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# STUDENT ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE TOWARD SPECIFICATION GRADING IN AN UNDERGRADUATE MANAGEMENT COURSE

Juanita Woods, University of North Georgia

## ABSTRACT

*This study explores the effectiveness of specification grading, an approach to grading that incorporates specific requirements and detailed feedback on student performance with a focus on student mastery of content, in two undergraduate management courses taught by the author. The study found that specification grading effectively distinguishes between students based on their level of mastery, with positive correlations between final grades and exam averages. Students perceived specification grading as fairer than traditional grading in terms of procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice, but not distributive justice. They also saw it as a relevant proxy for workplace performance evaluations. However, student attitudes toward the grading approach were varied. Some appreciate the sense of control, clear guidelines, and rewards for participation and effort. However, others found it confusing, time-consuming, and demotivating, with concerns about the lack of middle ground and excessive workload. The results of this study may help other academics create specification grading approaches for their courses that minimize negative student attitudes and increase student autonomy and mastery of the course material.*

## INTRODUCTION

For academics in higher education, grading might be the one activity we enjoy the least. Still, student grades are the de facto method of evaluating students to allow them to progress through degree completion. Academic evaluations include assessments of student performance through summative evaluations of obtained knowledge, resulting in grades tied permanently to the student record based on expert judgment (Schlemer & Vanasupa, 2016). Students' familiarity with this "percentage of perfection" grading has trained them to align their effort with achieving some level of quality, such as A, B, or C. However, once students graduate from college and enter the workforce, the approach to evaluating their performance changes. Employees are assessed based on satisfactory performance of job duties and knowledge of their job using performance assessments or evaluations (Thuy & Trinh, 2020). Feedback is provided to employees to enable them to improve their performance over time. Thus, applying a grading approach within the classroom that mimics workplace performance appraisal systems will better prepare students for their future careers.

The current study evaluates one instance of applying specification grading, a grading approach incorporating specified requirements and detailed feedback on student performance to

allow students to improve their performance on specific assignments. Research has shown that specification grading is a valuable tool for providing actionable and timely feedback to students, allowing them to quickly reflect and modify their skills (Carlisle, 2020).

This paper explores the effectiveness of specification grading in a management course by answering three guiding questions. First, does specification grading sufficiently distinguish students who have attained the minimum required level of knowledge from students who have mastered the content? Second, what are student perceptions of specification grading as an equitable assessment of performance and an appropriate preparation for workplace performance evaluations? Finally, what are student attitudes about their experience in a specification-graded course? Examining data from two undergraduate courses designed around mastery grading will answer these questions and assist other instructors in incorporating specification or mastery grading into their course design.

## **SPECIFICATION GRADING**

Specification grading, also known as mastery grading, is an alternative to the teacher-driven, summative approaches to traditional grading, where grades are often based on a complicated rubric or intuitive assignment of “percentage of perfect” grades that indicate student proficiency in completing an assignment (Nilson, 2015). In traditionally graded courses, students often perform to the minimum requirements, not fully comprehending the material but earning enough to “make the grade” (Nilson, 2015). Instructors using this approach are burdened with providing unbiased and consistent feedback that takes time and mental effort.

Specification-based assignments can be structured in many ways, such as a design where students earn points for completed work or where students must complete a bundle of work to earn a particular grade (e.g., A, B, C). Regardless of the structure, students earn points or credit for completed work by sufficiently meeting assignment requirements. Assignment requirements are declarative sentences, such as “the author must include at least one valid and appropriate reference other than the textbook to support recommendations.” For example, in a project management class, an assignment to produce a project charter might require appropriate content, a correct format, and submission quality (e.g., grammar and spelling). Specification-based assignments are similar to assessments using task-based rubrics, where task-specific criteria and performance statements are arranged in a matrix to denote the quality of a student’s response (Atkinson & Lim, 2013). The difference between specification-based assignments and task-based rubrics is that in the former, students are given a list of “exemplar” statements that describe what an optimal student submission should contain. Task-based rubrics may include the optimal statements but also include statements that describe varying levels of quality, making the process of developing rubrics time-intensive and subjective.

One caveat to the success of specification grading is that both the assignment and grade requirements are clear and unambiguous (Nilson, 2015). Proponents of specification grading suggest that this grading methodology motivates students to do their best rather than to perform at the minimum acceptable standards (Elkins, 2016). Students become active participants in their learning and appear more motivated to submit quality work.

Specification grading has been applied at the undergraduate and graduate levels and in diverse areas such as communication (Elkins, 2016), political science (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2018), mathematics (Carlisle, 2020), dietetics (Pope et al., 2020), public affairs (Jones, 2020), and education (Prasad, 2020). Approaches to implementing specification grading are similar, but unique features distinguish how instructors organize and evaluate assignments. Some instructors started with assignments grouped by difficulty level (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2018), while others bundled assignments based on the level of effort required (Elkins, 2016; Pope et al., 2020). Other instructors created assignment bundles based on a combination of effort and minimum student performance (Carlisle, 2020; Jones, 2020; Prasad, 2020) or solely on student performance (Schlemer & Vanasupa, 2016).

There were also various approaches to allowing students to revise submitted work that did not meet the assignment requirements. Most instructors allow for one or more revisions to be submitted by students (Elkins, 2016; Jones, 2020; Pope et al., 2020; Prasad, 2020; Schlemer & Vanasupa, 2016). Some instructors introduced a token system, where students could exchange a token for a chance to revise a submission or submit work late (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2018; Carlisle, 2020).

In these studies, the instructors also evaluated student attitudes and performance as indicators of the validity of specification grading as a practical and appropriate method of evaluating student performance. The following sections will explore student performance and attitudes as a basis for evaluating the success of one implementation of specification grading in an undergraduate management course.

### **Specification Grading and Student Performance**

The first question we must consider as educators is if specification grading sufficiently distinguishes students who have mastered the minimum required level of knowledge from students who have mastered more advanced concepts. The primary purpose of teaching students is to help them master a subject. Specification grading is designed around mastery, and most implementations allow students to master content by submitting multiple attempts of an assignment or quiz (Elkins, 2016; Jones, 2020; Pope et al., 2020).

After implementing specification grading, Blackstone and Oldmixon (2018) found no difference in the average or distribution of course grades between point- and specification-based grading systems. However, Carlisle (2020) noted that the specification-based grading system improved student performance. Numerous variables may affect the difference in grading, such as the content of the course (social science (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2018) versus mathematics (Carlisle, 2020) or the number of opportunities allowed for revision of submitted work. Being able to revise submitted work that did not meet the assignment requirements may give students who struggled early in the course a second chance that they might not have been given in a traditionally graded course (Carlisle, 2020).

Thus, a well-designed specification-based grading system should balance the opportunities for students to master the content with the level of effort required to earn higher grades (Carlisle, 2020). Further, the grading scheme should not reduce or negate the expected



correlation between exam grades and final grades. It is preferred that students receive grades commensurate with the amount of learning achieved and the effort required, which leads to the first hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1: Student final grades correlate positively and significantly with student exam averages.*

### **Specification Grading and Perceptions of Equity**

An essential aspect of well-designed grading systems is the ability to be applied fairly for all students. Students have perceived specification grading as helpful to their success and reduced feelings of stress about the course (Pope et al., 2020). Researchers have also noted that students felt the grading approach was fairer than other forms of grading (Jones, 2020). In the study by Pope et al. (2020), students appreciated the transparency of the grading process, which led to a sense of trust in the fairness of the grading approach.

The link between trust and perceptions of fairness has been conceptualized in the management literature as organizational justice (Table 1; Colquitt, 2001). Organizational justice is the overarching term for notions of fairness in how organizational procedures are applied (procedural justice), how outcomes or rewards are distributed (distributive justice), how organizational leaders treat employees (interpersonal justice), and how information is shared (informational justice) (Colquitt, 2001). The dimensions of justice have demonstrated positive effects on task performance in the workplace (Colquitt et al., 2013) and satisfaction with performance appraisals (Saraih et al., 2018), so it is a small step to consider that this relationship may also hold in academic settings.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Organizational Justice</b>	Perceptions of how policies, procedures, incentives, relationships, and information are fairly shared or applied within an organization (Castillo & Fernandez, 2017; Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013)	
<b>Procedural Justice</b>	Fairness perceptions of the application of policies and systems for decision-making (Castillo & Fernandez, 2017; Colquitt, 2001; Unterhitzberger & Bryde, 2019)	Performance Appraisal Policies, Grading Guidelines
<b>Distributive Justice</b>	Fairness perceptions of the distribution of resources and outcomes (Colquitt, 2001; Kovacevic et al., 2013)	Pay, bonuses, promotion, recognition, grades
<b>Interpersonal Justice</b>	Fairness perceptions of how people are treated and respected (Colquitt et al., 2013; Kovacevic et al., 2013; Saraih et al., 2018)	Relationship quality between supervisor and subordinates or instructor and student
<b>Informational Justice</b>	Fairness perceptions of how information is shared and communicated (Colquitt, 2001; Kovacevic et al., 2013; Unterhitzberger & Bryde, 2019)	Feedback quality and transparency of evaluation and decision-making process

Organizational justice and its relationships with student achievement (performance) and satisfaction have been studied in academic settings, with various results. Kovacevic et al. (2013) found that procedural justice was positively correlated with first-year college student achievement but not with other forms of justice. Castillo and Fernandez (2017) observed that a positive relationship existed between distributive, informational, and interpersonal justice with student satisfaction but not procedural justice.

Best practices in specification grading advise that the evaluation method should be transparent, reduce faculty-student conflict, increase students' feelings of situational control, and communicate high academic standards (Nilson, 2015). Because specification grading is designed to be transparent regarding how grades are evaluated, this assessment method should strengthen students' positive perceptions of informational justice. Specification grading should improve student perceptions of interpersonal justice by reducing conflict between students and instructors. Specification grading should further increase student perceptions of distributive justice by giving them autonomy through consciously selecting a target grade to achieve. Finally, because specification grading is designed to communicate high academic standards, this assessment approach should improve student perceptions of procedural justice.

*Hypothesis 2: Students perceive that specification-based grading provides a more equitable approach to evaluating student performance than traditional grading approaches in terms of a) procedural justice, b) information justice, c) interpersonal justice, and d) distributive justice.*

### **Specification Grading as Proxy for Workplace Performance Evaluations**

A final evaluation of specification grading relates to the primary purpose of business and management education programs, which is to prepare students to enter the workforce upon graduation. One way to prepare students is to provide them with knowledge and experience about how their performance will be evaluated in the workplace. Academic evaluations include assessments of student performance through summative evaluations of obtained knowledge, resulting in grades tied permanently to the student record. However, in the workplace, performance evaluations include proof of job-related knowledge and an evaluation of how well the employee works within the job context (Murphy, 2020; Murphy et al., 2018). Letter grades are not typically given in workplace settings, and most employers allow employees to redo sub-par work.

In workplace performance appraisal systems, performance standards (learning outcomes) are defined, individual performance goals (target grades) are identified, and detailed feedback is usually provided with improvement plans to enable mastery of one's job (Murphy, 2020; Murphy et al., 2018; Nilson, 2015). In both systems, feedback mechanisms and improvement plans are included in the evaluation process (Murphy, 2020; Murphy et al., 2018; Nilson, 2015).

Specification grading is similar to workplace evaluations in that it allows students to redo unsatisfactory work and gives them control over their effort and performance (Jones, 2020).

Thus, students are expected to perceive specification grading as an appropriate proxy for workplace evaluations.

*Hypothesis 3: Students familiar with workplace performance evaluations perceive that specification-based grading is similar to how performance is evaluated in the workplace.*

### **Example Course Design**

The course evaluated here is a required course for all BBA Management students. The course is designed with a management focus and aligns with the college's mission of preparing students to become innovative and ethical business and technology professionals. Learning objectives are defined at the department level, and all sections taught must satisfy the stated course learning objectives. The learning objectives represent the minimum level of knowledge expected to be acquired by students.

There have been several iterations of the grading approach to this class, continuously improving over four semesters. The initial deployment led to mixed results and the realization that students needed to be taught how to work with specification grading since they were used to percentage-based grading. During the second and third iterations, an effort was made to clarify the distinction between effort and performance for each target grade. Early iterations did not adequately distinguish between higher grades and did not include how D and F were assessed.

The final iteration, presented in Table 2, addresses the limitations of the earlier iterations. A clear delineation between effort and performance for each grade level (A, B, C) was achieved. Since BBA management majors must also earn a C or better in the course to earn credit toward their degree, a grade of "C" represents the minimum knowledge and performance expected for all students. Students who do not meet the minimum requirements for a C are assessed at the D or F level based on their participation, exam average, and assignments submitted. The distinction between the grade levels relates to the effort and mastery required to achieve each grade level, where the average exam and quiz score assesses mastery, and effort is assessed by the quantity and type of work completed that meet the stated requirements.

<b>Table 2</b> <b>EXAMPLE GRADE REQUIREMENTS</b>
<p>For a “C,” you must satisfactorily complete the following activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earn “MET” on the Career Skills Assessment.</li> <li>• Earn a 70% average or greater average on all exams and quizzes.</li> <li>• Earn “MET” on 70% of the learning modules.</li> </ul>
<p>For a “B,” you must satisfactorily complete the following activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earn “MET” on the Career Skills Assessment.</li> <li>• Earn a 70% average or greater average on all exams and quizzes.</li> <li>• Earn “MET” on 70% of the learning modules.</li> <li>• Earn “MET” on 3 of 4 Case Analysis assignments.</li> </ul>
<p>For an “A,” you must satisfactorily complete the following activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earn “MET” on the Career Skills Assessment.</li> <li>• Earn an 85% average or greater average on all exams and quizzes.</li> <li>• Earn “MET” on 85% of the learning modules.</li> <li>• Earn “MET” on 3 of 4 Case Analysis assignments.</li> </ul>
<p>Grades of “D” or “F” will be given to students who do not meet the minimum requirements for a C and will be determined based on a combination of content mastery and student effort.</p>

Other than exams and quizzes, all assignments are scored as “MET” or “NOT MET” based on whether students meet the assignment’s requirements. Every assignment includes a list of requirements that must be met for full credit. Students are encouraged to use these as checklists to ensure their submission meets all requirements. After the first submission, students can submit a revision within two weeks of the posted feedback based on instructor feedback for work that initially does not meet requirements.

Assignments focus on topics relevant to the class and require students to research current management trends, suggest a solution to a problem, or analyze a typical management scenario and make recommendations. Assignments are expected to take students 1-2 hours to complete. Student submissions are evaluated against a list of requirements. An example of assignment requirements is listed in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**EXAMPLE ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR “MET”**

<p>A “MET” score requires the following to be satisfied by the student’s submission.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>FORMAT:</b> The document shall be formatted appropriately: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Single-spaced, 12-point font (any professional style), and 1-inch margins.</li> <li>○ Word document or format that is compatible with Word.</li> <li>○ Use the headings that are provided in the instructions to organize your response (e.g., “1. Key Issues”). <b>Do not include question text.</b></li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>RESPONSES:</b> Responses must sufficiently address the questions in the assignment (at the instructor’s discretion).</li> <li>• <b>SOURCES:</b> The submission must include at least one valid and appropriate reference in addition to the case and textbook. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In-text citations must be included as appropriate, and associated references shall be formatted correctly in a “Works Cited” list at the end of the document.</li> <li>○ Please visit the University Library online guides for assistance formatting citations and references (link redacted).</li> <li>○ Turnitin Similarity Rating must be less than 15%, excluding the works cited.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>QUALITY:</b> The submission shall be free of grammar, spelling, and other writing errors.</li> <li>• <b>WORD COUNT:</b> The body of the submission must be at least 750 words. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ This excludes the list of references to be included at the end of the document.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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## METHOD

### Research Design

Three surveys were delivered to students’ university email accounts using Qualtrics™. The first survey was delivered in week 2 after course enrollment was finalized. The first survey asked questions about respondent demographics, the student’s target grade for the class, open-ended questions about their experience with specification grading, their level of understanding about how grades would be calculated in the class, and several questions evaluating the student’s general self-efficacy and perceptions of equity in grading processes in college. Descriptions of the measures used to evaluate these concepts are discussed below.

