



Evidence Summary

University Student and Faculty Opinions on Academic Integrity Are Informed by Social Practices or Personal Values

A Review of:

Randall, Ken, Denise G. Bender and Diane M. Montgomery. "Determining the Opinions of Health Sciences Students and Faculty Regarding Academic Integrity." International Journal for Educational Integrity 3.2 (2007): 27-40.

Reviewed by:

Matthew Thomas

Health Sciences Librarian, Bracken Health Sciences Library, Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

E-mail: matthew.james.thomas@gmail.com

Received: 19 April 2009

Accepted: 21 July 2009

© 2009 Thomas. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract

Objective – To understand the opinions of students and faculty in physical therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) regarding issues of academic integrity such as plagiarism and cheating.

Design – Q method (a mixed method of qualitative data collection with application of quantitative methods to facilitate grouping and interpretation).

Setting – An urban university-affiliated health sciences facility in the mid-western United States.

Subjects – Thirty-three students and five faculty members of ages 21 to 61 years, 30 associated with the physical therapy program

and 8 with occupational therapy, including 6 males and 32 females.

Methods – Initially, 300 opinion statements for, against, or neutral on the subject of academic integrity were gathered from journal articles, editorials and commentaries, Internet sites, and personal web logs, 36 of which were selected to represent a full spectrum of perspectives on the topic. Participants in the study performed a "Q-sort" in which they ranked the 36 statements as more-like or less-like their own values. A correlation matrix was developed based on the participants' rankings to create "factors" or groups of individuals with similar views. Two such groups were found and interpreted qualitatively to meaningfully describe the differing views of each group. Three participants could not be sorted into either group, being split between the factors.

Main Results – Analysis of the two groups, using software specific to the Q method, revealed a good deal of consensus, particularly in being “most unlike” those statements in support of academic dishonesty. The two groups differed primarily in the motivation for academic honesty. Factor one, with 21 individuals, was labeled “Collective Integrity,” (CI) being represented by socially oriented statements such as “I believe in being honest, true, virtuous, and in doing good to all people,” or “My goal is to help create a world where all people are treated with fairness, decency, and respect.” Factor two, with 14 individuals, was described as “Personal Integrity,” (PI), and focused on an internal sense of values and self-modulation, identifying with statements like “Honour means having the courage to make difficult choices and accepting responsibility for actions and their consequences, even at personal cost.” There were also some demographic patterns in the results. Twenty of the 31 students, 20 of the 29 females, and 17 of the 25 participants aged 30 and under were in the CI group, while 3 of the 4 faculty were in PI. Males, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and those over the age of 30 did not belong clearly to one or the other group, having close to equal numbers in both.

Conclusion – Given the two factors, CI and PI, this sample of OT and PT students and faculty can be seen to make academic decisions based on either what they believe society deems correct or what their own internal values tell them. The discovery that more females, students, and those 30 and under were associated with CI resonates with the some key claims in the literature, such as that younger individuals tend to have a more social outlook on academic integrity, or that women's ethic of care is often focused on connections among people. Most importantly, students and faculty appear to share a notable degree of common ground as it relates to their opinions on academic integrity. Additional exploration and the continued use and development of policies promoting academic integrity is called for.

Commentary

Given that this study is looking at the opinions of OT and PT students and faculty concerning academic integrity issues, the conclusions and discussion would be of interest to those shaping policies in this area as well as those concerned with educating faculty and students on the topic. Although further study is needed, the ideas expressed here could be used to guide and phrase discussion and policy, suggesting the use of two versions at the two factors/groups.

There were several aspects of this mixed methods study that call into question some of the conclusions that the authors came to. Firstly, the participants sample was composed primarily of younger female students. That there were not very many faculty members (5 out of 38, with only four being included in the final two factors) makes it difficult to be sure that other important viewpoints were not missed, let alone claim that they effectively fall into one or another factor. Also, in the “30 and under” category, all were either 21 or 26, the specific characteristics of which may have resulted in a substantial number of missed but important opinion statements as well as a skewed demographic conclusion about this group.

The nature of the ranking of opinion statements that participants were asked to do, namely the fact that there were a fixed number of “slots” for each likeness ranking, could possibly lead to inaccurate assumptions about the participants responses, despite the efforts to provide a complete spectrum of opinions. For example, there may be individuals who would otherwise place seemingly incompatible opinion statements at one end of the spectrum, revealing a supposed irrational view of the subject, which could be a valuable insight into their academic behaviour. Also, the assumption that those statements placed in the middle of the “less like – more like” ranking are neutral does not follow for the same reason.

This research does however present several valuable insights into the topic of integrity such as the binary split in perspectives, the demographic layout of the two factors, and possible reasons for the patterns. As mentioned in the work, Q methodology is not able to reveal more substantial differences

people have on this topic, and that more investigation into our understanding of the behaviour of those in academic environments is warranted, perhaps through comparable additional Q studies, comprehensive surveys and/or psychological analysis and substantiation.