduate and graduate students in a Southern U.S. university about the possible causes for academic misbehavior. Results reveal several causal variables: previous learning style, English language proficiency, unfamiliarity with American academic cultures, relationship between student and teacher, and availability of technical and educational resources associated with academic dishonesty.

Academic misconduct in higher learning institutions remains prevalent among students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Lipson & McGavern, 1993; Love, 1997). Academic misconduct is more prevalent among international students than students educated in English speaking countries (Park, 2003; Arkoudis, 2007). The University of Alberta (2001) describes academic dishonesty as cheating (use of unauthorized notes or study aids on an examination); plagiarism (use of other's works as their own without acknowledging the contribution of the author); fabrication (falsifying any information or data, unauthorized access, misuse of availability of computer system or alteration of computerized records); deception (providing false information to the instructor); and sabotage (preventing others from completing their course work).

Variables Affecting Plagiarism

Some researchers have suggested that academic offences often result from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of course policy or definitions of misbehavior such as plagiarism rather than a deliberate intention to cheat (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Evans & Youmans, 2000). Broadly speaking, scholars have categorized academic misconduct into two groups--intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism (Hammond, 2002; Park, 2003; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Bamford & Sergiou, 2005). Hall (2004) found several reasons for plagiarism such as differing cultural values, personality factors, stress, peer pressure, and contextual factors. Studies conducted in China, Latvia, Lithuania, and the USA revealed historical, political, economic and technical influences as major variables of plagiarism (Russikoff, Fucaloro, & Salkauskiene, 2003). A study at the University of Alberta mentioned poor time management and organizational skills, strong home culture, pressure for scholarship and jobs, and misunderstanding of course rules and regulations leading individuals to acts of plagiarism (The University of Alberta, 2001). McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001) suggest contextual factors such as peer's behavior, as the most powerful influence to educational cheating.

Previous Learning Style and Culture

In many cultures, as Cammish (1997) pointed out, the ability of learners to integrate the words of others in harmony with one's own was considered as an academic practice. In a 1999 article, Fleck investigated the concept of cheating in urban and rural Nepal from an ethnocentric perspective. He found that the underlying causes of cheating were grounded in Nepal's hierarchical cultural values, that education is considered a status or rank rather than a process of learning, and that cheat sheets, whispers, and copied answers were a part of examination reality in many of the public schools of Nepal. These kinds of academic practices occur in many ethnic oriented tribal communities, as Ballard and Clanchy (1997, cited in Hall, 2004, p. 4) explained: "In a Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic society, for example, the ability to quote from sacred writings, from the saying of the ages, from the words of leading scholars, is the essence of scholarship".

Nazir and Aslam (2010) studied perceptions of academic dishonesty among Pakistani undergraduate and graduate students in different universities and found that more than half of students studied were involved in dishonest acts such as helping other students copy home assignments, exam papers, or graded project reports. These students believed that cheating or copying was not very severe, and there was no penalty for such behaviors from instructors or administrators.

In the Western world, knowledge acquisition is an intellectual exercise whereby one applies and manipulates information and data from various sources (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). However, in non-western cultures, rote learning and memorization is still widely practiced and the degree of plagiarism is higher in graduate students than in undergraduate students due to greater demand for critical and analytical writing (Schevyns, Wild, & Overton, 2003). Some scholars focused on the fact that many international students have already fossilized their

learning attitudes into culturally influenced beliefs and behaviors from years of schooling at their home university and it appears they may be unable to alter those behaviors in the American classroom (Ryan, 2000; Carroll, 2002).

