An Empirical Study on Online MBA Cheating and Plagiarism Issues

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With the proliferation of electronic resources on the Internet, cheating and plagiarism issues have become a growing concern to educators and administrators from elementary to graduation education. These issues seem to concern stakeholders of online education even more as online students typically take courses at distance and physically separated from their instructors and classmates (Jocoy & Dibiase, 2006). While some (e.g., Herberling, 2002) argue that plagiarism and cheating issues in online environments are not more severe than that in residential environments, others state that it can be easier for students to plagiarize and cheat in online environments because of the nature of the delivery format (Rowe, 2004). Possibly due to the sensitivity of these issues, there is a lack of empirical studies in the relevant literature. Empirical studies addressing these issues in online environments are also rare. This article intends to make contribution in this regard, reporting on an empirical study recently conducted in an online MBA program offered by a top-ranking business school in a Midwestern university.

Two overarching research questions guided this study: (1) how do online MBA professors perceive plagiarism and cheating issues in online MBA courses? And (2) how do online MBA students perceive these issues in online MBA courses? Results of the study are expected to provide implications for online instructors, administrators and other interested stakeholders.

Methodology

Initiated in 1999, this online MBA program was designed for professionals who wish to continue their employment while earning their MBAs. The program grows exponentially in the past few years. The enrollment of students increased from 14 in 1999 to nearly 1000 in 2006, and the number of staff members increased from 3 in 1999 to over 20 in 2006. Instructors of the program were recruited from full-time faculty of the residential programs of the business school where the program was hosted. Approximately 70 professors were involved in the program.

Two electronic surveys were used in the data collection; one for the professors and one for the students. Professors and students were surveyed regarding the following issues: how do they understand plagiarism and cheating? Are they concerned with cheating and plagiarism issues? Why or why not? What do they think why some students cheat or plagiarize? What strategies do professors take in prevention and detection of cheating and plagiarism? What support do they need this regard?

All professors teaching the online MBA program were invited to complete the survey. A stratified random sampling method was used in selecting student participants. One hundred students were selected from four groups that started their study in the spring of 2005, fall of 2005, spring of 2006, and fall of 2006.

Results

Twenty one professors and 14 students responded to the survey, making the survey return rate 30% and 14% respectively. Students who did not respond were asked what prevented them from completing this survey. Four students replied and reported that they did not respond because they were busy or had taken too many surveys. Noticeably, none of them mentioned that these issues were not relevant.
Understanding of Plagiarism and Cheating

A majority of professors and students associated plagiarism with copying others’ work. The responses from professors tended to be more specific than students’ responses. Several of them mentioned copying information from the Internet and other published sources. One professor further pointed out “there is less sensitivity to web-based information because it is impermanent.”

Most of the responding professors and students seemed to believe that plagiarism was apparently an academic misconduct. It is worth noting that a few of them mentioned that students may commit plagiarism unintentionally. As she wrote, “In general, students do not source material well which explain is plagiarism but that is more a lack of training rather than intent to cheat.”

Faculty understanding of cheating was similar to the responses from students. Both of groups mentioned cheating was related to breaking rules. Some professors regarded plagiarism as one type of cheating.

Perceived Reasons Why Some Students Cheated or Plagiarized

Among the top three reasons that professors and students chose, two reasons were in common: “No time to study” and “must pass the course”. The top one reason professor chose was “Easy to do”, while this reason ranked the fourth on the students’ list. The majority of students (57.1%) perceived “lack of relevant skills (e.g., research skills, referencing skills)” as one reason why some students cheated or plagiarized. By contrast, only more than one third of professors chose this reason. Interestingly, many professors (42.9%) believed one reason for some students to cheat or plagiarize was “everyone is cheating.” However, only one student respondent agreed on this.

Concerns About Plagiarism and Cheating Issues

The majority (61.9%) of responding professors reported that they were concerned about plagiarism and cheating issues, whereas less than one third (28.6%) of the student respondents indicated that they were concerned. Students mentioned that they were concerned about these issues because of two reasons: (1) quality and reputation of the program. One student pointed out that cheating and plagiarism also “weakened the degree granted by the university-because the knowledge rested is weakened.” (2) some students obtaining an unfair advantage. One student mentioned that this will create “an uneven playing field.” Interestingly, although many professors indicated their concern, only two of them described why they were concerned. The reasons that the two professors mentioned were “this has happened in my course”, and “cheating is very easy in all aspects of on-line courses.”

If concerned, professors and students were also asked to specify the concerns they had. Following concerns were identified from their responses:

- Collaborating with each other on exams and projects that are supposed to individual work
- Copying other students’ work and submitting it as their own
- Asking (paying) others to take the exam or do the work
- Using materials from the Internet without attribution
- Freer riders on group projects
- Using materials in a closed book exam

The dominating majority of student respondents reported that they were not concerned about these issues. Two reasons they provided were similar to those provided by the professors. Both groups mentioned that students in the program are of high quality, who want to learn and do not cheat. This reason was most
frequently mentioned by both groups. Noticeably, one professor mentioned that he would become concerned if the program attempted to grow by admitting lower and lower quality students. Another common reason that the two groups reported was that the design of the courses offered in the program did not lead to cheating. As one professor mentioned, “I designed my assignments so that using outside source is limited in efficiency. For example, students write papers answering very specific questions and I must see a rough draft version first.” Similarly, another professor mentioned that he used case discussion heavily and he changed the discussion questions constantly.

