A Comparative Study of Whether the Relationship Between Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct Differs Between Traditional and Nontraditional Students

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WHETHER THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL REASONING AND ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT DIFFERS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

By
Janiel Francisco Vargas

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WHETHER THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL REASONING AND ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT DIFFERS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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A Comparative Study of Whether the Relationship Between Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct Differs Between Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami

Dissertation supervised by Professors Soyeon Ahn and Carol-Anne Phekoo
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Academic misconduct exists among undergraduate and graduate students from diverse backgrounds and continues to undermine higher education. To better understand the decision to engage in such behavior, this study examined whether the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differed between traditional and nontraditional students.

An electronic questionnaire was used to survey a convenience sample of undergraduates at a public university in the Southeast. Three research questions guided the study: (1) Does moral reasoning differ between traditional and nontraditional students? (2) Do unethical behaviors, pertaining to academic misconduct, vary between traditional and nontraditional students? and (3) Does the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differ between traditional and nontraditional students? While no significant differences in moral reasoning were observed between traditional and nontraditional students, it was a significant predictor of academic misconduct. In addition, demographic and educational factors were significant in relation to several items used to measure moral reasoning and academic misconduct.

Implications for higher education stakeholders are discussed. Suggestions for future research include implementation of the original DIT (Defining Issues Test).
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late brother, Javier Vargas, whose life was tragically cut short on February 28, 2016.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While writing a dissertation may be a solo undertaking, it certainly ‘‘takes a village’’ to realize one, as the old African proverb would go. To that end, there are a couple of extraordinary individuals whose contributions made this moment possible.

First and foremost, I must recognize the indefatigable efforts of the person whose been by my side from the start of this oftentimes arduous journey. This person is non-other than my chair, Dr. Soyeon Ahn. Soyeon, despite all we’ve been through over these last sixteen months, your steadfast commitment to make sure I saw this project through to the end never faltered. You made sure I stayed the course and never allowed me to veer off track. You kept me driven, motivated and determined during the days in which despair and sorrow got the best of me. Lastly, you kept me in line at all the times and never allowed me to slack off or become lazy.

Thank you for making me a savvy consumer of research. Thank you for making me realize that statistics is a language that can be both enjoyed and understood. And thank you for truly making me realize that the best dissertation is indeed the done dissertation.

Soyeon, I will leave this program knowing you as a friend, former professor, and now fellow colleague. I wish you nothing but the absolute very best in every aspect of your life – both personal and professional alike!

In addition to Soyeon, I’d be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the inexhaustible work ethic of my co-chair and higher education program director, Dr. Carol-Anne Phekoo. Dr. Phekoo, you’re not only the metaphorical glue that very much holds our
program together—you’re also the one who kept a lot of our sanity intact over these last three years.

On a related note, when you admitted me into this Ed.D. program three years ago, you did so on a conditional basis because my credentials were not quite up to par. As such, you took a bit of a risk when you decided to invest in my educational potential. Three years later I can only hope that said investment has not only paid off—but that all of your expectations related to me have been met, if not exceeded. Furthermore, you took me in and afforded me the opportunity to pursue a doctorate when plenty of others had already opted to not do so. For that, I am not only forever grateful, but also eternally indebted to you for it as well. Please don’t shy away from providing similar opportunities to others in the future, so that they too may be able to realize their educational potential. Thank you, thank you, and THANK YOU for absolutely everything!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The turn of the century brought higher education in America a marked increase in instances of academic misconduct (Keith-Spiegel & Whitely Jr., 2003). This was largely attributed to not only the advent of the Internet but also the many technological innovations that have followed (Kaufman, 2008). These revolutionizing advances have greatly enabled students’ ability to participate in acts of academic dishonesty, which have made it increasingly arduous for institutions to detect with ease (Heneghan, 2012). Such modernizations have not been the only culprits creating this epidemic plaguing postsecondary education in the United States (Aaron & Roche, 2013). Equally accountable is the cultural emphasis on competitiveness and meritocracy, coupled with overbearing societal pressures, which have driven many students to undertake such unethical means to succeed (Lang, 2013; Wideman, 2008). Doing so has allowed students to remain academically afloat in a world that demands more from them today than ever before.

These realities facing college students have led to a startling increase in the number of cases of academic misconduct and environments that seem to normalize such academic infractions. The problem has grown to become so widespread, that some would even argue we have reached the point where institutional integrity could be compromised by these surreptitious cultures of academic dishonesty (Hughes & McCabe, 2008). As such, it is imperative that institutions embrace a zero-tolerance policy regarding academic misconduct (Hughes & McCabe, 2008). Doing so ensures that both the intellectual rigor and educational mission of the academy aren’t weakened.
The late Donald McCabe, who greatly expanded upon the work of William Bowers (1964), dedicated a substantial portion of his research agenda to academic dishonesty at colleges and universities. He warned that there was a proliferation of incidents of academic dishonesty over the past decade and a half. This alarming trend, McCabe believed, would not regress anytime soon. The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), in partnership with McCabe and Rutgers University, surveyed approximately 71,300 undergraduates and 31,000 graduate students, over more than a decade. The results of the surveys revealed that 68% of all the undergraduates surveyed between 2005 and 2013 confessed to having committed some type of academic misconduct. Of the graduate students surveyed within the same period, 48% admitted to having committed such transgressions (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2017).

To further shed light on the data provided by McCabe and ICAI, plagiarism.org, a sponsor of Turnitin, focused on a four-year segment (2002-2005) from the 12 years McCabe surveyed. The purpose was to explain the percentages of specific types of violations of academic integrity committed by those surveyed during this time. The violations broke down as follows: 36% of undergraduates and 24% of graduate students admitted to paraphrasing and/or copying a few sentences off an online source without footnoting it within their work (McCabe, 2003, 2004, 2005). Additionally, 38% of undergraduates and 25% of graduate students confessed to having paraphrased and/or copied several sentences of information without providing the necessary quotations and/or in-text citations. Of those surveyed, it was also found that 14% of undergraduates and 7% of graduate students admitted to having either falsified and/or fabricated
a bibliography for a class paper (plagiarism.org). Moreover, 8% of undergraduates and 4% of graduate students confessed to having copied online content verbatim without citing or quoting it. Of those surveyed, 7% of undergraduates and 3% of graduate students admitted to having turned in work done by another student (plagiarism.org). Last, 3% of undergraduates and 2% of graduate students confessed to having obtained a term paper from an online paper mill. The nature of some of these violations speaks to the need for invaluable centers such as the ICAC to remain at the frontlines of tackling academic misconduct in higher education.

In response to these trends, institutional efforts to combat the prevalence of academic misconduct have included engendering greater understanding of student codes of conduct and what constitutes cheating or plagiarism and what does not (Trevino & McCabe, 1993). This exposure to ethical standards helps create greater awareness on the part of students of what is expected of them when they submit work for a class (Kaufman, 2008). Such mindfulness plays into their decision to either honor or violate institutional policies of academic integrity, which if violated can result in punitive action (McCabe & Trevino, 1993).

In addition to raising consciousness about institutional honor codes, other effective means have come in the form of cultivating cultures of accountability instead of ones of permissiveness or indifference, and these have gone far in helping attenuate the frequency of these transgressions (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Wideman, 2008). These proactive attitudes foster environments of condemnation when it comes to academic misconduct, as opposed to condonation of it (Wideman, 2008). A final approach to tackling these incidences has come in the form of anti-plagiarism and anti-cheating programs and initiatives such as Turn-It-In, Write-Check, Safe-Assign and
Proctor-U, all of which are being utilized more and more by colleges and universities. These tools implemented by institutions are intended to dissuade unseemly student conduct in terms of their schoolwork (McCabe, 2005; Wideman, 2008).

Given the prevalence of academic dishonesty in the U.S, the role of moral development as it relates to academic misconduct has been extensively scrutinized in numerous empirical studies over the years (McCabe et al., 2011; Wideman, 2008). This compendium of articles and studies has provided the conclusion that the moral development of college students substantially sways their decision to engage in unethical practices related to schoolwork (Miller et al., 2011). It also stressed that personal, social, contextual, situational, and institutional factors are important aspects which significantly influence the moral reasoning of college students (Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Kramer & Rettinger, 2009). This in turn subsequently helps determine where on the moral development spectrum a given student may lie. Moreover, the progression of one’s intellectual maturation during the college years is an underlying component of how a student may approach the topic of academic misconduct. Additionally, neutralization (Matza & Skyes, 1957) and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 1985) have been known to impact the moral reasoning of students.

Such a relationship between moral development and college student comportment extends from the fact that said development is considerably molded by several factors this study aimed to examine. Some of these factors, which moderate the relationship between moral development and academic misconduct, include age (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), gender (McCabe & Trevino, 1993), socioeconomic status (Piff et al., 2012), first-generation status, ethnicity (Anderman et al., 2001; Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Kramer &
Rettinger, 2009), academic level (Meng et al., 2014), academic major (McCabe, 2000; Forbus et al., 2011) and grade point average (McCabe et al., 2013). The way in which these factors link to students’ moral reasoning is indicative of a student’s moral growth, which in turn ultimately impacts academic behavior. To illustrate, one of these influential factors is age, which research has demonstrated has a marked impact on one’s ability to develop morally (McCabe et al., 2001; Wideman, 2008).

The level of one’s moral reasoning informs moral development by way of determining how far along a student may be on the continuum of said development (Kohlberg, 1958; Piaget, 1932). While college students may undergo notable periods of moral reasoning while in tertiary education, moral development is truly never maximized in such a context because it’s a lifelong process (Kohlberg, 1958; Piaget, 1932). Furthermore, because moral reasoning is believed to advance a person’s moral development, some of the educational and demographic factors that can influence moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1989; Rest, 1999) are the ones addressed in this study.

Of the abovementioned factors, age was used to distinguish between traditional and nontraditional students, as it concerns the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct in these two groups of students. Therefore, the role of this variable sheds light on how the influence of age affects the interconnectedness that exists between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional undergraduate college students.
Traditional versus Nontraditional Students

The distinctions between traditional and nontraditional students are chiefly observed by way of important characteristics (Adam & Corbett, 2010). These characteristics, which are also utilized to delineate each category of students, include (a) enrolling immediately upon graduating from high school versus a delayed and/or postponed enrollment in an institution of higher education; (b) being financially independent as opposed to being financially dependent; (c) being employed full-time as opposed to being employed part-time or not at all; (d) taking courses as a full-time student instead of doing so as a part-time student; and (e) having a spouse and/or biological children as opposed to being unmarried (Pelletler, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), these distinguishing factors are known to be the most noteworthy among both traditional and nontraditional students.

Given the characteristics addressed above, there exists clear distinction between the ways in which moral development is exhibited between traditional and nontraditional students. However, due to a dearth of literature pertaining to how moral reasoning differs between these two subpopulations of college students, little germane research can therefore be cited. As such, this study sought to provide the comparative context upon which said research can be conducted.

For the purposes of this study, a traditional college student is defined as someone newly out of high school who ranges in age between 18 and 23 years old. Furthermore, these students are enrolled full-time, are not financially independent, are not employed full time and are not married or have any children of their own. Nontraditional students (e.g., returning learners and veterans) are delineated as those who are not younger than
ages 24 to 28 years old. Additionally, these students are primarily enrolled in coursework as half-time students, tend to be financially independent, and are known to have spouses and children of their own.

**Moral Reasoning**

The seminal works of respected psychologists such as Kohlberg (1958, 1989) and Piaget (1932, 1965) appreciably influenced how we define and conceptualize moral reasoning within the context of today’s world. Each of their theories on moral development provides a conceptual framework for the moral reasoning of college students.

First, Kohlberg (1989) described moral reasoning as judgments of what is right and wrong (moral or immoral). This foundational definition informed his theory of moral development, and its three levels of moral reasoning: (1) pre-conventional reasoning; (2) conventional reasoning; and (3) post-conventional reasoning. Pre-conventional reasoning is morality that is driven by egocentric values and self-interests. Conventional reasoning is morality informed by society’s rules and expectations. Post-conventional reasoning is based on one’s own moral decisions, while respecting the moral judgments of others (Kohlberg, 1989). This conceptualization is what Kohlberg believed guides individuals’ moral reasoning and subsequent moral development.

Second, Piaget’s theory of moral reasoning and development (1965) was one that consisted of two key phases: the heteronomous and autonomous phases. Out of these phases, the one most applicable to the moral reasoning of college students is the second phase, autonomous. The autonomous phase predominantly deals with the intentionality
behind a given act, without giving much credence to what the moral repercussions of such an act might be (Piaget, 1965). The rationale for it is that people subscribe to different morals, as opposed to viewing morality as a code that everybody must adhere to. Such an approach to moral reasoning is not heavily influenced by the concept of immanent justice—the punitive ramifications of behaving unethically—which Piaget (1965) cites in his theory.

In summary, both theories provide the scaffolding for why the collegiate environment is influential on the moral reasoning of college students, which in turn has long-term ramifications on their moral development. Furthermore, the ways in which this pivotal context molds the moral reasoning of both traditional and nontraditional students was explored in this study. The focus of the current study was to compare how the relation between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differed by age between these two subpopulations of students.

**Moral Development in the Collegiate Environment**

Decades of research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (2016) further strengthen why the postsecondary context is useful when it comes to the moral growth and development of college students. According to their extensive research and that of others, there are certain areas of tertiary education that they believe to be the most influential when it comes to this dimension of maturation (Lies et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2016). These areas are experiential learning (e.g., service learning), cocurricular engagement, faculty-to-student relationships and interactions, academic

According to Pascarella & Terenzini, exposure to and participation in any of these areas can impact how students reason morally, which can then serve to either curtail or discourage them from partaking in the conduct regularly associated with those who engage in academic misconduct and other acts. As such, this led them (2016) to conclude that those students, traditional and nontraditional alike, who are actively involved in at least one of the abovementioned areas tend to exhibit higher levels of moral reasoning than those who elect to not participate at all.

**Academic Misconduct and Academic Integrity**

One of the best-known definitions of what constitutes academic misconduct comes from the International Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University (ICAI). ICAI describes academic misconduct as an action that provides an academic advantage to a student, which consequently disadvantages the rest (ICAI, 2017). Academic misconduct can be exhibited in many ways. However, some of the most commonly found manifestations of such comportment include cheating, plagiarizing, copying, colluding with others, paraphrasing without attribution, misrepresentation of data, falsifying information, and fabricating data (plagiarism.org; ICAI, 2017).

In comparison to academic misconduct and many unethical behaviors associated with it, academic integrity is the antithesis of everything academic misconduct embodies. Academic integrity, as defined by the International Journal for Educational Integrity, is adhering to and subscribing to values which promote the academic standards that condemn, in the strongest terms, unethical conduct which includes, but is
not limited to, cheating and plagiarism (IJEI, 2017). Moreover, academic integrity is also typically described as the moral code by which schoolwork is expected to be guided. Last, academic integrity, unlike academic dishonesty, ensures that the educative process of learning and hard work is one that is never compromised.

In this study, the definition of academic misconduct utilized is the one provided throughout the current study. As such, academic misconduct is defined as an act that provides an academic advantage to a student, which consequently disadvantages the rest (ICAI, 2017).

**Relationship Between Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct**

Research highlights that the association between moral reasoning and academic misconduct is one that primarily stems from a behavioral perspective (McCabe et al., 2011; Hughes & McCabe, 2006). This dimension of student development, coupled with one’s cognitive maturation, ties back to how students reason morally, which in turn will have implications to how they approach the topic of academic misconduct. Moreover, empiricists and psychologists such as Kohlberg and McCabe believed that this behavioral facet is what links moral reasoning to academic misconduct among college students. A few of these studies state that the link between moral reasoning and academic misconduct is not only affected by the behavioral factor but also by cultural and environmental factors (Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Wideman, 2008). Another study highlights that the relationship between moral reasoning and academic dishonesty ties back to the type of college experience a student has (McCarthy et al., 2002). In addition, established literature has also uncovered that there exist numerous intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the unethical behaviors that lead to the perpetration of academic
dishonesty among college students (Patton et al., 2016; McCabe, 2011). These factors, as empirical literature explains, markedly affect the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct.

Some of these studies illustrated the role of demographic and educational factors as they relate to the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct. In the case of age and gender, longstanding empirical evidence has demonstrated that students’ age and gender are key determinants of how likely they are to engage in academic dishonesty (McCabe, 2003; McCabe et al., 2005; Wideman, 2008). In addition to age and gender, other variables, such as socioeconomic status and first-generation status, were also found to have been influential in students’ decisions to partake in misconduct.

A study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences asserted that students from upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds tended to engage more in immoral behaviors concerning their schoolwork than those of middle or lower-class status (Piff et al., 2012). In the case of first-generation status, studies by McCabe (2012) and Rettinger and Kramer (2009) showed that students who were the first in their families to pursue a postsecondary education tended to participate more in academic dishonesty than those whose parents received a higher education.

Finally, others concluded that ethnicity, academic level, academic major, and grade point average affect, albeit to varying degrees, the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct (Kramer & Rettinger, 2009; McCabe et al., 2013; Meng et al., 2014; and Wideman, 2008). However, when it comes to how these many factors may differ between traditional and nontraditional students, the literature is quite
deficient; this study sought to fill that deficit by exploring how such factors may vary when other factors are controlled.

**Factors Affecting the Effects of Moral Reasoning on Academic Misconduct**

The correlation between moral reasoning and academic misconduct is influenced by several factors. These factors, which have been found to affect moral reasoning and academic misconduct, are age, gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, academic level, academic major, and GPA.

First, the extent to which some of the previously stated variables influence the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among college students depends upon whether the student is a traditional or nontraditional student. Scores of empirical studies, most of which were authored by McCabe and other leading researchers, have scrutinized and determined that some of these factors (e.g., age) are more influential on some students than they are on others (Hughes & McCabe, 2008). However, there are other factors that have yet to be extensively researched within the context of what this comparative study aimed to unearth. Additionally, the effects of these factors on moral reasoning are central to how predisposed a given student may or may not be to engage in academic dishonesty (McCabe, 2006; McCabe et al., 2001). The impact of controlling for these variables’ effect on the connection between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among undergraduates was an additional focus of this study. As such, the study examined the abovementioned moderating variables to ascertain to what extent or degree the moderating variables impact the strength of the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional students.
Traditional vs. Nontraditional Students and the Relationship Between Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct

The phenomenon of academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional college students is one that goes back to their moral reasoning, which is also known to inform their moral development. This moral development is affected by demographic and educational factors, which consequently shape their perceptions, dispositions, and attitudes towards these scholarly infractions. However, they differ between both categories of students, namely due to the many variables controlled for in this study.

A study conducted by Miller et al. (2011) found that nontraditional students, on average, exhibit a comportment toward academic dishonesty that is largely blasé. This attitude exhibited by nontraditional students was accredited to a sense of apathy with respect to things like institutional codes of conduct and the guiding principles of academic integrity, which most colleges and universities subscribe to when it comes to matters of scholarship, research, and teaching (Miller et al., 2011). It was also uncovered that these students’ perceptions did not give much weight to the possible ramifications of partaking in such unethical behavior. Many did not consider the potential disciplinary action that a school could conceivably take against them should they be caught in an act of academic dishonesty or misconduct. Miller et al. (2011) stated that this nonchalant attitude toward the punitive consequences of either cheating or plagiarizing was due to poor moral character and to the refusal to internalize any standards of integrity (Miller et al., 2011).

