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# Academic Dishonesty Beyond Cheating and Plagiarism: Students' Interpersonal Deception in the College Classroom

Darrin J. Griffin, San Bolkan, & Alan K. Goodboy

*The purpose of this study was to examine student deception in the college classroom. Participants were 256 undergraduate students who responded to an open-ended questionnaire to determine (a) the ways students deceive their instructors, (b) their motives for deception, (c) their methods used to accomplish deception, and (d) their rate of success in obtaining their desired goals. Results revealed that most students (a) deceived their instructors by engaging in academic misconduct and lying or making up excuses for late work and attendance issues, (b) were motivated to deceive because of grade issues, and to a lesser extent, impression management issues, (c) preferred using falsification and concealment as their methods of deception, and (d) perceived that they were successful through their deceptive acts.*

*Keywords:* Academic Dishonesty; Cheating; Deception; Lying

College students are interested in achieving their academic goals. That said, students may sometimes try to attain their goals dishonestly. For example, research has demonstrated that students sometimes deceive their instructors through creative padding (i.e., adding fillers to create an illusion of completed work), interactive

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Darrin J. Griffin (PhD, State University of New York, Buffalo, 2014) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Alabama, Box 870172, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. E-mail: djgriffin1@ua.edu. San Bolkan (PhD, University of Texas, Austin, 2007) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Long Beach, CA 90840. E-mail: san.bolkan@csulb.edu. Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University, 2007) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, 108 Armstrong Hall, P.O. Box 6293, Morgantown, WV 26506. E-mail: alan.goodboy@mail.wvu.edu

cheating (i.e., collaborating or borrowing work), false personal excuses, taking credit for others' work, and cheating on examinations (McKibban & Burdsal, 2013). Most of the research on *academic dishonesty* has operationalized the notion as cheating (e.g., Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992) and plagiarism (e.g., Ellery, 2008). However, it is possible that students engage in a variety of academically dishonest behaviors that researchers have not captured. The purpose of this study was to add breadth to the literature on academic dishonesty by examining the variety of deceptive behaviors students employ with their college instructors.

## Literature Review

Deception is defined as knowingly causing someone to be misled (Ekman, 2001; Levine & Kim, 2010). For communication to be considered deceptive, a sender must provide erroneous information (or omit relevant information) to a target and must both realize the information is incorrect and hold an expectation that the target person will believe the false information. Although deception in the college classroom may take the form of cheating and plagiarism (Cizek, 1999; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012; Szabo & Underwood, 2004), it can also occur when students resist their instructor's compliance-gaining attempts (Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989), make excuses (Hensley, Kirkpatrick, & Burgoon, 2013), and complete unauthorized collaborative work (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). The majority of college students report being dishonest at one time or another (McCabe & Trevino, 1993), and students in specific majors (e.g., business and engineering) report higher dishonesty rates due to increased pressure to perform and achieve high grades (Carpenter, Harding, Finelli, & Passow, 2004).

Most of the dishonest behaviors in academia are motivated by grade-related achievement, lack of student efficacy, or academic stressors such as time constraints (Davis et al., 1992; McCabe & Trevino, 1993); thus, students may resort to dishonest strategies when they believe that they cannot reach their academic goals through acceptable forms of achievement (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Moreover, people are also more likely to deceive when they hope to present themselves positively to others (Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002). Impression management is conceptualized as behavior that is used to illicit desired impressions in the minds of others (see Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2014), and occasionally these tactics include deceptive maneuvers. Thus, impression management may be a motive for students' deception.

Despite the research conducted on dishonest behaviors in academic contexts, we know little about the interpersonal interactions that take place when students employ deception in their classes. Examining students' dishonest behaviors as interpersonal deception will allow us to better understand the behaviors that occur when students engage in deception.

## Research Questions

Studies of academic dishonesty have revealed that deception occurs through cheating, plagiarism, or false excuse making. However, deception aimed at instructors

may involve other types of dishonesty. To better understand deceptions students enact with their college instructors, we examined our first research question:

RQ1: In what ways do college students report deceiving their instructors?

There are a variety of motivations that promote academic dishonesty, including performance concerns, external pressures, unfair professors, lack of effort, seeing cheating as a game or challenge, or denial of responsibility (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). To help shed light on additional reasons for deception, we examined the second research question:

RQ2: What are students' motives for deception in the classroom?

Although a great deal is written about academic dishonesty, information about the exact methods students utilize to engage in dishonesty is scarce. Thus, we proposed the third research question:

RQ3: What methods do college students rely on when deceiving instructors?

Finally, few researchers have asked students about their goal achievement with deception. Thus, we sought to answer our fourth research question:

RQ4: How often do students report obtaining their goals through deception?

