

Can Business Curriculum and Education Eliminate Cheaters?

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Abstract

It was recently reported in the finance.yahoo.com that MBAs are the biggest cheaters. In our study we undertake to study if the nature of interfacing of educational programs with occupational streams may have an impact on the cheating rate. In particular we divide curricular programs into two categories: productivity enhancing programs (PEP) which include programs that are followed by licensing procedures and programs that constitute a significant occupational preparation, and programs that are productivity signal-generators (PSP) which offer a more general preparation or training which is significantly built upon by employers for their own particular operational needs without substantial recall of previous training content and are not regulated by licensing procedures. We hypothesize that the rate of cheating is higher in PSP than that of PEP.

Introduction

MBA students tend to cheat at a relatively higher rate than graduate students in other programs: 56% of M.B.A. candidates say they cheated in the past year, 54% of graduate engineering students, 50% of students in the physical sciences, 49% of medical and other health-care students, 45% of law students, 43% of graduate students in the arts and 39% of graduate students in the social sciences and humanities readily admitting to cheating (“MBAs: The Biggest Cheaters” by Thomas Kostigen in Finance.yahoo.com on October 28, 2006).

Our purpose is not to confirm “MBAs are The Biggest Cheaters,” but to find reasons why students in business schools cheat and how to prevent cheating. For this study, cheating was defined as plagiarizing, copying other students' work and bringing prohibited materials into exams. In this research we attempt to understand the factors in program ambience that might influence such behavioral choices. Since cheating is certain to be contrary to all codes of ethics, our approach is to understand the choice as

something emanating from selfish rational behavior; as educators we should help students build business ethics in daily classroom activities.

A Rational Choice Model Explanation

We consider two extreme states of perceptions that might be associated with a program of study, in the eyes of a student: (1) Trainer Program (TP) and (2) Strainer Program (ST).

A trainer program would be one which actually imparts knowledge and training that will be maximally relevant in the prospective position of hire; a Strainer Program, on the other hand, is one that tests the mettle and caliber of a student which then can be shaped and molded through both external and internal inputs at the prospective position of hire. In TP the knowledge content needs to be acquired because it will be in direct demand at the place of hire; in case of ST the knowledge content may or may not be called upon, but qualifying the program will open up avenues where the real training will take place. For graduate of a TP program, success in the probationary period depends on demonstrating acquired knowledge and skill through the program; for ST graduates, success in the probationary period depends on demonstrating potential for the field of operation they are being trained for and may only nominally depend on previous academic training, at least so in the perception of the subject. Example of a TP program would be engineering programs, pre-medical programs, pre-law programs, and for graduate applicants, the undergraduate programs of their field of interest. Examples of ST would be a college program that serves to be a label of a college graduate to start a career, say in retail, in real estate or other such not-so-very-related fields of employment.

The central argument of our research is that motivation for cheating is tied to how a subject views his/her program of study in relation to the career he/she is considering for himself or herself. The more the subject considers the program to be a TP type the less likely that he/she will resort to cheating; the more the subject considers the program to be an SP type the more likely that he/she will resort to cheating. The second aspect of the research is to see how MBA students regard their program. If our hypothesis is right we would expect MBA students to perceive MBA programs as type SP. In general, we can consider the space between TP and SP as a continuous spectrum. The proximal pole of perception (TP or SP) will be in evidence in his/her view of cheating as a facilitator of career goals.

Business Programs: Potential "Ethical Characteristics" of Students.

Many business students believe cheating is an accepted practice in business (Kostigen, 2006). Business people facing uncertainty, try to hide information important to them and try to know other party's secret. They try hard to buy low and sell high, using tricks in negotiations.

Do potential cheaters intend to be businessmen so they enter business school? Must one be a cheater or trick player to make big money (the business environment)? Students who would be predisposed to cheat based on their knowledge that success in business requires skills of cheating would have to come from families that own business

or have strong business connections, or would be students that themselves have made connections to business communities.

There are significant differences among students in business school and among business school and other schools. For example, size of classes, assigned works and exams are significantly different; level of difficulty is different, finance, operation, accounting are the more difficult fields in the school of business.

Students' perceptions of programs relevance to career are also significantly different. Accounting majors are guaranteed job with good salary, they need to take CPA exams; finance majors may need to take CFA exams. These students are motivated to be prepared for these externally administered exams and so they may cheat less.

Marketing and MBA programs do not have strong central organization; some students just want the degree, they do not want to acquire knowledge.

Survey and Data

We try to identify five sources of students' perception of cheating as an expedient recourse, as they progress towards a professional career: (a) Perception of non-relevance of academic degree to the intended career, (b) grade as a signal of diligence and qualification, (c) perception that they are academically self-sufficient (d) success in life has nothing to do with honesty, (e) success in life does not depend on academic training. In view of these we plan to develop a questionnaire that can help as establish correlation between students and the following traits or factors:

- (1) sense of self-reliance and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (2) perception of academic qualification of successful professionals in the area of professional interest and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (3) perception on the relevance of academic training to job success opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (4) perception of employer's interpretation of grades in employment decision opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (5) perception of self-esteem and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (6) perception of social memory of ethical transgression and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (7) importance of professional regulation and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (8) perception of instructor attitude towards students and opportunistic behavior in academic testing (basically if a more strict professor would induce a higher incentive to cheat)
- (9) stance on moral ethics and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (10) perception of cheating a form of unfairness meted out to some one innocent and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (11) Can cheating result in a personal loss and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (12) Perception of social justice and opportunistic behavior in academic testing
- (13) Wealth factor and opportunistic behavior in academic testing

Could We Find Solutions Through Curriculum and Education?

Based on our findings we plan to explore ways of preventing cheating. Business ethics are extremely important; businessmen of to-day continue to commit crimes for money. The corporate scandals that have plagued Wall Street in recent history are setting up wrong examples for young students looking to make their mark in the business world: They are learning to cheat from the best of their flock.

Faculty only engage students in an ongoing dialogue about academic integrity that begins with recruiting, continues in orientation sessions and initiation ceremonies, and continues throughout the program may not be sufficient.

We may further argue that educational programs that have a strong or intense build-up component meaning that programs where subjects at a higher level have a strong pre-requisite requirement will also have lower cheating rate. This would be so because students will recognize that cheating (which has a random success rate) may not guarantee progress through the program since success at cheating at a lower course will impose a stronger need for cheating in a later course.

If we can establish this, we will not only be able to explain cheating but we will also be able to establish a characteristic of a cheating-free curriculum.

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