



Pharmacy educators' experience and views on academic dishonesty

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine faculty experiences with and perceptions of academic dishonesty and if there are inconsistencies in interpretation and handling of such violations.

Methods: Faculty members within two departments at a college of pharmacy were surveyed to collect their experiences with and perceptions of academic dishonesty. These faculty were also asked to interpret and respond to potential violations via hypothetical case scenarios.

Results: Of the 46 faculty members who participated in the survey, 75% reported having never experienced an Honor Code violation. Most respondents agreed that it is the responsibility of the faculty member to address every alleged Honor Code violation (95.3%) and that violations should be handled consistently (97.7%). Few respondents (34.9%) indicated that they have had adequate mentoring and training in handling situations of academic dishonesty. Most faculty respondents identified each hypothetical scenario as an Honor Code violation but reported a variety of methods to manage these potential violations.

Conclusions: Faculty at one college of pharmacy, reported minimal academic dishonesty experience, but have congruent beliefs on what Honor Code violations are and how they should be handled. However, methods chosen for managing hypothetical and real violations varied widely. A uniform process for managing violations should be considered to reduce academic dishonesty in pharmacy education.

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Introduction

Academic dishonesty such as cheating and plagiarism is, by some, defined and characterized via a continuum on the

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basis of intent, with “negligent” or “accidental” plagiarism at one end of the continuum and dishonesty, such as cheating on an exam, at the other.^{1,2} Academic misconduct is found and flourishing among colleges and universities worldwide.^{3–8} The first large-magnitude study, published in 1964, included about 5000 students from 99 regionally accredited colleges and universities across the U.S.⁹ This study assessed academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions and found that three-quarters of the student respondents had engaged in one or more of these practices.⁶ This same study was replicated over three decades later and discovered a slight increase in overall academic dishonesty and significant increases in explicit forms of exam cheating.⁶ Readily available technology may contribute to the

problem because student behaviors have included cutting and pasting internet information, sharing online quizzes, and texting confidential information to classmates.¹⁰ Furthermore, academically dishonest behavior has been self-reported across multiple institutions and disciplines and throughout graduate and professional education programs.^{3–5,11}

Healthcare professional programs including allied health, nursing, dentistry, medicine, and pharmacy have reported occurrences of academic dishonesty as well.^{3,8,11–15} This fact is troubling because healthcare professionals are viewed as individuals that emanate honesty and integrity.¹ Healthcare professionals are expected to practice by a code of ethics given at the beginning of their professional training. However, there is concern that students who exhibit academic misconduct in school are more likely to later exhibit professional misconduct, such as committing or failing to report fraudulent or illegal activity, and to deliver a reduced quality of patient care.¹

Although pharmacists have been recognized by the public as highly trusted professionals for many years, some student pharmacists have compromised academic integrity.¹⁶ A literature search revealed several surveys reporting the levels of and opinions regarding academic dishonesty among student pharmacists and other health professional students.^{2,3,8,11–15,17–19} According to a recent study conducted among third-year student pharmacists at four institutions, 16.3% directly admitted to cheating during pharmacy school while 74% admitted that either they or their classmates performed activities customarily identified as dishonest such as collaborating with a friend on an individual assignment.¹¹ The authors also found that students who cheated during high school or in a pre-pharmacy program were more likely to cheat during pharmacy school.¹¹

Given the recent rise in reports of academic dishonesty in the health professions, pharmacy educators are exploring how to address this area of concern. An editorial by Piascik and Brazeau in *The American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* serves as a reminder that learning, not conduct management, is the primary objective of pharmacy education.¹⁰ Additionally, tools such as honor codes, exam proctors, anti-plagiarism software, and ethics or academic integrity committees are in place and should be employed to monitor student behavior in our institutions of higher learning.¹⁰ With technology-assisted academic dishonesty, control of student behavior can become extremely difficult and taxing on educators. Additionally, it is unknown if there is consistency in how educators address the concerns across the profession, recognizing that there may be disagreements on how issues are addressed within the same institution or even within the same department of one college.

Recent revision of the Honor Code at the University of Kentucky College of Pharmacy has prompted formal and informal discussions among faculty regarding what constitutes academic dishonesty, how the violation is handled by the individual faculty member, and what the potential need is for more structure and consistency. The University of Kentucky

Senate Rules explicitly address academic offenses and procedures; however, any “school, college, or program may establish, with the approval of the Senate, an Honor Code or comparable system governed by the students” to which that Honor Code would then take precedence over the University Senate Rules.²⁰ A separate Honor Code has been in place since the early to mid-1980s at this college of pharmacy. The Honor Code outlined in the Student Handbook holds the expectation of the faculty that students will not cheat, plagiarize, or attempt to gain unfair advantage and will report any incident(s) to appropriate faculty if they become aware of such activity. The Honor Code is executed by the Honor Code Committee (HCC), which consists of one first-year, two second-year, three third-year, and four fourth-year pharmacy students; one administrator; and four faculty members. The HCC convenes when an alleged Honor Code violation occurs to administer the student hearing process as defined by the Honor Code. In addition to reviewing reported violations, this committee is charged to educate students, faculty, and staff; recommend changes in the Honor Code; and report to the Dean.

Although student pharmacist opinions on academic dishonesty have been published, little information exists on pharmacy faculty opinions and practices related to academic dishonesty. The authors hypothesize that even within one college of pharmacy, there are varied faculty opinions on what constitutes academic dishonesty and how the violations should be managed. Identifying the level of inconsistency and barriers to reporting violations is useful in helping to create more structured policies throughout a college or school of pharmacy. The primary objectives of this study were to quantify faculty experiences with academic dishonesty and determine if there are inconsistencies in interpretation and handling of violations related to academic dishonesty.

Methods

A three-part, 33-item, self-administered, electronic survey instrument was developed and sent to prospective respondents via e-mail. Study data were collected and managed anonymously using Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap; Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN).²¹

The subjects were regular and adjunct faculty in the University of Kentucky’s College of Pharmacy’s two departments. Community-based/voluntary faculty were excluded. Subjects were recruited by an investigator at a college-wide faculty meeting. An e-mail request that contained the survey link was sent out using faculty e-mail addresses obtained from the College. Two follow-up e-mail reminders were sent prior to survey closure.

The survey was designed to collect demographic information; faculty experience with and opinions about Honor Code violations; and how faculty view hypothetical Honor Code violations. The first section of the survey consisted of two items identifying the faculty member’s department and the number of years of pharmacy professional program teaching experience. The second section began with ten

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