When it comes to traditional students, research performed by Perry (2011) asserted that traditional students’ general attitude toward academic dishonesty was one
of shame and embarrassment when it came to the topic of what the article dubbed “academic malpractice.” The article noted a discernable lack of forthrightness among some of the respondents when it came to disclosing whether they had ever committed an act of academic misconduct (Perry, 2010). In addition, the article stated that a lot of the students were oblivious or lacked the insight on what constituted cheating or plagiarizing at their institution. As a result, a lot of them unknowingly turned in work that was not up to par with what the school’s code of conduct permitted (Perry, 2010). This lack of awareness, the study revealed, predominantly stemmed from professors who did not take the time to go over what constitutes academic integrity in their courses. Lacking an understanding of what academic integrity entails impedes their capacity to be able to distinguish what would or wouldn’t comprise immoral behavior toward a given class assignment (Perry, 2010). This in turn would limit their ability to develop morally.

An empirical study by Meng et al. (2014) appraised college students from six different institutions and indicated that neutral attitudes toward academic dishonesty also differed between traditional and nontraditional students (Meng et al., 2014). The study revealed that nontraditional students were more susceptible to neutralizing (i.e., to justify and/or rationalize a need to either cheat or plagiarize without viewing the decision as immoral) their academic dishonesty than were traditional students, although instances of neutralization were also reported among traditional students (Meng et al., 2014). Environmental and/or external factors, along with one’s cognitive development (or lack thereof), were cited as the main reasons for why nontraditional students were not nearly as condemnatory of this behavior as were traditional students. Furthermore, these neutralization techniques were viewed more favorably by nontraditional students than
they were by traditional students, principally because these students perceived these practices to be mainly condonable. The reasoning behind this view is that they were operating under the assumption that the practices were conventional among most students (Meng et al., 2014). This notion was in direct contrast to what most traditional students believed, which was that their attitudes toward academic misconduct were not going to be viewed any differently via neutralization.

Last, research highlighting Bandura’s (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Morality, revealed that the moral thinking of traditional students is more predisposed to the influences of what he referred to as “psychosocial determinants,” which in turn help shape their attitudes toward academic misconduct. McCabe et al. (2001) ascribed this to traditional students tending to be noticeably more involved on campus than nontraditional students usually are (McCabe et al., 2001). This is viewed as central to his theory since he hypothesized that these social interactions help to forge students’ moral standards, which also play a role in their moral development (McCabe et al., 2001). Bandura’s theory also asserts that those students who are the most socially engaged are traditionally the ones who display the highest level of moral reasoning when compared to those who are the least socially engaged.

Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct Between Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Heuristic research conducted by McCarthy et al. (2002) and Roth (2017) revealed no considerable differences in moral reasoning and academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students. Roth (2017) discovered that self-reported instances of both intentional and unintentional plagiarism did not greatly vary between
traditional and nontraditional students. However, it was noted that between the two types of plagiarism, both traditional and nontraditional students reported a higher rate of unintentional plagiarism than they did intentional plagiarism.

McCarthy et al. (2002) found that traditional and nontraditional students began college at similar levels of moral reasoning. As such, their research determined that the college experience, not age, was believed to be the most influential in the moral reasoning and overall moral development of these two subpopulations of college students. The study, however, only prioritized new students and did not account for those of different academic levels.

These two studies approached moral reasoning and academic misconduct as standalone phenomena. As such, neither accounted for how the nexus between the two would vary within the context of traditional and nontraditional students.

**Collectivistic and Individualistic Approaches to Academic Misconduct**

The role of whether academic dishonesty is approached as a collective (collectivism) or individualistic (individualism) act is contingent upon cultural factors. Ma, McCabe, and Liu (2013) found that China’s culture of hyper-competitiveness is one that promotes an individualistic approach to academic misconduct among Chinese college students, while in the West, some institutional cultures can inadvertently promote collective approaches to academic misconduct. Universities and colleges with sizable student bodies—research has found—are especially prone to such approaches to cheating and plagiarism, namely because these students adopt an attitude of being able to get away with whatever they decide to do (Rodney, Martin & Bigby, 2007).
The university sampled in the study is an example of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) known for various levels of social and cultural capital observed among its students. Most of these students, however, are known for their limited social and cultural capital. Nevertheless, such differences in social and cultural capital, coupled with the institution having a huge student body, creates an ideal environment that makes it susceptible to covert yet collective approaches to academic misconduct.

The Current Study

The longstanding issue of academic misconduct, which was exacerbated by technological innovations (Kaufman, 2008), is one that higher education has grappled with since its inception (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Not only can it bring about reputational ruin to an institution but also permeate nearly every aspect of the institution. The rate at which it has proliferated over recent decades has imperiled colleges and universities by way of devaluing the worth of college degrees. This stems from the prevailing sentiment among many which dictates that some students today are either cheating or plagiarizing their way to an esteemed credential. This negative perception tarnishes the image of not only undergraduate education but also of graduate education because undergraduates are not the only ones susceptible to participating in academic misconduct.

Research also suggests that such acts have been steadily increasing among graduate and doctoral students as stated in a study published in the International Journal for Educational Integrity (McCabe, 2005). Our understanding of what influences and motivates college students to engage in such immoral conduct has significantly expanded over the years. However, there continues to be gaps in the literature due to the
lack of research in other dimensions of this area—for example, investigating how the factor of age affects the frequency of instances of academic misconduct among nontraditional students, which is one of many potential moderators that can influence their disposition toward academic integrity.

In addition to academic dishonesty, changing student demographics, such as background characteristics, have prompted the need to examine whether the nexus between moral reasoning and academic misconduct varies among traditional and nontraditional students. Furthermore, assessing variations in cognitive growth between these two groups of undergraduates has stressed the need to scrutinize how moral reasoning differentially influences these students’ choices to engage in academic misconduct (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Heneghan, 2012).

The purpose of the current study was to compare moral reasoning and academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students, and to see whether the correlation between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differed between these two subpopulations of college students. Specifically, the goals of the study were met by controlling for several demographic and educational factors (i.e., age, gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, academic level, academic major, and GPA) known to moderate the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct for these two groups of undergraduates. These factors are known to affect the moral reasoning of college students, which can have palpable implications for how they would then approach academic misconduct within the context of their own schoolwork.
Research Questions

The goal of the current study was accomplished by way of answering the following three research questions:

1) Does moral reasoning differ between traditional and nontraditional students?

2) Do unethical behaviors, pertaining to academic misconduct, vary between traditional and nontraditional students?

3) Does the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differ between traditional and nontraditional students?

Theoretical Basis

The current study is grounded in the following five theories: (1) Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development; (2) Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian’s Approach to Moral Development; (3) Perry’s Theory of Intellectual & Ethical Development; (4) Gilligan’s Theory of Moral Development; and (5) Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Psychosocial Development. Each of these theories provide the theoretical underpinning upon which the study is based.

The first theory that achieves this is Kohlberg’s, which provides three vital levels of moral reasoning through which college students must traverse to develop morally (Patton et al., 2016). In addition to the previously stated levels of moral reasoning, it also outlines six stages of moral development which are driven by one’s moral reasoning.

The second theory is Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian Approach to Kohlberg’s theory, which provides a paradigm of moral development that is more inclusive of the moral
reasoning of nontraditional students. It is more inclusive because progression through it was not conceived to occur by way of fixed stages, which would exclude nontraditional students (Patton et al., 2016).

The third theory is Perry’s Theory of Intellectual & Ethical Development, which contends that the mental and moral growth of undergraduates progresses through four unique stages of viewing, approaching, and interpreting knowledge (Patton et al., 2016). These stages are (1) dualistic knowledge; (2) multiplistic knowledge; (3) relativistic knowledge; and (4) commitment to relativistic knowledge (Patton et al., 2016).

The fourth theory, Gilligan’s, provided the indispensable framework for how college women reason morally and subsequently develop morally. Gilligan’s theory was groundbreaking as women for a long time were erroneously believed to have been morally incompetent and therefore shunted off to the side (Patton et al., 2016).

The final of these theories is that of Chickering and Reisser, which came in the form of Seven Vectors of Psychosocial Development. Their theory highlights two domains of psychosocial growth, which were identified as having had implications for the relationship between the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of college students (Patton et al., 2016).

**Kohlberg’s theory of moral development.** The groundwork laid out by Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1958) theory of moral development provides the grasp of the connection that exists between moral reasoning and academic dishonesty in higher
education. This stems from his thesis that moral reasoning directly informs moral development (Patton et al., 2016). As such, progression through this framework is entirely contingent upon the advancement of one’s morality. Such development, he asserts, comes chiefly from one’s cognitive growth, which is enhanced the most within educational environments (Patton et al., 2016). His theory was also one of the first to incorporate the moral development of college students, even though most of those studied were young men.

Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is composed of three distinct levels of moral reasoning, within which are two stages of moral development. The three levels of moral reasoning are (1) pre-conventional reasoning; (2) conventional reasoning; and (3) post-conventional or principled reasoning (Patton et al., 2016).

In the first level—pre-conventional reasoning—students are not concerned about social norms because their individual interests take precedent. In the second level—conventional reasoning—social cognizance begins to grow, which results in students starting to identify more and more with social rules and expectations. In the third and final level—post-conventional or principled reasoning—students make their own choices and decisions while respecting those of others (Patton et al., 2016).

Each of these three levels of moral reasoning contains two stages. The first and second stages are heteronomous morality and individualistic, instrumental morality; the third and fourth stages are interpersonally normative morality and social system morality (Patton et al., 2016).
The fifth and last stages are human rights and social welfare morality, and morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles, which are seldom attained (Patton et al., 2016).

Kohlberg’s theory is linear because it follows a sequential order and thus is highly structured. His theory is also grounded in the concept of morality of justice, which is also known as ethics of justice (Patton et al., 2016). Finally, the theory primarily focuses on the process of how students make moral judgments instead of focusing on the content of these decisions (Patton et al., 2016).

Rest’s neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral development. Kohlberg’s theory was later adopted and modulated by James Rest (1999) and his colleagues. They coined a neo-Kohlbergian approach to morality, which more broadly expounded upon Kohlberg’s original work (Patton et al., 2016). This theory, unlike the other, considers the factors of content and structure in the moral reasoning of students. This in turn plays a role in their decision-making, which can ultimately have implications for their decision to potentially partake in any type of unethical behavior, as it concerns their schoolwork (Patton et al., 2016). Another differentiation found in Rest’s theory is that it is not a strictly fixed chronological model, which means that a student can undergo moral maturation in more than one of the levels of moral development outlined in Kohlberg’s theory (Patton et al., 2016). Such an approach to moral development would be a more inclusive one for nontraditional students because it would not subject them to a set model of stages that would be more suitable for traditional students (Patton et al., 2016).

The stages of Rest’s theory are driven by the concepts of moral rights and responsibilities. These stages, despite being enumerated, are not to be viewed
sequentially. The first stage is obedience, which deals with adherence to authority (Patton et al., 2016). The second stage is instrumental egoism and simple exchange, which involves brokering deals and compromising with others. The third stage involves developing interpersonal concordance or forming relations with others. The fourth stage consists of law and duty to the social order, which denotes that established law is mandated to safeguard those it was created to serve (Patton et al., 2016). The fifth stage highlights social consensus, which means that you are compelled to obey whichever provisions are accepted by due process proceedings. The last stage, non-arbitrary social cooperation, focuses on how levelheaded people should view organized and agreed upon collaborations as moral (Patton et al., 2016). Rest suggests that students can grow in more than one of these areas at once, and that such growth would be quantified in the form of percentages (Patton et al., 2016).

In addition to the stages detailed above, Rest and his team devised three schemas, which he views as the structures through which the development of moral reasoning takes place. These schemas are (1) the personal interest schema; (2) the maintaining norms schema; and (3) the post-conventional schema (Patton et al., 2016). The first schema focuses on the self and acknowledges cognizance of the other in moral decisions. The second schema presents a need for societal standards inspired by duty and embraced in uniform application (morality is prescribed by the law). The final schema underscores the role of moral obligation with respect to communal values (Patton et al., 2016).

**Perry’s theory of intellectual and ethical development.** The epistemological framework of Perry’s theory (1968) is one that focuses on a developmental scheme, which is composed of stages related to knowledge acquisition. These stages, of which there are four, include dualistic learners, multiplistic learners, relativistic learners, and
those committed to being relativistic learners (Patton et al., 2016). The first stage has two fundamental concepts: (1) that knowledge is predominantly approached dichotomously by college students (i.e., right versus wrong; moral versus immoral; success versus failure; and good versus bad); and (2) that the “expertise” and/or knowledge of a professor must never be questioned because they are experts in their respective subject areas. In the second stage, students recognize that knowledge is neither absolute nor irrefutable. As such, they begin to value the opinions and viewpoints of others but are unable to authenticate the accuracy of such utterances and notions (Patton et al., 2016). By the third stage, students view knowledge as contextual, in that they’re not only able to substantiate their own take on things but are now able to validate the options of others as well. This is achieved by citing statistics and relevant sources, in addition to engaging in logical reasoning. In the final stage, student choices and decisions are entirely contingent upon the role they would like to play within the relativistic world they’ve become a part of. As such, the knowledge they acquire in this context is what dictates things like their values, ethics, needs, goals, commitments, and relationships with others (Patton et al., 2016). Progression through these stages is sequential; however, Perry believed that cognitive and ethical development is a continual process that does not end once the fourth stage is reached (Patton et al., 2016).

The applicability of Perry’s theory to the relationship between the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of traditional and nontraditional students would shed light on how knowledge acquisition is observed and interpreted between these two subcategories of students, thereby determining whether their intellectual and ethical development is either dualistic, multiplistic, relativistic, or committed to relativism.
**Gilligan’s theory of moral development.** Gilligan (1993) developed a theory of moral development to assess any misconceptions surrounding the underlying factors that affect women's moral growth. These factors, per extensive empirical research performed by Gilligan, chiefly extend from women’s intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, in addition to their deeply rooted ethic of care (Patton et al., 2016). This ethic of care is in stark contrast to the one central to Kohlberg’s theory, which was the ethic of justice. With such research in place, she went ahead and postulated that women’s moral growth comes in the form of developmental sequences, comprising three levels within which two distinct periods of transition are found. These three levels consist of (1) orientation to individual survival; (2) goodness as self-sacrifice; and (3) the morality of nonviolence (Patton et al., 2016). The transitions between the levels are selfishness to responsibility, followed by goodness to truth. The first level is morality based on egoism and one’s own desires and self-interests (Patton et al., 2016). The second level involves morality based upon a woman’s relations with other women. According to this theory, moral judgments are influenced by others’ approval and acceptance of them. The final level is when a woman’s moral behavior is dictated by her ethics of care. As such, nonviolent approaches to moral actions and judgments are of paramount importance (Patton et al., 2016). The application of Gilligan’s framework to both traditional and nontraditional female college students is such that it would aid in explaining why their inclinations to perpetrate academic misconduct differs so vastly from those of their male counterparts. Her theory would also help contextualize females’ approach to such a topic.

**Chickering and Reisser’s seven vectors of psychosocial development.**

Psychosocial development, like moral development, is believed to be another contributor
to what leads a student to commit an act of academic misconduct. One of the most venerated psychosocial frameworks in existence is that of Chickering and Reisser (1993), which is composed of seven key vectors they believe influence college students the most when it comes to this dimension of maturation. Each of these paths is made up of certain aptitudes that students should meet (Patton et al., 2016). The areas of these non-sequential vectors are developing competence, managing emotion, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing an identity, developing purpose, and, finally, developing integrity (Patton et al., 2016).

In applying this theory to academic dishonesty between traditional and nontraditional students, two of the seven vectors would be most consequential to their decision to engage in such immoral behavior. Those vectors would be the developing competence vector, followed by the developing integrity vector (Patton et al., 2016). Deficiencies in one or both vectors would hinder their moral reasoning as well as their subsequent moral development. However, the degree of how underdeveloped either vector could be between the two types of students would certainly vary based on how variables influence a student.

**Significance of the Study**

Despite the ever-shifting demographics of college students and the enduring presence of academic dishonesty at institutions of higher education, empirical research has been quite scarce on academic misconduct among nontraditional college students, and few studies consider how the impact of moral reasoning on academic misconduct may differ between traditional and nontraditional students. As such, from a deficit
standpoint, this study was critical to comprehend the impact of college students’ moral
development on the decisions they make. Research has indicated that the collegiate
context is where individuals learn how to make smarter choices and experience the
ramifications of those choices. Cheating and other types of academic dishonesty are
destructive forces at the colleges and universities whose mission is to produce respected
members of society and whose faculty are working to create and disseminate knowledge.
Left unbridled, academic misconduct generates a toxic culture of mistrust, unfairness, and
added pressure that does not bode well for the larger society, especially as it increasingly
confronts concerns of integrity at every level. As discussed earlier, the statistics are
unnerving: Between 2005 and 2013, almost 70% of U.S. college undergraduates reported
partaking in academic misconduct. It remains indispensable for research to focus on this
phenomenon and better equip higher education stakeholders for the challenge.

Conducting such a study between these two subpopulations of undergraduates
was crucial for three primary reasons. First, it would provide insight into how
nontraditional students differed, if at all, from their traditional colleagues when it comes
to the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct. Second, it would
provide the preliminary research necessary to help fill gaps in the literature relating to
nontraditional students and academic misconduct. Last, it would shed light on the
similarities and differences in moral reasoning and development between traditional and
nontraditional students and attempt to extrapolate how these factors contribute to each
group’s decision to engage in academic misconduct. Such contributions highlight
whether the things that factor into traditional students’ propensity to participate in such
unethical practices are also those found among nontraditional students. In other words, were these factors more influential, less influential, or about the same between them?

One of the intended implications of the study includes the need to build and expand the knowledge base as it concerns the connection between the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of nontraditional students. To properly assess the needs and concerns pertaining to this population, more research needs to be conducted and encouraged. Another implication necessitates that professors spend more time going over their institutions’ student codes of conduct with all students. Doing so, as opposed to overlooking them entirely, exposes students—traditional and nontraditional alike—to those policies that institutions have in place to combat instances of academic misconduct. Without this exposure, students may find themselves accidentally fostering a culture of permissiveness when it comes to such unethical behavior. A final implication involves the prospect of reevaluating pedagogical and andragogical practices inside of the classroom to ensure that instructors aren’t inadvertently promoting environments that would encourage their students to resort to academic misconduct.

**Definitions**

**Moral reasoning:** Moral reasoning is operationally defined as the cogitating process by which a person ascertains what’s right or wrong, correct or incorrect, moral or immoral, and ethical or unethical.

**Academic misconduct:** Academic misconduct is operationally defined as mendacious behavior that takes on the form of an action which serves to provide an academic advantage to one student over the rest.
**Traditional students:** Traditional students are defined as those who attend college right out of high school and range in age between 18 and 23 years old.

**Nontraditional students:** Nontraditional students are defined as those who aren’t younger than 24 to 28 years of age and do not enroll in tertiary education immediately upon graduating from their institution of secondary education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The first part of this chapter provides a historical overview of the phenomenon known as academic misconduct. Second, the prevalence and harmful effect of academic misconduct on higher education in America is discussed. This discussion covers institutional efforts to combat academic dishonesty while also delineating the most frequently observed manifestations of such behavior among college students. Additionally, the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct are discussed at length. Finally, this association is expounded upon within the context of traditional and nontraditional students, both of whom are defined.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the theoretical foundation of moral reasoning and development within the context of academic misconduct. These frameworks contextualize how moral reasoning and development have evolved over time, which provides the groundwork for the study’s conceptual argument—how academic dishonesty ties back to one’s moral reasoning.

The final part of the chapter deals with the empirical literature involving the correlation between moral reasoning and academic misconduct. It specifically highlights how the eight factors in this study influence the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional college students. The role of how each of these variables impacts the affiliation between the study’s two leading variables is augmented by heuristic research.