Academic attribution and the use of others published material is greatly influenced by culture. Russikoff, Fucaloro and Salkauskiene (2003) found that commonly held economic practices in Communist and Post-Soviet settings to be influential in plagiarism. These researchers found students copying from each other and comparing composition lengths on a free-writing assignment in a post-Soviet Latvian institution of higher learning. When questioned by the researchers, students responded "We do it this way! We always do it this way! We copy and our teachers all know we just do it!" (p.110). Chinese students state that plagiarism and copying is "a pedagogical practice" (Russikoff, Fucaloro & Salkauskiene (2003, p. 112). Fleck (1999) studying the nature of 'cheating' in the public schools of Nepal found that students preferred copying answers from each other in free writing assignments.

Communication Difficulties

The lack of English language or writing proficiency as well as awareness of standard English citation conventions may contribute to plagiarism and cheating (Hyland, 2001; Park, 2003). Language barriers (Biggs & Burville, 2003) and problems arising from separating one's own thoughts from information gathered from texts and properly acknowledging the sources can also lead to plagiarism (Hall, 2004). In addition, international students may not have adequately developed study skills (e.g., essay writing, note taking, group work, and presentation skills) leading them to take academic shortcuts on academic tasks. Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2000) mentioned difficulties in comprehending the content of lectures, difficulties in understanding subject-specific terminologies, high speed of delivery in lectures and seminars, and difficulties in interpreting the English language as reasons that international students plagiarize.

Lack of Familiarity with the Culture of Academics

The cultural difference of what constitutes public knowledge vs. private knowledge is a central phenomenon of academic misconduct in some Asian and European educational settings. Some cultural groups do not regard plagiarism as a serious violation (Cammish, 1997). The University of Alberta (2001) suggested that 60% of international students interviewed stated they could not distinguish between paraphrased and plagiarized text. Ryan (2000) and Carroll (2002) highlighted the problems of such students who did not understand fully the difference between quoting, embedding sources, and plagiarism. In some cultural contexts, cheating is considered as a learned behavior (DiPietro, 2010). For example, Italian students viewed copying from other sources as acceptable and as a mark of respect to the original author (cited in Hyman, 2001). Hammond (2002, adopted from Hall, 2004, p. 1) listed the following reasons given by international students for plagiarizing:

"I couldn't keep up with the work."
"The lecturer/tutor doesn't care so why should I?"

"I have to succeed. Everyone expects me to succeed and I expect it, too."
"I don't understand what I'm expected to do to avoid plagiarism."
"I can't do this! I will have to copy."
"But you said "Work together.""
"But paraphrasing would be disrespectful."
"I got desperate at the last moment."

Both international and domestic students indicate that normal academic pressures can lead to academic misconduct. Russikoff, Fucaloro, and Salkauskiene (2003) found basic reasons why some individuals plagiarize: "it takes less time to complete an assignment, the ideas and writing are better, it is easier than having to produce original work, and teachers do not care" (p.113).

Student-Teacher Relationship

Student-teacher relationships play a crucial role in determining the degree of academic dishonesty for international students. Teachers are considered as highly respected authority persons in Asian countries such as Bhutan, China, India, Japan, and Nepal. Students in such cultures often consider teachers' opinions or information from books as the ultimate truth without question, and they reproduce this type of information verbatim (Ninnes *et al.*, 1999; Robertson *et al.*, 2000). Ryan (2000) points out that student from some cultures would believe it impolite to quote a reference or information from other sources as "…this indicates that the teacher does not know that the text exists" (p.23). Hall (2004) suggested that the teacher as a mentor determines the types of information that his or her students require to become successful in any collectivist culture. Knowledge in such cultures is considered "communal property" that anyone can use without acknowledgement (Ryan, 2000; Carroll, 2002).

Little research has been conducted on how undergraduate and graduate students are socialized in behaviors and attitudes related to academic misconduct. In a 1984 study by Nuss at the undergraduate level, 53% of faculty surveyed indicated they rarely or never discussed university policies related to cheating and plagiarism with their students. Another study by Love (1997) with six international graduate students, found that they did not have any orientation experiences focused on the American writing culture.