A second survey was delivered during week 8, the semester’s mid-point. At this point in the semester, students usually understand the approach to grading and are well-positioned to earn at least a C for the class. In the second survey, students were asked open-ended questions about their rating of specification grading as a compelling motivation for learning the course material, their likes and dislikes of specification grading, and their understanding of how grades are assigned in the course. Students were also asked about their familiarity with workplace performance evaluation systems and how well specification grading prepared them for the same.

A final survey was delivered during the last week of the semester. In this survey, students were asked to evaluate the perceived justice (procedural and distributive) of the course grading approach and the perceived interpersonal and informational justice demonstrated by the instructor. At this point, students knew what their course grade would be.

## Quantitative Data

**General Self-efficacy.** Student general self-efficacy was evaluated using a measure developed by Chen et al. (2016). Example questions include, “When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them” and “I will be able to overcome many challenges successfully” (Chen et al., 2016). Reliability for the eight-item measure was high ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ,  $n=8$ ).

**Justice Perceptions.** Both measures of justice (regarding the general grading approaches and the specification grading approach) were evaluated using an adapted version (Colquitt, 2001). For the general perceptions of grading justice, prompts directed the students to think about their experience with the various grading approaches and instructors they have had. For the specific perceptions of grading justice (specification grading), students were asked to think about their experience with the grading method of the current course and their current instructor. They answered twenty questions relating to the underlying constructs. Procedural justice included seven statements (e.g., “In general/in this course, to what extent have you had influence over the grading approach used to determine your course grade?”). Distributive Justice was measured with four items (e.g., “In general/in this course, to what extent does your grade reflect the effort you have put into your work?”), as was interpersonal justice (e.g., “In general/in this course, to what extent has your instructor treated you with dignity?”). Informational justice was measured with five items (e.g., “In general/in this course, to what extent has your instructor communicated feedback in a timely manner?”). Reliability estimates and pairwise correlations for these measures are listed in Table 4.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>1. GENSEFF</b>	(0.89)								
<b>2. GENPROJ</b>	0.064	(0.76)							
<b>3. GENDISJ</b>	0.104	.414*	0.92						
<b>4. GENPERJ</b>	-0.004	.352*	.591*	(0.89)					
<b>5. GENINFJ</b>	-0.030	.528*	.622*	.544*	(0.82)				
<b>6. INSPROJ</b>	-0.143	0.070	0.038	0.200	0.076	(0.83)			
<b>7. INSDISJ</b>	-0.070	-0.080	-0.090	0.219	-0.116	.506*	(0.93)		
<b>8. INSPERJ</b>	-0.107	-0.221	0.069	0.196	0.048	0.227	.450*	(0.95)	
<b>9. INSINFJ</b>	0.022	-0.124	-0.085	0.059	0.004	0.285	.512*	.457*	(0.82)

Note1: Reliability Estimates are on the diagonal; Valid Cases = 55.  
 Note2: GENSEFF = Student General Self-efficacy; GENPROJ = General Procedural Justice; GENDISJ = General Distributive Justice; GENPERJ = General Interpersonal Justice; GENINFJ = General Information Justice; INSPROJ = Course-Specific Procedural Justice; INSDISJ = Course-Specific Distributive Justice; INSPERJ = Course-Specific Interpersonal Justice; INSINFJ = Course-Specific Information Justice.  
 Note3: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

## Qualitative Data

Open-ended questions were included in Surveys 2 and 3 (see Table 5), and student responses were analyzed using a combination of sentiment analysis and content analysis. Student attitudes toward specification grading were analyzed using NVivo 12 Pro sentiment analysis, a scoring model for positive, negative, and neutral tones (*NVivo 12 Plus*, 2018). Statements were scored for sentiment by paragraph (entire response). Although the open-ended questions were not required, most students responded sufficiently.

Survey	Guiding Questions
2 (Mid-semester)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you like or not like about the approach to grading in this course? Please explain with specifics.</li> <li>2. Briefly describe your understanding of how to get the grade you want in this course.</li> <li>3. In your own words, describe how your performance is or might be evaluated at work.</li> </ol>
3 (End of Semester)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was the most important thing you did to achieve the grade you wanted in this course?</li> <li>2. What did you like or not like about the approach to grading in this course? Please provide specific examples.</li> <li>3. How did the grading of this course impact your learning of the course content?</li> <li>4. Now that you have experienced this style of grading, would you like to see other instructors use it? Why or why not?</li> </ol>

## Research Participants

Research participants include a convenience sample of undergraduate students enrolled in sections taught by the author during one semester. Students were awarded extra credit for each survey they completed. Students could opt out of survey participation at any time with no penalty, and students had the option to earn extra credit for an alternate set of activities to ensure students did not feel pressured to participate. Of the 55 students invited to participate, 28 completed all three surveys (51% response rate). 43% took the course face-to-face, while the remaining (57%) took the same course online. Students were young adults (age 18-24 = 79%) and worked at least part-time (work part or full-time = 68%, full-time student = 32%). The genders were equally represented (male = 50%; female = 50%). Respondents were juniors (11%) and seniors (89%) taking upper-division undergraduate coursework.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis Tests

The first hypothesis proposed that specification grading sufficiently distinguishes students who have mastered the minimum required level of knowledge from students who have

mastered more advanced concepts. The hypothesis was evaluated by comparing the student exam average and the course final grade. Results demonstrate a positive and significant correlation between student final course grades and the exam average (Table 6). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported, and the grading approach did not disrupt the expected positive and significant relationship between exam averages and the final course grade.

Variable	Mean (S.D.)	1
1. Final Course Grade	0.81 (0.10)	-
2. Exam Average	0.79 (0.15)	0.563**
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)		

The second hypothesis evaluated perceptions of justice between traditional and specification grading approaches. The results of a paired-sample t-test demonstrate support for procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice but not for distributive justice (Table 7). Perceptions of procedural justice in specification grading were significantly different (and more positive) than perceptions of procedural justice in traditional grading approaches ( $t_{(42)} = 5.388$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Perceptions of interpersonal justice in a specification grading course were significantly different (and more positive) than perceptions of interpersonal justice in traditionally graded classes ( $t_{(42)} = 5.382$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Perceptions of informational justice in a specification grading course were significantly different (and more positive) than perceptions of informational justice in traditionally graded classes ( $t_{(42)} = 3.694$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, there is no significant difference between perceptions of distributive justice in overall college grades and perception of distributive justice in the grade received in a specification-graded course ( $t_{(42)} = 0.953$ ,  $p = 0.346$ ).

Paired Sample	Mean (S.D.)	95% C.I.	t (df=42)	Significance (2-sided p)
Distributive Justice (General vs. Course-Specific)	0.204 (1.400)	-0.227, 0.634	0.953	0.346
Procedural Justice (General vs. Course-Specific)	0.804 (0.978)	0.503, 1.105	5.388	<0.001
Interpersonal Justice (General vs. Course-Specific)	0.634 (0.772)	0.396, 0.871	5.382	<0.001
Information Justice (General vs. Course-Specific)	0.577 (1.024)	0.262, 0.892	3.694	<0.001



The third hypothesis proposed that students perceive specification grading as an appropriate proxy for workplace evaluations. This hypothesis was supported (Table 8). Student familiarity with workplace evaluations demonstrated a positive and significant effect on student perception of specification gradings as a valid proxy for the same ( $B = 0.305$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ). Familiarity with workplace evaluations accounted for 33% of the variance in student perceptions of specification grading as an appropriate proxy for workplace evaluations.

Variable	B (S.E.)	t (sig.)
(Constant)	2.091 (0.387)	5.398 (0.000)
Familiarity with Workplace evaluations	0.305 (0.134)	2.278 (0.028)

*Note: B: unstandardized coefficient; Dependent Variable = appropriateness of Specification grading as a proxy for workplace evaluations.*

### **Attitudes toward Specification Grading**

Students were asked at the midpoint and end of the semester the following question, “What do (did) you like or not like about the approach to grading in this course? Please explain with specifics.” Twenty-two students responded to the question at the semester’s mid-point, and 28 responded at the end of the semester. At the middle of the semester, 59% of the responses were moderately to very negative, and at the end of the semester, 61% had the same sentiment. The positive sentiment (moderately to very) changed slightly, from 41% at the semester’s mid-point to 39% at the end. Positive feedback provided by students explained the opportunity for autonomy and the ability to balance workload across all courses and other personal responsibilities. Some issues students had with specification grading were confusion over requirements and a lack of incentives to complete the work (Table 9)—other negatives related to the perceived effort for initial submissions and potential revisions.

<b>Tone</b>	<b>Example Statements</b>
Very or Moderately Positive (Midpoint = 41%; End = 59%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I really liked how we could choose our grades based on the number of assignments we completed. Some courses require a larger time commitment, so it was nice that we had the opportunity to choose our grades and only complete the necessary assignments to obtain that grade. For example, I had a lot of group assignments this semester, so it was nice that I was able to opt out of the group project for [course] and still receive the grade I wanted.</li> <li>• I loved the style of mimicking the real world. The use of double submissions was a dream to have. As it really does allow you to take risks and develop the work rather than hope its gold the first time. I wish this were in all my classes.</li> </ul>
Neutral (not coded by NVivo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I liked that the instructions were very clear and there was a defined “minimum.” However, sometimes when schedules are busy, I wish I could get a 70 or sometimes even half credit and just move on. With this, it’s either all or none which can be hard.</li> <li>• I do not feel the grading structure is bad, and it seems more helpful, but it is more confusing in that it is not like your regular grading in other courses. It just takes a little more time in getting used to if it is your first time dealing with it.</li> </ul>
Very or Moderately Negative (Midpoint = 39%; End = 61%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I do not like how rigid the grading is. No matter how well you do, if you miss three or four assignments, you cannot earn greater than a C. The team project is also done in a strange way. It is optional, but you cannot earn an A in the course without doing it. However, if you don’t meet the requirements for an A in any other category, the team project means nothing, and it was a waste of time. There are also no late submissions, so if you missed a due date, you could drop two letter grades.</li> <li>• I didn’t like how doing well in one category doesn’t carry over into the other grading categories. So if a student does very well on the tests but misses one too many classes, they could still receive a lower letter grade.</li> </ul>

When asked if they would like to see this grading approach in other classes, the response was mostly positive, with 65% of the responses indicating they would like to see this approach used in other courses and 27% indicating that they would not like this approach used in other classes (Table 10). Two responses indicated that it depends on the instructor and the course.

Students who agreed that other instructors should use this approach liked the precise goals, clarity of the grade requirements, and clear connection between effort and the grade received. Students who did not like this grading approach did not like the opportunity for revisions; one commented on the lack of room for mistakes (even though revisions are allowed), while another commented on the dislike of having an opportunity to make revisions. Another student felt the approach to grading lacked the incentive to perform well.

<b>Table 10</b>	
<b>ATTITUDES TOWARD USING SPECIFICATION GRADING IN OTHER COURSES</b>	
<b>Tone</b>	<b>Example Statements</b>
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, it allows student to set a determinable goal at the beginning of the semester and have a clear plan on how to reach that goal.</li> <li>• Yes, it makes students learn how to manage their time.</li> <li>• Yes, the class is not a “give me” A. But students who put in the effort can get the grade of their choice as long as they work for it.</li> </ul>
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think it depends on the instructor and / or the subject matter. There are certain subjects that require a firm understanding of all aspects of the field to strive into it, engineering just as an example. In these scenarios a stricter grading criterion would probably be more optimal.</li> <li>• Only if they are as efficient with it as [instructor]. I feel as though it takes only a certain type of professor to be able to structure their assignments, quizzes, and exams the way in which she did.</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very much no. Sometimes I have very tough weeks and I want to do the bare minimum to get by without losing my mind. I would rather receive a low grade such as a C for doing subpar work than have to have the added stress of redoing an assignment entirely for subpar work.</li> <li>• No, I did not like how your grade would drop significantly due to one mistake.</li> </ul>

### **Grade-Oriented Behaviors**

Students were asked two questions about the behaviors required to get a desired grade (“Briefly describe your understanding of how to get the grade you want in this course”) and the actual behaviors they engaged in to get their final grade (“What was the most important thing you did to achieve the grade you wanted in this course?”). After a manual inspection of student responses to these questions, it was apparent that, in general, students understood what was required to achieve their grade goal, as it was stated in the syllabus. A few students went beyond the syllabus requirements, describing other behaviors that led to their desired outcome, including accepting personal responsibility, being organized, meeting deadlines, and putting in the effort to get the desired grade. Enacted behaviors to achieve desired outcomes included attention to time management and organization, studying the course materials, taking personal responsibility for their effort, and choosing the work to complete based on the grade they wanted.

- “You work for the grade you want. The more modules and discussions you do, the higher your grade.”
- “To achieve the grade desired, it helped to read every [assignment] ahead of time and figure out which ones I could do best.”
- “The most important contribution I made to achieve my grade goal was to keep myself accountable with how many learning modules I could miss, attendance requirements, and the required test average. Keeping myself accountable to my A goal grade is how I was successful in this class.”

- “I strived to achieve a C in this class. I did the minimum work requirements needed to do such a thing.”
- “I monitored my assignments completed and that they met the course objectives in the pursuit to achieve the bare minimum. Seeing that it’s my final semester, I did not feel it was necessary to shoot for the A.”

### Learning Impact

Finally, students were asked how the grading approach affected how well they learned the course content. The responses were mixed, with some students indicating no impact and others claiming the grading approach motivated them to learn (Table 11). Overall, there was a balance of positive (43%) and neutral (48%) responses, with only four students indicating a negative effect.

<b>Tone</b>	<b>Example Statements</b>
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think it made me learn more and better. By eliminating the 100+ online assignments throughout the semester, you are forced to put more thought into every assignment. Meaning that you have to think deeper about the topic because each assignment feels and is more important to your grade.</li> <li>• It went very well with my learning.</li> <li>• A lot, I probably learned more about the content of the class with this grading approach since you have to pay attention to be able to complete the assignments.</li> </ul>
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I do not believe grading impacts learning. If an individual wants to learn the material, they will make time for it.</li> <li>• I don’t think it was the grading as much as the assignments.</li> <li>• The grading didn’t affect my learning much because even when I didn’t do certain [assignments] or discussion posts, I still read and learned the topics</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I just wanted to pass one way or the other. I stopped trying to focus on learning so much as I was worried about submitting the work on time.</li> <li>• It made me not care about the material but rather just get the work done and over with.</li> </ul>

## DISCUSSION

Specification grading in higher education has grown since Nilsen’s book was published in 2015. As a result, academics have investigated how specification grading relates to student attitudes and behaviors toward learning. This study contributes to the support for specification grading as a valuable approach to encouraging student mastery of course material and autonomy in the classroom. While the sample size is small, the results demonstrate that, in this instance, specification grading sufficiently discriminated between students who did and did not master the course material with positive and significant correlations between final course grades and exam averages in this sample. Students perceived the overall equity of specification grading to be

stronger than traditional grading approaches regarding procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice, but not distributive justice. Further, students perceived specification grading as a relevant proxy for workplace performance evaluations.

Student attitudes about the grading approach did not vary significantly over the semester. Some students like having control over their grades and being able to choose their desired grades. They appreciated each grade's clear guidelines and goals and liked that effort was rewarded. They also like that the grading approach is based on met or unmet grading and that the rubric is detailed and specific. They appreciate being able to highlight their knowledge beyond memorizing definitions.

However, some students disliked that the grading approach was confusing and different than how their other courses were graded. They found that meeting the grade requirements was more time-consuming and challenging in the specification-graded course, especially when specific assignments were challenging, or multiple learning modules were due simultaneously. Some students also disliked that there was no middle ground between getting full versus partial credit and that missing a few assignments affected their grades significantly. They found having optional learning modules to be demotivating. They also found the grading approach too compartmentalized and not necessarily motivational to push them to produce more than the minimum expected.

Students also shared mixed opinions about the pass-fail style for each assignment. Some students liked it because it eliminated subjectivity in grading, while others found it too strict. Some students appreciated the feedback, while others found it lacking, especially when passing or failing an assignment. At the end of the semester, students appreciated the flexibility and transparency of the grading approach, with some even expressing enthusiasm and satisfaction with the system. However, others have expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the system, particularly the inflexibility of the grading scale and the uneven weighting of particular assignments.

