

Attitudes Toward Academic Dishonesty in Physician Assistant Students

Marianne Vail, DHSc, PA-C ¹, Suzanne Coleman, DHSc, FACHE, RN ¹, Mark Johannsson, DHSc, FRSPH ¹, Karen A. Wright, Ph.D, PA-C ²

¹College of Graduate Health Studies, A.T. Still University; ²School of Medicine and Health Sciences, George Washington University

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests some individuals in the medical and health professions engage in various acts of academic dishonesty during their training. While the exact prevalence of cheating in U.S. medical schools is unknown, research has identified rates of academic dishonesty ranging from 0% to 58.2%^{1,2,3} Little research on physician assistant (PA) students' attitudes toward academic dishonesty has been conducted and the national prevalence of cheating in PA schools has not been established.

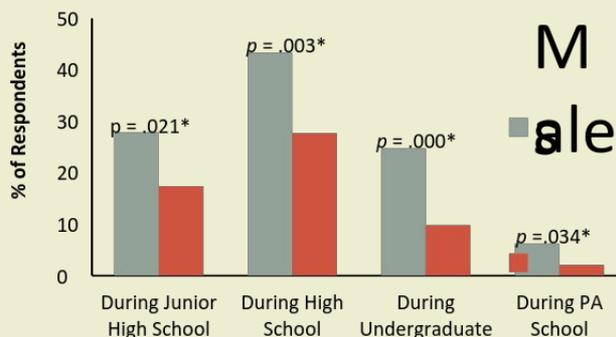
PURPOSE

To assess PA students' attitudes and experiences toward academic dishonesty during training and to establish a national prevalence of self-reported cheating by PA students.

METHODS

In April 2013, an anonymous survey was sent to PA students enrolled in clinical clerkships at 142 PA programs. Eleven statements on attitudes toward cheating were presented. Using a one *(strongly disagree)* to seven *(strongly agree)* Likert-type scale, clinical-year PA students were asked to either agree or disagree with each statement. Nine scenarios of cheating behaviors were then presented. For each scenario, respondents were asked to recall personal experiences and report whether they had observed or heard of classmates engaging in such behaviors. Respondents then self-reported cheating at various educational levels and noted if an honor code existed at their PA school. The last item addressed cheating during PA school with future trustworthiness as a PA. Data was collected through SurveyMonkey®. Mann-Whitney *U*, Chi-square, and logistic regression tests were used to analyze the data. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Self-Reported Cheating by PA Students



PA Student Attitudes Toward Cheating

Attitudinal Statement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Everyone cheats in PA school at one time or another.	402 (81.5)	28 (5.7)	63 (12.8)
I would cheat in PA school if I was certain I would not get caught.	443 (89.9)	26 (5.3)	24 (4.9)
In the long run, cheating in PA school does not hurt anyone.	452 (91.9)	20 (4.1)	20 (4.1)
Cheaters in PA school just end up hurting themselves in the long run.	57 (11.6)	20 (4.1)	414 (84.3)

REFERENCES

- Baldwin DC, Daugherty SR, Rowley BD, Schwarz MR. Cheating in medical school: A survey of second-year students at 31 schools. *Academic Medicine*. 1996; 71(3): 267-273.
- Dans PE. Self-reported cheating by students at one medical school. *Academic Medicine*. 1996; 71(1): S70-S72.
- Sierles F, Hendrickx I, Circle S. Cheating in medical school. *Journal of Medical Education*. 1980; 55(2): 124-125

RESULTS

- ❖ A total of 493 self-selected clinical-year PA students responded to the survey.
- ❖ The majority of respondents were female (79.6%).
- ❖ Only 3% of clinical-year PA students self-reported cheating during PA school.
- ❖ Males self-reported significantly higher rates of cheating across all education levels.
- ❖ The strongest predictor of cheating in PA school was a history of cheating as an undergraduate.
- ❖ The most common cheating behavior that clinical-year PA students reported observing or hearing about in PA school was receiving information about an exam prior to its administration (70.9%).
- ❖ Females were significantly more likely than males to disagree with the statements that everyone cheats in PA school at some point ($\chi^2 = 15599.50, z = -2.75, p = .012$) and cheating in PA school does not hurt anyone in the long run ($\chi^2 = 15933.00, z = -2.15, p = .032$).
- ❖ The majority of respondents ($n = 262, 53.4%$) reported that a person who cheated on exams in PA school is likely to be less trustworthy as a PA.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that cheating exists in PA education at a low self-reported rate, PA students' attitudes and perceptions of cheating behaviors varies, and a history of cheating as an undergraduate was a strong predictor for cheating in PA school. Future research is needed to validate the prevalence of academic dishonesty in PA education, identify didactic and clinical settings that may trigger such behavior, and develop educational solutions to eliminate academic dishonesty from PA education.