Access to Educational Resources

Having access to the electronic and print versions of educational materials is essential for both educators and learners to maximize learning. However, many learners in technologically underdeveloped countries do not have easy access to these resources. Limited teaching resources such as lecture notes and textbooks place burdens on instructors and students alike in China, India and Nepal (Ninnes *et al.,* 1999; Fleck, 1999; Biggs, 1996). In addition, poor quality of teaching aids, ineffective class management, inappropriate assessment, lack of expertise in education, and authoritarian approach have all been associated with academic misbehavior (Fleck, 1999; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004).

It is often argued that students in American and other Western universities are highly involved in academic misconduct because they have easy access to the internet resources (Russikoff, Fucaloro, and Salkauskiene, 2003). However, students and instructors in poor Asian countries without easy access to the Internet or library resources are also susceptible to cheating and plagiarism.

Psychological Pressure and Adjustment Issues

Psychological pressures that international students face in the process of transitioning to study in the US are associated with academic performance and misconduct. After arrival in a new country, international students face a number of challenges in adjusting to living and learning including cultural shock and financial problems which may impact study plans, academic motivation, and attention to assignments and course work. These adjustment problems can vary by country of origin, race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, and collective vs. individualist cultures orientation (Constantine *et al.,* 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2006).

The American university can also contribute to adjustment difficulties and the pressure to cheat when its international student services fall short by not making social connections to international students' home cultures, language, food and social life. As a result, international students may experience negative psychological responses such as tension, confusion, depression, homesickness, disorientation, feelings of isolation, alienation, and powerlessness (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2006) often leading to lower academic achievement in school (Rai, 2002; Ying, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2006). Eisenberg and Golberstein (2007) indicate that 37% to 84% of international students did not receive services like free counseling, mental health services, or psychotherapy. When international students experience psychological, social and academic pressures, they may be at greater risk of not following the standards and guidelines of American academic honesty requirements.

Much has been written about academic dishonesty and plagiarism among college students, but little has been done to study the causes of plagiarism among international students. As we have seen, international students with different culture, language, and learning environment backgrounds face several academic and non-academic problems.

I conducted a study of international students to answer the following questions:

- What are the major adjustment challenges for international students studying toward academic degrees in the U.S.?

- Do social, cultural, economical issues and psychological stress lead international students towards increased rates of plagiarism?

- Do home country teaching and learning styles contribute to documentation and citation difficulties?

- How do international students perceive cheating and plagiarism?

Methodology

I gathered data from international students studying at a southern university in 2010 using a questionnaire distributed by email and in-person. The questionnaire surveyed demographic factors such as gender, nationality, educational degree, and issues related to academic dishonesty. The focus of the study was to better comprehend the social, cultural and psychological backgrounds of international students. Of the 300 international students invited to respond, 230 students participated in the questionnaire, distributed by country of origin as follows: Australia (4), Azerbaijan (1), Belarus (1), China (66), Japan (10), India (30), Kenya (10), Malaysia (5), Morocco (4), Nepal (36), New Zealand (2), Norway (2), Poland (5), The Netherlands (4), Togo (2), Turkey (2), Saudi Arabia (23), South Korea (16), Sweden (3). Four participants did not mention their country of origin. Female participants (51.6%) slightly outnumbered male participants (48.4%). Academically, 58.3% of the students were undergraduates, 33.3% were graduate students, and 8.3% were in English as a Second Language programs.

Findings

The data obtained from the study were analyzed from the perspective of student learning and cultures. The findings of this study fall into six main categories.

Previous Learning Style and Culture

Some international students have unique learning styles, which may be different from those observed in traditional American classrooms. In many emerging Asian countries, teachers and educators follow traditional modes of instruction in the class. In a response to a question regarding previous learning and exam preparation in their home country 93.3% of international students admitted that they primarily memorized information, 43.3% acknowledged use of group study, 50% were encouraged to prepare by rote learning, and 10% experienced collaborative testing and sharing answers for exams.