Regarding the equity of traditional grading approaches versus the specification-based approach, students felt that specification grading was more procedurally fair than traditional grading approaches but no different in distributive justice. Further, the student felt the specification graded course allowed for increased interpersonal and informational justice than traditionally graded courses.

### **Practical Implications**

Because the tests and assignments used in this specification grading approach were the same as would have been provided had the author used a traditional grading approach, the content or coverage of course material did not change, nor did the assessment of student learning. In this instance, the primary difference between the two approaches was allowing students to choose which assignments they wanted to complete based on their grade goal or the amount of effort they were willing to invest in the course.

Based on the student feedback (both positive and negative) and instructor experience, there are several implications to consider when adopting specification grading. Key takeaways of

using specification grading may be idiosyncratic, but these takeaways may be relevant for other instructors to consider.

- **Plan for revisions to the grading rubrics over multiple semesters.** It takes time and effort (and several iterations) to develop good grading specifications for each assignment and to develop an overall approach to grading that distinguishes “A” students from “B” students from “C” students. Both student effort and demonstration of content mastery should be included to ensure a clear distinction between the grading levels.
- **Teach students about the grading approach.** It takes time to “train” students on the grading approach, and instructors should allow for sufficient instructional time to explain the process and answer student questions.
- **Plan for additional grading time.** Giving students a chance to revise sub-par work requires the instructor to grade some assignments a second time, which will add to their workload.
- **Provide feedback at multiple points in the assessment process.** Explanations of grading included with the assignment instructions and feedback shared during assignment assessment reduce potential confusion about the grades received. Feedback should identify where student work is deficient and explain to the student how they can earn full points with a revision.
- **Break down large projects into multiple deliverables.** Have students submit large projects (e.g., research papers or team projects) in parts to allow them time to fix mistakes early so the final product is of higher quality than it would have been without the interim feedback. Each component should include clearly stated specifications to guide student work.
- **Illustrate to students how the final grade is affected by not submitting specific assignments.** Because this method was new to students, it was helpful to give examples of how to achieve each grade and show what happens when required assignments are not completed or do not meet the requirements.
- **Offer frequent feedback on progress toward final grades.** At certain times during the semester, share with students how they can determine their grade progress or post an interim grade. Additionally, indicate when students are no longer eligible for an A or B grade. It might be helpful to remind the students who did not submit the first assignment required for an A that they are no longer eligible for an A.
- **Be prepared to explain the benefits of this approach to students and administrators.** Many educators are reviewed annually by their college or university administrators, and it is essential to educate them on the benefits of specification grading and what the instructor is attempting to accomplish. Include the research on specification grading and steps taken by the instructor to educate students on the process and continuously improve the grading approach within annual performance reports.

## **Theoretical Implications**

The motivation toward learning or receiving grades has been investigated for several decades. Scholars investigating student motivation have uncovered several interesting findings on the antecedents and consequences of these motivations. Students primarily motivated by learning focus on acquiring knowledge and skills and find learning intrinsically rewarding (Meyer et al., 2019; Pollio & Beck, 2000). On the other hand, students who are primarily motivated by grades focus on the results of their efforts (e.g., course grades) rather than the learning process (Pollio & Beck, 2000; Vallade et al., 2014). In other words, learning-oriented students seek mastery of the content, while grade-oriented students focus on their performance (Meyer et al., 2019).

Specification grading emphasizes mastery of course content and meeting performance outcomes, so both learning- and grade-oriented students were expected to be satisfied with the grading approach. In the current study, students indicated mixed perceptions of how the grading approach affected their learning. While many students mentioned that the grading system forced them to learn and study the material, some expressed concerns about focusing more on grades than authentic learning. Some students mention that the grading system helped them to understand the course content better by forcing them to apply the material to assignments, discussions, and quizzes. However, other students mentioned that the grading system made them less interested in learning the material and more concerned with finishing the work. Further research should be done to investigate the relationship between attitudes toward specification grading and student learning and grade motivations.

## **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The limitations of this study are typical of teaching innovation studies in that generalizability may be limited to the specific sample investigated. However, as with other case studies in teaching innovations, the student attitudes and perceptions presented here may benefit academics considering implementing specification grading in their courses. Knowing the possible responses may help academics develop their approach to specification grading that strengthens positive attitudes toward it.

Given the small sample size used in this study, generalizability of these results may be limited. Thus, it will be necessary to evaluate these hypotheses on a more extensive data set across multiple courses, semesters, or universities to increase general applicability of these findings. Conducting a systematic review of reports that focus on the outcomes of specification grading may be helpful. While there are many studies on individual applications of this approach to classroom evaluation, it may be helpful to quantify the relationships with student performance, learning, and attitudes across contexts. Doing so will provide academics interested in applying specification grading in their courses with a valid justification when administrative leaders question the efficacy of such an approach.

Future research should also explore instructor effort, feedback quality, the effect on learning outcomes, and the practical design of grading specifications. While these concepts were briefly discussed, more data must be collected across multiple contexts to develop a deeper picture of the effort involved with specification grading approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to evaluate student attitudes and behaviors in a specification-graded management course. The results show that specification grading does not significantly affect the expected alignment of final course grades with summative performance measures and may contribute to student autonomy and perceptions of grade-related justice in the classroom. This grading approach exposed students to an evaluation method like what they would experience in the workplace, which is where many business and management students go after graduation from college.

Practical implications have been provided to instructors who want to implement specification grading in their courses. Implementing specification grading will take multiple iterations and require the training of students, administrators, and other interested parties on the benefits and expected outcomes. Instructors should be aware of the time commitment before and during the course to ensure the students understand what is expected of them and how they will be assessed.

Finally, theoretical implications have been identified, along with directions for future research based on the current study's limitations. Future research on the relationship between grading approaches and student learning and grade orientation across multiple contexts is warranted and will expand the potential generalizability of these findings.

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# **WORKPLACE CONFLICT: SOLVING THROUGH CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

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## **CASE DESCRIPTION**

*This case concerns workplace conflict, and the secondary issues to examine to conflict include emotional intelligence (EQ) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The case is designed for undergraduate students in organizational behavior, principles of management, and international management. This case is designed to be taught in one class period, from 1 to 3 class hours, depending on if the instructor assigns the readings prior to class or it is done in class. There are no outside readings expected but it is expected that the class will be already familiar with EQ, Hofstede's concept of Cultural Dimensions and personality assessments in general.*

## **CASE SYNOPSIS**

*The purpose of this case study is to analyze a conflict in a finance team of 25 people who work at CaliWeb, a large technology company headquartered in California. A manager, Marcelo, and a direct report, Tom, were having difficulties in their relationship, and it was affecting the performance and harmony of the rest of the team. The senior director of the team, John, had been aware of the situation for a while and did not know how to mitigate this conflict. The company was going through a restructuring phase that was causing uncertainty among employees in the finance team. Several employees reported being anxious about how their job descriptions might change after the restructuring. Furthermore, there was evidence of cross-cultural clashes and a wide range of EQ variance among team members.*

*Marcelo and Tom had frequent disagreements about decisions and policies in the department. Their disagreements had become public and many people on the team had begun to "take sides." In addition to their professional disputes, their relationship was complicated by their different cultural values. In addition, both employees were unable to manage their emotions and to understand the other person's feelings. The animosity had reached the point that Tom threatened to leave the company. Thus, John needed to find a solution in the next two weeks before one of the team's best employees was gone.*

*This case study shows how emotional intelligence, national cultural dimensions, and personality can impact conflict behaviors within teams. The situation in this case is based on actual events. The names of the people and company have been altered to preserve anonymity.*

**Key Words:** *Conflict, Emotional Intelligence, True Colors, Hofstede Cultural Dimensions*

## **BACKGROUND**

CaliWeb<sup>1</sup> was an American multinational organization with the headquarters in California. The firm was founded in 1998 and it served the internet industry. It had over \$4 billion in revenue and more than 7000 employees in 2019. Since 2002 the company has been performing acquisitions to sustain its growth (Reuters, 2020).

Two years earlier, the organization performed its largest acquisition which changed the structure of most of the teams. For instance, the Americas' Finance team used to be small with only 12 employees and after the acquisition it became a team of 25 employees. Some of the new employees that came with the acquisition were having a hard time adjusting to the company's culture such as working with their direct managers. To encourage better alignment of the company's goals and objectives, the executives decided to change the organizational structure and concentrated all the decision making for the Americas with the North America team. The executives brought a few managers from South America to join the North America team and help with the process of standardization. This change helped standardize the company's operations, but it also brought cultural issues and conflicts.

## **THE CONFLICT**

Marcelo, and his direct report Tom, had been having frequent conflict for a few months and the rest of the team had started noticing that something was not right. Marcelo and Tom had distinct personalities, nationalities, and they were often unable to put the differences aside and work professionally together. Marcelo liked to communicate openly, to be creative and to be appreciated. While his direct report, Tom, was more independent, liked to have more time alone and was very resistant to change.

Marcelo became Tom's manager about 18 months ago when he was transferred from the Brazil team to the United States, to manage the US Finance team. At first, Marcelo's transition to the US seemed to be working just fine. Marcelo was enjoying his new position and his direct reports. Marcelo would take them for lunch and drinks on Fridays and by all measures, the team was reaching its targets and working well together. After a few months in the position, Marcelo started to get frustrated with some of the behaviors of his direct report, Tom, and took them personally. Tom started to show up late to work, take long lunch breaks, schedule vacations on

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<sup>1</sup> 1 The facts of this case are true; the name of the company and the people have been altered to preserve anonymity

busy weeks and would frequently question Marcelo's ideas and decisions. Tom would regularly challenge Marcelo with questions like "Why do we have to do this? I don't see a purpose for this report." In the beginning Marcelo would explain the reasoning behind the decisions, however he noticed that Tom was questioning everything, and Marcelo felt he was doing it to be annoying.

Because of the interpersonal friction, Marcelo started to get very frustrated. However, he didn't discuss the matter with Tom. Instead, Marcelo discussed his concerns with the other managers. Marcelo's complaints always followed a pattern like: "I don't know what to do with Tom. He is always late, does not care about the work and doesn't listen to me." The other managers would say: "You should have a one-on-one conversation with Tom, let him know how you feel and what is bothering you." Finally, Marcelo accepted their advice and scheduled a time to discuss the matter with Tom. By that time, however, things were very tense, and the meeting did not go well. Tom was upset because he felt falsely accused. He claimed that his work was getting done correctly, even though he wasn't always on time or at the office. After realizing that the meeting did not resolve any of the animosity, Tom talked to the director, John, and said he wanted a new manager, or else he would start looking for a new job within the next month. John had been aware of the friction since the beginning but did not intervene or take assertive actions to resolve the conflict between Marcelo and Tom. After hearing from Tom, he realized the situation was worse than he expected. Under Tom's threat of resignation, he knew it was time to get involved with this conflict.

John felt he had two options. First, he could split the team, so that Tom would report to a different manager. This option would not resolve the conflict, but it would avoid future conflict because Tom and Marcelo would no longer be required to work together regularly. A drawback of this option was that the other managers in the team had heard Marcelo's side of the story, and many believed that Tom was difficult and lazy, so they did not want to have Tom on their team either. Second, John thought he could make a concerted effort to help Marcelo and Tom resolve their differences in a healthy way. He recognized that progress would be slow and difficult, but it would be a win/win outcome if he could pull it off.

### **THE MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE**

As John contemplated how to help resolve the clash between Tom and Marcelo, he decided to write some notes about their characteristics. Table 1 summarizes his observations about the differences between the two.

**Table 1: John's Notes on Marcelo and Tom**

	Marcelo	Tom
Communication	Prefers frequent meetings with small groups; often they are unplanned. He turns a coffee break into a casual work meeting. He encourages full involvement and enjoys the give-and-take in group settings. Seems reluctant to correct a person, even when it's obvious the person is wrong about an idea.	Prefers to write detailed memos to his department. They are often complicated and analytical. He sends them by email wants the recipients to "reply all" to discuss the memos. His email responses are usually very direct and factual. In meetings, he tends to be succinct and sometimes forceful.
Planning	A bit of a dreamer. Likes to talk about the big picture and the big plans to get there. His office has posterboards and flip charts with scribbles and figures all over the place.	"Practicality" is the key word here. Not an optimist or a pessimist – he just wants to make a rock-solid plan and get all the details planned for the next few weeks.
Teamwork	Wants input from everyone. Even non-employees occasionally! Still asks advice from an uncle in Brazil when he is finalizing finance proposals. Also is generous with giving credit. Likes to share good results with anyone who was involved in a project. Sensitive to the relationships within his direct report group.	Not even sure if Tom likes teamwork. I've seen him produce amazing work, but he rarely asks for help, and he doesn't usually accept the suggestions when people do make them.
Professional interactions	I see he likes to maintain his status as the leader of his group. He is warm and welcoming, but he likes his title and the authority that comes with it. New to the team and unfamiliar with some USA norms but is proud of his role.	Sometimes seems unaware of the organizational structure. Sometimes talks to my boss about issues when he should talk to Marcelo. Seems a little disrespectful of authority.
Conflict	Seems like a conflict-avoider person. Doesn't want to have the hard talks with Tom. I wonder if he hopes it will "smooth over" without working on it. He seems truly offended but is being too passive about it.	Reminds me of a bulldozer. Powers ahead without noticing any bumps or boundaries. I don't think he's bitter or mean but kind of oblivious to how he can be harsh and how it affects others in the team. Also shows signs of a temper when people disagree with him.
Interpersonal relations	Definitely cares about people – his direct reports and everyone in Fin. Department. Almost seems like he should be in the HR department. Wants people to like him and like the company. Knows people's kids' and spouse's names!	Gives great advice to people, but only when they ask. Doesn't go out of way to help & isn't patient when people are slower than him. He is sharp but doesn't understand why people won't follow his logic. Or why they can't solve their own problems.

### TRUE COLORS 24 ASSESSMENT

In addition to his observations of Marcelo and Tom, John had the advantage of data from the True Colors 24 personality test (Honaker, 2013). As part of the re-structuring initiative, he required the finance team in North America to take the assessment.

John hired a consulting firm that assisted in developing leaders and high performing teams. John told the team: “This assessment will help us learn more about each other and how to interact better as a team. It is designed to help individuals understand their character traits and their main decision-making approach.”

The True Colors assessment categorizes people into one of four personality styles. Each style is assigned a color code: gold, orange, blue and green. **Gold** describes people who are detail-oriented, structured, organized, realistic and who have a strong sense of right and wrong. **Orange** is the opposite color from gold, people in the orange category are spontaneous, impulsive, high energy, playful, adventurous, and action oriented. **Blue** is for people who are caretakers, sensitive, great listeners, harmony-driven and who value relationships. Finally, **Green** is the opposite of blue and includes people who are very analytical, see the big picture, innovative, future focused and don’t need a lot of recognition (Honaker, 2003). Table 1 shows the self-image of each color and their main characteristics and table 2 illustrates the one-word associate to each color.

**Table 2: Descriptions of the Four Categories**

<p><b>Primary ORANGE</b></p> <p>Energetic, spontaneous, and charming. If you’re an Orange, you tend to be action-oriented and are comfortable taking risks. You probably also tend to be competitive and seek out adventures with opportunities to push the boundaries. Living in the moment and enjoying an adaptable time schedule are important to you.</p>	<p><b>Primary GOLD</b></p> <p>Punctual, organized, and precise. “Golds” tend to need structure and organization. If you’re a Gold, then order, rules, respect, and dependability are important to you. Time is a key part of your life if you’re a Gold personality type. You need to be on time and want others to be punctual as well. Following the plan or schedule is best for you.</p>	<p><b>Primary GREEN</b></p> <p>Analytical, intuitive, and visionary. These are traits of the Green Personality type. “Greens” find innovative thinking and problem solving exciting. If you’re a Green, you tend to be able to see the big picture and able to effectively analyze situations. Thinking outside the box is a real strength. You also have an extreme need to be right.</p>	<p><b>Primary BLUE</b></p> <p>Empathetic, compassionate, and cooperative. “Blues” tend to be very social people. If you’re a Blue, you value relationships and harmony. Genuine kindness, sincerity, and compassion are important to you. You enjoy opportunities to work with others and collaborate and any opportunity to develop a connection.</p>
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(TrueColors, 2019)

**Table 3: One-word Association of the Four Colors**

Primary ORANGE <b>ADVENTUROUS</b>	Primary GOLD <b>TRADITIONAL</b>	Primary GREEN <b>VISIONARY</b>	Primary BLUE <b>NURTURER</b>
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(O’Brian, 2019)

The results of the True Colors assessment gave John some valuable insights. His result showed that gold was his primary color and orange was his weakest. He managed a large group of employees, so John tried to be task oriented, extremely responsible and organized. He was not

very open to change; however, and therefore he was having a hard time dealing with the issues in the team.