Background of the Current Study

Throughout its history, academic misconduct has been an obstacle to higher education (Gallant, 2008; Rudolph, 1990). From the colonial era to the digital age, its
presence cannot only undercut academic integrity, it can also negatively affect (i.e., lead
to its reputational ruin) an institution (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Instances of academic
dishonesty can be pernicious to nearly every aspect of a college or university. The
components it can affect include teaching, research, and scholarship, among others
(McCabe et al., 2001). Additionally, given their nature, these practices can even devalue
the worth of a college degree, because public opinion would create the impression that
students are receiving degrees by employing these unethical means instead of merits,
hard work, and sacrifice (McCabe et al., 2001).

These types of unfavorable perceptions call into question the veracity of a
postsecondary education. Moreover, they can lead people to operate under the notion that
U.S. colleges and universities are mere diploma mills with no purpose to them at all
(McCabe et al., 2001). Such a perception would compromise the pivotal role that these
institutions play within society, as they’re often regarded as microcosms of society,
known to mirror whatever may be going on nationally (McCabe, 2006). That is why the
role of higher education must remain one that is never diminished, undervalued, or cast
aside.

Academic misconduct in higher education has grown more and more elusive and
sophisticated over the years (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Heneghan, 2012). From the late
20th century into the 21st century, it was boosted by the advent of the Internet and other
technological advances (i.e., the introduction of the smartphone, smartwatch, Blackberry, and
tablet) that greatly transformed the way many college students carried out acts of academic
dishonesty (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Heneghan, 2012).
The result of this led to incidences of academic dishonesty burgeoning across the nation to levels never observed before (Heneghan, 2012). This trend was best documented by revered scholar and researcher Donald McCabe in conjunction with the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI). Their joint research revealed that over the last decade the rate of cheating and plagiarizing had increased among both undergraduates and graduate students. These alarming statistics—68% undergraduates and 43% graduates, respectively—stemmed from survey data that was collected by McCabe and ICAI from numerous institutions of higher learning over a period of 12 years (ICAI, 2017).

Institutional deterrents to combat the proliferation of academic misconduct have come in the form of generating greater awareness and having more intentional discourses around what student codes of conduct consist of, with respect to what constitutes academic dishonesty and academic integrity (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). This type of exposure to ethical values and principles, which are normally outlined in an institution’s student handbook of rights and responsibilities, help foster a greater sense of cognizance around what is expected of students in higher education (Kaufman, 2008). Developing this awareness influences their decision to either honor or violate institutional policy on academic misconduct, which in turn can result in corrective action being taken against the student or students by the institution (McCabe & Trevino, 1993).

In addition to deterring these kinds of infractions by raising consciousness about institutional honor codes, other efforts that have helped mitigate the frequency of these transgressions include establishing better communication between students and instructors, and fostering cultures of accountability instead of those of laxness or apathy.
(McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Wideman, 2008). These proactive attitudes promote environments of denunciation when it comes to academic misconduct, as opposed to the allowance of it (Wideman, 2008).

A third way by which to confront the prevalence of these incidences has come in the form of antiplagiarism programs and software, which are being used in greater frequency by more and more institutions each day. These measures being employed by institutions to better detect these acts of academic misconduct are intended to discourage this behavior, which runs counter to how college students should approach their education (McCabe, 2005; Wideman, 2008).

Despite institutional efforts to assuage instances of academic dishonesty among their students, strategies to completely prevent them from engaging in such behavior are all but impossible (Kibler, 1993). As such, approaching this longstanding predicament from a behavioral perspective is the best way to comprehensively understand why college students resort to these means (Kibler, 1993). The behavioral aspect most closely tied to their decision of whether to partake in acts of academic misconduct is moral reasoning (McCabe et al., 2011; Hughes & McCabe, 2006). This dimension of student development, per prominent researchers and psychologists like McCabe and Kohlberg, plays a key role in the decision to either cheat or plagiarize. However, both have also pointed out that college students’ moral reasoning is heavily influenced by extrinsic factors and other types of variables, which can sway how they reason morally (McCabe 2001; Kramer & Rettinger, 2009). Furthermore, the germane literature suggests that moral reasoning dictates how far along a given student is in their overall moral development (Patton et al., 2016). The nexus between the moral reasoning and
academic misconduct of traditional college students is one that is well documented and has been judiciously researched over the last several decades (Kaufman, 2008). However, current literature remains startlingly scarce as it concerns the implications of this relationship for nontraditional students, who form a blossoming segment of college students today (Pelletler, 2010).

These students are quickly changing the demographic landscape of higher education. In addition, a general expectation among them has been exposed that asserts that institutions must cater to their wants and needs (Pelletler, 2010). As a result, there exists an educational necessity to explore how these students approach the topic of academic dishonesty. Doing so can provide the context upon which to determine how morally developed, if at all, these students are when they begin their postsecondary education (Pelletler, 2010). Such an exploration also offers the opportunity to gauge their moral reasoning by way of controlling for key variables that help mold their moral reasoning when it comes to their acting on the enticement to commit an act of academic dishonesty within this environment (Grabowski et al., 2016). This investigation of traditional and nontraditional students allowed for a comparative study.

**Defining Moral Reasoning and Moral Development**

Kohlberg delineates moral reasoning as judgments of right and wrong (Patton et al., 2016). This definition can be explained by describing it as the cogitating process by which we determine whether something is right or wrong (moral or immoral) depending upon what said act or decision is expected to achieve (Kohlberg, 1958). In addition to this definition, Kohlberg (1958) believes that everyone in life traverses at least one level of moral reasoning. These levels are pre-conventional reasoning, conventional reasoning,
and post-conventional reasoning (Patton et al., 2016). In the first level, moral reasoning is viewed through the lens of being egocentric, with individuals focusing only on their own interests, needs and perceptions. In the second level, individuals’ moral reasoning is more concerned with social norms and expectations, which influence their decision-making when it comes to ethical issues (Patton et al., 2016). The third and final level of moral reasoning deals with morality by way of one’s own values and principles, as opposed to those dictated by social structures and governing laws (Patton et al., 2016).

Moral development, as explicated by Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1989), is the lifelong ruminating process by which we develop an understanding of morality. This process is not only what guides a person’s ethical principles but also dictates how one approaches moral dilemmas. While moral development and moral reasoning may be viewed interchangeably, they are not considered the same for the purposes of this study. Instead, moral reasoning is viewed as what informs an individual’s moral development.

**Delineating Academic Misconduct**

The International Center for Academic Integrity defines academic misconduct as dishonest behavior in the form of an action which serves to provide an academic advantage to one student over the rest. This therefore leaves the other students at an academic disadvantage (ICAI, 2017; Wideman, 2008). This kind of conduct can be observed in myriad ways within higher education. Ways academic dishonesty is exhibited include cheating, copying, plagiarizing, falsifying data, fabricating information, deceiving, paraphrasing without attribution, colluding with others to either cheat or plagiarize, enabling others to either cheat or plagiarize, and passing off someone’s
work as your own (Wideman, 2008; plagiarism.org). These manifestations of academic misconduct are not part of an exhaustive list because these attempts continue to evolve as new barriers are placed to combat them.

A frustrating aspect shared by the previously stated examples of academic dishonesty is that students are becoming increasingly cunning about how they go about perpetrating these acts (Miller et al., 2011). This furtive approach to academic misconduct is allowing for many such students to go unnoticed by their professors (Miller et al., 2011). This in turn will only serve to further encourage the utilization of these practices unless institutions and educators begin to take a much more proactive role. This proactive role can take the shape of investing in more effective tools and resources with which to outsmart such students and consequently expose these underground practices (Miller et al., 2011).

Most instances of academic misconduct are adjudicated by university representatives in proceedings that help discern the crime and punishment of students who violate the code of conduct (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). These proceedings, which most universities have in place, are conducted primarily as conduct hearings that aim to achieve two goals. First, the hearing serves to ascertain the culpability of the student and deliberate on sanctions. Second, having assessed the culpability of the student, the representatives discuss the severity of the disciplinary sanction to be imposed, which is dependent on the nature of the conduct violation. Furthermore, if the hearing finds the student’s act constitutes a defilement of the institution’s code of conduct, a sanction will be imposed (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). These sanctions, which are typically outlined in a given school’s handbook on student rights and responsibilities, normally vary. Some
forms of penalty include a warning, probation, suspension or expulsion. However, repeat offenders are invariably sanctioned more harshly, given the progressive nature of judicial structures in postsecondary education (Kaplin & Lee, 2013).

**Outlining Types of Academic Misconduct**

As stated previously, academic misconduct can be displayed in a multitude of ways, within the context of a college or university. However, the prevailing types of academic dishonesty are defined as follows. The first of these is cheating, which is described as the act by which a student gains an iniquitous advantage during a test or any other type of examination. The second is copying, which is simply known as the facsimile of schoolwork. The third is plagiarism, which is delineated as the ignominious practice of a student’s passing off someone else’s work as his own without giving the original author any credit. The fourth is collusion, which is the decision to connive with others to perpetrate academic dishonesty. The fifth is falsification, which is explicated as the deed of feigning data that never existed. The final is fabrication, which is known as the prevarication of information to mislead and/or deceive others. These six definitions account for the most commonly practiced acts of academic misconduct.

**Defining Traditional and Nontraditional Students**

Traditional college students usually range in age from 18 to 23 years old, although some can begin college as young as 17 and not graduate till they are around 24 (Dean & Levine, 2012). They typically begin their postsecondary education immediately upon graduating from high school. These students tend to be financially dependent upon others and are enrolled as full-time students. Additionally, with respect to their schoolwork they tend to be employed part-time, if at all. Moreover, they do not have any
biological children of their own (Dean & Levine, 2012). Many of these students tend to live on campus and are actively involved on campus (Dean & Levine, 2012). In addition to the aforesaid descriptions, these traditional students are characterized as being late-blooming millennials, digital natives, multitaskers, career- and goal-oriented, heavily stressed, academically deficient, narcissistic, alcohol and substance abusers, and socially, politically and economically engaged (Dean & Levine, 2012; Renn & Reason 2012).

The National Center for Education Statistics, a subsidiary of the U.S Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, outlined seven key characteristics of nontraditional college students. One characteristic is delayed enrollment to an institution of tertiary education. Additionally, the student attends college part time to be able to work full time (Pelletler, 2010; NCES). The nontraditional student is deemed as financially independent for financial aid purposes, may have dependents other than a spouse, and may be a single parent. Last, this student may not have completed high school and instead received his or her GED (Pelletler, 2010; NCES). In addition to the previously stated characteristics, NCES notes that these students can have more than one biological child and that they’re usually no younger than about 24 years old.

Furthermore, NCES states that the three most noteworthy determinants of nontraditional status are enrollment patterns, financial and family status, followed by high school graduation status. These factors are nearly always considered when ascertaining whether a student is traditional or nontraditional (NCES, 2017). Last, a study conducted by NCES revealed that nontraditional students account for a substantial
segment of undergraduates. This trend is only expected to grow further as the landscape of higher education in the 21st century continues to evolve (NCES, 2017).

**Projected Enrollment Trends Between Traditional and Nontraditional Students**

A comprehensive report published in 2016 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that by the year 2023, the enrollment of nontraditional students or adult learners will have outpaced or surpassed that of their traditional counterparts. As such, the center predicts that by then the median age of undergraduates will likely range between 25 and 34 years old. Specifically, the report focuses on three age groups of college students that it expects will see appreciable enrollment increases between the years of 2018 and 2023. The first of these groups is undergraduates between the age of 18 and 24 years old. This group can anticipate an increase of 12% over the next six years. The following group is those students who fall between the age of 25 and 34. These undergraduates will see an increase of 23% over the noted period. The final age group, those students above the age of 35, can anticipate an increase of 17%. In addition to these estimations in matriculation, NCES also explained that during this period undergraduate populations at institutions across the country will continue to diversify student demographics, and thus become that much more heterogeneous.

The statistics bear out the reality that the presence of nontraditional students in American classrooms will continue to be ever-expanding, which will compel institutions to become more receptive to their needs and wants. These students, as noted by DeVitis and Sasso (2015), deal with three types of barriers: dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers. These barriers and other-related factors have been shown to have repercussions on how they can influence these students’ decision to engage in
academic misconduct. Traditional students, however, are not nearly as influenced by these barriers due to support structures, programs, key services, and other accommodations regularly available to them on campus (DeVitis & Sasso, 2015).

**Differences in Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct Between Traditional and Nontraditional Students**

Existing literature on how moral reasoning and academic misconduct vary between traditional and nontraditional students remains scarce. What limited research does exist has revealed no appreciable distinctions in moral reasoning and academic misconduct among college students. An example of such a study would be one conducted in 2002 by McCarthy et al., which found that both traditional and nontraditional students begin college at nearly identical levels of moral reasoning. McCarthy’s (2002) study also underlined that the overall college experience, not differences in age, was viewed to be the most impactful on college students’ moral development. As such, the factor of age was deemed an insignificant contributor in what influenced their moral maturation the most. A drawback observed in McCarthy’s study (2002) was that it only assessed the moral reasoning of new students, not those of continuing students.

Another more recent study found no noteworthy differentiations in instances of academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students. Study findings (Roth, 2017) indicated that self-reported cases of intentional and unintentional plagiarism did not significantly contrast between traditional and nontraditional students. What was noted in this manifestation of academic dishonesty was that the frequency of engaging in instances of unintended or unintentional plagiarism was found to be higher among both traditional and nontraditional students (Roth, 2017). Ultimately, however, neither
subpopulation of college students was found to have partaken in more occurrences of overall plagiarism than the other.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspectives employed to inform the research in this comparative study came from various theoretical frameworks. These theories provided the lenses through which the two leading variables of this study were examined while providing the theoretical argument for the research questions in the study. As such, the abovementioned theories are (1) Piaget’s Theory of Moral Reasoning; (2) Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development; (3) Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian’s Approach to Moral Development; (4) Perry’s Theory of Intellectual & Ethical Development; (5) Gilligan’s Theory of Moral Development; and (6) Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Psychosocial Development.

Renowned clinical psychologist Jean Piaget (1932, 1965) devised a seminal theory of moral reasoning that greatly influenced the work of many other prominent moral theorists. His theory consists of two stages, which are the heteronomous phase of moral reasoning, followed by the autonomous phase of moral reasoning (Piaget, 1965). While the first stage is mostly germane to the moral development of children, the second phase is much more relatable to the moral reasoning of college students (late adolescence). The premise of this phase is that the element of deliberateness is what propels a student’s action with respect to the prospects of academic misconduct, within the context of his or her schoolwork (Piaget, 1965). Piaget asserts that the act perpetrated by a given student is largely dismissive of what the potential moral consequences of such an act might be. The explanation for this is that people (college students in this
case) subscribe to varying standards of morality instead of observing universal morals that everyone must follow (Piaget, 1965). This approach to moral reasoning among young adults is further exacerbated by the fact that it is immaterially affected by what Piaget coined as immanent justice, which is the fear of the castigatory ramifications of acting on an immoral impulse (Piaget, 1965).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1958, 1989) significantly expounded upon Piaget’s conceptual framework by way of conceiving his own theory of moral development. The composition of his theory is three distinct levels of moral reasoning, within which are two stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1989). Progressing through his framework is entirely dependent upon one’s moral reasoning, which he believes is most influenced by one’s cognitive development. The theory is deeply rooted in what he termed morality of justice, which is commonly known as ethics of justice (Kohlberg, 1989). Furthermore, a major critique of his theory was that it chiefly focused on studying the moral maturation of college men while paying minuscule attention to the development of college women (Kohlberg, 1989).

The three levels of moral reasoning central to his theory are pre-conventional reasoning, conventional reasoning, and post-conventional reasoning (Kohlberg, 1958 & 1989). The first deals with defying social standards and norms, because students are only focused on their personal wellbeing and other related interests (Kohlberg, 1989). The second addresses greater social mindfulness among college students, which results in more adherence to society’s rules and expectations. The last focuses on students’ ability to make judgments and selections while respecting those of others (Kohlberg, 1989). In addition to the aforesaid levels of moral reasoning, the theory also includes six stages of
moral development, which are informed by whichever level of moral reasoning a given student happens to be on. The first two stages deal with heteronomous morality, followed by individualistic, instrumental morality (Kohlberg, 1989). The following two are interpersonally normative morality and social system morality. And then the last two consist of human rights morality, followed by social welfare morality (Kohlberg, 1989).

Following Kohlberg’s theory, Rest (1999) and several colleagues not only further built upon Kohlberg’s framework but also approached it differently and patched up gaps they saw in his theory. Their model of moral development was not sequential nor linear, unlike Kohlberg’s (Rest et al., 1999). Because of this structural difference and malleable nature, students can exhibit either moral reasoning or moral development contemporaneously (Rest et al., 1999). Kohlberg, who believed that the primary driver impelling students through his theory was the advancement of their cognitive development. Conversely, Rest and company contended that the factors of content and structure were the key influencers that molded the moral reasoning of students (Rest et al., 1999). In addition to that previously stated, their model of moral development is grounded in the notions of moral rights and responsibilities, when it comes to what moral behavior should be dictated by (Rest et al., 1999).

Rest’s model is similar to Kohlberg’s in terms of organization. However, unlike viewing moral reasoning advancement through the prism of fixed levels, Rest posited that one’s moral reasoning progresses through what he characterized as three schemas (Rest et al., 1999). These schemas are the personal interest schema, the maintaining norms schema, and the post-conventional schema. The first schema draws attention to not only oneself but to others as well, when it comes to moral decision-making. The second
schema argues that standards of morality are prescriptive or that they are prescribed by authoritative figures (Rest et al., 1999). The final schema underscores the obligatory nature of morality as it relates to collective or societal values. Within these schemas are a total of six stages like those in Kohlberg’s theory but articulated a bit differently (Rest et al., 1999). The first stage is adherence; the second stage is instrumental egoism and simple exchange; the third stage is interpersonal concordance; the fourth stage is law and duty to the social order; the fifth stage is social consensus; and the final stage is non-arbitrary social cooperation (Rest et al., 1999).

Educational psychologist William Perry’s (1968, 1970) theory of intellectual and ethical development expanded upon the literature discussing moral reasoning and growth among college students. However, Perry approached his theory of moral reasoning differently from Piaget, Kohlberg and Rest. This variance stemmed from the fact that he contended that the ways in which students understand and make meaning of knowledge is what ultimately informs their ethical development (Patton et al., 2016). In other words, he theorized that the cognitive processes of thinking and reasoning tie back to moral behavior. As such, he viewed epistemological growth and ethical development as interwoven.

Perry’s theory is composed of four sequential stages which are composed of nine positions through which students progress (Patton et al., 2016). The stages that house the nine positions are (1) dualism; (2) multiplicity; (3) relativism, and (4) commitment to relativism. In the case of dualism, authority reigns supreme and there’s a clear answer to everything; knowledge is viewed dichotomously (Patton et al., 2016). In terms of multiplicity, differing opinions and contrasting viewpoints are observed
and valued; knowledge is considered subjective and therefore can no longer be viewed as absolute; and students become more inquisitive and conflicted about things (Patton et al., 2016). When it comes to relativism, situations and circumstances are viewed contextually; knowledge is relativistic; opinions and utterances are supplemented by logic, sources and statistics; and students can validate their own stances as well as those of others (Patton et al., 2016). Finally, when it comes to commitment to relativism, students come to the realization that life is fraught with uncertainties and inexplicable matters, in addition to coming to terms with the reality that there are no easy answers for complicated issues (Patton et al., 2016).

The nine positions that belong to each of the areas discussed above: Under dualism are basic duality and full dualism; under multiplicity are early multiplicity and late multiplicity; under relativism are contextual relativism and pre-commitment; and under commitment to relativism are commitment, challenges to commitment, and post-commitment.

