

We've Got Issues

Willamette University Psychology Department Quarterly Newsletter

*F*rom the Chair

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*M*ark Your Calendar...

October 21st

Mid Semester Day—no CLA classes

October 31st

Happy Halloween!

November 12th

Psychology Subject Exams for Graduate Record Examinations (GREs)

November 21st

CLA Web Registration begins.

Welcome
Back!!

Workplace “Integrity” and Academic Honesty

In recent years, personnel and industrial psychologists have seen a virtual explosion in the use of so-called “integrity tests” to screen and hire employees. These measures are designed to assess attitudes and past behaviors related to such counterproductive work behaviors (“CWB’s”) as theft, fraud, drug use, and absenteeism in the workplace. Recent research has suggested that integrity tests rank behind only cognitive ability tests and measures of specific job knowledge in their ability to predict desirable workplace performance.

A related area of concern within our educational system involves academic dishonesty – including everything from plagiarism to cheating on exams to false reasons given for securing excused absences or assignment extensions. If one thinks of being a student as a kind of “job” and academic honesty as a desirable aspect of “performance,” does it make sense to think that what we know about predicting CWB’s in the workplace might actually be used to predict students’ academic cheating?

Recent psychology major Gale Lucas (WU’ 05) joined me two years ago to begin a project exploring this very question. An ongoing controversy in the fields of personality and social psychology concerns the degree to which one can really predict behavior based on measures of attitudes and personality traits. Most of the research on academic dishonesty, for example, has suggested that factors in the immediate situation might be far more important than general traits or attitudes in predicting who will “cheat” and when. A major limitation of this work, however, is that only a limited range of traits or attitudes have been explored, and they have often been used to predict only single instances of cheating (e.g., whether someone will cheat on an exam at a specific point in time).

In contrast, personnel and industrial psychologists have typically been more concerned with predicting “longer term” behavior or trends. If we know a person’s enduring attitudes and habits or qualities, will that help us accurately forecast general patterns of behavior (as opposed to specific instances) in some other work-related context?

In the study that Gale and I did, we worked with a large sample of introductory psychology students representing a broad cross-section of WU majors and interests (you might even have been among the group!). In an initial session, students anonymously completed two different integrity tests – one a commercially available instrument that looked primarily at admissions of past “deviant” behaviors, and the second a publicly available test used in integrity research that measured mostly attitudes and opinions about theft and workplace honesty. Neither of these instruments asked any questions having to do with attitudes or behaviors related to academic cheating.

In a second session a few weeks later, students responded anonymously to an Academic Dishonesty Inventory (ADI) that Gale developed based on past research instruments. The ADI includes a list of 26 different behavioral examples of academic dishonesty and asks respondents to simply indicate for each one whether or not they have engaged in the behavior at least once in the past two years. For example, 57% of our Intro Psych sample admitted to having paraphrased from a book without acknowledging the source; 65% admitted to allowing another student to copy their homework; only 5% said they attempted to gain special consideration by offering favors or “bribes”; and 0% reported having someone else take an exam in their place. The ADI as a whole is scored on a 26 point scale that simply tallies the number of different behaviors the respondent admits to having engaged in.

The frequency with which students reported engaging in academic cheating is, itself, an interesting question. Yet the primary purpose of the study was to see if we could predict their self-reported level of academic honesty over the last two years by knowing scores on “academically unrelated” measures of workplace integrity. The results were quite striking. For one of the measures – the Employee Integrity Index – scores correlated = .53 ($<.001$) with scores on the academic dishonesty measure. For the other integrity measure – the commercially used Insight Survey – the correlation was .48 ($<.001$). In both cases, scores on workplace integrity measures were strong predictors of students’ self-reported academic honesty. These relationships were smaller but still strong even after controlling for socially desirable responding (a tendency to respond to questionnaires in ways that promote favorable impressions, which could artificially inflate correlations in a study such as this.)

Is there any moral to the story here? First, one always has to be cautious in interpretation – remember “NHST Step 7,” all you former Friedrich Pych 253 students? In terms of the theoretical question about “traits” predicting other behaviors, we did receive strong support. It’s important to note, however, that most of the participants in the sample were first or second year WU students, which means instances of cheating they recalled “from the last two years” might well have occurred in high school where norms regarding cheating are perhaps different. WU students know well that the University takes a very firm stance on academic integrity violations and pursues these cases seriously. Nevertheless, such results do suggest that simply changing environments may not radically alter academic integrity behaviors. If past attitudes and actions – even in work settings completely unrelated to school – are highly predictive of academic honesty, it suggests that promoting academic honesty might require more than simple “university rules” or careful proctoring and monitoring.

If people’s behavior in this realm is in fact guided by more general attitudes and traits regarding honesty and integrity, then perhaps a route to greater and more universal academic honesty is for students, faculty, and administrators to continue to cultivate an environment that encourages people to live by and these shared standards of honesty – standards that are at the very core of what it means to be in a community of free and independent learners seeking truths about the world. Perhaps an “honor code” is indeed something that works best when mutually supported and internalized as part of our beliefs and values rather than simply being a set of rules enforced by authorities as they try to police the academic environment.

To read more about this recently published study, see:

Lucas, G.M., & Friedrich, J. (2005). Individual differences in workplace deviance and integrity as predictors of academic dishonesty. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 58, 15-35.

*Graduate Record
Examinations (GREs)*

Prometric Testing Center
1020 Green Acres Rd., Suite 11
Eugene, Oregon 97408
(541)485-4589

Prometric Testing Center
14623 McLoughlin Blvd S.E.
Milwaukie, Oregon 97267
(503)659-0486

University of Oregon
720 East 13th Avenue, Suite 302B
Eugene, Oregon 97403
<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~testing>
(541)346-2772

Prometric Testing Center
1122 NE 122nd Avenue, Suite 106 A
Portland, Oregon 97230
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Psychology Subject Exams for GREs

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