Marcelo had blue as his primary color, whereas Tom had the opposite primary color, green. Marcelo preferred a collaborative way of working that resulted in meaningful outcomes. He also liked to apply his imagination and personal values in decision-making, which could have been related to his Brazilian culture. On the other hand, Tom preferred a more efficient decision-making process that resulted in logical outcomes and liked to apply analytical skills to his decisions. The main point was that Marcelo focused on needs, values and relationships, whereas Tom was more of a logical person and appeared to be uncaring and insensitive to Marcelo.

## CONCLUSION

As the year came to an end, John had two weeks to find a way to solve this conflict and bring harmony and effectiveness back to the team. Otherwise, Tom, one of his best employees, said he would leave. John became more familiar with the cultural differences and the personality of the employees based on the True Colors assessment. He was also aware that the team needed more training and information sessions regarding emotional intelligence and the cross-cultural norms so they could better work together. John needed to decide how to approach Marcelo and Tom and had to find a way to solve this conflict without negatively affecting the rest of the team.

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# THE INCREASING PROBLEM WITH TEXTBOOK PIRACY

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## ABSTRACT

*Textbook piracy is a continuous problem that has evolved as the digital era has progressed. Digital rights management (DRM) technology and legal action against pirating websites have been implemented to combat textbook piracy. However, the cheapest option to get a textbook is to download a copy from the Internet, as opposed to renting or purchasing a used copy. This paper conducted a qualitative study to investigate the current problems with student textbook piracy and look at the repercussions on the education industry. The purpose of this research is to assess academic textbook piracy, including its sources, effects, and proposed remedies. This qualitative study includes comments from students, faculty, and textbook publishers regarding their thoughts and opinions on textbook piracy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are a Business Management student. The semester has just started, and your professor tells you that you need to buy an expensive textbook for the class you will only need for a short period of time. One of your friends also told you about a website where you can download the book for free. Tempted with the thought, you are faced with a dilemma. Buy the book or get it for free with the click of a mouse? For many, the latter option may seem like the best choice.

The unlawful use, replication, or distribution of copy-protected textbooks is textbook piracy. Students have turned to these illegal measures because of the rising cost of textbooks. Textbook piracy has been a topic of concern for many years. According to the Canadian Alliance of Student Groups in 2020 (Nemec, 2020), 50% of postsecondary students in Canada reported accessing free or inexpensive alternative resources, such as illegally obtained textbooks. In 2021, 78% of US students purchased course materials, 35% rented, and 30% downloaded materials for free (Follett, 2022).

In addition to rising school costs, the average cost of textbooks has risen approximately four times faster than the rate of inflation (Pilgrim, 2020). Individual textbooks routinely exceed \$200 and because of this high cost of textbooks, 65% of students skip purchasing their required books. (Pilgrim, 2020).

Internet piracy has been a major concern for decades and can be traced back to the early days of the Internet. The development and evolution of online piracy have been influenced by technological advancements, changes in consumer behavior, and legal and governmental responses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In an effort to combat Internet piracy, Congress approved the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) in 2004. The DMCA provides copyright holders with legal protection and a mechanism for the removal of copyrighted content from Internet sites (Johnson, 2020). In the 2010's, online piracy continued to increase as new technologies and file-sharing sites were created. In addition to The Pirate Bay, many other sites arose that allowed users to download even very large files using torrents. These new sites saw a 1390% increase from 2016 – 2019 (Spajic, 2023). The ultimate contributing factor to online piracy has been the increase in users' understanding and feeling comfortable working with technology. In addition, the increased speed of the Internet has significantly decreased the amount of time it takes to download unlicensed copyrighted material.

### Current State of Textbook Piracy

Digital technologies have made it easier to copy, share, and distribute copyrighted materials, including textbooks. Google and other search engines have made it easy for students to find the textbooks they require and provide them with a link to download the material. Many of the textbooks are in simple “.pdf” format which can be directly downloaded to any digital device. While not all copyrighted textbooks that are available online can be easily located with a simple browser search, continued diligence typically results in locating the needed textbook (Hati et al., 2020).

Because textbook piracy is an unlawful and often unreported practice, there is little documentation on its overall scope. Many studies, however, have tried to determine the prevalence of textbook piracy in academia.

Use of digital resources continues to increase. In 2020, one of every five purchased materials were digital products, a huge increase from the ratio of one of every seven paid materials in 2019. From spring 2019 to spring 2020, the percentage of students who downloaded free textbooks doubled, from 14% to 26% (Nemec, 2020).

Many factors influence students' pro-sharing attitude. Some of these include their immersion in technology and the lack of a deeper moral understanding of why watching movies online or downloading music is illegal. A strong majority (70%) of younger online users find nothing wrong with online piracy (Vuleta, 2023).

According to digital piracy statistics, the millennial generation is most likely to consider piracy normal. Several factors contribute to this normalization, such as their pro-sharing attitude and preoccupation with the online world (Valuta, 2023). Table 1 (Follet, 2022) shows how textbook piracy has been increasing at an alarming rate over the last few years.

Year	% of Pirated Textbooks
2019	13%
2020	26%
2021	30%

Adapted from Follet (2022). Outcomes made accessible: Improving outcomes and retention while lowering the cost of college learning materials. *Follett Higher Education White Paper*. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://higher.ed.follett.com/insight-content/outcomes-made-accessible-improving-outcomes-and-retention-while-lowering-the-cost-of-college-learning-materials/](https://higher.ed.follett.com/insight-content/outcomes-made-accessible-improving-outcomes-and-retention-while-lowering-the-cost-of-college-learning-materials/) Accessed December 4, 2023.

There are several legal ways to acquire a textbook. Typically, new textbooks are more expensive, but they may contain updated content and supplementary materials. Used textbooks can be a cost-effective alternative, but they may not be in ideal shape and might not include all the resources that come with new textbooks, such as pass codes to online homework assignments. Renting textbooks is becoming an increasingly popular alternative for students seeking to save money. Most campus bookstores and online sellers provide rental alternatives, allowing students to utilize the textbook for a semester or year at a lesser cost than purchasing a new textbook. If a student does not need to keep the textbook once the course has ended, textbook rental may be the best choice. E-books are downloadable digital textbooks that can be read on a student's electronic device. They are usually cheaper than printed textbooks and can be accessed from anywhere there is a web connection.

## METHODOLOGY

To investigate the issues of textbook piracy a qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative research is effective when researching a complex subject such as textbook piracy, which is illegal. It is difficult to study this issue outside the context in which it occurs (Benbasat et al., 1987). It may be difficult to get honest answers to questions regarding textbook piracy, therefore the qualitative method will allow the researcher to conduct probing questions (Benbasat et al., 1987).

In this study students from the author's classes were asked to respond to a question posted in a discussion forum. Out of approximately 200 students 121 participated. Students were junior and senior undergraduates, who it was felt would have had more exposure to textbook piracy. The discussion forum proposed the following: "I have found that there are many sites online where you can download .pdf versions of textbooks for free. Have you ever, or would you ever do this?". Faculty members were then asked to give their input on textbook piracy and if they would attempt to deter their students from downloading pirated textbooks or encourage them. Finally, five representatives from textbook publishers that were contacted were questioned. Open-ended questions were posed to the representatives to understand the depth of the problem

with pirated textbooks in the publishing industry and how it has affected the industry and their business plan for the future. The study was conducted at one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Students in HBCUs tend to be more financially disadvantaged, therefore a heightened knowledge of textbook piracy could be present.

## FINDINGS

Below are the findings from the interviews with the students, faculty, and textbook publishers. Throughout the study students identified reasons why they pirated textbooks. After reviewing the comments from the students, several areas were identified that caused them to pirate textbooks, including the costs of the textbooks and the need for the textbook for the course.

### Costs of textbooks

Textbook piracy is a global issue affecting students everywhere. The high cost of textbooks continues to be a significant motivation for students to utilize pirated textbooks (Weisbaum, 2016). Students are concerned about their grades if they do not have the required textbook.

Although textbook piracy is still in its infancy, it has already had a significant influence on the way students access and utilize educational resources. As technology evolves, it is likely that textbook piracy strategies and techniques will also evolve (Gakhar & King, 2020).

According to Welding (2023), the high price of books was the top reason given by students who decided not to obtain the required texts, however 38 percent said they did not want them or did not believe they would need them.

The cost of printed textbooks has risen by 65 percent over the past decade (Pilgrim, 2020). In order to recover their investment and compensate for lower sales, academic publishers have established high prices for college textbooks.

Normally, students pay hundreds of dollars per semester for tuition alone, often through student loans. The high cost of textbooks adds substantially to student loan debt. According to a study, 65% of students reported not acquiring a required textbook due to its high cost, with 94% of those students reporting that they were concerned that it would affect their grades (Welding, 2023). These high costs also have a greater impact on low-income students who already have trouble trying to make ends meet.

Students are often caught in a lose-lose situation. They need the textbooks for class, but the costs are prohibitive. As long as the market is controlled by a handful of publishing giants that profit from students' necessities, it could stay that way. Students have to find ways to pay for textbooks. Around one-third (30%) of students reported paying for textbooks with financial aid (Welding, 2023).

The overall student loan debt in the United States hit \$1.7 trillion at the end of 2022, with the average student loan debt after graduation being \$37,574. (Welding, 2023).

According to a Student PIRGs poll, 15% of students reported borrowing money to pay for textbooks, with an average loan amount of \$1,205. According to the poll, 48% of students

chose not to purchase a required textbook because of its high price, with 29% of those students saying that they had postponed or delayed medical care to pay for textbooks. Students also claim that to purchase their textbooks they had to miss meals and family visits (Lederman, 2018).

High textbook prices may have long term impact on students. Ultimately this could prevent the student from investing in their future by buying a home or starting a business. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, students are 1.6% less likely to purchase a home by the age 30 for every \$1,000 increase in student loan debt (Hati et al., 2020).

Large amounts of student loan debt can also affect students' career options and choices, as they may be pressured to pursue higher-paying employment rather than pursuing their dream job in order to repay their loans. Students who cannot afford to purchase the required textbooks may not have the appropriate tools for academic success, ultimately decreasing their future employment opportunities and earning potential (King & Gakhar, 2019).

The high cost of textbooks can pose substantial academic and psychological difficulties for students. The stress of being unable to afford necessities such as food and shelter can negatively impact a student's mental health. Financial difficulties may increase anxiety and cause depression, making it more difficult for students to concentrate on their education (Hinojosa, 2020).

Because of the aforementioned issues, some students believe that obtaining textbooks illegally through online piracy is the only option they have to get the required materials they need to complete their education.

### **Need for Textbook**

Textbooks are a crucial component of many courses because they offer students the information and background knowledge necessary to comprehend course material. Textbooks may also include supplementary resources, such as study guides, Internet access codes, and practice examinations. Yet, the extent to which textbooks are necessary can vary among courses, teachers, and schools. Some courses may need students to purchase many textbooks, while others may heavily rely on lecture notes, Internet resources, or other types of teaching materials.

Professors may ask students to purchase textbooks they never use in class for a variety of reasons. Instructors may require students to purchase textbooks to guarantee that they have access to all the course information, even if it is not specifically taught in the class. Teachers may believe that the students will be better prepared for examinations and other assessments and will have a solid foundation of knowledge about the course available to them.

The number of students who purchase textbooks that are never used in class depends on a number of factors, such as the teaching style of the teacher, the course subject, and the usefulness of the textbook to the course subject.

Underutilized textbooks are quite prevalent, and students may be electing not to purchase textbooks because of financial concerns. Before requiring textbooks, teachers should consider the cost of textbooks and the possible financial burden it may have on their students. Teachers often do not consider the financial position of the students.

More than a third of students reported not having their prescribed textbook on the first day of class because they wanted to know if the textbooks listed in the syllabus or at the bookstore would be necessary for the course (Koenig, 2019).

In recent years, the proportion of students who have the majority of their textbooks purchased on the first day of class has decreased. In 2019-2020, only 34% of students had the majority of their textbooks before the start of sessions. 67% of students who did not receive their textbooks by the first day stated that they waited to determine whether the materials were necessary (Nemec, 2020).

Some students lack access to all materials in textbooks. In 2019-2020, around 28% of students report not obtaining at least one of their required textbooks, up from 25% in 2018-2019. Although 57% of this group identify price as a factor, they also cite other reasons, such as not desiring the textbook or not believing it was necessary (45%), other students saying it was unnecessary (35%), or the professor saying it was unnecessary (29%) (Nemec, 2020).

Sixty percent of respondents indicated they did not believe their decisions had affected their grades. But around two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that their academic performance would improve if they had access to all textbooks on the first day of class (Lederman, 2018).

Because professors often require students to purchase textbooks that are never or rarely used in the course is another reason students claim for resorting to textbook piracy. “Students want to wait to see if the professor is really going to use it and if it’s really going to be necessary for class,” says Lisa Malat, COO of Barnes & Noble College (Welding, 2023).

The high costs, along with students’ perceptions of the necessity of a textbook are reasons students delay or even avoid purchasing textbooks. (Welding, 2023).

By obtaining illegally pirated textbooks, these problems are no longer a concern for the students, so they feel better prepared for class and feel their overall performance can improve. It no longer matters if the textbook will be used in class. If it is free, then it is of no concern to them. Table 2 (Vorias, 2021) shows the reasons students avoid purchasing textbooks.

Why Students Avoid Textbooks	Percentage
Students who delay or avoid purchasing required materials	85%
Students who say this decision negatively impacted grades	50%
Students who cite cost as a reason for not purchasing	91%
Students interested in including the costs of textbooks with tuition	78%

Adapted from Vorias, T. (2021). College textbooks: The final blow of higher education’s affordability crisis. *The Michigan Daily*. August 10, 2021. <https://www.michigandaily.com/opinion/columns/college-textbooks-the-final-blow-of-higher-educations-affordability-crisis/> Accessed Jan 18, 2023.

## Methods of Textbook Piracy

As students' knowledge of their ability to get their textbooks for free increases, it becomes an easy decision for them. The legal methods mentioned above are costly and the pirated option is free.

Campbell's Biology, eleventh edition, is one of the most popular biology textbooks among university students worldwide. A new copy of the eleventh edition of Campbell Biology, for instance, might cost more than \$200. A digital version, or e-book, of the same edition can be much less expensive, starting at approximately \$55; a new loose-leaf version on Amazon costs more than \$90 (Powell et al, 2021). However, no matter how low the costs become, the .pdf version of the book can still be easily found on the Internet for free. For a student, saving even \$55 can have a positive impact. Even students without financial difficulties may be unwilling to pay for something they can get for free. This generation of students have been raised in a time when music, movies, and games are freely available through online piracy. The generation is also tech savvy and has little problem finding what they are looking for. There seems to be little or no ethical concerns from the students or any fear of legal ramifications.

Pirated textbooks appear on a variety of sites, including "pirate libraries" that show in Google searches, unlawful PDFs on eBay, counterfeit physical copies on Amazon, hidden file-sharing groups on Facebook, and the sharing of USB drives by individuals. (Jenkins et al, 2020).

In November 2022, those operating Z-Library, a popular site for pirating textbooks, were arrested and charged with various crimes including copyright infringement, wire fraud, and money laundering (Woodcock, 2022).

Library Genesis was a site that was operated by Z-Library, but they were able to keep a mirror site running to allow continued access to pirated textbooks (Woodcock, 2022). As sites are identified and closed, others open to take their place. In many cases it is the very same site that has just been renamed and rebranded.