Unlike many of her male counterparts, Carol Gilligan (1993) developed a theory of moral development that was exclusive to the moral growth of women; little was understood about women and their morality before this, and the little that was known was later shown to be erroneous (Gilligan, 1993). The core of Gilligan’s theory asserts that the moral reasoning of women is largely dictated by their intrapersonal and interpersonal relations in addition to their ethic of care, which tends to be an innate characteristic in many women (Gilligan, 1993). Her framework is made up of three developmental
successions within which are two periods of transition (Gilligan, 1993). These sequences are composed of orientation to individual survival; goodness as self-sacrifice; and the morality of nonviolence. The first level involves ethnocentrism and a person’s own intrinsic motivations and desires (Gilligan, 1993). The second level consists of interpersonal morality. The third level is about a woman’s ethical comportment being informed by her ethic of care. Between the first and second levels, a woman will undergo two unique periods of transition (Gilligan, 1993). The first of these transitions involves selfishness to responsibility while the second transition deals with goodness to truth (Gilligan, 1993).

**Psychosocial Development and Academic Misconduct**

Arthur Chickering and Robert Reisser (1993) conceived a model consisting of seven key vectors of identity development, which all college students should develop during their time in college. Progress through these conceptualized vectors is non-sequential, meaning that a student doesn’t have to be proficient in one before they can advance into the next (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving toward autonomy through interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Patton et al., 2016). Out of these vectors, the two most closely tied to the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of college students are developing competence and developing integrity.

The implications of psychosocial growth for the relationship between the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of college students would be the most
heavily swayed by not only the capacity of these students to acquire intellectual competence but also their ability to develop a sense of integrity that wouldn’t be easily compromised. Advancement through these two vectors of Chickering & Reisser’s theory (1993) would not be uniform between traditional and nontraditional students, as discernable differences would be present based on many of the factors controlled for in this study.

**Comparing Theories of Moral Development**

Two competing theories from which comparisons and contrasts can be drawn are Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development (1958, 1989) and Rest’s Model of Moral Development (Rest et al., 1999). The parallels and variations between the two are noteworthy despite one being utilized to revise and subsequently improve upon the original framework of the other. A similarity that garnered quite a bit of reproach from other developmental psychologists and researchers was that both theories were Western-centric and gave little attention to the moral development of women (Patton et al., 2016; Rest et al., 2000). An important difference among them was that in design, they varied quite a bit (e.g., schemas versus levels). Kohlberg’s theory is heavily regimented in that it follows a hard-stage blueprint that must be followed sequentially, while Rest’s is significantly more broad and far-reaching with no set direction to follow (Patton et al., 2016; Rest et al., 2000). Another comparison is that each theory subscribes to a cognitive model of development as the overarching factor that informs one’s moral reasoning and subsequent moral development.

However, these models do differ in approach. The two models developed by Kohlberg and Rest are different in their central view. Kohlberg’s model is central to
individualism and one’s own moral behavior and judgments, while Rest’s is more focused on cognitive structures and social influences (Patton et al., 2016; Rest et al., 2000). A final contrast between the two is that moral growth in Kohlberg’s theory can only occur at one time, whereas with Rest’s it not only can arise organically but also take place simultaneously within more than one of his schemas (Patton et al., 2016; Rest et al., 2000).

Another theory worth comparing to that of Kohlberg’s is Gilligan’s Theory of Moral Development (1993). Parallels between these two frameworks include their linear and sequential nature, in addition to viewing moral reasoning through the lenses of three identical levels of morality (Gilligan, 1993; Patton et al., 2016). Despite sharing the previously stated similarities, each theory approaches moral development differently. Kohlberg gauges it by stages, while Gilligan does so through two periods of transition. Major contrasts found in each theory include the fact that one is grounded in ethics of justice/morality of justice, while the other is driven by the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Patton et al., 2016). In addition to these driving forces, Kohlberg’s theory focused on young men, while Gilligan’s, in response to Kohlberg’s, intentionally researched only the moral development of young women to counter fallacies about the morality of females that had become part of mainstream thinking at the time. Another variance between the two was that Kohlberg was all about intrapersonal morality, while Gilligan concentrated on interpersonal morality (Gilligan, 1993; Patton, 2016).
Rationale for the Current Study’s Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical frameworks discussed above provided the foundation for this study. In addition to supporting the research, the frameworks also provided a theoretical understanding of the student population surveyed and helped place it in context for achieving better comprehension of the differences between two classifications of college students.

Based as it is on intersecting concepts, theories and models, the theoretical foundation of this study provided more than one angle from which to view and grasp the phenomena under study. The foundation also facilitated the examination of how these phenomena may influence the population investigated.

In particular, the foundation informed the study’s conceptualized premise, pertaining to the need to pursue research questions and how the study’s findings may contribute to the existing body of literature.

The theoretical basis applied to the problem this study sought to investigate by way of contextualizing the relationship between its two underlying variables, moral reasoning and academic misconduct. In addition, it shed light on how one variable informs and/or influences the other, and on whether this correlation differs in any way between traditional and nontraditional college students.

Furthermore, the theoretical foundation provided the framework for considering the problem, which in turn helped inform the overall study so that such a crucial context was in place. Aside from the abovementioned leading variables, the study’s target population, which ties back to the problem, greatly benefits from the theoretical
foundation because it explicates how moral reasoning and development are observed and manifested among college students.

Factors That Relate to Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct

This section provides the empirical literature for the controlled variables of the study. These variables came in the form of demographic and educational factors relating to how they influence the relationship between the two leading variables of the study, which are moral reasoning and academic misconduct. As such, the reviewed literature provides the context within which these important variables are better understood. Within each of the areas previously stated, the individual variables were age, gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, academic level, academic major, and grade point average. The degree to which each variable affects the previously stated correlation was probed within the context of traditional and nontraditional college students.

Age. A student’s age has long been considered a demographic factor in their decision to perpetrate an act of academic dishonesty (McCabe et al., 2001; McCabe, 2005). This was perhaps best documented in a heuristic study (1997) by Donald McCabe and Linda Trevino in which they observed that upper-division undergraduates tended to cheat a lot less than their lower-division counterparts. These findings were directly linked to the differences in age, although not overly significant, that existed between these two subclasses of students. The authors noted that the most glaring example occurred between a freshman and a senior when they tested for the factor of age in evaluating the penchant to engage in academic misconduct.
McCabe and Trevino (1997) also attributed the susceptibility of first- and second-year students to engage in either cheating or plagiarism to be greater than those among third- and fourth-year students predominantly due to their capacity to reason morally, which is what ultimately informs their moral development. As a result, McCabe and Trevino (McCabe et al., 2001) argued that their cognitive maturation, or lack thereof, naturally predisposes these lower-division students to such vulnerabilities. However, when it comes to applying this hypothesis to nontraditional students, it was difficult to ascertain whether the same conclusion could be extrapolated, considering that these students are known to be a bit older (Wideman, 2008). Nevertheless, the factor of age, by what McCabe and Trevino (1997) researched and concluded, is viewed as a notable driver of undergraduate misconduct even if no comparative research was conducted with nontraditional students to assess how this variable would influence this segment of undergraduates.

**Gender.** The role of gender when it comes to academic dishonesty among college students has been appreciably scrutinized by many scholars to decipher which sex has the greater propensity to carry out such unethical practices. McCabe, who was at the forefront of most of these studies, spearheaded one in 1993, in which he and colleague Linda Trevino garnered data from survey research at a myriad of institutions; they found that more male than female students admitted to having committed acts of academic misconduct at one point or another (McCabe et al., 2011; McCabe, 2005). They noted that women are known to cognitively develop at a much faster rate than men, therefore permitting them to view such activities as cheating and plagiarism in a much more negative light than men normally would (McCabe & Trevino, 1993).
A later research article by Wideman in 2008 augmented the earlier findings regarding this variable by highlighting an empirical study from 2004, which found that a remarkable 68% of college men confessed to having cheated on an examination compared to just 38% of women. This study, however, was not inclusive of any nontraditional students (Wideman, 2008).

**Socioeconomic status.** The degree to which a student’s socioeconomic status influences their decision to partake in academic misconduct has been of great interest to researchers, given the wide gaps that tend to exist among college students when it comes to this topic. A research article (Piff et al., 2012), comprised of seven empirical studies, discovered ties between a student’s socioeconomic status and his or her decision to take part in academic dishonesty, within the context of their schoolwork. The article points to key psychological and structural factors that were mainly exhibited by students who identified as belonging to the upper class of the socioeconomic bracket (Piff et al., 2012). The factors that made them prone to perpetrating such acts included possessing an attitude of avarice and operating under the mindset that due to their social status, they would somehow get away with the act without facing punitive consequences (Piff et al., 2012). In contract, in the case of those students who identified as belonging to either the middle or lower class of the socioeconomic bracket, incidences of academic misconduct were significantly less; there tended to exist greater cognizance of the risks involved for these students (Piff et al., 2012).

**First-generation status.** The correlation between first-generation status and academic dishonesty is corroborated by empirical research (Jean, 2010; Chen &
Vowell, 2004). Study findings have indicated that first-generation students, unlike those who do not identify as first generation, tend to struggle with academic performance as a byproduct of poor academic preparation, which in turn increases their susceptibility to engaging in such decadent comportment (Chen & Vowell, 2004; Jean, 2010). Such academic deficiencies primarily stem from a lack of resources from high school into college. As noted by the higher education literature, without such foundations in place for them, their odds of persisting and eventually graduating will plummet (Chen & Vowell, 2004; Jean, 2010). Such groundwork needs to be provided these students to ensure they not only flourish in the classroom but also develop the moral reasoning and development that can help counter opportunities to cheat or plagiarize (Chen & Vowell, 2004; Jean, 2010).

First-generation students, unlike many of their peers, are known to greatly lack the four main types of capital most commonly referenced in higher education literature (Arnold & Barrett, 2015). Of these four categories of capital (academic, economic, social and cultural), research has found that first-generation students exhibit the least economic and academic capital when they begin tertiary education (Arnold & Barrett, 2015). Such inadequacies predominantly stem from unfamiliarity with such items as the FASFA, which can result in financial aid illiteracy. Other factors include coming from households in which neither parent pursued nor completed a formal higher education (Arnold & Barrett, 2015). An additional factor that often influences poor academic capital among these students is not having siblings or friends who can provide them with their own anecdotal experiences of what postsecondary education is like (Arnold &
Barrett, 2015). These siblings and/or friends can also shed light on the college-choice process (Arnold & Barrett, 2015).

**Ethnicity.** The demographic factor of ethnicity was scrutinized in a 2004 empirical study whose findings indicated that one’s ethnicity is one of four sociological factors that can be utilized to predict proclivities toward academic misconduct among college students (Chen & Vowell, 2004). The study found that cultural traits from certain ethnicities can predispose some students more than others to these unethical practices. The cultural values and ideals instilled during childhood may have tangible ramifications later for how certain students would approach academic dishonesty in college (Chen & Vowell, 2004).

The research noted that certain cultures can be more regimented and disciplined when it comes to educational expectations, whereas others may be a bit lax and not so demanding when it comes to the need to excel in curricular pursuits (Chen & Vowell, 2004). These cultural influences have been observed in just traditional students, which doesn’t shed light on whether nontraditional students would be impelled in an analogous manner (Hughes & McCabe, 2006).

**Academic level.** The effect of a student’s academic level on propensity to carry out acts of academic misconduct has been the subject of increased scrutiny over the last few decades (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000). The influence of this factor was the topic of empirical research that revealed some noteworthy findings about academic misconduct and students’ academic level (Hughes & McCabe, 2006; McCabe, 2005). The research found that out of the four categories of academic levels used in American
postsecondary education, the two that exhibited the highest percentages of scholastic dishonesty were freshmen and seniors, although cases of cheating and plagiarism were also reported among those who identified as sophomores and juniors (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000). The underlying explanations of why freshmen and seniors had greater numbers of academic misconduct included adjustment issues in the case of freshmen, and issues stemming from procrastination and academic fatigue in the case of seniors. However, the research chiefly sampled a homogenous population of undergraduates, meaning that it is not known whether the results may have differed had a heterogeneous population of students been sampled instead (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000).

**Academic major.** The extent to which a student’s major factors into their decision to partake in academic dishonesty was the focus of a heuristic study that looked at how key educational factors influence unethical behaviors (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000). One of the major findings of the study was a significant discrepancy between soft and hard sciences, with respect to incidences of academic misconduct. The study found that students enrolled in soft science majors (i.e., sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy, English, and anthropology) cheated and plagiarized on their schoolwork much less than did those who majored in hard sciences (i.e., chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, geology, applied mathematics, and statistics). The noteworthy disparities between these classifications of disciplines predominantly stemmed from substantial differences in the academic rigor and demand of the majors (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000).
Another noteworthy result was that there was a high percentage of academic misconduct found among business majors, which is considered a social science (Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000). This statistic has been substantiated by subsequent research (Baker, 2012). It can, therefore, be deduced that one’s major does to an extent affect how he or she may both reason and mature morally (Baker, 2012). The study, however, sampled only traditional undergraduates. Research would have to be conducted to ascertain how this relationship would apply to nontraditional students (Roberts, Anderson & Yanish, 2000).

**GPA.** Nearly three decades of empirical research (Hughes & McCabe 2006) concluded that the student’s grade point average is a determinant of academic misconduct. This influencer, while not viewed as the sole educational factor in the burgeoning of such behavior, is nevertheless considered a significant contributor to it among undergraduate students (Butterfield, McCabe & Trevino, 2001, 2004). This was perhaps best noted by McCabe, Trevino, and Bower, who conducted extensive survey research across institutions of tertiary education in Canada and the United States. They concluded that students with low GPA averages tended to more commonly engage in such practices to ensure their “academic survivability.”

Such students, unlike those with high or relatively higher GPA averages, also grapple with the prospect of being placed on academic probation or, in a worst-case scenario, being dismissed from their program or institution for being unable to improve their GPA (McCabe & Trevino, 1993, 1996). Mounting pressures may not only drive them to make such immoral decisions but also can impede their ability to reason
and develop morally. Last, while the researchers surveyed thousands of students, there was no focus on how GPA, in relation to academic dishonesty, may impact nontraditional undergraduate college students.
Chapter 3: Methods

The current study aimed to compare whether the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differed between traditional and nontraditional college students. As such, the goal of the study was accomplished by answering three research questions. The questions: (1) Did moral reasoning differ between traditional and nontraditional students? (2) Did unethical behaviors, pertaining to academic misconduct, vary between traditional and nontraditional students? and (3) Did the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differ between traditional and nontraditional students? These research questions were answered based on the data gathered from college students at a public university located in the southeastern United States.

In this chapter, the background characteristics of the sampled university are provided. The sampling technique utilized and the research design employed in the study are also discussed. Afterward, the instruments used to measure moral reasoning and academic misconduct are expounded upon. Lastly, the statistical analysis utilized to answer each of the research questions is discussed.

Target Population and Sample

The target population of the study was undergraduate college students attending four-year public institutions in the United States. To make a statistical inference on the targeted population, a convenience sampling method was used to obtain the data from a multi-campus, SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Universities) accredited, public university in the Southeast. The ethnic composition of the sample institution was comprised of 61.9% Hispanic, 15% White, 13% Black, 5.1% nonresidential, 4.1%
Asian, 2.2% as having more than one race, and 1% as having a nonidentified ethnicity (Office of Analysis & Information Management). In addition to the ethnic diversity of this university, the geographic background of students is composed of 31 states and 80 countries, although this only accounts for less than 10% of all undergraduates at the school. Most of these students instead come from the home state of the university (Office of Analysis & Information Management). Other demographic data includes a gender ratio of 44.3% male to 55.7% female. In addition to the gender ratio, these students have an age distribution that ranges from 18 to over 35 years old (Office of Analysis & Information Management). Lastly, the sampled university consists of a diversified and heterogeneous student body, which is representative of the characteristics found in college students across the country.

The students from the sample university were both traditional and nontraditional, which make up roughly 47,770 of the institution’s entire student body of approximately 56,112 students at the sampled institution (Office of Analysis & Information Management). The background characteristics of these traditional and nontraditional students include variances between full-time and part-time enrollment; being first-generation college students; and exhibiting various socioeconomic statuses (Office of Analysis & Information Management). Most of these students identify as commuter students, with only a fraction of them being residential students who live on-campus, according to data from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. Some of the drawbacks of the sampling technique used in this design include the possibility of data bias and sampling error. When it comes to some of the design’s
benefits, it’s neither time-consuming nor expensive, in addition to its ease of use, which
does not require that criteria be met beforehand.

**Research Design**

The research design utilized in the study was cross-sectional and correlational,
which served the purpose of gauging the relationship between moral reasoning and
academic misconduct. The data garnered from the design employed was collected by an
online survey-questionnaire, which was emailed to the students who attended the sample
institution. Some of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the survey used in
the research design include the ability to disseminate the survey to many students,
simultaneously and anonymously, which lets participants be forthcoming with their
responses. However, concerns using the survey design include participants’ dismissive
attitudes towards online surveys, in addition to not completing all the items and
answering all the questions whenever they take one.

**Data Collection**

The data used in the study was in the form of students’ responses to an electronic
survey-questionnaire, which was generated by an online survey tool. The conduit through
which the survey-questionnaire was disseminated came from an electronic mailing list in
the form of an undergraduate listserv, which was provided by the institution’s
Department of Undergraduate Education in conjunction with the Offices of the Provost
(Academic Affairs) and University Registrar (Enrollment Services). The online survey-
questionnaire administered at the sampled university included a consent form and a
section that solicited some background and research-related information from the
participants, all of which was germane to the study. The current research required
approval from the researcher’s home institution. However, neither clearance nor IRB approval was required by the appraised school due to the nature of the study, which didn’t require the researcher to directly collect the data on campus. The survey-questionnaire opened on October 2, 2017, and thereafter remained accessible for roughly two months until it closed on December 2, 2017. This was done as an effort to garner a significant response rate from the intended population (see the appendices section for a copy of the purpose of the study/student consent form/verbal script, in addition to a copy of the survey-questionnaire and its three sections containing 80 items). Over the course of the data-collecting period, the researcher sent out three reminders, which were on October 16, November 1, and November 15, so that it would draw the attention of any student who might not have seen it earlier (see appendices section for the URL to view survey). This strategy of sending reminders multiple times has proven to be an effective approach because it serves to expand visibility, thus increasing the odds of participation, instead of sending it out only once and risking the possibility of it quickly being buried under other correspondence.

Variables and Measures

The variables utilized to answer the research questions were 1) traditional versus nontraditional students, 2) moral reasoning, 3) academic misconduct, and 4) controlled variables pertaining to student demographic and educational factors. These variables and their measures are defined below.

Traditional vs. nontraditional students. Traditional versus nontraditional status was gauged by way of student age. As such, traditional students are those who attend college right out of high school and range in age between 18 and 23 years old.
Furthermore, these students are enrolled full-time in school, are not financially independent, are not employed as full-time employees, and or not married or have any children of their own. Nontraditional students tend to not enroll in tertiary education immediately upon graduating from their institutions of secondary education. These students, who are normally no younger than between 24 and 27 years old, tend to hold full-time jobs, are primarily enrolled in coursework as half-time students, tend to be financially independent, and are known to have spouses and children of their own. In the study, traditional students were coded as 0, while nontraditional students were coded as 1.

**Moral reasoning.** Moral reasoning was operationally defined as the cogitating process by which a person ascertains what is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, moral or immoral, and ethical or unethical. It was measured by items included in the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2, Rest et al., 1978, 1999), which is an enhanced version of the original DIT.