In response to a question on writing and information finding conventions, 76.7% of respondents admitted that they did not follow the APA or MLA writing format on class assignments in their previous work at their home university. This indicates that the majority of survey participants followed standard writing formats only in American schools. Similarly, 16.7% agreed that it was acceptable to consult with a friend when writing or studying; 26.7% believed that finding answers from online sources was acceptable; and 30% shared that getting help from others in taking online exam or completing a take home test was appropriate.

Incompetence and Other issues

This study indicated English was a major language barrier for foreign students. More than half (58.3%) of the participants were undergraduate students and their level of English proficiency was just rated as just "satisfactory". Of the remaining participants, 10% rated themselves as a limited user, 11.4% as a moderate user, 12.3% as a good user and 8% as a very good user.

When students are not interested in their programs of study, they are likely to slack off on their academic course work. For example, when asked what academic problems they faced in their course work, 27.5% of respondents supported the statement that "I didn't have a high enough score on the TOEFL/IELTS and I had to do ESL program",10% respondents said "I did a pre-requisite or foundation course as I changed my major", 2.5% regretted "I dropped the course because I wasn't interested," and 37.5% responded "I am just doing this program because I didn't have any other choice." In addition, 45% self reported, "I found my own English not good enough." These responses suggest that many international students were pursuing university study without a particular interest in the academic field. It is believed that students may not progress well academically when they do not enter the program, or take courses, of their choice.

The method of classroom instruction in secondary schools and universities in their home country plays a vital role in determining English competency for many international students. The survey showed that 69% of students were taught in a non-English local dialect or native language. In addition, 50% interacted with their professors in the local language while they were in their home country. These factors indicate that international students may not be acquiring strong language competence in English. For most international students, face to face encounters with native English speakers did not occur until their entry into the US. As a result, many students cannot express themselves comfortably, have low self esteem and fear making mistakes when approaching their professors in an American classroom setting (Cammish, 1997).

Being Unfamiliar with the Culture of Academics

In response to the question "Why you think that many students copy materials from the Internet and text books while doing reports, course assignments or theses?" more than half of students (56.7%) indicated that they lacked knowledge of what plagiarism is. Nearly half (46.7%) of students indicated that they were unfamiliar with the academic culture of American schools. Forty percent revealed cheating on their exams or course assignments because of the pressures of timed exams. Furthermore, 10% of the students cheated on the tests and admitted taking advantage of the permissive leniency of the instructor. The results of this study support the findings of previous research that international students do not know what plagiarism truly means (Hall, 2004; Cammish, 1997; the University of Alberta report, 2001; DiPietro, 2010).

Student-Teacher Relationship

Cultural values that international students hold determine the form and style of communication, interpersonal behavior, and interaction between students and teachers. In the collective culture of Asian countries, learners may have a unique classroom demeanor—very polite, respectful, and obedient. Many foreign students find American classroom cultures disorienting when they have to navigate unfamiliar customs such as casual dress, students eating in class, direct communication, and calling professors by their first names.

This conflict of classroom culture is supported by student responses to the question about student-teacher interaction. Students indicated that their home country behavior practices still influenced their US classroom interactions. Seventy percent responded that "I listen more and speak less;" 40% said, "to be silent is a part of a good discipline in the class," and 13.3% responded "there were no questions and interaction in the class," and "I never made eye-to eye contact while speaking." This indicates that international students in this study bear similar cultural features to those in previous studies.

Access to Educational Resources

International students, especially from developing countries such as Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan, may not have access to a computer or research library (Rennie & Mason, 2007; Neuman, Khan, & Dondolo, 2008). In response to the question "how often did you use a library, computer or references while preparing term papers and class assignments in your previous study at your home university?" 26 % reported 'always', more than half (53.3%) answered 'seldom', and 20% replied 'rarely'. In response to another question about their previous learning experiences in their home countries, 53.3% reported that their teachers asked them to memorize, read, and take comprehensive tests. Twenty percent of respondents said that their teachers read directly from the text with little or no explanation of content materials whereas nearly half of the respondents stated that teachers did not use computers, did not conduct research, and did not assign project work at their previous schools. This lack of exposure to educational resources suggests that some international students are at greater possible risk for academic misinterpretation of established college norms in American institutions of higher learning.