Many times, textbooks can be found with a simple Google search. Other times students have to be more tech savvy to search the Internet or the dark web, but with a little perseverance, pirated copies can usually be found. The author conducted a search of 30 textbooks that were currently being used in the business school and was able to find pirated versions of each.

Peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing networks and chat forums also provide access to pirated textbooks. Social media sites may also be a way to find pirated textbooks. Students can search social media platforms for organizations or sites that specialize in distributing pirated resources, such as textbooks. Some groups and pages may be private and require an invitation or approval to join. By far the easiest way to obtain pirated textbooks through social media is to post a comment asking if someone has access to a textbook or can tell you where to find one.

Reddit is another popular forum where you can find the textbooks you are looking for. First you can simply search [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com) for the textbook, If the initial search is unsuccessful, you can simply create a post asking for someone to provide you with the specific textbook, by including the book name, author(s), edition, and ISBN.

Not all textbooks can be located online for free download. However, this does not mean that a textbook cannot be obtained for free. There's a good chance other students are also looking for the same book, which cannot be found on Reddit. Reddit also provides students with instructions for finding free textbooks (Reddit, 2023). Students can also utilize the non-technical way of pirating textbooks by simply using a copy machine to make a duplicate copy for a classmate.

When textbooks are purchased online through websites such as Amazon or through a book publishers' website, they are protected through digital rights management (DRM). DRM involves encrypting digital content with a unique key, so that only authorized devices may access it. This can include limits on the total number of devices that can access the material, as well as limitations on copying, printing, or distributing the content. DRM solutions can also be used to prevent content modification and reverse engineering. DRM is designed to protect the intellectual property rights of content creators and distributors, and to generate income through the sale or licensing of digital material. DRM is widely used in the digital textbook market (Reddit, 2023).

Typically, leased versions of textbooks arrive in ".azw4 format", whereas the purchased editions arrive in ".mobi format", both of which are DRM-protected. Certain piracy websites instruct users on how to remove the DRM that is intended to protect the copyright. DeDRM is a method to remove Digital Rights Management (DRM) restrictions from digital content. This allows the content to be shared on any device (Reddit, 2023).

DeDRM is a controversial topic, as it may violate copyright laws and is generally seen as unlawful. DeDRM technologies are not endorsed by e-book publishers or authors, and their use might have legal and ethical repercussions. Users should evaluate the possible implications of using DeDRM technologies and to prioritize ethical behavior and intellectual property protection (Reddit, 2023). To use DeDRM you need to have a specific level of technology knowledge, but instructions easily found online.

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

There are potential solutions available to curb the increasing amount of textbook piracy. Open-source textbooks are freely available to students. If professors would adopt these textbooks students would not have to pirate a textbook for their class. Another potential solution is to appeal to the ethical issue of textbook piracy. It is against the law and breaking the law has potential negative ramifications. Ethical considerations were useful in preventing the pirating of music (Nemec, 2020). Government programs have been created that may reduce the amount of textbook piracy. Most students agree that they would prefer textbooks to be included in the cost of their tuition (Welding, 2023). Finally, textbook publishers are playing their role by offering books to rent at a much more discounted price.



## **Open-Source Textbooks**

A small number of schools have adopted open-source resource texts to address access and cost concerns. This eliminates the total cost of teaching materials for the student. Only around 6% of schools have adopted this curriculum model to date (Pilgrim, 2020). Open-source material is peer-reviewed academic content distributed under an intellectual property license permitting free use.

Open-source textbooks have the potential to save money for students. Open-source book proponents, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Student Public Interest Research Group, emphasize the affordability of such textbooks as a solution to the escalating cost of college tuition. Textbook publishers adamantly oppose the use of open-source textbooks because it threatens their overall business model of selling textbooks to students (OnlineSchools.org, 2023).

OpenStax has served over 14 million students with its free textbooks. More than 36,000 instructors have adopted OpenStax textbooks. OpenStax textbooks are now used in 60% of universities that are degree-granting (Falk, 2020). In 2020, OpenStax has saved students approximately \$1.2 billion in textbook costs (Falk, 2020).

Open-source textbooks are a valuable resource for universities and a great benefit for students, however these benefits can only be realized if instructors at universities choose to use open-source material as the textbook for their courses. Table 3 (Jenkins et al., 2020) shows a list of open-source resources available.

Source	Offerings
OpenStax	Operated by Rice University providing peer reviewed, quality open textbooks with interactive components
Open Textbook Library	Hundreds of complete, open college-level textbooks collected by the University of Minnesota.
BC OpenEd	A curated collection of open textbooks, many reviewed by British Columbia faculty.
WikiBooks	A project of the Wikimedia Foundation, this collection of group written textbooks in a variety of sources follows rules similar to Wikipedia.
Project Gutenberg	Find the full text of classics and public domain works from the first massive eBook creating organization in existence. Nothing fancy here, just files with the full text.
Google Books	Some books presented in this mass conglomeration of scanned books are fully available, most are excerpted.
American Institute of Mathematics	A list of open textbooks in various subdisciplines of Mathematics approved by the AIM editorial board.
Aviation Handbooks and Manuals	Open Textbooks on Aviation from the Federal Aviation Administration (US).
FreeBooks4Doctors	Free medical textbooks.
Lyryx Open Textbooks	Lyryx offers high-quality open textbooks in the fields of accounting, mathematics, and economics. They also have optional added (paid) resources such as homework and quizzes to accompany the open textbooks.
Bloomsbury Academic	Bloomsbury is a well-respected and longtime UK publisher who has released some of their academic titles for open access/open education.
Adapted from Jenkins, J.J., Sánchez, L.A., Schraedley, M.A.K., Hannans, J., Navick, N. & Young, J. (2020). Textbook broke: Textbook affordability as a social justice issue. <i>Journal of Interactive Media in Education</i> , 2020(1), p.3.	

### Appeal to Students' Ethical Considerations

There are also several ethical issues that students may face when pirating textbooks. Copyright laws are in place to protect the intellectual property of authors and publishers. Textbook piracy violates these laws. When it involves taking and using another person's work without their consent, piracy can be viewed as theft (Hati et al., 2020). When students acquire these textbooks online for free, they are aware that it is illegal but also aware that there is little to no chance of any repercussion to them. So, it comes down to the ethical issues. But when students weigh the ethical issues with the high costs of textbooks, which can often have significant impact on their financial situation, the lure of the free textbook outweighs any ethical concerns they may have (Lakkaraju, 2022).

Students who engage in piracy contribute to a greater culture of unethical behavior. This can continue a cycle of dishonesty and ultimately have detrimental effects on both students which they may carry into other areas of their lives and society as a whole (Hati et al., 2020).

Textbook piracy can hurt the publishing industry by reducing the profits made from textbook sales. This can cause a decline in investment in the research and development of educational materials. It is essential that students understand that piracy is not a victimless crime. Publishers and authors devote significant time and money to creating and producing textbooks. They rely on textbook revenues to finance their work. When students pirate textbooks, they essentially take and use this work without permission, which can have major consequences for the authors of these textbooks (Davis & Bialik, 2020).

However, even with these looming legal and ethical issues, students continue to pirate textbooks. Students of this generation are comfortable with downloading illegal material, such as music and movies, so it is no surprise that this age group continues to resort to textbook piracy.

From the latest Internet piracy statistics, it seems this generation is taking piracy to new levels of popularity. Textbook piracy is just seen as an extension of this. They have never been punished before, so they do not fear any negative ramifications.

### **THE DANGERS OF TEXTBOOK PIRACY**

There are some dangers to downloading pirated textbooks. Recent research by Kaspersky Labs demonstrates that many illegally acquired pirated textbooks include viruses. During the 2021 academic year, 356,000 incidents (Spajic, 2023) were detected in which a user downloaded an infected digital textbook (Spajic, 2023). Kaspersky classified the types of viruses included with pirated textbooks. The most frequently found virus was the Stalk worm, which spreads via USB flash drives and the local network and is frequently the forerunner to a more severe attack. Although Stalk does not exhibit any immediately dangerous behavior, it can facilitate the deployment of further malware by an attacker (Spajic, 2023). Consumers who download pirated textbooks are 28 times more likely to get their device infected with malware or viruses (Spajic 2023). If students are compelled to use illegal sources to find textbooks, they should exercise caution.

Textbook piracy falls under the same legal category as legally downloading copyrighted movies or music. Many of the offers for pirated textbooks are phishing scams, asking for credit card information from gullible victims before allowing them to access the free copy (Powell et al., 2021). Many sites advertise VPNs for the user to purchase to make sure the download is secure, thus another way to extort money from those looking for free textbooks.

Websites that offer pirated textbooks are often not legitimate, as they participate in illicit duplication, sharing, or distribution of copyrighted goods. Downloading pirated textbooks through these websites is a breach of copyright law and may have legal and ethical consequences.

Pirated textbooks may contain errors, omissions, or out-of-date content, which can have a severe impact on the learning and performance of students. The use of pirated textbooks may also restrict students' access to supplementary resources, such as online study aids, discussion forums, and teacher support, which are frequently included in authentic textbooks.

Copyright infringement, which textbook piracy falls under, is illegal and can result in fines ranging from \$750 to \$30,000 (Lakkaraju, 2022). Textbook piracy is illegal and can have serious repercussions, such as criminal prosecution, academic sanctions, and ethical implications. Downloading unlicensed content can also expose students to malware and other security

threats. Students who choose to do this should be very diligent to ensure they are not exposed to these risks.

## RESULTS

The result from the study will be presented below, showing student comments, faculty comments, and finally publisher comments. The first results come from students' comments with their experiences with issues that face them and their experience with textbook piracy. Regarding the high costs of textbooks, students made various comments about their experiences with textbook piracy. Textbook prices are a large contributor to textbook piracy. (Weisbaum, 2016).

### Student Comments

Textbook costs seemed to be one of the prevailing themes.

Student Comment
<i>The price of textbooks has gotten out of hand and as a result of this, I prefer to download books for free online. The benefits of downloading books include the convenience and affordability.</i>

The following student expresses frustration with the cost of textbooks at the bookstore, so purchasing from online sites such as Amazon gave some cost relief. Renting textbooks was also more cost effective. However, once a site that offer free textbooks was found, that became the method of choice.

Student Comment
<i>The price of textbooks has always been super expensive; my first semester of college I noticed how outrageous the prices were for textbooks in the bookstore, so I purchased my textbooks from different websites like Amazon. Renting or purchasing textbooks I needed for class wasn't even half the price the textbooks were in the bookstore. The purchase of textbooks became a huge weight I got to lift off my shoulders, especially when I came across a website that provided free textbook pdf versions online. The website was super resourceful and came in handy for different classes that I took. For the classes I couldn't find I would stick to Amazon or another website where I am able to rent the book; till this day I still use the free textbook online for my graduate classes.</i>

As previously mentioned, (Lederman, 2018), students may have to choose between food or textbooks. The following student express this concern.

Student Comment
<i>I have had to choose books over a meal plan.</i>

A big concern was that the textbook that was listed in the bookstore or on the faculty member's syllabus may not be necessary (Koenig, 2019), therefore students wait to purchase the textbook after the first day of class. While professors may want students to show up to class on the first day with their books (Nemec, 2020), this frustrates the students, uncertain about which professors will use the textbook or not. Students are concerned about their grades if they do not have the required textbook. This has given way to more textbook piracy.

Student Comment
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<i>[One of my professors] requires that we show up to class on the first day with our textbook or we will be penalized. I don't think that's fair because we have all experienced times when we didn't need the textbooks. I always showed up on the first day to hear what the professor says about the book and if we need to buy it or not. Sometimes a professor says it's ok to buy a previous version which is usually much cheaper. I don't want to spend \$200 if I'm not going to use the book.</i>
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Discovering textbooks are required but not used for class has led to student frustration.

Student Comment
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<i>Finally, after all these years we are finally heard. Textbooks are outrageously priced. Only purchased to sit on the desk. I have taken so many classes where we didn't even open the textbook. Everything we needed was all there in the PowerPoint or lecture.</i>
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The next students have experience with purchasing textbooks that are rarely used. Because of this, students sought online free solutions they felt were easily found.

Student Comment
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<i>I have a website where you just input the title/ISBN and the book will be pulled up. I feel justified because I am already paying double the tuition with no textbooks included. Every year we have to purchase a new textbook and they are rarely ever used. Most of the information in the books is online anyways for the most part so why would I pay so much for something I could get for free?</i>
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Although students originally purchase their textbooks when they initially enter college, they find more cost-effective solutions with textbook piracy.

Student Comment
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<i>This was one of the issues I have faced during my time in school I started out buying books for every class and it financially drained me, so I switched to downloading my books for class online and it feels like a financial burden lifted off me.</i>
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<i>There were times in my first year where I purchased or rented books I never used, so I have used other alternatives like downloading the book from an online source, or simply taking pictures of someone else's books when I couldn't find a free version. The price of books has gotten astronomical over the years. When I began graduate school, my professor recommended a site called vitalsource.com to find cost effective books online. This was something I found relieving, but wished I knew about it sooner. With other expenses hanging over the heads of many students, there is no question as to why finding PDFs or other free discounted options is a better route financially.</i>
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<i>I am grateful for the Internet and search engines. It has been a game changer and allowed me to relieve some of the financial burdens of being a student.</i>
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While all textbooks may not be found online for free, students with the right technological expertise can be very successful in finding the free textbooks.

Student Comment
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<i>The benefit of being a student in the age of the Internet is having resources to find alternatives. There are several websites that offer textbook pdfs for free. As a resourceful student, I currently leverage this approach whenever I begin a new course. Before buying it out right, I always search Google for an available .pdf, and have been relatively successful taking this approach. It has saved me hundreds.</i>
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Student Comment
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<i>I have used this technique before I buy a book for a course. 8/10 I will find a pdf version online</i>
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Z-Library was a popular website for downloading pirated textbooks (Woodcock, 2022). This is just one of the resources that are available to students.

Student Comment
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<i>I can download the purchased books from Z-library without payment in pdf files and collect the information I need. It has made things easy for me. It seems unfair for students - who are already financially limited to incur additional costs and pay thousands of dollars on top of tuition. Online libraries are a very good source of information, and it makes sure to reduce the challenges for students and smoothen their lives. I prefer the pdf version of the books rather than paying a lot for them.</i>
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**Student Comment**

*Guys, if you haven't seen this before, you need to! Why spend \$500+ on textbooks each semester when you can download them for free? The textbook industry has been screwing us, now it's time for us to screw them. These sites will potentially save you HUNDREDS on your books! I have found PDF downloads of 75% of the books I needed. Enjoy!*

Reddit is another popular site for downloading textbooks.

**Student Comments**

*By checking online, I discovered at times there are free PDF's available for downloads, but if you were to buy the same text from the bookstore it costs arms and a leg. Reddit is a good tool in help looking for textbooks, often you will find others who were seeking the same textbooks and what website they used to get it.*

While there are many sites available to download pirated textbooks, sometimes it takes no more than a simple Google search.

**Student Comment**

*Whenever I am searching for a .PDF of a book, I usually start with googling the ISBN and seeing the results that pop up. Its hit or miss for the most part, but I have been able to find some books for some of my classes.*

When students find these .pdf books or sites that provide free textbooks, they are likely to share it with other students.

**Student Comment**

*I can totally agree with you about the relief I felt when I gained access to a site that allowed me to download PDFs for the required text. Literally as soon as I was given the site, I sent it to everyone that I knew in college or attending school. It has been a huge help and I always feel a sigh of relief when I find books that I need on the site*

There are potential dangers and ethical issues concerning textbook piracy. Pirating someone else's work is considered theft (Hati et al, 2020). Students are aware that downloading pirated textbooks is illegal, but they don't feel threatened by any potential punishment, nor do they have any ethical concerns (Lakkaraju, 2022).

Student Comment
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<i>Downloading textbooks for free can be considered illegal as they are still under copyright. But I consider it like this. The Internet is said to be a place where information can be accessed easily and if someone else has taken the opportunity to make textbooks easily available for free I definitely can't complain and I would go with the best and cheapest option available to me.</i>
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Other potential dangers include downloading textbook from sites that could infect the students' computer with malware and/or viruses (Spajic, 2023).

