

**Understanding Student Experiences with
Contract Cheating and Other Outsourcing Behaviours:
Research Project Brief**

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Abstract

Purpose: The primary goal of the project, in partnership with the Alberta Council on Contract Cheating (ACAI), is to understand post-secondary student experiences with contract cheating. As there is currently little information about contract cheating in Canada (and Alberta specifically), results from our research will address this need and will be used to create critical resources for students as they navigate academic integrity in the college setting.

Methods: Survey research methodology will be utilized to collect self-reported experiences of contract cheating among college students. Well-established measures from the contract cheating research outside Canada will be employed (McCabe, 2005; Bretag et al., 2019).

Data Sources: Data will be collected from students registered in a career program as of Fall 2021 term at a community college in Alberta, Canada.

Implications: This study will provide much needed information about contract cheating for administrators and policy makers at post-secondary institutions. This study will also provide the means to create evidence-based resources for post-secondary students toward building a culture of academic integrity. Information collected as part of this survey will add to research on academic integrity by providing researchers a more comprehensive understanding of the types of and complexity in relationships among stressors (both in and outside the educational context) learners experience which may help explain contract cheating behaviours.

Key Words: Contract cheating, academic integrity, academic dishonesty, plagiarism, stressors

Project Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Address the need for more information about contract cheating in Alberta that will inform / advocate for policy to protect students.
2. Involve students as partners in research to develop a sense of agency around academic integrity.
3. Expand research by exploring stressors and resources outside the educational context toward a more comprehensive understanding of contract cheating.
4. Inform college communities toward the development of supports for students.

Research Questions

The general research question that guides this research is:

- What are post-secondary student experiences with contract cheating?

To answer this broad question, six specific research questions will be addressed:

1. How prevalent is contract cheating at a community college in Alberta?
2. How do students engage in contract cheating?
3. What are student perceptions of support provided by teaching and learning at the college?
4. What is the effect of student stressors (experienced inside and outside the educational context) on contract cheating?
5. What role does access to resources (e.g., social support, coping, mastery, belief systems), both inside and outside the educational context, play in explaining contract cheating?
6. How can including students as partners in research develop a sense of agency around academic integrity?

Project Architecture

To address the research questions, the project will involve two parts:

- Part A: The main survey link will be sent to all students registered in career programs as of Fall 2021 (N = 5,200 approx.). The survey will be comprised of questions that capture self-reported contract cheating behaviours, demographic information, as well as information regarding stressors, access to resources, and mental health. Data collected from the main survey will address Research Questions 1 through 5.
- Part B: Student Researchers will be asked to complete a short survey prior to undertaking the research and then again at the conclusion of the research. Questions will focus on their pre and post knowledge of contract cheating and their experiences as partners in research. Data collected from student researchers will address Research Question 6.

Research Design – Part A

Our research design is influenced by previous studies in the academic integrity field outside Canada that have focused on self-reported cheating behaviours (McCabe, 2005; Bretag et al., 2019). As we locate contract cheating within the model of the stress process, we also draw upon key research in the sociology of mental health (Pearlin et al 1981; Aneshensel, 1992, 1996, 2015; Au, 2017; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013; Thoits, 2011; Wheaton et al., 2013). We turn to these sources for well-established measures and conceptual framework.