## Method

### *Participants*

After gaining approval from the institutional review board, a sample of 256 undergraduate students from lower- and upper-division communication courses at a large Mid-Atlantic university (117 men and 116 women, 23 unreported) received minimal extra credit in return for participation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 44 years ( $M = 19.77$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ) with 61 freshmen, 77 sophomores, 67 juniors, and 29 seniors (22 unreported).

### *Procedures*

After receiving a written definition of deception (i.e., one person intending to mislead another and doing so deliberately; Ekman, 2001), participants were asked to answer open-ended questions while thinking about a specific situation when they deceived a college instructor who taught a class in which they were enrolled (but not the instructor teaching the class where the survey was taken). Participants described: (a) the situation involving a deception, (b) the reason for the deception and expected outcome, (c) the exact statement or behavior used, and (d) whether or not the deception led to accomplishment of their intended goal.

### *Data Analysis*

To analyze the data, we performed a content analysis based on a grounded theory approach. The first author used a constant comparative technique to create

categories that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2000). After the data were coded into thematic categories, the first author used axial coding to collapse the data into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Any data that could not be categorized was placed into a category of other. The first author created a codebook containing the names of the categories, descriptions, and a representative example to be used in the training of a second coder. Relying on the codebook, an independent coder coded 100% of the data to determine intercoder reliability. Using Kappa, reliability was 0.87 for RQ1, 0.86 for RQ2, 0.80 for RQ3, and 0.91 for RQ4. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

## Results

### *Research Question 1*

The first research question asked how college students deceive their instructors. The largest group of deceptions included students' reports of academic misconduct ( $n = 72$ , 28.1%). Next were lies about late work for classes ( $n = 67$ , 26.2%) and attendance related excuses ( $n = 53$ , 20.7%). Participants also indicated they used false reactions to imply something that was not true in response to an instructor's inquiry ( $n = 21$ , 8.2%). A small portion of students reported they deceived their instructor by refraining from reporting an observation of others cheating ( $n = 14$ , 5.5%) or by using nonverbal feedback to deceive an instructor ( $n = 13$ , 5.1%). Some students indicated that they could not recall deceiving an instructor or do not engage in these behaviors ( $n = 13$ , 5.1%). Three responses did not fit any category ( $n = 1.2\%$ ; see Table 1).

### *Research Question 2*

Our second research question explored why students deceive their instructors. Students largely noted that their motive was grade related ( $n = 200$ , 82.3%). Within this category, students were motivated to obtain better grades on assignments ( $n = 100$ , 41.2%), because they wanted more time or to complete something at a different time ( $n = 70$ , 28.2%), or because their lack of attendance would hurt their grade ( $n = 30$ , 12.3). Some students deceived their instructors for impression management reasons such as saving or maintaining face ( $n = 19$ , 7.8%), to avoid involvement in a situation ( $n = 10$ , 4.1%), or to help a friend or fellow student ( $n = 9$ , 3.7%). Five responses did not fit any category (2.1%; see Table 2).

### *Research Question 3*

The third research question inquired about the method of deception. The most utilized method was falsification ( $n = 119$ , 49.6%). Students also reported they deceived an instructor by concealment such as leaving out relevant information ( $n = 74$ , 30.8%), utilizing a half truth or half concealment ( $n = 17$ , 7.1%), relying on denial

**Table 1** College Students' Deceptions in College Classrooms and Representative Examples

	n	%
<p><b>Academic Misconduct:</b> Break academic rule of university or instructor.</p> <p>“For my real estate law class, I worked with a partner outside of class to help get my assignment done faster when the professor strictly stated to not discuss the assignment with anybody.”</p> <p>“I answered the multiple-choice questions of a friend next to me by writing the answer in pencil after the friend pointed out the question. Afterwards, I erased what I had written.”</p>	72	28.1
<p><b>Late Work:</b> Lie to take test early or get extension on due date for an assignment.</p> <p>“To get out of missed homework, I explained to my instructor that I had terrible food poisoning and I was throwing up for 24 hours. But I wasn't sick, I just forgot.”</p> <p>“I had forgot to write a paper that was due and didn't have time to write it before class because I had a doctor's appt. So in order for me to still receive credit, I asked the doctor for a note saying that I was there during class so that my paper wouldn't be considered late.”</p>	67	26.2
<p><b>Attendance:</b> Provide false reason for missing class or tardiness, sign in another student who is not present, falsely claim being present.</p> <p>“I told a teacher I was unable to attend class because I got caught in traffic. What really happened is I slept in late and woke up about 20 minutes after class started.”</p> <p>“I signed in someone for attendance when they weren't there so they wouldn't get penalized.”</p>	53	20.7
<p><b>False Reaction:</b> Respond, imply, or use equivocation to indicate the opposite of what is true in reaction to an inquiry.</p> <p>“My instructor once who asked the class if we had been reading this novel we were supposed to keep up on. I was so worried about all my other work, I kept putting it off. Until my instructor asked me directly what I had thought of the book so far. I made general statements, which he believed, and therefore received credit.”</p> <p>“My English professor asked me how far along in my drafting process I was for my essay. I didn't even start it yet, but I lied and told her I wrote my introduction and a few paragraphs.”</p>	21	8.2
<p><b>Others Cheating:</b> Not reporting others cheating or receiving undeserved credit.</p> <p>“My two friends were sitting on either side of me during an exam. When either didn't know an answer, they would ask the other because there were only 2 versions of an exam. I didn't say anything because frankly, I didn't really care what they did.”</p> <p>“I knew several students were cheating on an exam but didn't say anything.”</p>	14	5.5