Student Comment
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<i>There are also websites that you can indeed download the PDF file and use it just like that. The website might be sketchy but it gets the job done.</i>
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### Faculty Comments

Faculty members were also interviewed to get their feedback. While getting comments from faculty members, they also understand that the prices of textbooks are unreasonable.

Faculty Comment
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<i>Maybe the textbook publishers deserve this. They have been fleecing students for years.</i>
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Students from lower-income schools feel the costs pressure even more. This study was conducted at an HBCU

Faculty Comment
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<i>I teach at an HBCU, so our students come from different backgrounds than students at other universities. Budgets are tight and many of them are working one or more jobs just to pay for school. We have many who are single parents. If there is a way for them to save some money, I'm all for it (pirating textbooks).</i>
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Faculty members even admitted to making their students aware of these free textbook options.

Faculty Comment
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<i>I have told my students that there is a free version of the textbook we are using for this class available online. I don't actually give them the link but they all know how to use Google.</i>
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Using open-source textbooks are available to students at not costs. Many faculty are aware of, and use, open-source material, which takes financial burden off their students.

Faculty Comment
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<i>If faculty would start using more open-source material, then this wouldn't be a problem. There are a lot of good choices in open source. I use it for my class...and it's free</i>
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One faculty member acknowledges the efforts put in by textbook authors and that they should be rewarded for their efforts. The faculty member believed that textbook rentals could reduced textbook piracy while still giving credit and monetary returns to the authors.

Faculty Comment
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<i>Many academics spend a lot of time writing textbooks, which include exercises, exams, and other useful information. They deserve to be paid for their work. The prices do tend to be high, so it would be good if they could be delivered in a less expensive manner. Many publishers are allowing students to rent textbooks at a much cheaper price. I know this has helped many of my students.</i>
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When students consider the ethical issues with textbook costs, the lure of the free textbook can overcome ethical considerations they may have (Lakkaraju, 2022). Ultimately faculty member believed that it was up to the student to make the decision to pirate textbooks even though there are ethical considerations.

Faculty Comment
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<i>Our students understand the ethical issues and the risks associated with downloading stuff from the Internet. I'm not their priest, I'm their teacher. It's up to them what they choose to do.</i>
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One faculty member referred back to the days when Napster was popular with the illegal downloading of music, implying that students have been pirating material for a while so textbook piracy is just an obvious step for them.

Faculty Comments
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<i>With the prices of textbooks, I'm surprised it has taken this long for students to start doing this. They have been downloading music for years. I remember Napster.</i>
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Faculty members believed that many students are tech savvy enough to find pirated textbooks.

<b>Faculty Comment</b>
<i>Today's students are more tech savvy, so I think many of them have already figured it out.</i>

<b>Faculty Comment</b>
<i>It's only going to get worse. Students will figure it out and it will snowball. The textbook publishers should be worried.</i>

After learning about textbook piracy, two faculty members were more than willing to inform their students.

<b>Faculty Comment</b>
<i>I'm all for telling my students!</i>

<b>Faculty Comment</b>
<i>I've been teaching here for over 20 years, and I have seen the struggles that students have with paying for school. Textbook prices are outrageous. I always try to use older versions, so the books aren't as expensive. But students still come to my office crying about their financial situation. I have personally bought textbooks for students out of my own pocket. Now that I know students can get their books for free, you're damn right I'm going to tell them.</i>

### **Publishers' Comments**

Students have the option of keeping or reselling second-hand textbooks when they have completed a course, however digital products offered by Cengage, Pearson, McGraw-Hill and other textbook publishers are rented and the license expire after a defined term. This renders the textbook useless at the end of the rental period. This software cannot be duplicated by students so they must purchase the license from the textbook publisher. Students are required to purchase access codes to have access to the material they need to complete homework assignments for their classes. This is a method that publishers have started to use to combat textbook piracy.

<b>Publisher Comment</b>
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<p><i>We are starting to use products with access codes more often. This forces the students to purchase the code to do the work for the class. We have really been pushing this method which can ultimately help us reduce the textbook piracy we are seeing in the industry. It seems like other book sellers have also caught on. Access codes are the future of textbooks.</i></p>
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Several textbook publishers have adjusted their pricing policies to make textbooks more affordable for students. This involves giving cheaper e-book editions of textbooks as well as textbook rentals. Some textbook publishers have cooperated with educators and institutions to produce customized resources for students. This may involve the creation of open educational resources or digital textbooks that are less prone to piracy. To stop the circulation of pirated textbooks, publishers have also taken legal action against pirate websites and even individuals.

Some textbook publishers have focused on education and awareness efforts to inform students and teachers of the potential legal and ethical implications of textbook piracy. This may mean providing information about copyright laws and encouraging the use of legal sources for textbooks. Students who engage in textbook piracy may face legal action and academic punishments. In addition to these effects, students should also be aware of the number of risks involved with textbook piracy.

<b>Publisher Comment</b>
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<p><i>We are trying to work with the universities to get them to purchase university licenses for our products. By selling such a large amount we would be able to significantly reduce the cost of the access codes and universities could include the lower costs in the students' tuition with very little impact. Students wouldn't even notice a \$50 or \$60 increase in their tuition. Then they would have unlimited access to all the courses we offer at no cost to them. We think it's a win-win situation for universities and students.</i></p>
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## CONCLUSION

No one can predict the future of textbook piracy. The growth of textbook piracy may lead to a greater emphasis on open-source options. Open Source can provide a cost-effective and flexible alternative to traditional textbooks, and educators and students may use them more frequently to avoid the legal and ethical consequences of piracy. Publishers moving more toward a model that requires access codes will eliminate pirating for their products.

Increased efforts to prevent textbook piracy, including legal action against pirating websites may have an impact, however this has been tried in the music and movie industry with little success. Once one site is taken down, it re-opens under another name. Greater awareness and emphasis on the ethical and legal use of textbooks can result in a heightened awareness. As sites that provide pirated textbooks become more detectable and the Fed starts to crack down more, many move to the dark web, where it is difficult for anyone to track, making the books readily available to students (Woodcock, 2020).

Although progress has been slow, the federal government has recently made efforts to curb the rising cost of textbooks. The following represents some of the key strategies the government is using to address the issue.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), which became law in 2008, prohibits publishers from bundling textbooks with other materials unless they are completely essential for the course and requires that publishers disclose textbook costs to universities. In the interest of helping students make educated judgments about their textbook purchases, the law also requires that schools and universities provide details on the necessary texts in course schedules (Hinojosa, 2020).

The Affordable College Textbook Act would give grant funding to encourage the creation and use of open educational resources and other low-cost alternatives for textbooks. This would mark a possible step toward making instructional resources more accessible and inexpensive for students (Hinojosa, 2020)

Educators, publishers, and legislators are collaborating to create new and inventive methods to make educational resources available, while ensuring that charges are acceptable and equitable. Open educational materials, subsidies, and tax credits can help make higher education cheaper and more accessible to all students.

Publishers may have to consider reducing the price of textbooks to make them more affordable for students. This could decrease the motivation for students to pirate textbooks, but pirating textbooks for free would still be the most economical option. The government could strengthen copyright laws and enforcement mechanisms. Copyright laws should be updated to keep up with the advancements in technology. Additionally, copyright laws should be enforced strictly to deter students from engaging in piracy. Educational institutions should also increase awareness of copyright laws and their implications to encourage students to respect intellectual property rights. Publishers should also consider providing free or discounted access to supplementary materials to students who lawfully purchase or access their textbooks. This can improve the value of textbooks and reduce the motivation for students to engage in textbook piracy.

It is possible that textbook piracy will continue to grow as long as textbook costs remain high. With the growth of digital technology, sharing and accessing pirated information has become easier than ever. This trend will undoubtedly continue to grow as new technologies and ways to share textbooks emerge. Even if the cost of textbooks decreases, the costs will still not be lower than the free textbooks that are available online. It has been suggested that the cost of textbooks be included in the cost of tuition. This would be a way to prevent textbook piracy.

The study shown in this paper merely provides a snapshot of the current level of textbook piracy and cannot accurately predict its future growth. It is essential for educators, publishers, and students to continue working to find new and inventive ways to make educational materials available while obeying copyright laws and upholding ethical and legal behavior.

Many faculty members are also concerned and frustrated with the high price of textbooks. They often see students coming to class unprepared without textbooks, realizing the reason is that they cannot afford the textbook for the class. But what are they to do? To complete the course the textbook is required, so their hands are tied.

In conclusion, to show the extent of textbook piracy at our university, every syllabus of every faculty in the business school was reviewed. Thirty faculty members use textbooks in their courses. All 30 of the textbooks were available online for free download. One course that stood out required 3 different textbooks which would cost the students over \$500 if purchased at the university bookstore (which many students must do to use their financial aid). As faculty members we must realize the high costs of textbooks are a problem for many students and we should look for alternative ways to help our students, such as investigating open-source textbooks. Students' financial situations are different, and as faculty we have little to no way of knowing which students are struggling financially. School is stressful enough without having to worry if you must choose between textbooks or a meal plan. Textbook piracy is illegal and unethical. As faculty it is our duty to steer our students in the right moral direction, but as human beings who see the suffering of our students, we ourselves are faced with an ethical dilemma.

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# ACADEMIC DISHONESTY OF TAIWANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Academic dishonesty (AD) is a global plague. This study examines an understudied population, Taiwanese college students from Zhongli, Taiwan (n=603). We used two scales, student attitudes towards academic dishonesty and one measuring the frequency of those behaviors. Both were found to be reliable. Defining AD is key to getting a complete understanding of the concept. We found self-reported academic dishonesty behaviors prevalent both in exam cheating and plagiarism. When we expanded the definition of AD to include homework assignments, we found cheating to be near universal. We conclude the paper with limitations and a call for further research.*

**Key words:** *academic cheating, plagiarism, survey, college student, Taiwan*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic cheating is a global problem (Orok et al, 2023), but its importance extends beyond the classroom. College students are the future workforce and leaders in society (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006; Lin & Wen, 2007). Their unethical behaviors now could be problems for the future. Based on current research, we should be worried. Cheating on campus is rampant. Brown & Choong (2005) found that 95.9% of private U.S. university students and 96.7% of public U.S. university students had admitted at least one dishonest practice. While some findings have lower percentages, depending on how you define dishonest acts, the results are staggering.

While the American college campus has been thoroughly examined, much of the world has not. Taiwan is underexamined on academic dishonesty (Ludlum, et al., 2019; Iberahim et al., 2013). In the current project, we surveyed Taiwanese college students on academic cheating. To support this analysis, we will first review the relevant literature.

Next, we will examine the survey methods. Then, we will discuss the findings. We conclude by suggesting further research in this area.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We know a great deal about academic dishonesty, and the results are quite dire. In this project, we use the terms academic dishonesty and cheating interchangeably. We rely on the heavily examined American college population. In the classic study, Bowers (1964) surveyed over 5000 students across 99 US campuses and found 66% of students had cheated at least once. More recently, McCabe and his co-authors examined multiple large groups on AD. McCabe (1997) surveyed 16 campuses to compare business and engineering students and found that 84% of business students and 72% of engineering students admitted to cheating within the last year. McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino (2006) surveyed over 5000 students from 32 colleges and found 56% of business students and 47% of non-business students admitted to cheating at least once during the last year. McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield (2001) reported on a variety of contexts, including differences of major, emphasis or lack of honor codes, and numerous individual factors, always with a similar result: most college students cheat.

Individual factors have been correlated with academic dishonesty. Age matters. Older students are less likely to commit academic dishonesty (Kisamore et al, 2007; Olafson et al, 2013; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Klein et al, 2007; Landa-Blanco et al, 2020). Consistent with this finding, the year in school also matters. First year college students are more likely to cheat than upperclassmen (Adama et al 2023).

One factor that gathers a great deal of attention is gender. Most studies (but not all) have found that males commit AD more than females (Hensley et al, 2013; Bowers, 1964; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Whitley, Nelson, & Jones, 1999). However, within the same major, gender differences are more modest (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

Religion should be an important factor in AD, as ethics are often grounded in religion. However, the method of reporting has resulted in mixed results. Religious identity (which denomination a student chooses) has little effect on AD (Yu et al, 2017; Huelsman et al, 2006; Bruggeman & Hart, 1996). This does not mean religion is immaterial. Choosing one religion from a list of many does not significantly affect AD. However, religious attendance / participation is positively correlated to academic honesty (Bloodgood et al, 2008; Burton, Talpade, & Haynes, 2011, Rettinger & Jordan, 2005). In addition, more intense religious feelings (regardless of denomination) were tied to more self-reported academic honesty (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005).

In addition to individual characteristics, international comparisons are important as ethical standards vary with culture (Lin, 1999). There are strong differences in how people from the East and West see academic dishonesty (Thomas, 2017). In the current project, Taiwan's culture is heavily influenced by Confucian doctrine (Lin, 1999), making a direct comparison to USA results difficult.

In contrast to American and Western European students, the literature on Taiwanese undergraduates and academic dishonesty is limited. Lin & Wen (2006) completed a national study of undergraduates (n=2068) in Taiwan. They used a scale of 17 cheating behaviors divided into four areas of academic dishonesty, including cheating on tests, cheating



on assignments, and plagiarism. Lin & Wen (2006) found that 61% of Taiwanese students admitted to cheating. Further, they found that the top five most practiced academic dishonesty behaviors in Taiwan were providing an assignment for another student, giving prohibited help to others on their assignment, copying others' assignments, passing answers to other students, and copying answers from other students. They also concluded that female students were more honest, and first year students were more dishonest.

Hsiao (2015) compared undergraduate students in Taiwan (n=525) and compared their unethical conduct and the cheating intentions while controlling for work experience. They concluded the anticipated negative affect appears to be stronger than positive effect on cheating intention. Hsiao (2015) found significant determinants of cheating intention are quite different in the part-time job and full-time job student groups. Hsiao did not analyze other demographic groups.

Hsiao & Yang (2011) surveyed Taiwanese business undergraduate students with a full-time job (n=215). They restricted the concept of academic dishonesty to traditional forms of cheating on exams. They concluded that the students' ethical behavior was influenced by peer behavior. Furthermore, a lack of penalties for cheating behavior may also provide excuses for students to interpret their cheating behaviors as insignificant. They did not examine students by age, gender, or occupation.

Yang, Huang, & Chen (2013) investigated undergraduate students in Taiwan (n=431) using the Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS) which included plagiarism, cheating on exams, improper cooperation, and tampering with grades. They found social science students cheated more than business or engineering students. They also discovered that students, regardless of gender or major, were significantly more willing to report classmates than friends. In addition, they found that male students reported a slightly higher level of involvement in three types of misconduct.

Ludlum & Gwinner (2016) examined undergraduate business students in Taiwan (n=1410). They found that 30% claimed to have never seen a student cheat on an exam, however 33% claimed it happened frequently. When asked about reporting another student, 60% claimed he/she would never report another student cheating. Less than 4% indicated would always report a student cheating. These findings indicate that cheating incidents are likely under detected.

Yang (2012) examined graduate students in Taiwan (n=586) using a 26-item Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS) related to publishing academic papers and plagiarism. Yang (2012) found the fraudulence subscale ranked the highest in terms of perceived frequency, followed by plagiarism, falsification, and delinquency. Yang (2012) also found that master's students participated in more academic dishonesty than doctoral students, that males assumed more students committed bad behaviors, and that females were more critical of those behaviors. This result cannot be compared to the current study since those behaviors (ranking of authors on a published paper, etc.) have little application to the undergraduate experience.

The current project's first goal is to build on this knowledge of the understudied Taiwanese student population. Also missing in current research is an examination of the individual characteristics (age, gender, religion, and employment) for differences in academic dishonesty, especially among undergraduates. This paper's second goal is to fill that void. This

project will examine two broad research questions. First, is academic cheating common in Taiwan? Second, do individual factors affect students' attitudes towards academic cheating?

### METHOD FOR THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The participants were from Chien Hsin University of Science and Technology in Zhongli, Taiwan. The university has over 13,000 students in five colleges with seventeen (17) degree programs (Chien Hsin, 2023). Our survey included a sample of students (n=603) by first finding professors who volunteered their students (and class time) to participate in this project. We attempted to include all business majors, our intended study group.