The DIT-2 improves upon the original by modernizing the dilemmas and items used in the original; shortening the overall length of the assessment; and improving its overall response reliability (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999). The most notable distinction between the DIT and DIT-2 was that the latter introduced the N2 score or moral judgment score, which is an index not utilized on the original. Such practical improvements heightened its overall validity (Rest et al., 1999).

The Defining Issues Test-2 incorporates three levels of moral progression, which are the personal interest schema, the maintaining norms schema, and the post-conventional schema, as outlined in Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development. A total
of four stories or moral dilemmas from a slightly shorter version of the DIT-2 were utilized to appraise one’s moral reasoning and development. An example question: “Is Mustaq Singh courageous enough to risk getting caught for stealing?” These four hypothetical scenarios consisted of questions that had to be ranked and rated by the respondents. The responses gathered from the four items and their respective questions were analyzed and subsequently computed by indices which were divided into three main categories (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006). These classifications were developmental indices, developmental profile and phase indices, and experimental indices (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006). Out of the three categories, only the developmental indexes were utilized in the study.

The subsequent data became available on separate composite scores corresponding to each category of indices. These scores provided the averages for each of the categories, which in turn determined the levels of moral reasoning and development observed. The items on the rank scale ranged from greatly important to not relevant, while the same items on a rating scale ranged from 1 to 12, with their order determining their degree of importance. The psychometrics for the Defining Issues Test came in the form of seven criteria outlined by the Center for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Validity was noted by way of several indicators utilized to substantiate that the test effectively measures what it was designed to accurately gauge. These markers are differentiation of various age/education groups (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006); longitudinal gains; DIT scores which are significantly related to cognitive capacity measures of moral comprehension (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006); DIT scores which are sensitive to moral education interventions (Rest et al., 1999;
Thoma, 2006); DIT scores which are significantly linked to many pro-social behaviors and to desired professional decision-making (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006); and DIT scores which are significantly linked to political attitudes and political choices (Rest et al., 1999; Thoma, 2006). In addition to validity, its reliability was also found to have been consistently trustworthy, as evidenced by acceptable values observed on both its internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha—upper .70s/low .80s) and test-retest reliability (upper .70s/low .80s).

**Academic misconduct.** Academic misconduct was operationally defined as mendacious behavior in the form of an action which serves to provide an academic advantage to one student over the rest. It was measured based on 17 items extracted from the Academic Integrity Survey (McCabe, 2003), which was composed of a four-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 point, representing “never,” to 4 points, signifying “not relevant.” A sample item: “Copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge.” The composite score is created by averaging responses on 17 items, which ranged from 0 to 4. Each score denoted the extent of involvement in academic misconduct.

According to the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2017), the psychometric analysis of the Academic Integrity Survey revealed that the measures employed to gauge academic misconduct consistently assessed the phenomenon for more than two decades (ICAI, 2017; McCabe, 2003). The reliability of the measures was found to be good, as demonstrated by Cronbach’s alpha (between 0.7 and 0.8), which displayed an acceptable measure of internal consistency (ICAI, 2017; McCabe, 2003).
**Controlled variables.** The controlled variables in the study were student background variables, which included gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, in addition to academic variables, which included academic level, academic major, and grade point average. These variables were operationally delineated as follows. First, gender is a nominal variable that was coded as Female = 0 and Male = 1. Second, socioeconomic status is categorized as lower, middle and upper class. Third, ethnicity is a categorical variable (i.e., African-American, White-American, Asian-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, Middle Eastern, multiethnic, etc.). This variable was dummy coded into three groups. Fourth, academic level is also a categorical variable, i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. This variable was also dummy coded into two groups. Fifth, discipline or academic major is another categorical variable due to the fact it can be categorized by whatever students decides to major in (i.e., political science, history, economics, biology, mathematics, and so forth). This variable was recoded into just two groups, which were soft sciences and hard sciences. Last, GPA is a categorical variable that was dummy coded into two groups.

**Statistical Analysis**

SPSS Version 25 (IBM Corp., 2016) was used to analyze all the data gathered from the survey-questionnaire. This analysis was subsequently utilized to answer the research questions the study focused on.

First, the descriptive statistics observed in the study, which included means and standard deviations, were summarized accordingly. Second, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were used to see whether there were any statistical differences in moral reasoning and academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional
students. Then, a series of correlation analyses were conducted to explore any possible relationships among any of the variables. Lastly, two sets of hierarchical multiple regression models were performed: (1) Moral reasoning was predicted by factors in two blocks (block 1 with traditional vs. nontraditional students, and block 2 with all individual and academic variables), and (2) academic misconduct was predicted by factors in four blocks (block 1 with traditional vs. nontraditional students, block 2 with all individual and academic variables, block 3 with moral reasoning, and block 4 with moral reasoning and its interaction with traditional vs. nontraditional students). In each hierarchical multiple regression, the significance of unique variables included in each block was tested based on the significance of the R-squared change. Finally, the significance of the final model and unique contribution of each variable was tested.

**Power Analysis**

Two priori power analyses were conducted using G-Power (Faul & Kiel, 2014) to estimate the required sample size needed to detect a statistically significant difference in variables between the two groups (independent means) from the first two research questions. In both cases, parameters of alpha, power, and the allocation ratio were 0.05, 0.80, and 0.07, respectively. With respect to the approximate sample sizes for each group, they were approximated at 241 for the groups labeled number one, and at 189 for the groups labeled number two. In aggregate, the sample size required for each question came out to 241.

A third priori power analysis was used to identify the required sample size that would lead to the significance of a regression coefficient of interest. In this case, the values inserted for the parameters of alpha and power were 0.05 and 0.80. These values
resulted in the effect size and sample size for the question being 0.25 and 81. Therefore, 313 students (241+72 adjusted for 30% of missing data) were targeted to be sampled for the current study.
Chapter 4: Results

The findings presented in this chapter sought to answer the following research questions: (1) Does moral reasoning differ between traditional and nontraditional students? (2) Do unethical behaviors, pertaining to academic misconduct, vary between traditional and nontraditional students? and (3) Does the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differ between traditional and nontraditional students? The goal of the current study was first achieved by summarizing the descriptive statistics for all the variables examined in the study. Then, a series of independent samples t-tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were performed to compare moral reasoning and academic misconduct among students with different individual and academic backgrounds. Lastly, a series of correlations and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore any possible associations among variables, in addition to looking for any predictors that explain the differential effect of moral reasoning on academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students.

Sample Description

Out of the 298 participants surveyed, 161 (54.4%) respondents identified as traditional students, while 137 (46.0%) identified as nontraditional students. The age range of all those surveyed breaks down as follows: Eighty (26.8%) respondents identified as being between 18 and 20 years of age; 78 (26.2%) participants identified as being between 21 and 23 years of age; 66 (22.1%) students identified as being between 24 and 26 years of age; 49 respondents (16.4%) identified as being between 27 and 29 years of age; and, lastly, 25 (8.4%) participants identified as being 30 years of age or older.
Of the 298 respondents, 93 (31.2%) identified as male, while 205 (68.8%) identified as female.

The ethnic breakdown of the sample was as follows: One hundred fifty-nine (53.4%) students identified as Hispanic/Latino/a; 90 (30.2%) students identified as White/Caucasian; 26 (8.7%) students identified as Black/African-American; 12 (4.0%) students identified as Asian-American; and 11 (3.7%) students identified as “other.” The first-generation status of those in the sample was as follows: One hundred ninety-eight (64.4%) students identified as being first generation, while 100 (33.6%) other students did not identify as first generation. The socioeconomic status of the participants was as follows: One hundred ninety-four (65.1%) students identified as being of lower-class status; 99 (32.2%) students identified as being of middle-class status; and just 5 (1.7%) students identified as being of upper-class status.

The academic levels found in the sample were as follows: Forty-four (13.8%) students identified as freshmen; 84 (28.2%) students identified as sophomores; 69 (23.2%) students identified as juniors; and 104 (34.9%) students identified as seniors. The academic majors reported in the sample were coded and then divided into two categories, which were soft sciences and hard sciences. Out of 298 reported majors, 213 (71.5%) were categorized as soft sciences, while 86 (28.5%) were labeled as hard sciences. The GPA range of all the respondents in the sample was as follows: One hundred ninety-eight (66.4%) students reported having a GPA between 4.0 and 3.1; 91 (30.5%) students reported a GPA between 3.0 and 2.1; 6 (2.0%) students reported a GPA between a 2.0 and a 1.1; and just 3 (1.0%) students reported a GPA below 1.0.
Descriptive Statistics for Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct

This section provides the descriptive statistics that summarize the participants’ responses on each of the items that measure moral reasoning and academic misconduct.

Moral reasoning. Three developmental indices were devised and computed to appraise three different levels of moral reasoning (i.e., the personal interest schema, the maintaining norms schema, and the postconventional schema). The mean for each schema were 29.73 ($SD = 7.25$), 27.43 ($SD = 8.40$), and 10.23 ($SD = 7.90$), respectively. Beyond the developmental indexes, a moral judgment score and a composite score were also calculated. The mean for the moral judgment score (N2 score) was 17.88 ($SD = 6.44$, $Min = 4.59$, $Max = 44.80$, $n = 298$), and the composite score was 22.46 ($SD = 2.12$, $Min = 16.67$, $Max = 44.80$, $n = 298$).

Academic misconduct. The means of the items used to evaluate academic misconduct ranged from 1.29 to 1.50, while the standard deviations ranged from 0.88 to 0.60. The item with the highest mean reported a value of 1.79, while the item with the lowest mean came in at 1.31. The item with the lowest standard deviation came in at 0.60, while the item with the highest standard deviation registered at 1.00. Finally, the composite score computed from the survey reported a mean of 1.50 and a standard deviation of 0.60.

Differences in Moral Reasoning by Demographic and Educational Variables

This section discusses and summarizes the statistical results comparing scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score among students on demographic and educational background variables.
**Mean differences by traditional vs. nontraditional students.** First, a series of independent samples t-tests were performed to ascertain whether there existed any variations between traditional vs. nontraditional students on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score. Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for all variables. The results from the independent samples t-tests, which are found in Table 4, showed that no significant differences were found between traditional and nontraditional students on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score.

**Mean differences by gender.** A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to explore whether there existed any differences in gender by scores found on three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for all variables. The results from the independent samples t-tests, which are viewable in Table 5, revealed no statistically significant differences by gender on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score.

**Mean differences by first-generation status.** A series of independent samples t-tests were performed to determine whether differences existed between first-generation and non-first-generation status on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning
composite score. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for all. The findings from the independent samples t-tests, which are viewable in Table 6, revealed that a statistically significant mean difference between the two groups was found on moral judgment score ($t(296) = -2.42, p = .02$), suggesting that non-first-generation students ($M = 19.09, SD = 6.22, n = 100$) showed a significantly higher mean moral judgment score than first-generation students ($M = 17.20, SD = 6.47, n = 198$).

**Mean differences by academic major.** A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether any differences between two categories of academic major exist on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for all. The findings from the independent samples t-tests, which are viewable in Table 7, revealed that no statistically significant mean difference was found on any of variables between students majoring in soft sciences and those majoring in hard sciences.

**Mean differences by age range.** A series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to explore whether mean differences on scores found on three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score by age. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all variables. The results from the ANOVAs, which are found in Table 8, showed
that no statistically significant mean differences on any of variables were found by the five age ranges.

**Mean differences by academic level.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first performed to determine whether any mean differences existed on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score by four academic levels. Findings from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances indicates that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all the variables in the questionnaire. The results from the ANOVAs, which are found in Table 9, revealed statistically significant mean difference between the four academic levels was found on the maintaining norms schema ($F(3, 294) = 3.89, p = .009$). Post-hoc analysis using Tukey indicates that sophomores ($M = 24.92, SD = 9.12, n = 84$) had a significantly lower mean score on the maintaining norms schema than juniors ($M = 29.13, SD = 7.92, n = 69$) and seniors ($M = 28.28, SD = 7.99, n = 104$).

**Mean differences by ethnicity.** A series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to explore whether mean differences on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score by ethnicity. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all variables. The results from the ANOVAs, which are found in Table 10, showed that no statistically significant mean differences on any of variables were found by ethnicity.
Mean differences by GPA range. A series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to explore whether mean differences on scores found in three distinct levels of moral reasoning, on a score that gauges moral judgment (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score by GPA. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all variables. The results from the ANOVAs, which are found in Table 11, showed that no statistically significant mean differences on any of the variables were found by GPA.

Mean differences by socioeconomic status. A series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to explore whether any mean difference existed in three moral reasoning level scores, on a moral judgment score (N2 score), and on a moral reasoning composite score by socioeconomic status. Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all variables. The results from the ANOVAs, which are found in Table 12, showed that no statistically significant mean differences on any variables were found by socioeconomic status.

Differences in Academic Misconduct by Demographic and Educational Variables

This section discusses and summarizes the statistical findings comparing 17 individual items measuring academic misconduct and a composite score of these 17 items by demographic and educational factors.

Mean differences by traditional vs. nontraditional students. First, a series of independent samples t-tests were performed to ascertain whether there are any mean
differences between the two subpopulations of students on any of the 18 items (including the composite score) found in McCabe’s Academic Integrity Survey.

Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for most of the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behaviors of (1) fabricating or falsifying a bibliography ($F = 10.03, p = .002$); (2) working on an assignment with others (via email or instant messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work ($F = 5.59, p = .02$); (3) in a course requiring computer work, copying another student’s program rather than writing your own ($F = 4.23, p = .04$); (4) fabricating or falsifying lab data ($F = 6.24, p = .01$); (5) using digital technology (such as text messaging) to get unpermitted help from someone during a test or examination ($F = 13.88, p < .05$); and (6) turning in a paper copied, at least in part, from another student’s paper, whether or not the student is currently taking the same course ($F = 4.38, p = .04$). These six items from McCabe’s survey were found to be in violation of the previously stated assumption. As such, degrees of freedom for testing mean differences on these items were adjusted accordingly.

The results from the independent samples t-tests, which are viewable in Table 13, revealed statistically significant mean differences between traditional and nontraditional students. A statistically significant mean difference between traditional and nontraditional students was found on one item. In particular, for using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests ($t(254.85) = -1.99, p = .04$), nontraditional students ($M = 1.40, SD = .82, n = 137$) reported a higher mean on the unethical behavior of using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests than did traditional students ($M = 1.26, SD = .66, n = 161$).
**Mean differences by gender.** A series of independent samples t-tests were first conducted to determine whether any differences existed between genders for any of the 18 items (including the composite score) found in McCabe’s survey. Findings from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for most of the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behaviors of (1) getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken a test \( (F = 6.93, p = .009) \); (2) in a course requiring computer work, copying another student's program rather than writing your own \( (F = 6.01, p = .02) \); (3) helping someone else cheat on a test \( (F = 10.73, p = .001) \); and (4) copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge \( (F = 5.38, p = .02) \). These four items from McCabe’s survey were found to be in violation of the aforesaid assumption. As such, degrees of freedom for testing mean differences on these items were adjusted accordingly. The results from the independent samples t-tests, which are viewable in Table 14, showed that statistically significant mean difference was found on only one item between females and males. In particular, for helping others cheat on tests \( t(205.26) = -2.27, p = .001 \), females \( M = 1.55, SD = .84, n = 205 \) reported a significantly higher mean than males \( M = 1.33, SD = .33, n = 93 \).

**Mean differences by first-generation status.** A series of independent samples t-tests were first performed to ascertain whether mean differences exist among first-generation status for any of the 18 items (including the composite score) in McCabe’s Survey. Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for nearly all of the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behaviors of (1) working on an assignment with others
(in person) when the instructor asked for individual work ($F = 5.56, p = .02$); and (2) for getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken a test ($F = 5.86, p = .02$). These two items from McCabe’s survey were found to be in violation of the previously stated assumption. As such, degrees of freedom for testing mean differences on these items were adjusted accordingly. The findings from the independent samples t-tests, which can be viewed in Table 16, revealed no statistically significant mean difference was found on any of the items by first-generation status.

**Mean differences by academic major.** A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether any mean differences existed between two classifications of academic majors for any of the 18 items (including the composite score) in McCabe’s survey. Findings from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for nearly all the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behaviors of (1) fabricating or falsifying a bibliography ($F = 5.07, p = .03$); and (2) turning in work done by someone else ($F = 4.65, p = .03$). These two items from McCabe’s survey were found to be in violation of the aforesaid assumption. As such, degrees of freedom for testing mean differences on these items were adjusted accordingly. The findings from the independent samples t-tests, which are found in Table 16, showed that no statistically significant mean difference was found on any of items between the two classifications of academic major.

**Mean differences by age range.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)s were first performed to determine whether any mean differences existed by five age ranges for any of the 17 items in McCabe’s survey. Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between
groups was met for all the items in McCabe’s survey. As shown in Table 17, no statistically significant mean difference was found in any of items measuring academic misconduct.

**Mean differences by academic level.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to ascertain whether any differences existed between four academic levels for any of the 17 items in McCabe’s survey. Findings from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behaviors of (1) fabricating or falsifying a bibliography \((F(3, 294) = 5.17, p = .002)\); (2) working on an assignment with others (via email or instant messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work \((F(3, 294) = 5.73, p = .001)\); (3) helping someone else cheat on a test \((F(3, 294) = 4.82, p = .003)\); (4) copying (by hand or in person) another student’s homework \((F(3, 294) = 3.52, p = .02)\); (5) receiving unpermitted help on an assignment \((F(3, 294) = 2.86, p = .04)\); and (6) turning in work done by someone else \((F(3, 294) = 2.89, p = .04)\). These six items from McCabe’s survey were found to be in violation of the aforesaid assumption and thus the alpha of .025 was used to test the significance of null hypothesis posited in ANOVA.

The results from the ANOVAs, which can be viewed in Table 18, denote significant mean differences were found on four items by the four categories of academic level (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior and senior). These mean differences among the four groups were noted on four unethical behaviors associated with McCabe’s survey. These include (1) working on an assignment with others (in person) when the instructor asked for individual work \((F(3, 294) = 3.55, p = .02)\); (2) working on an assignment with
others (via email or instant messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work \( (F(3, 294) = 5.03, p = .002) \); (3) receiving unpermitted help on an assignment \( (F(3, 294) = 3.53, p = .02) \); and (4) copying another student’s homework \( (F(3, 294) = 5.45, p = .001) \).

Post-hoc analyses using Tukey indicate sophomores \( (M = 2.02, SD = 1.02, n = 84) \) reported a significantly higher mean on working on assignments with others in person than freshmen \( (M = 1.48, SD = 0.89, n = 41) \). Second, sophomores \( (M = 2.08, SD = 1.07, n = 84) \) reported a significantly higher mean on working on assignments with others via email or instant messaging than freshmen \( (M = 1.56, SD = 0.97, n = 41) \) and juniors \( (M = 1.52, SD = 0.85, n = 69) \). Third, sophomores \( (M = 1.98, SD = 0.99, n = 84) \) reported a higher mean receiving unpermitted help on an assignment than freshmen \( (M = 1.46, SD = 0.83, n = 41) \). Lastly, sophomores \( (M = 2.05, SD = 1.03, n = 84) \) reported a higher mean on copying (by hand or in person) someone else’s homework than freshmen \( (M = 1.36, SD = 0.82, n = 41) \).

