University Students' Reported Incidence and Perceptions of Plagiarism

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Abstract

University students reported plagiarism behaviors that they had engaged in and rated how common and wrong the behaviors were and to what extent they violated the university’s academic honesty policy. The findings indicate that plagiarism behaviors are fairly common among students and there were differences in the perceptions of plagiarism based on how much college experience a student had.

Introduction

Plagiarism is a pervasive and growing issue for universities, but estimates of plagiarism vary widely (Walker, 2010). This problem is compounded by students not having a clear idea of what behaviors constitute plagiarism (Power, 2009). Approximately half of students are also under the impression that plagiarism is not a serious issue (Leonard et al., 2014). Many studies have examined cheating behaviors, but fewer have specifically examined plagiarism as a subset of these behaviors. This study assessed the frequency of plagiarism and how common and wrong students believed that specific plagiarism behaviors noted in the university’s Academic Honesty Policy were. Understanding students’ perceptions of plagiarism may shed light on the norms around cheating and assist with prevention.

Method

Participants (N = 658)
- 658 students randomly sampled from the university (overall: 62% female)

Procedure
- Randomly selected UNI students received an email with a link to the study
- Academic Ethics Questions: Questions included in this study were adapted from specific behaviors mentioned in the UNI Academic Ethics Policy. For each behavior students were asked:
  - If they had engaged in the behavior while at the university
  - A 1-4 rating of how common they believed the behavior was
  - A 1-4 rating of how morally wrong they believed the behavior was
  - A 1-4 rating of how much they believed the behavior violated policy

Demographic questions (e.g., sexual orientation, level of education, age, and academic major)

Hypothesis 1
- More students will indicate that they had turned in the same paper for two assignments without permission than other types of plagiarism.

There was no difference in the number of students who had turned in the same assignment for more than one class without permission vs. most of the other plagiarism behaviors, p=0.06, V=.08 (Table 1). It was more common than presenting the work of another as their own in a thesis, dissertation, presentation, or scholarly article, 3.4% vs. 3.5% (Table 1).

Hypothesis 2
- The total number of students who indicated that they had presented the work of another person as their own will be lower than the frequency of other plagiarism behaviors.

Students were less likely to have presented the work of another as their own compared to an aggregation of other plagiarism behaviors, χ2(1,553)=68.86, p<.001 V=.112.

Hypothesis 3
- Students with less college experience will be more likely to engage in plagiarism.

Juniors and seniors were most likely to have plagiarized during their time at the university (F(4,361)=3.81, p=.005 χ2=0.27). Freshmen and graduate students had the lowest reported rates of plagiarism (Figure 1).

Hypothesis 4
- Students with non-STEM majors (students who indicated that their major was not in the natural, social, or behavioral sciences) will be more likely to have engaged in plagiarism.

The levels of plagiarism behaviors between STEM (M=1.00, SD=0.98) and non-STEM students (M=0.98, SD=1.01) were not significantly different, F(1,572)=0.071, p=.79, n²=.01 (Figure 2).

Hypothesis 5
- Students will view turning in the same paper or assignment for more than one course as less of a violation of academic policy than other plagiarism behaviors.

Students viewed turning in the same assignment or paper for more than one course as more of a violation of academic policy than failing to properly cite, improper use of a direct quote, paraphrasing a source without citing, and presenting the work of another as their own χ2=0.099, p<.111. Presenting the work of another as their own in a dissertation, presentation, or scholarly paper was viewed as more of a violation (1562)=8.34, p<.001, V=.35. (Figure 3)

Hypothesis 6
- Students with more college experience will perceive plagiarism as more wrong than students with less college experience.

Seniors and graduate students rated the behaviors as more morally wrong than students with less college experience, F(24, 2168)=1.66, p=.023, n²=.018 (Figure 4).

Hypothesis 7
- Students with more college experience will perceive plagiarism as more common than students with less college experience.

There was no significant difference in the perceived commonality of plagiarism behaviors between students with less college experience and those with more, F(24, 2148)=1.36, p=.11, n²=.015 (Figure 5).

Discussion

Students who had more college experience were more likely to have engaged in plagiarism during their time at the university and more likely to believe that the behaviors were morally wrong. This difference could be due to education about and increasing penalties for plagiarism as students get into more advanced classes. This study was based on self-reported plagiarism behaviors, which leads to concern about differences between what students report and what they do. Earlier education about the ramifications of plagiarism could help curb these behaviors.

References


Table 1: Comparison of Plagiarism Behavior Frequencies

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<tr>
<th>Plagiarism Behavior</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
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Figure 1: Comparison of the Total Number of Plagiarism Behaviors by Class

Figure 2: Number of Plagiarism Behaviors Engaged in by STEM and non-STEM Students

Figure 3: Ratings of Behavior by Degree of Violation of Academic Honesty Policy...