**Table 1. Demographic data of sample**

<b>Major</b>	Business 67%	Non-Business 33%		
<b>Year in School</b>	First 47.3%	Second 28.2%	Third 14.1%	Fourth 10.3%
<b>Gender</b>	Males 57%	Females 43%		
<b>Relationship</b>	Married 3%	Single 97%	Has children 2%	
<b>Religion</b>	Non-Religious 47%	Taiwan Folk Religion 25%	All others 28%	
<b>Employed</b>	Part time 50%	Unemployed 50%		
<b>Parents' education</b>	Legacy student 37%	First generation student 63%	Military experience 7%	
<b>Taken business ethics course</b>	Yes 56%	No 44%		

Underclassmen were underrepresented in our sample. Males outnumbered females 57% to 43%. Our group consisted of primarily traditional students (95% were aged 18-22).

Only 15 students (3% of the respondents) were married, and only 11 (2%) students had children. Half of the students (50%) worked part time while attending school. Taiwanese Folk Religion was the dominant group with 25%, while 47% identified as non-religious. Other students were spread among other faiths. Nearly all students (83%) reported going to a church service less than once a month, and only 4% identified with being "strongly religious." The majority of students (63%) were the first in their family to attend college. Only 7% had military experience. Over half (56%) had taken a business ethics course.

## PROCEDURES

A convenience sample was taken from large, introductory classes at Chien Hsin University in Zhongli, Taiwan during a series of guest lectures in the spring of 2019. To avoid language/translation issues, the bi-lingual survey was conducted simultaneously in English and Mandarin Chinese. The students at Chien Hsin are multilingual (Mandarin and English), with several programs taught in English to benefit their international exchange programs. Most foreign teachers in Taiwan are English speakers (Chang, Bai, and Wang, 2014). The Mandarin translation was accomplished by one of the authors, who is a language professor, and the translation was pilot studied before implementation.

Students were asked to complete the questionnaire during class time. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. No inducements were offered to the students to participate. A total of 603 surveys resulted. Some surveys were returned blank, but the exact number of these were not retained. We would estimate a return rate of approximately 90% or higher. The text of the questions is included in the tables.

## MEASURES

We used two measures for academic integrity. First, we replicated the 18 item Attitudes Toward Cheating (ATC) scale from Simha, Armstrong, & Albert (2012). These items used a three-level scale, Not Cheating, Trivial Cheating, and Serious Cheating. Second, we replicated the 18 item Frequency of Cheating (FOC) scale from Simha, Armstrong, & Albert (2012) which put the same behaviors of ATC into first-person and past tense (“I did \_\_\_”). For the FOC, we used a five-level scale, Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Many times, and Always. The scales were reliable with an American student sample. Simha, et al., (2012) found that business students had more lax attitudes toward cheating and cheated more often than leadership students. This project is the first known use of the ATC and FOC scales on a Taiwanese sample.

The project appeared to have face and content validity. As a test for internal consistency, we conducted Cronbach’s alpha for our two scales. Our first construct, Attitudes Toward Cheating resulted in an alpha of .947 for the 18-item scale. Our second construct, Frequency of Cheating resulted in an alpha of .938 for the 18-item scale. We used SPSS version 24 for analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We were best able to minimize the socially appropriate response bias by using a large group survey, anonymous results, and confidential submissions. We begin by first looking at the overall results of our two constructs, Attitudes Toward Cheating (ATC) and Frequency of Cheating (FOC). We started with an original sample size of 603. See the complete results below in Table 2. Note that ATC9 is missing. One of the demographic questions was inserted in that spot to break up the pattern.

**Table 2. Attitudes Toward Cheating Results.**

<b>Attitude Towards Cheating Questions (n = 603)</b>	<b>Not Cheating</b>	<b>Trivial Cheating</b>	<b>Serious Cheating</b>
ATC1.Copying homework assignments from others	26	59.1	14.9
ATC2.Allowing others to copy homework assignments from you	26.1	56.5	17.4
ATC3.Collaborating with others on assignments meant to be completed alone	42.7	45.2	12.1
ATC4.Collaborating with others on tests meant to be completed alone	33.1	39.6	27.3
ATC5.Using unauthorized cheat-sheets on an exam	32.4	28	39.6
ATC6.Looking at or copying from other's exam copies	30.9	28.3	40.8
ATC7.Allowing others to look at or copy from your exam copy	27.4	38.7	33.9
ATC8.Obtaining exam questions illicitly beforehand	38.8	15.7	45.5
ATC10.Using unauthorized electronic equipment for use in exams	35.4	31	33.6
ATC11.Fabricating bibliographies on assignments/papers	38	31.7	30.2
ATC12.Copying from a source without citing the source	31.4	38.5	30.1
ATC13.Obtaining papers from the web and turning them in as your own work	36.2	19.4	44.4
ATC14.Making others write your papers for you, and then turning them in as your own work	38.6	22.7	38.6
ATC15.Referencing materials without reading them	37.3	44.8	18
ATC16.Falsifying grade scores	37.8	11.5	50.7
ATC17.Changing one's answers after getting the grade in order to increase one's score	35.9	17.5	46.5
ATC18.Making false and fraudulent excuses to postpone assignments and/or tests	31.8	37.8	30.2
ATC19.Falsifying school documents	39.1	13.1	47.4

Overall, with the ATC, we found that Taiwanese students do not view homework violations (ATC1-2-3) or failing to cite references (ATC15) as serious cheating. Bad behaviors while taking an exam (ATC4-5-6-7-8) and making false excuses to avoid assignments (ATC18) were viewed as more serious. The students viewed the most serious infractions as falsifying scores (ATC16-17) and providing false documents to the school (ATC19).

**Table 3. Frequency of Cheating means.**

Frequency of Cheating Questions (n = 603)	Mean
FOC1.I have copied homework assignments from others	2.50
FOC2.I have allowed others to copy homework assignments from you	2.81
FOC3.I have collaborated with others on assignments meant to be completed alone	2.74
FOC4.I have collaborated with others on tests meant to be completed alone	2.43
FOC6.I have used unauthorized cheat-sheets on an exam	2.04
FOC7.I have looked at or copied from other's exam copies	1.99
FOC8.I have allowed others to look at or copy from your exam copy	2.25
FOC9.I have obtained exam questions illicitly beforehand	1.55
FOC10.I have used unauthorized electronic equipment for use in exams	1.57
FOC11.I have fabricated a bibliography	1.50
FOC12.I have copied information from a source without citing the source	1.70
FOC13.I have obtained a research paper from the web and handed the paper in as my own	1.46
FOC14.I have had others write my research paper for me, and then handed in the paper as my own	1.48
FOC15.I have referenced materials without reading them	1.83
FOC16.I have falsified grade scores	1.49
FOC17.I have changed test or assignment answers after getting my grade score	1.46
FOC18.I have made false and fraudulent excuses to postpone assignments or tests	1.58
FOC19.I have falsified school documents (i.e., parking permit, certificate, doctor notes etc.)	1.36

The scale used to capture the Frequency of Cheating behaviors was a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A higher mean indicates the behavior was more common. The most common behaviors in our sample were reported as homework and collaboration infractions (FOC1-2-3-4) and allowing another person to copy from your exam (FOC8). We were not surprised to find that the behaviors viewed as minor infractions (homework and collaboration) were also those that happened most frequently. We were surprised, however, to find that letting another person copy from your exam (FOC8) happens frequently, as students considered this a serious infraction.

The behaviors reported as occurring the least often were plagiarized papers (FOC14), falsified scores (FOC16-17), and falsified school documents (FOC19). These behaviors were rated as the most unethical in the ATC. This was a positive sign. The behaviors that were viewed as most unethical were occurring the least.

Overall, the amount of cheating was dismal. Serious exam cheating at least once any time in college (FOC 5, 6, 8, & 10) was self-reported by 70.6% of Taiwanese students. Serious plagiarism at least once any time in college (FOC 11, 12, 13, & 14) was self-reported by over half (51%) of our sample of students. When we expanded the scope of AD to include minor cheating (like homework), the results were shockingly bad. Only 2.82% of students claim to have never cheated in any way at any time in college. When we expanded the concept to never cheated or only cheated once, only 4.81% of the students were cleared. While bad, these results

are in line with studies from other nations (see Bowers, 1964; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006; Orok et al, 2023) and previous studies in Taiwan (Lin & Wen, 2006). Cheating is frequent, common, omnipresent, with the only differences being how AD is defined. These findings support the conclusion that widespread academic cheating is a global phenomenon.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

All survey projects have limitations. Academic dishonesty research is sensitive, and it is difficult to control for the social desirability bias (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002) despite our best efforts. Second, the results relied on self-reported data from the students. Self-reported data were not confirmed by any other means. Self-reported data always has problems of generalization and reliability. However, with student privacy concerns, as well as the content of the survey (unethical behaviors) anonymous surveys were the only possibility. Another limitation was that we only examined one institution. This school might not be representative of all Taiwanese universities. In addition, most were business students, however individual sub-disciplines (accounting, finance, economics, management, etc.) were not delineated. Differences in these sub-disciplines could be significant. Other discipline areas (science, math, history, language, etc.) were under-represented. Our sample also did not include graduate students who could have far different views on ethics. In addition, our sample consisted of almost exclusively traditional students (young, unmarried, without children). Future projects should target the non-traditional students as their views should not be assumed to be the same as traditional students. Another limitation of this study is the non-random sample. A random sample could result in more generalization.

### **CONCLUSION**

Is academic cheating common in Taiwan? We can confidently conclude that academic cheating is common in Taiwan, no more and no less than any other nation, and depending on the definition of AD, the offenses can be nearly universal. Academic cheating is assumed to be a global phenomenon, and our findings would support that conclusion.

Future projects should examine more cultures to confirm that academic cheating is a global problem, not just a few isolated countries. In addition, future endeavors should include other parameters to allow for more in-depth statistical analysis. Further, new projects should strive to gain a well-rounded sample to examine subgroups of students (by religion, major, age, marital status, having children, etc.). Finally, any future projects should examine in detail the newest cheating behaviors of students. New technologies are adding new opportunities to cheat while on campus.

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# EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH DIGITAL TOOLS FOR E-LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to share strategies and recommendations for the creation of coursework that equips students with digital tools designed to enhance their e-leadership development journeys. Recommendations were created after analyzing an assignment given to students in an online leadership development graduate course. The assignment directs students to develop a “tool” for leadership development as a first step toward curating a larger-scale “e-leadership toolbox” that could serve as a portfolio of resources designed to help them develop and thrive as leaders in a digital environment. The featured assignment for this course directs students to describe how they could create and leverage a virtual board of directors, implement and reflect on personal branding efforts, or find value in e-mentorship strategies. Students use this assignment as an opportunity to apply the course material that relates to strategies used to cultivate accountability in the leadership development process. The assignment encourages students to think critically about course concepts and provides an opportunity to apply the concepts directly to their roles in their current or desired future workplace or industry. Reflecting on the assignment has allowed this researcher to provide recommendations intended to inspire creative ideas and inform curricular best practices in online (and often interdisciplinary) social science programs that seek to prepare students to thrive in technology-mediated work environments.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic affected organizations worldwide and will no doubt have long-term effects on the way people work and how organizations achieve outcomes. While the rise in popularity of remote work had already precipitated a need for increased emphasis on teaching e-leadership skills in social science programs, the pandemic has created a more urgent demand for excellence in employees’ abilities to lead their workforce in digital environments. This urgency has prompted faculty to consider new ways to help students gain an understanding of e-leadership to meet their needs and the needs of their employers. As one Master of Science in Leadership program considers options to help meet those needs in a practical way, we have started to consider the creation of an “e-leadership toolbox” that students could maintain and use as needed throughout their time in the program and beyond.

With a potential long-term goal of creating a program-wide “toolbox” for students, one faculty member has taken a first step toward its creation and potential implementation in a leadership development course. A brief review of the body of literature on both the importance of e-leadership skills and creative approaches to leadership development highlights an

opportunity for educators to urge students to discover and explore digital tools designed for practical use that allow them to apply the course material beyond the classroom. Curricula across leadership-focused graduate programs often contain an element that addresses e-leadership mainly through content focused on virtual team leadership or management. The question explored in this practice is “How can instructors help students in graduate-level leadership development courses develop or refine creative strategies for e-leadership beyond leading virtual teams?” In this paper, the focus is on an assignment designed to help the student increase ownership and accountability for their efforts in leadership development, with an emphasis on e-leadership skills.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### The Rise of e-Leadership

Avolio et al. (2014) defines e-leadership as “a social influence process embedded in both proximal and distal contexts mediated by advanced information technology that can produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and performance” (p. 107). While the formal study of leadership and organizational behavior has been popular for many decades, e-leadership is a relatively new sub-topic of study (Avolio et al., 2000). The rise of telecommuting and online work in modern workplaces continues to bring much attention to this concept as leaders face new challenges in running increasingly remote work environments. Liu et al. (2018) reported that energy (to engage in continuous learning and master relevant technologies) and well-honed analytical skills were among the most important e-leadership skills. Similarly, other researchers identified and organized “...six skill-based competencies that successful e-leaders should aim to master. The competencies are: e-communication, e-social skills, e-team building skills, e-change management, e-technological skills, and e-trustworthiness” (Van Wart et al., 2019, p. 91). Other scholars suggested focusing on the often juxtaposed processes exacerbated by remote work. Purvanova and Kenda (2018) highlighted the need for e-leaders to master the balancing act between opposing behaviors, such as “manage productivity and inspire performance-beyond-expectations, set clear goals and form meaningful relationships, manage the process and encourage individuality and flexibility” (p. 776).

DuBrin (2023) reported that virtual work teams surged during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that due to the many benefits realized, organizations are increasingly adopting this practice for the long-term. As this trend becomes a sustainable practice for many organizations, the need for e-leadership learning becomes even more time-sensitive. Virtual managers are tasked with crafting and supervising performance benchmarks for remote employees – a process sometimes entirely mediated by technology. DuBrin found that challenges in navigating those processes remotely are often rooted in poor communication and a lack of trust that sometimes plagues virtual workspaces. His research supports engaging in some specific e-leadership skill development activities to provide solutions to e-leadership challenges. These skills include establishing trust through transparent communication, leveraging and appreciating team diversity, and enhancing the visibility of the work of the virtual team.

Leadership educators have incorporated research on successfully leading remote work teams into various courses for many years, but the evolving formal body of literature continues to identify and refine these additional skillsets needed to be a successful e-leader. Academic programs need to be a quick study on this topic in order to revise or develop appropriate curricula that promotes current, relevant skill development. Van Wart et al. (2019) highlighted the intense speed of workplace changes in the digital era, which has obviously outpaced the speed of research in this area. These changes are constantly creating new challenges for both workplace leaders charged with leading effectively via digital channels and academics responsible for managing curricula that will prepare leaders for their responsibilities in the workplace.

### **Digital Leadership Development**

As more organizations allow (or sometimes – in the wake of a global pandemic - mandate) employees to work remotely, e-leadership skills are increasingly emphasized in organizational efforts toward leadership development, even while leaders are scrambling to determine what the exact outcomes of those efforts should be (Byrd, 2019). Graduate programs in the social sciences often include courses in leadership development, which focus on development of the leadership capacity of self and/or others (Stork et al., 2015). The rise of e-work has prompted ongoing questions for leadership educators teaching courses in leadership development, including: How can/should we update curricula or course materials to meet the needs of the modern remote workforce? What should we be teaching that specifically applies to leadership development in a digital environment? (Van Wart et al., 2019)

Industry leaders continue to provide feedback to universities that graduates often lack in soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace (Jaschik, 2015). Researchers have studied many organizations and found that companies that offer specific e-leadership professional development and training opportunities are more prepared to face the challenges present in increasingly global markets (McCann & Kohntopp, 2019). Iordanoglou (2018) reported that as organizations increase their desire to improve leadership development efforts, they must proactively offer such training to employees much earlier than current organizational norms typically provide. She also concluded that leadership development efforts “should start with personal dream and vision, involve peer to peer coaching and coaching with compassion, and establish close and caring relationships...” (p. 127). Jenkins (2018) provided a more narrow suggestion by listing important themes for online leadership development courses, including “self-understanding, action learning, interaction, contextual, knowledge evaluations, follow-up, mentorships, and self-advancement” (p. 72). While the content for effective modern e-leadership development in organizations is clearly evolving rapidly, academic programs can benefit from these insights as we equip our students with appropriate skills in this area.