(Continued)

**Table 1** Continued

	n	%
<b>Nonverbal Feedback:</b> Sending nonverbal messages that are not genuine. “When I laughed at a terrible joke one of my math teachers made.” “One of my instructors likes to look at me when they’re talking about the lecture slides. I nod to pretend that I’m actually paying attention.”	13	5.1
<b>No Deception:</b> Have not or do not mislead or deceive instructors, fail to recall deceiving an instructor. “I don’t deceive my teachers. I am an honest student.” “I have not deceived an instructor in 5 years ... Just never had a reason to.”	13	5.1

*Note.* 3 responses (1.2%) did not fit the categories.

in reaction to an instructor’s inquiry ( $n = 10$ , 4.2%), allowing the instructor to continue with a false belief by an incorrect inference dodge ( $n = 10$ , 4.2%), or misdirecting through the use of emotional expressions ( $n = 9$ , 3.8%). Only one response (0.4%) did not fit into a category (see Table 3).

#### Research Question 4

We asked participants to tell us whether or not the deception they reported was successful in obtaining their desired goals. Responses indicated that a majority of

**Table 2** Motives for Deceiving College Instructors and Representative Examples

	n	%
<b>Better Grade/Avoid Grade Deduction</b>	200	82.3
<i>Evaluations:</i> Complete missed work, retake a test or quiz, improve grade. “I wanted points for the assignment and not a zero.” “I deceived my instructor because I wanted an A.”	(100)	(41.2)
<i>Time Constraint:</i> gain more time to study or finish an assignment, take test early due to schedule conflict, time to do something else. “I hoped to get more time to study.” “Get more time to write my paper.”	(70)	(28.8)
<i>Attendance:</i> Be excused for absence, avoid point deduction for missing class. “I did not feel like attending class I was exhausted.” “I didn’t want points taken off my final grade from not being at school.”	(30)	(12.3)

(Continued)

**Table 2** Continued

	n	%
<b>Impression Management:</b> Maintain a positive impression, make instructor feel good. “Avoiding being seen as irresponsible.” “I wanted them to feel good about themselves.”	19	7.8
<b>Avoid Involvement:</b> None of student’s business, nothing to gain from telling on other student, avoid disrupting own test. “I didn’t want to cause any trouble. Plus, it’s not like I’ve never cheated.” “Nothing to do with me.”	10	4.1
<b>Altruism:</b> Help a friend or fellow student get a better grade or prevent punishment. “I was trying to help a friend get a better grade.” “I didn’t tell the teacher about the cheating students because I feel like it’s kind of an unspoken role amongst students. Students vs. teachers kind of thing; we are on the same team.”	9	3.7

Note. 5 responses (2.1%) did not fit the categories.

**Table 3** Method of Deception and Representative Examples

	n	%
<b>Falsification:</b> Presenting all information inaccurately. “Sent an email saying I was going to my sister’s wedding but really just stayed in my apartment.” “Lied to him about my husband having an illness to have the weekend to study.”	119	49.6
<b>Concealment:</b> Leaving out or withholding true information that is expected. “I caught students with cheat sheets but simply pretended I never saw it and didn’t tell anyone.” “My teacher literally asked if someone knows someone who cheated, I stayed quiet.”	74	30.8
<b>Half Truth/Half Concealment:</b> Admitting only part of what is true. “My uncle had died after being taken off life support, which in reality happened but not at the time I said it.” “I brought in the doctor’s appointment note and explained that I was there for over an hour when I wasn’t.”	17	7.1

(Continued)

**Table 3** Continued

	n	%
<b>Denial:</b> Present false information in a moment of inquiry—not planned or initiated by the student. “Told them [instructor] I was using my phone as a calculator.” “My professor asked me where my paper was and I told him that I emailed it to him on the due date and he must have never gotten it.”	10	4.2
<b>Incorrect Inference Dodge:</b> Allowing the target to take on a false belief or continue believing inaccurate information. “I sat there and acted like I knew what we were talking about even though I didn’t.” “Have a different notebook open while the class was discussing the homework.”	10	4.2
<b>Misdirecting:</b> showing a fake emotion, showing a real emotion but misidentifying true cause. “I smiled, laughed and shook my head as if I found his ‘joke’ humorous the way he did.” “I just used my fake laugh for a couple of seconds.”	9	3.8