Psychological Pressure and Adjustment Issues

Many international students experience emotional problems such as anxiety, homesickness, cultural and social isolation, not only in the immediate transitional adjustment phase but also for many months that follow. Many students from developing countries also face financial challenges paying for academic and living expenses. Although it is illegal to work off campus, international students feel compelled to engage in any kind of work to support their unmet needs.

Students have a difficult time excelling in their studies and paying attention to school work if they are not socially, mentally, and/or economically ready. In this study, 56.7% of new international students indicated that they had a fear of making mistakes, and 50% reported they did not express themselves most of the time. Nearly half (46.7%) of respondents shared that they felt awkward and found it difficult to speak with others and another 36.7% suggested they lost words with an exact meaning or translation. Almost one in four students (23.3%) expected their friends could share course work with them.

When a professor asks a question in class, international students sometimes take a longer amount of time to collect their thoughts or formulate an answer. Beginning instructors may not be aware of that some foreign students are mentally translating words before speaking. When possible, international students like to use "beautiful sentences" from books or other resources to include in their writing to compensate for these language difficulties.

Implications

The findings from the current study and previous research highlight the fact that academic misconduct is a very complicated issue for international students. Many students do not know what plagiarism is and cultural and social beliefs cloud the issues of improperly borrowed reference sources. The goal of the instructor is to positively impact learning as well as improve communication between teachers and students (Evans & Youmans, 2000) and it is essential that educators teaching international students understand the social, cultural, and pedagogical background of their students and an awareness of how they may or may not be aligned with US academic values and behaviors (Grey, 2002). Instructors need to explain how to avoid improper documentation in college writing and providing positive reinforcement with corrective action, instead of punishment, should become the norm. One possible solution is to offer an integrated bridge course on academic writing techniques and pitfalls for international students. Felix and Lawson (1994) and Bamford and Sergiou (2005) recommend conducting cultural reorientation programs focused on proper reference citation for international students. Ryan (2000, p.56) suggests the following to reduce plagiarism among international students:

- Discuss what is meant by plagiarism and give real examples
- Explain the difference between paraphrasing and plagiarism
- Demonstrate to students how to paraphrase, synthesize and weave other sources into their own work
- Show students how they are supposed to meet referencing requirement and why the requirements exist
- State what is not permitted, describing what it is and why it is unacceptable
- Explicitly state the consequences of not complying with the rules against plagiarism.

Changing improper writing habits of foreign students in regard to proper citation and plagiarism is hard work. The classroom educator must provide clear and explicit instructions to his or her students about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable writing in an academic setting. Arkoudis (2007) recommends that all teachers of students who are not native English speakers use a handbook of educational approaches to avoid plagiarism.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that academic misconduct and plagiarism is prevalent among international students. According to the literature review and survey responses, external social, economical, or psychological pressures were listed as main causes of plagiarism. It needs to be noted that many students do not know what plagiarism is due to complex cultural differences as well as the past learning and teaching styles of their home country. It is difficult to break the routine habits of international students (Bamford & Sergious, 2005) and they must receive direct, explicit instruction concerning plagiarism in the preparation of research papers as well as course work. It is important for faculty to understand the divergent linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their international students. Special attention should be given to students suffering from social and psychological discomforts such as anxiety, homesickness, or cultural disorientation in the cross cultural adjustment process. The notion of academic dishonesty must be addressed from a

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perspective that recognizes that international students, especially those from developing countries, come from distinct cultural, economic and educational backgrounds.

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