It is now estimated that most students will engage in some form of academically dishonest practice in their post-secondary career, with percentages ranging from as low as 50% to as high as 92% of students (Vandehey et al., 2007; Peled et al., 2019). The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to massive structural changes in every area of public life, as social distancing and quarantine measures have become commonplace (Odriozola-González et al., 2020). It is currently unknown to what extent this will affect academically dishonest practices, but we believe students are most likely facing an increase in pressure to engage in academically dishonest practices. Preliminary institutional data has confirmed our suspicions, as the University of Lethbridge has seen a dramatic increase in reported instances of academic dishonesty, with a roughly 8.5x increase in reported cases in one of our faculties during the Spring 2020 semester. We can only expect this trend to continue as we transition to what the university has deemed a “remote-learning” model which will see all classes shift to online instruction.

Before the global COVID-19 pandemic, we collected survey responses and conducted focus groups, or semi-structured interviews in order to assess academic dishonesty at the University of Lethbridge. Our aim here is to use our pre-COVID-19 data to inform what specific motivations students at the University of Lethbridge experience and to later educate students and faculty on the differing motivations disclosed. In order to better distinguish differences between these factors, we utilized Minarcik & Bridges (2015) previously established framework, as it allowed us to look at contextual differences. They split motivators into two main categories, which include dispositional factors, such as an individual’s personality and personal actions, and situational factors, which are context-dependent, such as an individual’s social and physical surroundings and other specific external pressures.

Students reported two main dispositional factors which motivate academically dishonest behavior. These include a general lack of understanding and an apathetic attitude. Students reported that a major motivating factor in academic dishonesty relates to students not understanding what specific parameters in the policy mean, leading them to make their own rules about what is dishonest and not, which do not always converge on a professor’s ideas. Specifically, students reported feeling very unclear about the extent to which sharing ideas and assignments with peers or group members was appropriate, and when it became dishonest. Students reported that they did not know what to do or what to say when approached by a classmate or a groupmate and asked to share answers or their assignments. Faculty members also reported feeling uncomfortable with widespread definitions of academic dishonesty, because their differing disciplines called for different methods to obtain understanding. For example, Computer Science and Mathematics professors stated that it was fine for students to look up and copy small pieces of code (or integrate “code snippets” into their work), as it would allow the student to understand the reasoning behind the problems. However, professors in other sciences reported having a zero-tolerance for looking up answers online, as the student needed to use data from the labs they participated in, as opposed to online simulations.

Many students and faculty reported feeling as if students who cheat or are academically dishonest do not care about what they are learning or what a university education has to teach them. Students reported their classmates detaching from their education by viewing their education as a means to an end, rather than a learning experience. They reported their friends saying that they just wanted to graduate and have something to put on their resume, so they did not feel a personal connection to what they were studying. Additionally, students said they believed people would be more likely to cheat in “GLER”, or General Liberal Education Requirement classes as opposed to their main courses. Overall, this reasoning aligns with the notion that students believe that what they are learning is not relevant to their long-term career aspirations or goals. Faculty members indicated that they too felt that the majority of students were largely apathetic and lacked a curiosity or passion for their subject.

The reported situational factors speak to a variety of lifestyle factors that participants felt motivate academically dishonest behavior in students. Many students and professors conceded that some students are also struggling to juggle their various external commitments with their academic work. Professors and students listed taking full course loads (of five classes or 15 credit hours) and taking labs or tutorials as pressure inducing. Additionally, both groups discussed a pressure to obtain the highest grade possible as a motivating factor, whether that be in order to pass the class or attend other academic graduate programs.

There were other situational pressures that were non-academic in nature. Other concerns included a lack of finances, working in addition to attending university, and having children or other responsibilities in their home. Additionally, many students reported feeling pressure to obtain high grades from their parents, which caused them significant mental duress. Yet, many students and faculty members clarified that they didn’t believe that these external factors excused cheating, as many of our participants had these types of responsibilities themselves or had them when they were students.

These findings indicate a few weak areas in which faculty can work to combat academically dishonest behavior. As we shift to remote learning for the Fall 2020 semester, it will be imperative for all faculty to take the time to clearly explain to their students what is academic dishonesty, especially in an online context, what is considered academically dishonest in your discipline or field of study, and what is allowed and not allowed for specific assignments. Professors are encouraged to work to combat apathy in their students by working to develop new engagement measures. For example, previous research has indicated that providing students with opportunities to reflect on their learning may help to engage them with the idea that learning is a process, which may help to foster a sense of pride in students (Eaton et al., 2017). Faculty can provide students with response opportunities via Moodle and other online platforms. Lastly, we recommend that faculty members increase their flexibility and understanding when dealing with students in the upcoming semesters, as this will be a difficult time for everyone. When designing assignments, professors should consider their feasibility in a quarantine situation. Faculty members should avoid assignments with tight time parameters when able, as some students may not have a quiet place to themselves throughout the day. If the assignment requires special privileges, or can’t feasibly be done from a personal computer, one should consider modifying the assignment.

In sum:

* Before the pandemic, we asked both students and faculty members what they thought motivated students to engage in academically dishonest behaviour. Student motivations for academic dishonesty can be broken into both situational, or personal, factors and dispositional, or context-specific, factors.
* Students reported two main dispositional factors, including a lack of understanding and a general apathy towards academic integrity. However, they also mentioned that their relationship with the professor, their passion for the subject, their department of study, and individual personalities and attitudes can also influence a student’s propensity to engage in academically dishonest practices.
* A lack of understanding was said to increase accidental cheating. Unintentionally, the lack of understanding may lead students to plagiarise or cheat by accident, due to not understanding the proper rules of attribution. Apathy towards the academic process and learning was reported as a possible motivator of cheating by both students and faculty members.
* Students and faculty also reported a variety of situational factors, including health concerns, a full course load, financial pressure and attempting to get into graduate school programs. They reported that these factors pressured students to cheat in order to meet specific grade goals, whether that would be passing a course or trying to obtain higher grades.
* However, in the post COVID-19 semesters, we expect to see an increase in dispositional and situational factors due to the chaos and confusion that accompanies the transition to remote instruction and the student’s circumstances. Faculty should be sure to take extra time to explain the academic dishonesty policy to all incoming students, as well as explaining how to honestly and dishonestly go about their academic work. Additionally, faculty will need to engage with students in unique ways, since they will be missing the traditional classroom format. One suggested way to go about this is to provide students with additional avenues to respond and engage with the professor, including being more freely available via email and Moodle, and creating opportunities for students to reflect on their learning via online platforms such as Moodle. Additionally, faculty members will need to be more accommodating and flexible to student’s unique situations during this time.

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