*Note.* 1 response (0.4%) did not fit the categories.

students perceived that they accomplished their goals ( $n = 216$ , 91.9%). Few students indicated that their deception did not help them reach their goals ( $n = 11$ , 4.7%), or that they were unsure because the situation was either too recent for the outcome to be determined or that there was no way of knowing ( $n = 8$ , 3.4%). Eight participants (3.4%) did not indicate whether their goals were accomplished.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine college students’ deception with their instructors. First, results indicated that the majority of students admitted to deceiving an instructor at least once during college and that, similar to results from previous studies, these deceptions were in relation to academic misconduct as a way of bolstering, protecting, or securing a positive grade. In fact, grades were such a concern for students in our sample that they accounted for roughly 82% of students’ reasons for deception. Of course, grades were not the only concern for students; impression management was of interest as well. The second most reported reason for deception included impression management concerns, where students mentioned they used deception to avoid an awkward interaction or save face. These types of responses indicated students’ desire to maintain the perception that they are good students or to avoid offending an instructor. In these cases, students noted that their reason for using deception reflected a need to present themselves positively to others (Feldman et al., 2002). For example, several students reported laughing at an

instructor's joke even though they did not think it was funny. The reason students may have reported impression management concerns is because students tend to be concerned with both their classroom performance *and* their interpersonal interactions with instructors (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006).

Moreover, our results revealed that half of students' deceptions relied on fabrications to deceive their instructors. The other method of deception that students relied on with frequency was concealment. This may be the case because deception is not a simple practice. To successfully remain undetected, a liar often must deal with the cognitively complex task of telling a false version of the truth that does not give away the deception but that also supports a false belief. That said, students may not use more sophisticated ways of deceiving, such as using an incorrect inference dodge or telling the truth in a manner that misdirects the target, because these methods of deception are more complicated, may require an interaction with the target, and, ultimately, may be unnecessary.

Over 50 years of research on human deception detection has shown that humans are poor at deception detection (Frank, Feeley, Paolantonio, & Servoss, 2004). The results from our fourth research question align with this notion. The majority of students in our study reported that their deceptions helped them to obtain their goals. We must also keep in mind that there are myriad reasons why professors might portray that they have believed a student's deception. For example, further suspicion or directed guilt may only serve to add undesirable stress on the instructor. The deceptions that were reported as unsuccessful in obtaining students' goals seemed to fail as a result of a process that was implemented by an instructor to prevent cheating or false excuses. For instance, the few students who reported that their goals were not accomplished mentioned that their instructors' policies did not differ based on whether or not they believed the deception (e.g., only university sanctioned excuses with notes are accepted or that late work is never accepted regardless of the circumstances).

The present study has its limitations. For example, the presence of university honor codes affect students' behavior related to dishonest conduct (McCabe & Trevino, 1993), and the institution where participants in this study were enrolled does not have an honor code that prohibits lying (although it explicitly forbids cheating and plagiarism). This is important because the presence of rules restricting students to truth telling may yield different results than those reported here. Additionally, we did not examine the influence of students' culture on their choices to employ deception. Thus, the responses from these students may differ from responses that other students may provide at other institutions in differing parts of the country or world. Students may also be becoming increasingly more aware of the influence their evaluations have on their instructors' professional success and this might play a role in how instructors respond to excuses and deceptions. We did not examine the role of these factors, which may influence student-teacher interactions.

The students who reported in this study were all enrolled in communication courses. Thus, we were unable to examine the influence that academic area of study may place on deception. Future research should examine whether students in various

majors on campus differ in their methods and frequency of deception. Future researchers may also consider investigating unsuccessful deception attempts or situations when students chose honesty over deception to better understand the nature of this type of communication and events that encourage it. It would also be interesting to understand the feelings students have toward deceiving their instructors. For example, do students feel guilt when duping their teachers? Finally, we know from the research on academic dishonesty that students' culture and demographics can influence these behaviors. Future research on student deception should test to see how these variables influence interpersonal deception episodes in the classroom.

Students in this sample were asked to report on one occasion where they deceived an instructor. Therefore, it is important for instructors to realize that many of their students are honest in the classroom and research suggests that, "on any given day, the majority of lies are told by a small portion of the population" (Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010, p. 23). However, instructors wanting to curb student deception may best be advised to build a culture revolving around expectations of trust where there are also opportunities for discussions about the temptations and consequences surrounding truth telling and deceit. Additionally, instructors can build courses in such a way that students can make errors, mistakes, and miss points but not feel that an acceptable grade is lost. If students can learn, succeed, and meet their classroom goals while still having some room for error, they may be less inclined to resort to deception in the classroom.

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