Method

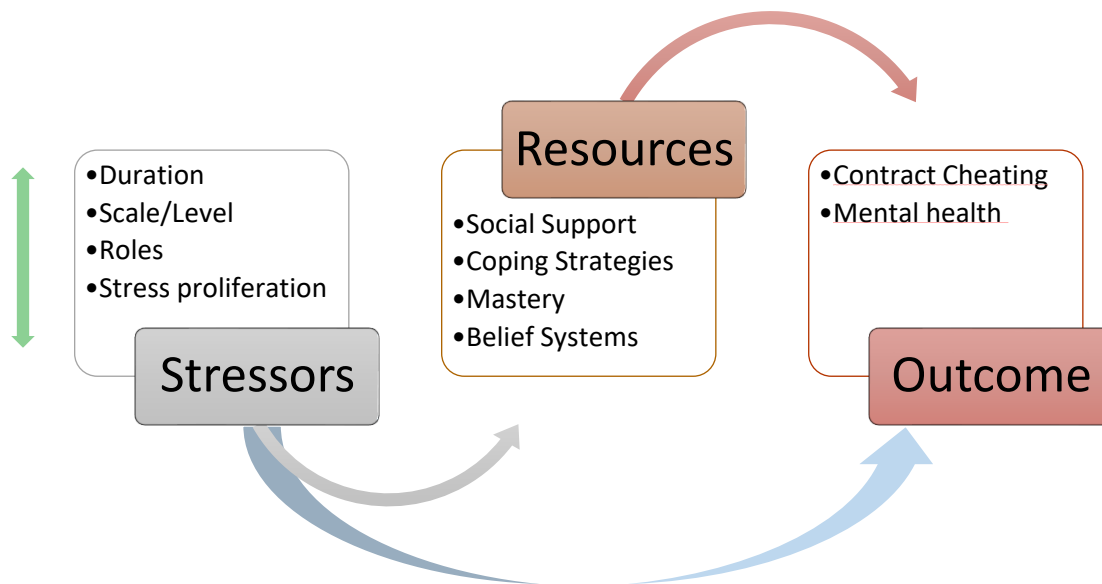
The research process will involve acquiring contact information for students in all career programs, data collection using survey methodology, data cleaning and validation, quantitative data analysis.

Conceptual Framing

Contract Cheating. For our purposes we follow the definition of contract cheating set out by Bretag et al. (2019, p.2):

...where a student gets someone – a third party – to complete an assignment or an exam for them. This third party might be a friend, family member, fellow student or staff member who assists the student as a favour. It might be a pre-written assignment which has been obtained from an assignment ‘mill’. The third party may also be a paid service, advertised locally or online.

The Stress Process Model. We locate contract cheating within the stress process model originally conceptualized by Pearlin et al (1981) in sociology of mental health research.



Adapted from The Original Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al 1981)

Data analysis will include causal modeling that explores contract cheating as an outcome (i.e., occurrence) and as a resource (i.e., coping strategy).

Research Design – Part B

The design will draw on research focusing on Students as Partners (SaP) and Scholarship on Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Cullinane & O’Sullivan, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Prescott et al., 2020).

Research Method

Qualitative Case Study (following Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014).

Research Question: How can including students as partners (SaP) in research develop a sense of agency around academic integrity?

This case study considers a students-as-partners research project on contract cheating intended to develop resources to support students as they navigate academic integrity in a college setting. It focuses on how engagement in the research project enables students to develop research skills and agency around academic integrity.

Student researchers will complete a short survey prior to undertaking the research project and then again after the research project has ended. Questions will include knowledge of contract cheating, sense of agency around contract cheating, perception of why students engage in contract cheating, perceptions about how to support students to complete their work with integrity, possible challenges they foresee as student researchers, and their experiences as researchers.

Student researchers will hold authorship over their reflection on their experiences and possibly co-create a report or paper highlighting these.

Conceptual Framing:

We are guided by previous work within the Students as Partners (SaP) research.

Research Ethics

As this research involves human participants, it must comply with *the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Therefore, we will follow the procedures set out in *500-3-2 Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Participants Procedure* including submission of a research ethics application to the Research Ethics Board at Bow Valley College. We are committed to carrying out this research with ethical and scientific integrity detailed in *500-3-3 Integrity in Research and Scholarship Procedure*.

The Research Ethics application will be submitted May 13, 2021.

Significance

This research project has great potential to yield important information on contract cheating as:

- There is little research on the prevalence and nature of contract cheating at the post-secondary level in Canada (and Alberta specifically) (Eaton & Edino, 2018).
- There is a need for creating resources for students (research in this area typically focuses on policy or resources for instructors) (Eaton & Edino, 2018) by students (i.e., students as partners in research).
- There is currently no research exploring students' stressors and access to resources (both inside and outside the educational context) in explaining contract cheating (exploration of student reasons for engaging in outsourcing behaviours tends to be limited to conditions within the educational context).