**Mean differences by ethnicity.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to ascertain whether any mean differences existed between five ethnic groups on any of the 17 items in McCabe’s survey. Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances indicate that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for nearly all the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behavior of (1) in a course requiring computer work, copying another student’s program rather than writing your own \( (F(4, 293) = 2.81, p = .03) \); (2) fabricating or falsifying research data \( (F(4, 293) = 3.53, p = .008) \); (3) copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge \( (F(4, 293) = 3.18, p = .01) \); (4)
copying from another student during a test or examination without his or her knowledge \( (F(4, 293) = 5.05, p = .001) \); (5) using digital technology to get unpermitted help from someone during a test or examination \( (F(4, 293) = 2.50, p = .04) \); and (6) turning in a paper copied from another student’s paper, whether or not the student is currently taking the same course \( (F(4, 293) = 6.01, p < .01) \). These six items measuring academic misconduct were found to be in violation of the previously stated assumption and thus an alpha was set to .025 for testing null hypothesis associated with \( F \) statistics for these items.

The results from the ANOVAs, which can be viewed in Table 19, denote no statistically significant mean differences were found on any of the items among the five ethnic groups (i.e. Hispanic/Latino/a, White/Caucasian, Black/African-America, Asian-American, and other).

**Mean differences by GPA range.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first performed to determine whether any mean differences existed by five GPA ranges for any of the 17 items in McCabe’s Survey. Findings from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances denote that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was not met for most of the items found in McCabe’s survey, except for the unethical behavior of (1) working on an assignment with others (in person) when the instructor asked for individual work \( (F(3, 294) = 1.73, p = .16) \); (2) receiving unpermitted help on an assignment \( (F(3, 294) = 1.72, p = .16) \); and (3) copying another student’s homework \( (F(3, 294) = 1.87, p = .13) \). Except for these three items, the abovementioned assumption was violated for all other items and thus an alpha of .025 was used for testing null hypotheses associated with \( F \) statistics for these items.
The results from the ANOVAs, which can be found in Table 20, indicate significant mean differences were found on four items by GPA ranges: (1) fabricating or falsifying research data ($F(3, 294) = 4.18, p = .006$); (2) turning in a paper copied from another student’s paper ($F(3, 294) = 3.55, p = .02$); (3) using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or delay taking an exam ($F(3, 294) = 4.19, p = .006$); and (4) a composite score of academic misconduct ($F(3, 294) = 3.22, p = .02$).

Post-hoc analyses using Tukey indicate that students with the GPA range of 2.0 to 1.1 ($M = 2.16, SD = 1.16, n = 6$) showed higher mean on fabricating or falsifying research data than those with the GPA ranges of 4.0 to 3.1 ($M = 1.24, SD = 0.67, n = 198$). Second, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.95, n = 6$) reported a higher mean on turning in a paper copied from another student’s paper than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1 ($M = 1.23, SD = 0.65, n = 198$). Third, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 ($M = 1.70, SD = 0.98, n = 6$) reported a higher mean on using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or delay taking an exam than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1 ($M = 1.39, SD = 0.70, n = 198$). Lastly, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 ($M = 1.63, SD = 0.74, n = 6$) reported a higher mean on overall academic misconduct than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1 ($M = 1.44, SD = 0.48, n = 198$).

**Mean difference in socioeconomic status.** A series of Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) were first conducted to determine whether any variations existed between three socioeconomic statuses for any of the 17 items in McCabe’s survey. Results from Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances suggests that the assumption of homogeneity of variances between groups was met for all the items in McCabe’s survey, except for the
unethical behavior of (1) fabricating or falsifying a bibliography ($F(2, 295) = 3.35, p = .04$); (2) in a course requiring computer work, copying another student’s program rather than writing your own ($F(2, 295) = 7.20, p = .001$); (3) fabricating or falsifying research data ($F(2, 295) = 4.00, p = .02$); (4) turning in a paper copied from another student’s paper ($F(2, 295) = 7.70, p = .001$); and (5) turning in work done by someone else ($F(2, 295) = 4.59, p = .01$). The abovementioned assumption was violated for these items and thus an alpha of .025 was used for testing null hypotheses associated with $F$ statistics. The results from the ANOVAs, which can be found in Table 21, indicate that no statistically significant mean differences among students from different socioeconomic status was found on any of items.

**Pearson Correlations Among Continuous Variables**

No statistically significant relationships were found among all continuous variables used in the subsequent regression analyses.

**Results from Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Moral Reasoning**

A hierarchical regression model was performed to predict students’ moral reasoning in two different blocks: block 1 with traditional vs. nontraditional students, and block 2 with all individual and academic variables. Table 24 summarizes results from hierarchical multiple regression predicting students’ moral reasoning.

Based on a comparison of the two models ($R^2 = .01, F_{(R2)}(6, 274) = 0.46, p = .84$ for model 1 vs. model 2), the first model was chosen as the final model. Therefore, results only from model 1 are summarized below. The overall model 1 was not found to be statistically significant ($F(1, 280) = 1.23, p = .27$), suggesting that none of the variables were found to be statistically significant. The R-squared value of .004 suggests that
0.4% of total variance in the outcome variable was explained by the predictors included in the model, showing a negligible relationship between outcome and all variables included ($R = .07$). Of all predictors included in model 1, only intercept ($b = 22.34$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(280) = 128.71$, $p < .01$) was found to be statistically significant. The significant intercept of 22.35 suggests that the expected moral reasoning is 22.35 for nontraditional students. However, no statistically significant mean difference was found on moral reasoning between traditional and nontraditional students ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.26$, $t(280) = 1.11$, $p = .27$).

**Results from Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Academic Misconduct**

A hierarchical regression model was performed to predict students’ academic misconduct in three different blocks: block 1 with traditional vs. nontraditional students, block 2 with all individual and academic variables, and block 3 with moral reasoning and its interaction with traditional vs. nontraditional students. Table 25 summarizes results from hierarchical multiple regression predicting students’ academic misconduct.

Based on the comparisons of four models ($R^2 = .02$, $F_{(R2)} (6, 274) = 1.06$, $p = .39$ for model 1 vs. model 2; $R^2 = .01$, $F_{(R2)} (1, 273) = 3.62$, $p = .06$ for model 2 vs. model 3; $R^2 = .004$, $F_{(R2)} (1, 272) = 1.10$, $p = .30$ for model 3 vs. model 4); and a significant slope related to moral reasoning, the last model was chosen as the final model. Therefore, results only from model 4 are summarized below. Of all predictors included in model 4, students’ academic misconduct was significantly predicted by the following variables: intercept ($b = 1.82$, $SE = 0.26$, $t(272) = 7.08$, $p < .01$) and moral reasoning ($b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(272) = -2.10$, $p = .04$). The significant intercept of 1.82 suggests that the expected level of academic misconduct is 1.82 for students in the reference group,
after controlling for all other predictors. Second, the significant slope of -0.05 related to moral reasoning indicates that the overall level of academic misconduct is significantly decreased by 0.05 for every additional increase in moral reasoning, when controlling for all other predictors. However, no difference in the effect of moral reasoning on academic misconduct was found between traditional and nontraditional students ($b = 0.04, SE = 0.04, t(272) = 1.05, p = .30$).
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter begins with a summary of the study, including its purpose, rationale and research questions, followed by a discussion of the findings and the conclusions that can be drawn. It then provides practical implications as well as recommendations for research based on the findings and the study’s limitations.

The Current Study

The changing tide of student demographics and 21st century technology have helped spur an increase in academic misconduct cases at U.S. colleges and universities (Kaufman, 2008), as well as the need to better understand the factors that influence college students in their decisions to engage in such behavior. While research has examined student characteristics and other factors in relation to cheating and plagiarizing, for example, it also has underscored the need to scrutinize how moral reasoning influences students’ decisions to engage in academic dishonesty (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Heneghan, 2012). As such, the purpose of this study was to compare moral reasoning and academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students, in addition to seeing whether the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differed between these two groups of college students. Specifically, the aims of the study were met by controlling for several demographic and educational factors (i.e., age, gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, academic level, academic major, and GPA) known to moderate the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct for these two factions of undergraduates.
From a deficit perspective, research has been extremely limited on academic misconduct among nontraditional college students, and few studies consider how the effect of moral reasoning on academic misconduct may or may not differ between traditional and nontraditional students. As such, this study was important to help understand the impact of college students’ moral development on the decisions they make. Research has indicated that college is where individuals learn how to make better choices and experience the consequences of those choices. Cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty hurt everyone, including the institution whose mission is to produce valuable members of society, the faculty working to create and disseminate knowledge, and the student body and its members who cheat. Left unfettered, the latter breeds a toxic culture of mistrust, injustice, and added stress that does not bode well for the larger society, particularly as it increasingly faces issues of integrity at every level. As noted earlier, the statistics are unsettling: Between 2005 and 2013, almost 70% of U.S. college undergraduates reported engaging in academic misconduct. It remains imperative for research to focus on this phenomenon and better equip higher education stakeholders for the challenge.

This study sought to answer three research questions:

(1) Does moral reasoning differ between traditional and nontraditional students?

(2) Do unethical behaviors, pertaining to academic misconduct, vary between traditional and nontraditional students?

(3) Does the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct differ between traditional and nontraditional students?
Summary of Findings

The study revealed several significant findings that are discussed and then summarized in relation to each of the three research questions.

First research question. A hierarchical multiple regression model with two blocks was used to predict moral reasoning between the two subpopulations of students. This analysis revealed no mean differences in moral reasoning between traditional and nontraditional students, after controlling for demographic and educational background variables. In addition, none of the predictors used in the model significantly predicted the outcome variable. As such, the findings revealed that overall moral reasoning did not appreciably vary between these two subpopulations of college students.

Second research question. A mean difference was observed in one item gauging academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students. This difference was noted on the item that deals with “using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests.” Specifically, nontraditional students reported a higher mean on their propensity to engage in the unethical behavior of using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests. In other words, nontraditional students were found to engage more regularly in this unethical conduct than their traditional counterparts.

Third research question. A hierarchical multiple regression model with four blocks revealed no mean differences in academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students. In addition, the hierarchical multiple regression model showed that moral reasoning was found to be a significant predictor of academic misconduct, regardless of traditional vs. nontraditional students. However, no differences in the effect
of moral reasoning on academic misconduct was observed between traditional and nontraditional students. In short, moral reasoning was discovered to be a substantial contributor of academic misconduct, even though its influence on said misconduct was found to be insignificant between the two subpopulations of undergrads.

Summary. The major findings of the study are as follows. First, certain demographic and educational factors were found to affect moral reasoning and academic misconduct. Secondly, while no statistically significant differences in moral reasoning were observed between traditional and nontraditional students, it was nevertheless found to be a significant predictor of academic misconduct, thereby solidifying the statistical relationship between the two subgroups. Lastly, while moral reasoning was found to be a significant predictor of academic misconduct, its effect on academic misconduct was discovered to not significantly differ between traditional and nontraditional students.

Preliminary Findings Related to Moral Reasoning

Results indicated non-first-generation students’ moral judgment was on a higher level than first-generation students, more in line with the post-conventional stages of moral development as described by Kohlberg (1958, 1989). In addition, sophomores displayed a conventional reasoning that was less developed than that exhibited by juniors and seniors.

Preliminary Findings Related to Academic Misconduct

Female participants demonstrated a greater tendency to help others cheat on tests than males. Sophomores indicated a greater tendency than freshmen to work on assignments with others in person or on email and instant messaging, to receive unpermitted help on assignments, and to copy another’s homework. In addition, students
with lower GPA ranges displayed greater proclivity than those with higher GPAs to fabricate research data, submit a paper copied from another student’s paper, lie to delay a due date or exam, and engage in “overall academic misconduct.”

**Linking Study Findings to Research and Theory**

This section discusses current study findings in terms of their consistencies or inconsistencies with relevant theory and research.

**Moral reasoning.** Study results indicated no significant difference existed in moral reasoning between traditional and nontraditional college student participants. This primary finding aligns with prior research, though it is limited. In investigating differences between levels of moral reasoning for traditional and nontraditional students, McCarthy et al. (2002) found both groups entered college at similar levels, and they posited that age may not be the most influential factor in developing moral reasoning. They argued that the college experience would most likely impact the moral reasoning of both groups. However, in this current study, participants represented all class levels, not just entering (new) students, as in McCarthy et al. (2002).

Preliminary analyses revealed that non-first-generation students reported a significantly higher mean moral judgment score than first-generation students. This result is substantiated by empirical research. For example, MacAri, Maples and D’Andrea (2015) found that nontraditional students scored significantly lower than traditional students on all three tasks of the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment, one of which was designed to measure the development of autonomy, a key aspect of moral reasoning. In fact, it was found that the more nontraditional characteristics ascribed to students, the lower the reported level of development. Other research revealed
that first-generation students, unlike their non-first-generation counterparts, are likely to struggle with academic performance, which may stem from inadequate academic preparation. This subsequently increases their overall susceptibility to making poor decisions and engaging in potential acts of academic dishonesty (Chen & Vowell, 2004; Jean, 2010). It has also been noted that these academic weaknesses primarily stem from a lack of access to invaluable resources that may not be available to these students as they make the daunting transition from high school to college. Without such an indispensable support for them, their odds of persisting and eventually graduating will slowly but steadily decrease.

This finding further contributes to the literature on first-generation college students that involves the four types of capital (social, cultural, academic and economic capital) most commonly known to impact college students, as cited by Arnold and Barret (2015). Arnold and Barrett noted that in the case of first-generation students, their greatest deficiencies lie in economic and especially academic capital, thereby shedding light on why most embark on their college careers so poorly equipped and underprepared to take on the many challenges and vigor of a postsecondary education (Arnold & Barrett, 2015).

The poor academic capital exhibited by many first-generation students stems from their inadequate classroom preparation. This is turn influences how their cognitive development, or lack thereof, informs their moral development. To that end, Perry’s (1967, 1970) Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development contends that the ways in which students comprehend and make meaning of their knowledge is what ultimately shapes their moral development. Perry theorized that one’s cognitive processes of
thinking and reasoning impact moral deportment. As such, he viewed students’
epistemological growth and ethical development as intertwined. Overall, the more
developed the student’s cognition, the more academically up to par and morally
developed he will be.

In addition, another reason first-generation college students might have recorded a
lower score in moral judgment may involve deficiencies in the key vectors of developing
competence and integrity once in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Such gaps in
these dimensions of their psychosocial development would not be nearly as frequent
among second- or third-generation students, due primarily to the various types of capital
to which they are usually exposed prior to embarking on their postsecondary careers.

Preliminary analyses also revealed mean differences in the maintaining norms
schema (the second level of moral reasoning) by academic level. Specifically, the results
revealed that sophomores reported a significantly lower mean score in the maintaining
norms schema than did juniors and seniors. These results are authenticated and supported
by moral development models such as Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian model of moral
development (1999, 2000). In this study, sophomores displayed lower-level conventional
reasoning, which aligns with the third level of moral development found in his second
level of moral reasoning (the maintaining norms schema). Moreover, the finding also
denotes that juniors and seniors were found to have shown higher conventional
reasoning, which would thereby put them on the fourth stage of his maintaining norms
schema.
The findings in the current study about sophomores diverges somewhat from prior findings that instances of academic misconduct, namely cheating and plagiarism, have been reported across all four academic levels, with first- and fourth-year students displaying the highest frequency of these unethical practices (Ledesma, 2011; McCabe & Hughes, 2006; Anderson, Roberts & Yanish, 2000).

**Academic misconduct.** In the current study, while moral reasoning was found to be a significant predictor of academic misconduct, its effect on academic misconduct was discovered to not significantly differ between traditional and nontraditional students. Study results did, however, reveal a difference between traditional and nontraditional students on one unethical behavior: Nontraditional students were more likely to use digital technology to get “unpermitted help” during tests. This also aligns with limited research in this area. In a recent dissertation, Roth (2017) found no significant difference between student enrollment as nontraditional or traditional college undergraduates and self-reported instances of intentional or unintentional plagiarism. He reported that there was little difference in the means between self-reported instances of intentional plagiarism between traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. There was also little difference in the means between self-reported instances of unintentional plagiarism between traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. Unintentional plagiarism occurred 2.55 times as often as intentional plagiarism with traditional undergraduate students and 2.5 times with nontraditional students. The finding of a difference between traditional and nontraditional students on the one unethical behavior measure related to using digital technology to get “unpermitted help” during tests by nontraditional students can be understood and is theoretically supported by Chickering and Reisser’s Seven
Vectors of Psychosocial Development (1993). In committing this type of unprincipled behavior, nontraditional students conspicuously exhibited greater deficiencies in the vectors of developing competence and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

This preliminary analysis also revealed that nontraditional students exhibited lower pre-conventional reasoning than did their traditional counterparts when it came to the perpetration of this unethical behavior. Nontraditional students, in fact, exhibited very limited moral development within the context of Kolhberg’s theory.

Additionally, preliminary analyses revealed a statistically significant mean difference between males and females in “helping others cheat on tests.” Females registered a higher mean difference than did males. This can be explained and even corroborated by Gilligan’s Theory of Moral Development (1993). In her framework, she posits that most women subscribe to a dogma known as ethic of care, which deals with their intrapersonal and interpersonal relations, and explains how these relationships can weigh heavily on the morality of their decisions and actions (1982). This ethic of care not only informs the three levels of morality observed in her framework but can also predispose women to engage in certain behaviors like the one noted above, which could conceivably be ethically compromising, even if the underlying intention is just to help a close friend in need or in dire straits, regardless of the circumstance. As such, the rationalization of such an inclination would be largely displayed in her third level of morality, “the morality of nonviolence,” which comes after the second and last stage of transition in her framework, which is the transition from goodness to truth (Gilligan, 1982, 1993).
The third set of findings pertains to statistically significant mean differences between four academic levels on four unethical behaviors. First, sophomores reported a significantly higher mean on “working on assignments w/ others in person” than freshmen. Secondly, sophomores registered a significantly higher mean on “working on assignments w/ others via email or instant messaging” than freshmen and juniors. Thirdly, sophomores reported a higher mean on “receiving unpermitted help on an assignment” than freshmen. Lastly, sophomores registered a higher mean on “copying (by hand or in person) someone else’s homework” than freshmen. Sophomores consistently reported a higher mean difference across the four previously stated unethical behaviors, when compared to freshmen and juniors. These results are in line with the finding that the mean score of the second level of moral reasoning was significantly lower with sophomores than it was with the other academic levels. The findings also align with a study done by McCabe and Trevino (1997), which found that lower-division undergrads tended to cheat and plagiarize more than their upper-division counterparts. All of this in turn substantiates the findings of their having a greater propensity for indulging in unethical behaviors, given their moral susceptibility to them.

Within the context of empirical research, studies have generally concluded that instances of academic misconduct are prevalent among all four academic levels (McCabe, 2005; Forbus et al., 2011). However, as suggested earlier, these studies fail to explain how moral reasoning differs by academic levels. Nonetheless, existing data has concluded that freshmen and seniors outpace sophomores and juniors when it comes to cases of academic dishonesty (McCabe, 2005; Forbus et al., 2011).
The final set of findings concern statistically significant mean differences between four GPA ranges on four unethical behaviors. First, students with the GPA range of 2.0 to 1.1 showed a higher mean on “fabricating or falsifying research data” than those with the GPA ranges of 4.0 to 3.1. Secondly, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 reported a higher mean on “turning in a paper copied from another student’s paper” than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1. Thirdly, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 registered a higher mean on “using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or delay taking an exam” than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1. Lastly, students with the GPA range of 3.0 to 2.1 reported a higher mean on “overall academic misconduct” than those with the range of 4.0 to 3.1. These results are boosted and authenticated by extensive empirical research conducted by Butterfield, McCabe, Trevino, and Bower (2001, 2004), who concluded that GPA notably contributes to a student’s decision to partake in unethical behaviors related to schoolwork.