Other reasons that students listed for why they were not concerned about cheating and plagiarism issues included: “focusing on one’s own study instead of comparing with others”, and “cheating is less in online environments.” For instance, according to one student respondent, “I do not concern myself with these problems because for me it’s about what I can get out of the program not how well I do compared to the other students.” Another student concurred and mentioned “I believe there are far great concerns in my life to focus on.”

One professor mentioned that he was concerned not because he was certain that no one was cheating or he did not care. Instead, he felt that “other than trusting my students to do the right thing, it is a largely out of my hands.” The other professor seemed to concur and mentioned “I had little way of controlling this sort of behavior in an online environment.” His general attitude on these issues, however, seemed more towards “do not bother”. According to him, teaching MBA courses online was very time consuming, and “going to significant lengths to try to determine if cheating is taking place makes little common sense to me.”

Prevention and Detection of Plagiarism and Cheating

Professors were surveyed concerning what strategies they took or would take in prevention and detection of plagiarism and cheating issues. The major prevention strategies were identified as below:

- Clearly stating expectations, e.g., whether students are allowed to consult with books, their peers, and outsiders.
- Explaining in detail what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, and specifying policies and consequences in syllabi, emails, etc.
- Frequent updating of course materials and test items, such as randomizing the order of questions, creating fresh exams questions.
- Making the assignments and exams difficult to cheat or plagiarize, such as using time blocks to reduce opportunities for cheating in exams.
- Using the honor code. At least four instructors mentioned that they asked students to sign (or tick a check box) an honor code statement electronically stating that they completed the exam or report without the help of others and without helping others in any manner.

The detection strategies professors used were categorized below:

- Comparing students’ work with that of their peers and students taking this course before, looking for similarities especially similar mistakes.
- Looking for consistency by comparing students’ work with their own previous work. As one professor said, “plagiarism typically shows in the use of technical language and style which the students usually do not use.”
- Using technology tools such as Google, Turnitin.com.
- Checking the file properties.

Relevant Support That Students and Professors Would Like to Have
Students and professors were asked what support they would like to have in this regard. Three major needs were identified from students’ responses:

- Being provided with references guidelines on how to cite appropriately. One student specified that she would like to know the standard form the business school used for the citation of sources.
- Being provided with clear guidelines and policies from the program.
- Holding individual students more responsible in team projects.

Similarly, two major needs were categories from professors’ responses:

- Being provided with guidance, policies, and administrative support.
- Being provided with some workshops and relevant information, such as how other professors perceive these issues, how students perceive these issues, and available technologies and strategies used in detection of cheating, especially concerning student collaboration in exams.

Summary and Discussion

The majority of responding professors showed concern about online cheating and plagiarism issues. This finding supports the existing literature that cheating and plagiarism issues concern online educators. The quality of students and course design are important factors identified in discussion of cheating and plagiarism issues. Careful design of the courses can help prevent and decrease cheating and plagiarism. The prevention and detection strategies that the instructors reported verify and expand those in the existing literature (e.g., Christen, 2003; Varvel, 2005). Noticeably, several respondents implied that recruiting high quality students and maintaining the admission standards helped decrease cheating and plagiarism issues. While it might be reasonable to assume that self-motivated students who have high academic achievements might commit academic misconduct less often than those who had low academic achievements and were less motivated, this assumption, however, needs to be deliberately examined by empirical research.

“No time to study” and “must pass the course” were two common reasons that the majority of faculty and student respondents selected for why some students cheated or plagiarized. This probably partly reflects the reality that students of this program are busy, full-time employees who need to juggle their time among their job, family, and study. Although many professors may not feel obliged to teach students time management skills and how to make balance among their many commitments, how to design the online course in a way to help keep distance students on track needs to be taken into consideration for all online instructors and instructional designers. Sample strategies might include dividing huge tasks into smaller ones and monitoring students’ progress regularly.

Another finding of this study showed that professors’ concerns differ and their specific concerns related to assessment tasks they used. For instance, the professor who taught quantitative analysis did not ask students to write essays in his course, therefore, he was not concerned that students would copy and paste materials from the Internet. Instead, his concern was that some students might copy others’ work. Similarly, professors who asked students to work in teams were not concerned that students collaborate with each other, but worried about free riders issues. Correspondingly, the prevention and detection strategies they took were also found related to the assessment tasks they used. Understanding the assessment tasks they use and their specific concerns in cheating and plagiarism issues can help administrators and supporting staff to provide more relevant and effective support to online instructors.

Furthermore, lack of referencing skills was recognized by both faculty and student respondents as one reason why some students plagiarized. Being provided with reference guidelines on how to cite appropriately was frequently mentioned by student respondents in terms of support they would like to have in this regard. Finally, consistent with the literature (e.g., Howard, 2001), online program
administrators are suggested to provide instructors with clear guidance, policies, and administrative support in handling online cheating and plagiarism issues.

References


Biographical Sketches

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