Project Management

The project is managed by Lead Researchers, Corrine Ferguson and Margaret Toye who conceptualized the research in collaboration with Sarah Elaine Eaton and Sheryl Boisvert, Co-Chairs, Contract Cheating Working Group for the Alberta Council on Contract Cheating (ACAI). Two student researchers from Bow Valley College will assume specific tasks throughout the research process.

Timeline

Research Ethics Board (REB) application is sent - **May 13, 2021**

Research Ethics Board approval – **June 3, 2021**

Data collection tools finalized – **June 30, 2021**

Data collection starts – **November 1, 2021** (following the International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating on October 20, and ACAI’s Academic Integrity Week October 18-22, 2021)

Data collection at 50% - **November 10, 2021**

Data collection is finished – **November 22, 2021**

Data cleaning / preparation – **December 1, 2021**

Aggregate data analysis starts – **January 4, 2022** (The researchers and learners will analyze the aggregate data)

Report writing begins – **February 2022**

Report is finalized – **April 2022**

Knowledge Dissemination Plan

1. *Presentations.* Results of the findings may be presented by the lead researchers as a conference paper, aiming for the International Conference on Academic Integrity in March 2022 or the Canadian Symposium on Academic Integrity (date TBA). The student researchers will present on the research project, sharing their advocacy resource, at the ACAI provincial meeting in Winter or Spring 2022.
2. *Publications.* A research report will be shared with ACAI for publication on their website. The lead researchers may write up the study findings for a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity). The advocacy resource will be shared with ACAI and published on their website. ACAI will share the resource among its member institutions. A possible co-created paper between researchers and student researchers with a submission to a journal such as the International Journal for Students as Partners.

Research Team

Lead Researchers:

Corrine D. Ferguson, M.A., Instructor, School of Community Studies, Bow Valley College
Margaret A. Toye, Ph.D., Associate Dean, School of Community Studies, Bow Valley College

Co-Investigators:

Sarah Elaine Eaton, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Co-Chair of Contract Cheating Working Group for the Alberta Council on Contract Cheating (ACAI)

Sheryl Boisvert, B.Ed, CPA, CGA NorQuest College, Co-Chair of Contract Cheating Working Group for the Alberta Council on Contract Cheating (ACAI)

Student Researchers:

To be determined, Bow Valley College

The two student researchers from Bow Valley College will be hired following College policies and procedures. Student researchers will be responsible for the following tasks:

- Attend and actively participate in research team meetings.
- Assist in creation and dissemination of recruitment scripts and reminder notices.
- Act as point of contact during the survey and monitor the project email address, corresponding with participants as necessary.
- Facilitate the recruitment incentive draw and distribution of gift cards.
- Assist with creation of advocacy resource.
- Assist with report and presentation preparation.
- Act as student advocate of academic integrity.
- Other duties as assigned.

Intellectual Property Statement

As set out in Bow Valley College's Intellectual Property Policy (#300-2-14), "all IP created by College employees, contractors, learners and volunteers in the execution of their duties or in collaboration with external partners under the auspices and authority of the College shall be the property of the College" (p. 1).

In this instance, we recognize the intellectual property as being Client Driven IP, defined in the policy as "that created by employees, learners, volunteers and contractors in applied research collaborations that address challenges and opportunities brought to the College by the client" (2c.).

Student researchers hired to perform duties as part of this research project are employees of the college, and as such may not share, copy or publish the results of the research without the consent of all members of the research team (7d.).

Student researchers are “free to reference their participation in a project in a resume, portfolio, or curriculum vitae” (7b.) if no proprietary information is disclosed, and consent is granted by members of the research team.

Student researchers may contribute to dissemination of results (e.g., advocacy resource, internal and external presentations) at the discretion of the lead researchers and co-investigators.

It is understood that the project will result in knowledge that is generated in collaboration with members of the research team and therefore, student researchers and co-investigators cannot represent results as their own work.

Authorship Guidelines and Publication Ethics

Authorship will be determined following standard practices and based on substantive contribution to the forms of knowledge dissemination. The member of the research team who has contributed the most to the production of that output will be listed first, and the remainder listed in order of their contribution. To help guide us we follow the recommendations and protocols from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2021).

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