All the findings discussed above illustrate how those with lower GPA ranges exhibited higher means in certain unethical behaviors than did those with higher GPA ranges. This further amplifies the crucial role that grade point averages play in this ignominious conduct among college students. As such, with these results aligning with existing research (Hughes & McCabe 2006), its influence on academic dishonesty must remain on the frontlines of future research. Doing so will ensure the further expansion of this base of heuristic data.

**Moral reasoning and academic misconduct.** In the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct, the study found moral reasoning to be a significant predictor of academic misconduct, even though its effect on academic misconduct was
found to not greatly differ between traditional and nontraditional students. As such, this not only cements the relation between the two leading variables of the study but also theoretically and empirically buttresses it. Piaget (1932, 1965) and Kohlberg’s (1958, 1989) theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual framework for moral reasoning and development. At the core of each of their frameworks is that moral reasoning and its subsequent development are advanced by two leading influences, which are one’s cognition, in the case of Kohlberg, and one’s intentionality, in the case of Piaget. These two factors are ultimately propelled by one’s behavior or conduct, which is where the two frameworks meet or intersect. This behavioral aspect is related to a given student’s proclivity to carry out acts of academic misconduct. The extent or degree to which it impacts their moral reasoning can have major ramifications on how they approach academic dishonesty.

Rest’s Neo-Kohlbergian (1999, 2000) approach to moral development stresses the role of content, structure and greater society on one’s moral comportment (greater emphasis on moral relativism), which can then have real implications for the nexus between moral reasoning and academic misconduct. His framework is more inclusive of factors at the macro-level, as opposed to Kohlberg’s theory, which was more micro-oriented. The influence of these external factors on students’ moral deportment invariably affects how they reason morally and approach academic dishonesty. As such, the model’s (Rest et al., 1999) focus on moral behavior, which in turn impacts propensities toward academic misconduct, is congruent and in line with the finding of the research question.
Lastly, the behavioral component that binds moral reasoning to academic misconduct is also strongly bolstered by empirical research (McCabe et al., 2011; Hughes & McCabe, 2006) which emphasizes the importance of the factors—both psychological and psychosocial—that shape and mold conduct, thereby influencing moral reasoning and decision-making related to academic misconduct (Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Wideman, 2008). This solid correlation between the two is not only empirically and theoretically supported but also now statistically backed.

**Implications for Practice**

Within a societal context, the demise of the liberal arts education (i.e., philosophy, humanities, etc.) in favor of embracing a business-oriented model that aligns with corporate America has fostered a culture across American colleges and universities in which technical and professional skills are prioritized over the expansion of intellectual capabilities. Such a departure is in stark contrast to the original aim of higher education, which was to cultivate the thinking and reasoning of its students by way of their academics (i.e., curriculum, courses, and related interactions). Such aims not only aligned with the goals of a liberal arts education but also incorporated a humanistic element into the educational process which appears to be largely absent today. Ultimately, the ramifications of such a deprioritization are that the moral and ethical development of college students is not central to their acquisition of knowledge; this in turn may affect the important development during college of a “moral compass” and decisions on whether to engage in academic misconduct.

As institutions grapple with questions of morality and integrity—even the notion of “American values”—it is imperative that higher education reexamine its core mission
and values and, most importantly, how those values are communicated in daily practice. What kind of campus culture exists—one of accountability or one of apathy? One of inclusiveness and transparency or one that is selective and closed? An institution’s values should mirror the ethical behavior expected of its students as stewards of the academy who are engaged in research, teaching and scholarship.

Research findings indicate that college experiences, curricular and co-curricular alike, influence the development of moral reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005, 2016), while academic misconduct and its proliferation only serve to weaken the learning environment (Robertson, 2008; Thomas, 2015). To that end, colleges and universities should explore how differences in that environment may affect the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional students. For example, while most traditional students are found in conventional classroom settings, taking courses between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays, nontraditional students often take most classes in the evenings and on weekends (NASPA, 2013). In addition, nontraditional students are more likely to enroll in online education (e.g., MOOCs and blended-courses), which has been the most accessible, convenient, and accommodating to them (NASPA, 2013).

Considering these distinctions, approaches and strategies to promote academic integrity must reflect the context in which the attainment of knowledge is taking place. This section discusses these implications in further detail.

**Student affairs.** While all educators must be knowledgeable about the moral development of college students, it is particularly incumbent on student affairs
professionals to promote daily campus activities that support such growth while engaging both traditional and nontraditional students.

**Programming.** Scheduling of programs, workshops, and events must consider nontraditional students, whose days often include work and family responsibilities (Renn & Reason, 2013). Resourcefulness will be required to target nontraditional students in unconventional ways that meet them where they are. For example, the Tunnel of Oppression is an interactive, multimedia experience adapted by some colleges and universities that showcases contemporary injustices and inequities toward marginalized groups in society through exhibitions on campus. Uncensored exposure to the realities of alienated and subjugated people can be a catalyst in students’ moral development, which affords the ability to approach such problems with higher levels of moral reasoning and critical thinking.

**Residence halls.** The function area of Housing & Residence Life can especially benefit from the findings of this study. Nearly three decades of extensive research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005, 2016) concluded that residence halls are ideal environments and settings in which to cultivate the moral reasoning and subsequent development of students. Because of this, it’s incumbent upon colleges and universities that offer on-campus housing to push the myriad of benefits in addition to many invaluable resources that living in a residence hall can offer both traditional and nontraditional undergraduates, even though historically they have primarily catered these opportunities to traditional students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1994).

The prospect of offering on-campus housing opportunities to nontraditional students with spouses and families of their own would cultivate rapport with housing
employees, such as front-desk staff, RAs, hall directors and so forth. Such interactions and discourses would not only instill a sense of community and belonging but also positively impact students’ moral growth, which would in turn discourage participation in unethical approaches to schoolwork. Similarly, traditional students would reap the same benefits of living on campus. In their case, they would have opportunities that would range from peer interactions to living-learning communities, and from opportunities for involvement to partaking in live-in faculty programs (mentorships between residents and faculty members), in which certain faculty members from the institutions would live among them in the residence halls with their own families.

Extensive research from the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I, 2011) has conclusively shown the many holistic benefits of living in such an environment, educational and otherwise.

**Student organizations.** The degree or extent to which a student is involved in on-campus clubs or organizations can impact his or her moral development, as noted by Pascarella & Terenzini (2016). However, involvement in such co-curricular endeavors dramatically differs between traditional and nontraditional students. Extracurricular engagement is significantly higher among traditional students than it is among nontraditional students (Renn & Reason, 2013). Major time constraints among nontraditional students preclude them from being even remotely involved in anything on campus. Student affairs personnel can change this by calling for nontraditional student representation on governing boards or councils that oversee student organizations. That representation would advocate for the creation of clubs and organizations that specifically cater to the needs and wants of nontraditional students. These clubs would be both
resourceful and informational for these students and other adult learners, as they would deal with topics and concerns applicable to this subpopulation of college students. Possible topics would include the importance of academic integrity, the applicability of life-skills and time-management skills, how to deal with procrastination, tips for life-work balance, daycare options for working parents, career-training, mental health awareness, certifications for career advancement, stress management, and so forth. The pragmatic nature of these topics would appeal to nontraditional students.

**Student employment.** The role of employment in the nexus between moral reasoning and academic misconduct can positively impact both traditional and nontraditional students. As such, encouraging part-time employment either on or off campus can help a student develop a work ethic, which could then carry over to curricular pursuits. This can also apply to a nontraditional student who may be unemployed while in school. Moreover, college student personnel need to stress the importance of student employment opportunities to these types of student. Doing so may lead to greater ethical consciousness in the classroom.

**Student conduct.** The findings of the study stress the indispensability of institutional mechanisms to dissuade students from perpetrating acts of academic misconduct. Ensuring that these deterrents are serving their intended purpose is of utmost importance. Otherwise, if discovered to be archaic and/or ineffective, institutional practices may need modifications and certain updates to ensure their continued effectiveness. Furthermore, offices of deans of students or judicial affairs on college campuses need to take a more proactive role in actively fostering cultures of academic
integrity at their institutions, for example, by increasing the visibility of their handbooks on student rights and responsibilities that emphasize and clearly explain codes of conduct to which students are bound. Impressing upon students the potential repercussions of violating an institutional honor code may serve as a deterrent to manifestations of academic dishonesty. Student conduct administrators need to take it upon themselves to combat climates of apathy toward academic misconduct. This can be achieved by putting on workshops and presentations in classrooms and at orientations, and creating institutional pledges on academic integrity that students would be asked to take. These pledges would espouse the ethical values and standards to which a given college or university subscribes as guiding principles for students’ schoolwork.

Colleges and universities need to consider the role of moral development as it relates to the adherence of student honor codes. Research has found that the connection between moral development and honor codes is one in which a student’s level of moral reasoning was found to not only influence his or her understanding of an institutional honor code but also to impact their decision of whether or not to comply with such ethical standards. Goodwin (2007) found that those students who reported the highest level of moral reasoning (postconventional reasoning) valued academic integrity the most, thereby making them the most likely to adhere to such ethical codes. Those who registered the second-to-highest level of moral reasoning (conventional reasoning), stated that their own behavior influenced their values the most, judging the morality of their actions by whatever is deemed as socially acceptable. They viewed honor codes as germane because of their importance to university communities. Finally, those who
reported the lowest level of moral reasoning (preconventional reasoning) considered honor codes to be sets of rules necessary to deter instances of cheating. These students, however, also stated that the “right behavior” can sometimes be dictated by whatever happens to be in the best interest of the student.  

Faculty. The study’s findings underscore the importance of faculty discussing institutional policies and procedures related to academic misconduct in their classrooms. Professors must explain how crucial it is for students to exhibit academic integrity—why it matters to them personally—and to illustrate instances of plagiarism, for example, which research has shown students may often commit unintentionally (Keith-Spiegel & Whitely Jr., 2003; Roth, 2017). Failing to discuss such matters when reviewing the syllabus with students could inadvertently promote a classroom environment that lacks accountability and appears permissive or apathetic.

Faculty also must be ever-mindful of pedagogy, given the quickly shifting nature of college student demography, including the varying learning styles exhibited by today’s students. Doing so will not only support comprehension of the subject but also likely deter cases of academic misconduct, as competence can instill confidence and integrity.

In addition, faculty may consider the role of “educational interventions” in the classroom. Heuristic research conducted by Cunnings, Maddux and Cladianos (2010) found that educational interventions, such as administrating the Defining Issues Test (DIT) of moral judgment development, positively impact the moral reasoning and subsequent development of college students. The DIT has been found to be a reliable and valid measure of the ways adolescents and adults understand moral issues (Thoma & Dong, 2014). As such, faculty may use such interventions in the form of moral dilemmas,
case studies, and discourses on controversial topics and polarizing issues, all of which would be within the context of the course subject. Engagement in such activities designed to advance the moral reasoning of college students can help showcase moral leadership in the classroom, where so much growing and learning takes place.

Faculty should also review the design of their courses. Lang (2013) has found that courses that feature unrealistic performance expectations may provide students the incentive to cheat or plagiarize. Other such incentives include courses that rely solely on multiple-choice tests for assessment, and those known for arbitrary and capricious grading criteria (Lang, 2013). Restructuring such problematic learning environments to make them more effective can benefit everyone in the classroom.

**Institutions.** Institutional policies related to academic misconduct must inform practice in every respect. Doing so provides uniformity in how cases of academic dishonesty are arbitrated by colleges and universities. As such, development and implementation of said policies must align with the practices carried out by both administrators and faculty (Bricault, 2007). This in turn ensures that all institutional proceedings concerning unethical behaviors are consistent across the board. Moreover, matters involving the prevention, detection and sanctioning of cases of academic misconduct must be handled with transparency and without the omission of anything that could disadvantage the accused student (Bricault, 2007). Lastly, issues pertaining to due process and equal protection within the context of postsecondary education must be prioritized and never overlooked when it comes to a charged student (Bricault, 2007).

**Higher education policymakers.** An implication of the study for state policymakers is the need to add a provision to the lower-division curriculum (UCC) at
state colleges and universities that would mandate all students, traditional and nontraditional alike, to take an introduction to ethics course within their first two years of coursework. Also useful would be instituting a directive to require state universities to offer and expand continuing education programs, services and opportunities (i.e., the credentialing of knowledge and life skills) to better serve the needs and wants of nontraditional populations. In addition, state legislatures could consider having schools adopt learning outcomes that would address a student’s expected moral development by the time he or she graduates.

**Traditional and nontraditional students.** The implications of the study for traditional and nontraditional students stress the salience of their moral development within the context of academic misconduct. These undergraduates need to take it upon themselves to subscribe to an ethical blueprint that guides their scholarly pursuits. Doing so will ensure they prioritize the importance of academic integrity. These students also need to make concerted and deliberate efforts to seek out opportunities, services, programs and resources on campus that will cultivate their moral development. Forging relationships with others within the collegiate context would also aid in said development. Moreover, while their needs and wants may be different due to sociodemographic factors, traditional and nontraditional students alike can nevertheless greatly benefit from higher level moral reasoning while they pursue higher education.

In the specific case of nontraditional students, institutions need to be deliberate about providing support structures for those who are not only first-generation and of low SES but are also known to be veterans, working adults, immigrants, and returning
students. Tailoring such efforts to target their academic struggles and deficiencies would go far in helping them avoid the temptation to carry out acts of academic dishonesty.

Limitations of the Study

This section discusses the limitations of the study, which include social desirability bias, speeding, gender bias, and the instruments used in the study.

The first limitation, social desirability bias, was likely the most prevalent on the responses registered in McCabe’s Academic Integrity Survey, which was the instrument used to measure the participants’ academic misconduct. Given the nature of what this assessment asked respondents to disclose, it is highly likely that response bias played a role in many of their answers to make sure their responses were viewed positively by others who took the assessment. In addition, social desirability bias also leads respondents to select choices that align with mainstream answers instead of choices that would predictably garner fewer responses. Lastly, this type of response bias likely led to some respondents overly reporting unethical behaviors while others underreported their unethical behaviors.

Another limitation likely observed in this study was speeding, given the number of items and overall length of the survey-questionnaire disseminated to students. Speeding is when respondents answer items without judiciously reading what the item stated, asked for, or required of the respondent. The frequency of this practice in survey research can be decreased by both condensing the length of survey-questionnaires and by limiting the number of items that need to be either ranked or rated.
A third limitation deals with gender-bias among the answers garnered from the survey-questionnaire. The gender distribution of the sample used in the study was significantly skewed toward female respondents (68% to 31%). Because of this disproportionality, the data in the study primarily reflects the answers provided by female respondents. Nevertheless, there is an appreciable representation of male participants in the data as well.

The final limitations involve the two tools used to gauge moral reasoning and academic misconduct. In the case of the DIT-2, a limitation lies in how the items found in its five moral dilemmas were designed and crafted to tug at certain political attitudes and inclinations more so than others, thereby not allowing the measure to be fully impartial and objective. Such political undertones can influence respondents’ answers to certain items. When it comes to McCabe’s Academic Integrity Survey, a limitation is found in its questions, which are outdated. Such archaic items need to reflect modern-day manifestations of academic misconduct. As such, appropriate updates are warranted.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research related to this topic should explore other variables, such as personal, social, contextual, situational and institutional factors, to assess their impact on the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct among traditional and nontraditional students. Doing so would add to the body of knowledge found in this study. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that simultaneously follow a group of traditional students and a group of nontraditional students over the span of their undergraduate careers would be a great way to investigate how the relationship between their moral
reasoning and academic misconduct evolves from the time they begin college to the time they graduate. This would be achieved by appraising moral reasoning and academic misconduct at the start of the freshman or first year, then again at the end of their senior or last year.

In addition, future research should consider why moral reasoning and academic misconduct were found to not significantly differ between traditional and nontraditional students. Specifically, it should examine the role of social and cultural capital as they relate to the lack of notable distinctions in moral reasoning and academic misconduct between traditional and nontraditional students. It should also explore whether any dissimilarities in social or cultural capital influence the relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct in these two subpopulations of college students.

Other studies should consider utilizing the original Defining Issues Test (DIT-1), which features different hypotheticals or moral dilemmas to gauge moral reasoning. This version of the DIT includes Kohlberg’s well-regarded “Heinz Dilemma,” which was derived from his theory of moral development. Finally, future studies should also consider using the three-story model of the DIT-1, which would not be nearly as lengthy for participants. This combination of just three stories would serve as an abridgement of the original, five-story model.

Finally, future studies should also streamline the way in which they garner demographic and educational data from both types of students. Utilizing a lesser number of categorical variables would make the survey responses more manageable and easier to analyze in aggregate.
Conclusion

This study highlighted academic dishonesty in considering differences between traditional and nontraditional students in the effect of moral reasoning on their behaviors. This effort merits continued exploration, as cheating and plagiarism have become endemic to colleges and universities.

The relationship between moral reasoning and academic misconduct, coupled with the ever-changing demography of college students, calls for institutions to not only review their mission and vision statements but also recommit to their core values. These values should align with or complement the six provided by the International Center for Academic Integrity’s definition of what constitutes academic integrity: Trust, Fairness, Respect, Responsibility and Courage (ICAI, 2018). Espousing and instilling such ideals in students will guide their scholarly pursuits and persist beyond college, affording them the opportunity to become well-functioning citizens of a democratic society.
References


Table 1.

Frequency of Sample Responses

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<tr>
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*Note. n = 298*
Table 2.

*Descriptive Statistics for Academic Misconduct*

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<td>.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working on assignments w/ others (in person)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.95</td>
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<td>Working on assignments w/ others (via email or instant messaging)</td>
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<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting test questions or answers from others</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
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</tr>
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<td>.89</td>
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<td>.81</td>
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*Note. n = 298*
Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics for Moral Reasoning*

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<th>SD</th>
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Table 4.

*Independent Samples t-test on Moral Reasoning between Traditional vs. Nontraditional Students*

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<th>p</th>
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<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
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*Note. * p < .05
Table 5.

*Independent Samples t-test on Moral Reasoning between Male vs. Female*

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<td>n</td>
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<td>10.23</td>
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Table 6.

Independent Samples t-test on Moral Reasoning between First-generation and Non-first-generation Students

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Note. * p < .05
Table 7.

*Independent Samples t-test on Moral Reasoning by Academic Majors*

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Table 8.

ANOVA Comparing Moral Reasoning by Age

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<td>8.71</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>7.74</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<td>9.2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>8.04</td>
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<td>8.45</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>6.38</td>
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<td>18.58</td>
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<td>17</td>
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Note. * p < .05
Table 9.

ANOVA Comparing Moral Reasoning by Academic Level

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
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<th>Junior</th>
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<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>8.90</td>
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<td>29.13</td>
<td>7.92</td>
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<td>11.19</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>7.38</td>
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<td>18.25</td>
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<td>17.54</td>
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*Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$
Table 10.

ANOVA Comparing Moral Reasoning by Ethnicity

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<td>27.95</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>28.30</td>
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Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01
Table 11.

ANOVA Comparing Moral Reasoning by GPA

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<td>.66</td>
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<td>17.40</td>
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Table 12.

ANOVA Comparing Moral Reasoning by Socioeconomic Status

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<td>SD</td>
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<td>df2</td>
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<td>29.53</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>31.60</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>295</td>
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<td>10.64</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>8.17</td>
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<td>295</td>
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<td>18.01</td>
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<td>3.87</td>
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<td>295</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2.16</td>
<td>22.61</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>21.60</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>.70</td>
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Table 13.

*Independent Samples t-test on Misconduct between Traditional vs. Nontraditional Students*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Nontraditional</th>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
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<td>161</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on assignments w/ others (in person)</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on assignments w/ others (via email or instant messaging)</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting test questions or answers from others</td>
<td>161</td>
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<td>.88</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.62</td>
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<td>161</td>
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<td>.95</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others cheat on tests</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fabricating/falsifying lab data</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricating/falsifying research data</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copying from others with their consent</td>
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<td>.80</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.43</td>
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<td>1.31</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving unauthorized assistance on schoolwork.</td>
<td>161</td>
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<td>.94</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.95</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.67</td>
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<td>161</td>
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<td>.71</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using false/forged excuses to obtain extensions/delays on due dates for exams</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning in work done by someone else</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.58</td>
<td>137</td>
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</table>

*Note.* *p* < .05; **p** < .01;
### Table 14. 

*Independent Samples t-Test on Misconduct by Gender*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fabricating/falsifying bibliography</td>
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<td>.96 205</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.84 296</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on assignments w/o others (in person)</td>
<td>93 1.79</td>
<td>.98 205</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.94 296</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on assignments w/o others (via email or instant messaging)</td>
<td>93 1.81</td>
<td>1.03 205</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.99 296</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting test questions or answers from others</td>
<td>93 1.53</td>
<td>.81 205</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>.92 200</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copying another student's program in a course requiring computer work</td>
<td>93 1.37</td>
<td>.90 205</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.04 203</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others cheat on tests</td>
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<td>.72 205</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>.84 205</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricating/falsifying lab data</td>
<td>93 1.36</td>
<td>.83 205</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.90 296</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricating/falsifying research data</td>
<td>93 1.34</td>
<td>.80 205</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.77 296</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copying from others with their consent</td>
<td>93 1.34</td>
<td>.75 205</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>.84 197</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copying from others without their consent</td>
<td>93 1.23</td>
<td>.68 205</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.75 296</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using digital technology to get unpermitted help from others during tests</td>
<td>93 1.31</td>
<td>.73 205</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.75 296</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving unauthorized assistance on schoolwork.</td>
<td>93 1.64</td>
<td>.92 205</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>.94 296</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
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<td>Copying (by hand or in person) someone else’s homework</td>
<td>93 1.68</td>
<td>.97 205</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.95 296</td>
<td>.40</td>
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<td>Turning in a paper copied from someone else</td>
<td>93 1.31</td>
<td>.76 205</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.79 296</td>
<td>.80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using false/forged excuses to obtain extensions/delays on due dates for exams</td>
<td>93 1.48</td>
<td>.80 205</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.83 296</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning in work done by someone else</td>
<td>93 1.27</td>
<td>.74 205</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.79 296</td>
<td>.59</td>
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<tr>
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<td>93 1.37</td>
<td>.77 205</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>.91 207</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.53</td>
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Table 15.

*Independent Samples t-Test on Misconduct by First-generation Status*

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<th>Non-first-generation</th>
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<td>296</td>
<td>.96</td>
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<td>100 1.95 .99</td>
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<td>186.39</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
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<td>Working on assignments w/ others (via email or instant messaging)</td>
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<td>100 1.87 1.01</td>
<td>-0.87</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>198 1.62 .86</td>
<td>100 1.76 .95</td>
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<td>181.92</td>
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<td>198 1.54 1.03</td>
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<td>296</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others cheat on tests</td>
<td>198 1.47 .80</td>
<td>100 1.49 .84</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
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<td>.92</td>
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<td>198 1.48 .90</td>
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<td>0.93</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fabricating/falsifying research data</td>
<td>198 1.35 .81</td>
<td>100 1.28 .71</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>.44</td>
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<td>Copying from others with their consent</td>
<td>198 1.41 .81</td>
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<td>-0.75</td>
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<td>.45</td>
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<td>.84</td>
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<td>100 1.34 .76</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>296</td>
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<td>296</td>
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Independent Samples t-Test on Misconduct by Academic Major

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<td>SD</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
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*ANOVA Comparing Mean on Misconduct by Age*

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*Note.* Each question can be found in Appendix C.
### Table 18.

**ANOVA Comparing Mean on Misconduct by Academic Level**

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*Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Each question can be found in Appendix C.*
Table 19.

ANOVA Comparing Mean on Misconduct by Ethnicity

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Note. * p < .05. Each question can be found in Appendix C.
Table 20.

ANOVA Comparing Mean on Misconduct by Grade Point Average

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Note. *p < .05; **p < .01. Each question can be found in Appendix C.
Table 21.

*ANOVA* Comparing Mean on Misconduct by Socioeconomic Status

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Note. *p < .05. Each question can be found in Appendix C.
Table 22.

Hierarchical Regression Modeling Predicting Moral Reasoning

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- $R^2$ 0.01
- $F(R^2)$ 0.46
- $df_1$ 6
- $df_2$ 274

$R$ 0.004 0.014
$R$ 0.07 0.12
$F$ 1.23 0.57
$df_1$ 1 7
$df_2$ 280 274

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 
Table 23.

*Results from Hierarchical Regression Model on Academic Misconduct*

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*R*<sup>2</sup> | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.004 |

*F*(R<sup>2</sup>) | 1.06 | 3.62 | 1.10 |

df<sub>1</sub> | 6 | 1 | 1 |

df<sub>2</sub> | 274 | 273 | 271 |

*R*<sup>2</sup> | 0.001 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.04 |

*F* | 0.16 | 0.94 | 1.28 | 1.26 |

df<sub>1</sub> | 1 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

df<sub>2</sub> | 280 | 274 | 273 | 272 |

*Note.* *p* < .05. **p* < .01.
Appendix A: Verbal Consent Script/Form

Hi, my name is Janiel Francisco Vargas and am conducting a research study on the relationship between the moral reasoning and academic misconduct of traditional & nontraditional students. We received your name from an undergraduate student listserv, provided to us by Florida International University’s Department of Undergraduate Education, in conjunction with the Offices of the Provost and University Registrar.

You will be asked to complete an online survey-questionnaire. The questions will deal with the topics of moral reasoning and academic misconduct. The questions themselves will consist of both open and closed-ended questions, in addition to matrix questions, in the form of ranking and rating scales. It will take about 30-40 minutes to complete.

We do not foresee you will have any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences associated with the study. You will not personally benefit from being in this research study and no compensation will be provided.

The data gathered from you will be safely stored in an online survey tool for about 3 years following the completion of the study. During that time, however, only the researcher who conducted the study, in addition to authorized personnel from the University of Miami will have access to the data.

All your answers will be coded by a special identifying number rather than your name. All the papers pertaining to the study will be kept in a locked file cabinet, and all electronic data will be stored in computer files. Only people who are directly involved with the project will have access to those records. When the project is finished and results are reported, no individual will be identified in any way.

Your participation is voluntary. You can decline to participate, and you can stop your participation at any time, if you wish to do so, without any negative consequences to you.

By you answering the survey/interview questions, you consent to participate in this research project. Do you have any questions pertaining to this? If not, you may proceed to begin taking the survey-questionnaire.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Soyeon Ahn at (305) 284-5389. Dr. Ahn serves as Associate Dean for Research at UM’s School of Education and Human Development. She also serves as the Director of the Research, Measurement, and Evaluation (RME) Program.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the University of Miami, Human Subject Research Office at (305) 243-3195.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Preview/?sm=vnItxY_2FNyfcat76IRtTt_2BnK_2BYMIDcCCnX_2BMcJSpmBqa7f9mXGSrzyK0vp0ZLDBzm
Appendix B: Demographic and Educational Data

1. Do you identify as a traditional or nontraditional student?

Traditional Student (18-23)
Nontraditional Student (24 and above)

2. Which age range do you fall under?

18 to 20
21 to 23
24 to 26
27 to 29
30+

3. What’s your gender?

Male
Female

4. Which socioeconomic status do you identify with?

Lower-class status
Middle-class status
Upper-class status

5. What’s your major?

6. What’s your GPA range?

Between 4.0 and 3.1
Between 3.0 and 2.1
Between 2.0 and 1.1
Below 1.0

7. Do you identify as a first-generation student? (i.e., the first in your family to attend college)

First-Generation
Not First-Generation

8. What's your ethnicity? (e.g., Hispanic-American, African-American, Caucasian, Native-American, Asian-American, etc.)
Appendix C: Measuring Academic Misconduct (i.e., unethical behaviors)

Please answer the following items:

1. Fabricating or falsifying a bibliography

2. Working on an assignment with others (in person) when the instructor asked for individual work.

3. Working on an assignment with others (via email or Instant Messaging) when the instructor asked for individual work.

4. Getting questions or answers from someone who has already taken a test.

5. In a course requiring computer work, copying another student's program rather than writing your own.

6. Helping someone else cheat on a test.

7. Fabricating or falsifying lab data.

8. Fabricating or falsifying research data.

9. Copying from another student during a test with his or her knowledge.

10. Copying from another student during a test or examination without his or her knowledge.

11. Using digital technology (such as text messaging) to get unpermitted help from someone during a test or examination.

12. Receiving unpermitted help on an assignment.

13. Copying (by hand or in person) another student's homework.

14. Copying (using digital means such as Instant Messaging or email) another student's homework.

15. Turning in a paper from a "paper mill" (a paper written and previously submitted by another student) and claiming it as your own work.

16. Turning in a paper copied, at least in part, from another student's paper, whether or not the student is currently taking the same course.

17. Using a false or forged excuse to obtain an extension on a due date or delay taking an exam.
18. Turning in work done by someone else.

19. Cheating on a test in any other way.
Appendix D: Gauging Moral Reasoning & Development

First Dilemma - Famine:

The small village in northern India has experienced shortages of food before, but this year's famine is worse than ever. Some families are even trying to feed themselves by making soup from tree bark. Mustaq Singh's family is near starvation. He has heard that a rich man in his village has supplies of food stored away and is hoarding food while its price goes higher so that he can sell the food later at a huge profit. Mustaq is desperate and thinks about stealing some food from the rich man's warehouse. The small amount of food that he needs for his family probably wouldn't even be missed.

What should Mustaq Singh do? Do you favor the action of taking food?

Shouldn't take the food
Can’t decide
Should not take the food

Rate the following items in terms of importance (You're not answering the questions; you're just ranking their importance)

1. Is Mustaq Singh courageous enough to risk getting caught for stealing?
2. Isn't it only natural for a loving father to care so much for his family that he would steal?
3. Shouldn't the community's laws be upheld?
4. Does Mustaq Singh know a good recipe for preparing soup from tree bark?
5. Does the rich man have any legal right to store food when other people are starving?
6. Is the motive of Mustaq Singh to steal for himself or to steal for his family?
7. What values are going to be the basis for social cooperation?
8. Is the epitome of eating reconcilable with the culpability of stealing?
9. Does the rich man deserve to be robbed for being so greedy?
10. Isn't private property an institution to enable the rich to exploit the poor?
11. Would stealing bring about more total good for everybody concerned, or wouldn't it?
12. Are laws getting in the way of the most basic claim of any member of a society?

Consider the 12 issues above and rank which issues are the most important.

Most important item
Second most important
Third most important
Fourth most important
Second Dilemma - Reporter

Molly Dayton has been a news reporter for the Gazette newspaper for over a decade. Almost by accident, she learned that one of the candidates for Lieutenant Governor for her state, Grover Thompson, had been arrested for shop-lifting 20 years earlier. Reporter Dayton found out that early in his life, Candidate Thompson had undergone a confused period and done things he later regretted, actions which would be very out-of-character now. His shoplifting had been a minor offense and charges had been dropped by the department store. Thompson has not only straightened himself out since then, but built a distinguished record in helping many people and in leading constructive community projects. Now, Reporter Dayton regards Thompson as the best candidate in the field and likely to go on to important leadership positions in the state. Reporter Dayton wonders whether she should write the story about Thompson's earlier troubles because in the upcoming close and heated election, she fears that such a news story could wreck Thompson's chance to win.

Do you favor the action of reporting the story?

Should report the story  
Can't decide  
Should not report the story

Rate the following issues in terms of importance

1. Doesn't the public have a right to know all the facts about all the candidates for office?  
2. Would publishing the story help Reporter Dayton's reputation for investigative reporting?  
3. If Dayton doesn't publish the story wouldn't another reporter get the story anyway and get the credit for investigative reporting?  
4. Since voting is such a joke anyway, does it make any difference what reporter Dayton does?  
5. Hasn't Thompson shown in the past 20 years that he is a better person than his earlier days as a shop-lifter?  
6. What would best service society?  
7. If the story is true, how can it be wrong to report it?  
8. How could reporter Dayton be so cruel and heartless as to report the damaging story about candidate Thompson?  
9. Does the right of "habeas corpus" apply in this case?  
10. Would the election process be more fair with or without reporting the story?  
11. Should reporter Dayton treat all candidates for office in the same way by reporting everything she learns about them, good and bad?  
12. Isn't it a reporter's duty to report all the news regardless of the circumstances?

Consider the 12 issues you rated above and rank which issues are the most important.

First most important item  
Second most important  
Third most important  
Fourth most important
Third Dilemma - School Board

Mr. Grant has been elected to the School Board District 190 and was chosen to be Chairman. The district is bitterly divided over the closing of one of the high schools. One of the high schools must be closed for financial reasons, but there is no agreement over which school to close. During his election to the School Board, Mr. Grant had proposed a series of "Open Meetings" in which members of the community could voice their opinions. He hoped that dialogue would make the community realize the necessity of closing one high school. Also, he hoped that through open discussions, the difficulty of the decision would be appreciated, and that the community would ultimately support the school board decision. The first Open Meeting was a disaster. Passionate speeches dominated the microphones and threatened violence. The meeting barely closed without fist-fights. Later in the week, school board members received threatening phone calls. Mr. Grant wonders if he ought to call off the next Open Meeting.

Do you favor calling off the next Open Meeting?

Should call off the next open meeting
Can't decide
Should have the next open meeting

Rate the following issues in terms of importance.

1. Is Mr. Grant required by law to have Open Meetings on major school board decisions?
2. Would Mr. Grant be breaking his election campaign promises to the community by discontinuing the Open Meetings?
3. Would the community be even angrier with Mr. Grant if he stopped the Open Meetings?
4. Would the change in plans prevent scientific assessment?
5. If the school board is threatened, does the chairman have the legal authority to protect the Board by making decisions in closed meetings?
6. Would the community regard Mr. Grant as a coward if he stopped the open meetings?
7. Does Mr. Grant have another procedure in mind for ensuring that divergent views are heard?
8. Does Mr. Grant have the authority to expel troublemakers from the meetings or prevent them from making long speeches?
9. Are some people deliberately undermining the school board process by playing some sort of power game?
10. What effect would stopping the discussion have on the community's ability to handle controversial issues in the future?
11. Is the trouble coming from only a few hotheads, and is the community in general really fair-minded and democratic?
12. What is the likelihood that a good decision could be made without open discussion from the community?

Consider the 12 issues you rated above and rank which issues are the most important.

Most important item
Second most important
Third most important
Fourth most important
Fourth Dilemma - Cancer

Mrs. Bennett is 62 years old, and in the last phases of colon cancer. She is in terrible pain and asks the doctor to give her more pain-killer medicine. The doctor has given her the maximum safe dose already and is reluctant to increase the dosage because it would probably hasten her death. In a clear and rational mental state, Mrs. Bennett says that she realizes this; but she wants to end her suffering even if it means ending her life. Should the doctor give her an increased dosage?

Do you favor the action of giving more medicine?

Should give Mrs. Bennett an increased dosage to make her die.
Can't decide
Should not give her an increased dosage

Rate the following issues in terms of importance.

1. Isn't the doctor obligated by the same laws as everybody else if giving an overdose would be the same as killing her?
2. Wouldn't society be better off without so many laws about what doctors can and cannot do?
3. If Mrs. Bennett dies, would the doctor be legally responsible for malpractice?
4. Does the family of Mrs. Bennett agree that she should get more painkiller medicine?
5. Is the painkiller medicine an active heliotropic drug?
6. Does the state have the right to force continued existence of those who don't want to live?
7. Is helping to end another's life ever a responsible act of cooperation?
8. Wouldn't the doctor feel guilty from giving Mrs. Bennett so much drug that she died?
9. Would the doctor show more sympathy for Mrs. Bennett by giving the medicine or not?
10. Should only God decide when a person's life should end?
11. Shouldn't society protect everyone against being killed?
12. Where should society draw the line between protecting life and allowing someone to die if the person wants to?

Consider the 12 issues you rated above and rank which issues are the most important.

Most important item
Second most important
Third most important
Fourth most important
**Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter**

**UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI**
Human Subject Research Office (M809)
1400 NW 10th Avenue, Suite 1200A
Miami, FL 33136

**APPROVAL**

August 7, 2017

Soyeon Ahn
5202 University Dr. 33143
305-284
5389
s.ahn@miami.edu

Dear Dr. Soyeon Ahn:

On 8/7/2017, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of Study:</td>
<td>A Comparative Study of the Relationship between the Moral Reasoning and Academic Misconduct of Traditional &amp; Nontraditional Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Soyeon Ahn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>20170405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Online Survey Questionnaire!.docx  
HRP-503 - TEMPLATE PROTOCOL(MinRisk) - Version 4.0! (1).docx |
The IRB approved the study from 8/7/2017 to 8/6/2020 inclusive with a Waiver of Documentation of Consent. Before 8/6/2020 or within 45 days of the approval end date, whichever is earlier, you are to submit a completed Continuing Review to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 8/6/2020 approval of this study expires on that date.

To document consent, use the consent documents that were approved and stamped by the IRB. Go to the Documents tab to download them.

NOTE: Translations of IRB approved study documents, including informed consent documents, into languages other than English must be submitted to HSRO for approval prior to use.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. If your study indicates JHS as a performance site, as the PI, you must ensure that you have been granted permission by the JHS Clinical Research Review Committee (CRRC) prior to commencing study activities at JHS. Such approval is reflected by receipt of a JHS CRRC Approval Letter. If you have any questions regarding this process, please contact the JHS Office of Research at 305-585-7226.

Should you have any questions, please contact: Vivienne Carrasco, Sr. IRB Regulatory Analyst, (phone: 305-243-6713; email: vcarrasco@med.miami.edu)

Sincerely,

Khemraj (Raj) Hirani, MPharm, Ph.D., RPh, CCRP, CIP, RAC, MBA
Associate Vice Provost for Human Subject Research
Appendix F: FIU Memorandum

MEMORANDUM

To: Janiel Francisco Vargas

CC: File

From: Eliza Gomez, M.Ed., Coordinator, Research Integrity

Date: September 1, 2017

Protocol Title: A Comparative Study of the Relationship between the Moral Reasoning & Academic Misconduct of Traditional and Nontraditional Students

The Florida International University Office of Research Integrity has reviewed your study and has determined that FIU IRB review will not be required for the following reasons:

- FIU will not be engaged in conducting the research with human subjects; and
- The research activities will be administered off-campus via an online survey (the external researcher will not physically come to the FIU campus to conduct the research).

For further information on conducting research with FIU participants, please review the following document: [http://research.fiu.edu/documents/irb/documents/ExternalResearchers.pdf](http://research.fiu.edu/documents/irb/documents/ExternalResearchers.pdf).
November 1, 2017

To: Mr. Christopher Grayson  
Director, Research Integrity  
Florida International University  
11200 SW 8th Street, MARC 426  
Miami, FL 33199

Dear Mr. Grayson,

On behalf of the Provost and the Registrar, this letter grants Janiel Francisco Vargas (PI) access to student record information for the following project "A Comparative Study of the Relationship between the Moral Reasoning & Academic Misconduct of Traditional and Nontraditional Students’.

Sincerely,

Kenneth G. Furton, Ph.D.  
Provost and Executive Vice President

Kevin Coughlin, Ph.D.  
Interim VP Enrollment  
Management & Services  
University Registrar