Byrd (2019) articulated some of the challenges of honing and delivering leadership development content in an online environment. She found that organizations can overcome some of those challenges by delivering information via “virtual action learning” due to its heavy emphasis on leaders building and maintaining relationships. An amplified cognizance of the

challenges organizations face as they work to identify the desired competencies and objectives for training - in addition to the ideal methods of delivery for that training - has moved this issue toward the spotlight in leadership education.

### **Developing an e-Leadership Toolbox**

The increasing prominence and importance of e-leadership skills in organizations sparked the idea of incorporating the concept throughout the curriculum of our Master of Science in Leadership program. Many of our course learning outcomes focus on preparing students to understand organizational dynamics and to appreciate and be prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. At present, we must consider that many of these organizations can and will accomplish their work virtually.

Graduate-level students expect to gain practical knowledge and skills, and a virtual “toolbox” is one way to help them take that knowledge with them, allowing for convenient recall in the future. Similar to an academic e-portfolio, we are considering the implementation of this “e-leadership toolbox” and using the assignment in the leadership development course as a first step toward directing students to develop a “tool” to include. The aim of the toolbox is to allow students to develop and organize their own tangible e-leadership artifacts that could enhance their ability to turn theory into practice, though we realize that the potential adoption and implementation of such a system would require planning, resources, and buy-in from multiple parties to be effective for students (San Jose, 2017).

The efficacy of e-portfolios in graduate programs has received mixed reviews from educational researchers. Faculty in graduate programs in various disciplines have identified e-portfolios as one way to assess how well students meet program learning objectives. Students reported perceived benefits from compiling their work as the process of creating a portfolio allowed them to more clearly recognize connections between their studies and opportunities to apply their new knowledge in their work environments (Goertzen et al., 2016). Driessen (2017) found that reflective portfolios are often viewed as obligatory and generally unhelpful by both students and educators. However, comprehensive portfolios built throughout the course of a program that contain diverse artifacts are viewed by students as helpful resources after graduation (Driessen, 2017; Kruger et al., 2013; Munday, 2017; Reese & Levy, 2009) and can “help individuals present a more comprehensive professional persona” (Kruger et al., 2013, p. 51). The proposed toolbox in the present case is intended to be an organized, themed repository/portfolio for students to visit and re-visit as they face real-world leadership challenges in the future rather than a tool for assessment. As an academic leadership program, we recognize that appropriate real-world leadership approaches and skills are situational, rather than one-size-fits-all. Our hope is that our graduates would view the e-leadership toolbox as one resource at their disposal as they consider options for addressing challenges with leadership situations that are mediated by technology.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

While pursuing the Master of Science in Leadership program at a regional, public university in the southeastern region of the United States, students can choose to take Leadership Development as an elective course. This program is entirely online and courses are offered in an 8-week accelerated format. The course description states, “This course will provide participants with knowledge regarding effective strategies for leadership development for others and themselves. The course combines theory and research to provide practical examples for creative mentorship strategies and structuring experiences for leadership development.” Students engage with content on giving and receiving feedback, cultivating psychological safety in the workplace, mentoring, personal brand management, building trust, and diversity, equity, and inclusion programming. Various strategies for each of these topics are presented, and students complete written assignments in which they apply these strategies to realistic scenarios.

This fully online program has been operating in its current form for about five years. After a change in degree designation and a full curriculum overhaul, the program has seen a rapid increase in enrollment. This program serves a diverse group of students – in terms of demographics, professional background, and level of work experience. To better equip our students to answer the call for leaders to develop e-leadership skills that go beyond addressing the leadership of remote work teams, the “e-leadership toolbox” concept is under preliminary consideration as a whole-program approach. This method would allow students to maintain an organized portfolio of practical assignments that can assist them indefinitely after graduation.

While the ultimate goal is to assess the desirability and feasibility of expanding the toolbox concept program-wide, this paper examines the exploratory implementation of the concept in one specific course. In an effort to create an innovative assignment that is both practical and valuable for students who increasingly find themselves living and working in a mostly-virtual environment, the e-leadership unit within the leadership development course was a natural place to begin this effort.

To best serve the diverse study body, the instructor’s goal was to create an assignment students could find valuable no matter their phase of career. After reflecting on the course material and learning objective (practicing strategies to effectively develop self and others as leaders), the instructor decided to build the final course assignment on the concepts of mentoring and personal branding, which are practices that can foster leadership development in a virtual environment (Greene, 2015). Students prepared for this assignment with several readings, including the book *Creative Mentorship and Career-Building Strategies* by Mary Pender Greene (2015). This book provides guidance on many types of mentoring - including peer mentoring, reverse mentoring, and situational mentoring - and realistic examples of effectively engaging in those practices. Additionally, Greene describes and recommends the creation of a Virtual Personal Board of Directors (VPBOD) as a tool for leadership development. She defines the VPBOD as “a group of trusted and respected advisors, corresponding to specific aspects of your professional life” (p. 30). Students are encouraged to fill specific roles on that board, to include Technical Officer, Financial Officer, Ethics and Morals Officer, Political Analyst, and Marketing

and Branding Officer. The goal is for each role applicable to the individual's professional situation to be filled with an appropriate mentor. Students also read peer-reviewed journal articles related to various facets of virtual mentoring (Evans, 2018; Neely et al., 2017) and the importance of leveraging virtual professional networks and personal branding efforts to cultivate leadership opportunities (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010; McCallum & O'Connell, 2009; Milovanović, 2015). Personal branding is defined by Gorbatov et al. (2018) as "a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery" (p. 6). Contemporary personal branding efforts are now mostly mediated by technology.

Students taking this course worked toward the learning objective of practicing strategies to effectively develop self and others as leaders. They were prompted throughout the course to study and reflect on mentorship-related practices. Refining these processes equips them with the knowledge to encourage their mentees, followers, or team members to engage in effective mentorship when appropriate. As described below, they were tasked with engaging in an activity for their own self-development now to increase their familiarity with the practice and boost their confidence in the process. The artifact or "tool" created in this assignment was designed and intended to assist students in learning a helpful practice that they could reference throughout their career as they serve as mentors and work to guide leadership development efforts for others. Student instructions for the final assignment were as follows:

*Students can choose one of the following three options for this project. Choose the one that you feel will have the most meaning for you personally in your phase of career/leadership development.*

Option #1: After reading the assigned text/articles on creating a virtual personal board of directors, write an APA-style essay about *your* virtual personal board of directors. In 4 - 6 pages, provide specific information about a few of the roles/players you would include, how you would build your board, and how you would leverage your board. Be specific in regards to ways your board will help you reach your career goals.

Option #2: After reading the assigned text/articles on personal branding, create a 10 - 15 minute video describing your own personal brand. You can record yourself doing a presentation, or you can narrate a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation and save it as a video file. Include information about how you will build (or have built) your personal brand and how your efforts could help you achieve your specific career goals.

Option #3: After reading the assigned text/articles on types of e-mentors, choose at least two of the types of mentors described. Write a 4 - 6 page APA style essay explaining how you believe you could benefit from being mentored in one of these ways, and how you and a mentee could both benefit from you providing mentorship in one of these ways. (So, in one scenario, you are the mentor, and in the other you are the mentee.) For example, you might feel that you could benefit as a mentee from traditional e-mentorship in a certain area, and that you could provide

effective peer e-mentorship in another area. Be specific in regards to ways both of these e-mentorship experiences could help you reach your career goals.

### DISCUSSION OF OUTCOMES/RESULTS

Students were given the option to complete one of the three assignments mentioned above in the 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 sections of the leadership development course. Outlined in Table 1 are the total enrollment for each section, and the number and the percentage of students who selected each assignment option.

		Mentoring		Virtual Personal Board of Directors		Personal Branding	
Year	Enrollment	# of Students	% of Students	# of Students	% of Students	# of Students	% of Students
2019	9	6	66%	3	34%	0	0%
2020	11	5	45%	4	37%	2	18%
2021	7	3	43%	3	43%	1	14%
2022	6	1	17%	4	66%	1	17%

Student work was submitted individually and directly to the instructor through the learning management system. All projects were assessed only by the instructor, using an original grading rubric. Eighty percent of the grade was based on project conceptualization, and twenty percent was evaluated on organization, professionalism, mechanics, etc. Regarding conceptualization, projects were assessed based on several factors, including appropriateness of topic to meet the learning objective (practicing strategies to effectively develop self and others as leaders), thoroughly and accurately applying appropriate information from the readings, and incorporating thoughtful reflection where appropriate (see excerpt from grading rubric in Table 2 below).

Table 2. <i>Assignment Grading Rubric</i>				
Conceptualization. Points Possible: 40 points				
Unacceptable: 0 points	Poor: 1 – 13 points	Fair: 14 – 27 points	Good: 28 – 39 points	Excellent: 40 points
Strategy not appropriate; information not linked to Creative Mentorship text	Strategy not completely appropriate; Covers some of the project and somewhat links to the topics in the text	Appropriate strategy; Covers parts of project and somewhat links to the topics in the text	Appropriate strategy; Covers all items in instructions; highlights/relates to the appropriate information from the text; Some reflection	Appropriate strategy; Thorough; highlights/relates to appropriate information from the text; Thoughtful reflection

After recording and reflecting on observations about the topics addressed in the assignments each year, the instructor identified several interesting themes in student responses to each assignment, as described below.

Option #1: Virtual personal board of directors. Students tended to apply course material here on the importance of building a professional network, leveraging social media and live events to build and maintain a professional network, emphasizing the benefits of diversity among board members, and (when applicable) maintaining a balance of board members that work in their current field and their desired field. Many students who were not yet working in their career full-time were able to identify individuals for their virtual personal board of directors who could be of assistance to them on their journey toward their career path.

Option #2: Personal branding. Students emphasized many important elements of personal branding, including social media presence, taking an online-but-actionable public stance toward social justice, volunteering, community involvement, networking, and professional behaviors.

Option #3: E-mentorship. Most students emphasized the growing importance and convenience of e-mentorship as a tool both to mentor others and to be mentored. While many had not formally studied this practice in an academic setting, most seemed to be familiar with it or have experience with it in some sense. This seems to be quite popular in practice and students were noticeably excited about it as they researched best practices and shared what has (or has not) worked for them in the past, and what formal-but-flexible e-mentorship goals they had in mind for the future.

### **REFLECTIONS OF THE PRACTITIONER**

In the sections of the course taught thus far, students selected the personal branding assignment less than either of the other options. The instructor wondered if this was partially due to the assignment instructions listing the submission method as a video rather than a written document in the 2019 and 2020 sections. In the 2021 and 2022 sections, the instructor allowed the students to choose writing an essay or creating a video for any of the three prompts, since the



objectives could be achieved in either modality for each assignment, but still only 14 % - 17% of students chose that option.

In future terms, the instructor plans to implement updates to the course readings and assignment as the literature and frequency of remote working conditions continue to evolve. The learning objective “practicing strategies to effectively develop self and others as leaders” can be met in multiple ways, and this assignment could be implemented more broadly to allow students to apply the material in different ways. For example, students may benefit from designing a mentor training session for their organization (or an organization they aspire to work for). This could allow them to apply the material they engage with throughout the course to a real-world setting (virtual or otherwise). Alternatively, students may enjoy meeting the objective by reading a case study that highlights a need for leadership development efforts and suggesting solutions to develop the leadership capacity of employees on their team. This assignment could be enhanced by using one scenario that involves face-to-face teams and another that involves virtual teams. This could create some interesting opportunities for students to compare and contrast efforts that are appropriate in various scenarios.

If the toolbox concept is adopted by the program, faculty will need to discuss this and other options for course assignments in each course offering. New questions will most certainly arise, including: How can/should students collect their ideas – what platform should they use to build their toolboxes? How can we ensure the e-leadership assignments are scalable for application in many industries? Will program faculty be expected to blur the boundaries between teaching and modeling behaviors? How does social media fit in (faculty blogs/accounts, information sharing, personal branding, sharing of original research, etc.)? How can faculty model e-leadership behaviors and stress the importance of e-leadership skills to students while accelerated degrees are shrinking timelines for our programs? Can a leadership educator with no digital footprint teach students about e-leadership, and if so, how? Should students be encouraged to share their toolboxes with one another – and if so, should the toolboxes be presented virtually in a symposium? How can students share this toolbox with their employer, if desired? The body of literature on implementing e-portfolio systems will be an important resource upon implementation.

Graduate programs in the social sciences have long been preparing working adults with the relevant skills to lead virtual teams. Now that employees increasingly find themselves working in virtual spaces, other facets of the study of e-leadership must shift accordingly. As educators, responding to the changing needs of our students is crucial, and in this case, a one-course-at-a-time approach has made the journey toward providing an e-leadership “toolbox” for our students feel like an intentional process that can be replicated across the curriculum.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

While the assignment analyzed for this paper was given in the context of a leadership graduate program, several strategies drawn from the project can be applied to various disciplines, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. As mentioned in the Literature Review, portfolios are implemented in programs across disciplines with variable levels of success.

Incorporating an e-portfolio system within a program could have positive implications for accreditation and quality enhancement of the degree program(s). Programs pursuing accreditation are often required to assess student learning using both direct and indirect measures. An e-portfolio could serve as a work product that can be scored by an internal or external assessment team. In the example of the e-leadership toolbox, program administrators would also be able to show accreditors how students are applying the information learned in the program to real-world concepts that will help them succeed in the modern workforce.

Establishing a common thread throughout a program could also have positive implications for program marketing. In the instance described in this paper, e-leadership could provide an attractive element for marketing and admissions staff to focus on as they differentiate the program from others offered in the same region and/or discipline. Highlighting timely skills that students will take away from a program that can immediately be applied in a work setting could sway prospective students to view the program as more interesting or practical than a competing option. While this paper focused on the thread of e-leadership to be woven through a Master of Science in Leadership program, the concept is scalable for other disciplines as well. Some potential examples include: weaving a thread of ethical decision-making through a Healthcare Administration program; weaving threads of equity and social justice through a Business Administration program; weaving threads of creativity and innovation through an Engineering program; weaving a thread of professional communication skills through a Teacher Education program. This concept could be scaled and replicated as program needs and local, regional, or national industry needs evolve.

This practice could also have practical implications for student organizations typically sponsored outside of academic departments. The assignment design and e-leadership toolbox concept could potentially be scaled to benefit students in a co-curricular setting. For example, non-credit bearing university-sponsored leadership development programming could implement a version of this assignment in a workshop-style event. Students could feasibly learn about one of the concepts (mentoring, Virtual Personal Board of Directors, or personal branding) in a typical workshop format and then work individually or together in groups to produce an artifact that prompts them to apply the information in a useful way. Some student organizations that maintain even a partial focus on leadership development (student government, social student organizations, leadership societies, sports teams, etc.) could also benefit from these types of exercises.

While formal mentoring partnerships between established and new members in student organizations are likely a long-standing tradition, the other concepts may be novel for these groups. For example, a concerted effort toward educating athletes on personal branding efforts that could work to unify and strengthen their overall team “brand” could prove to be beneficial to multiple stakeholders. The leadership lessons that are ingrained in team sports could be enhanced by a properly scaled exercise in increasing individual leadership capacity through goal-setting and strategic planning efforts designed to support the development and management of individuals’ personal brands.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Students were able to meet the learning objectives for this assignment by completing any of the three options presented. Providing choices to students for assignments is often well-received as students tend to enjoy some level of autonomy in their educational experience. Graduate students in particular tend to appreciate assignments that are applicable to their personal careers (Holzweiss et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015). It is recommended that instructors provide the students with some flexible options that will allow them to meet the objective and create their artifact or “tool” in a way that is meaningful to them.

Initiatives for developing “e-leadership toolbox” items for additional courses are also recommended. Current tentative topics (informed by the e-leadership competencies identified by Van Wart et al., 2019) to be explored in our program include developing and maintaining e-trustworthiness (in the Ethics course), working in virtual teams (in the Small Group Leadership course), communicating online (in the Communication Strategies for Leadership course), and virtual civic engagement (in the Community Leadership course). Programs in other disciplines can emulate this one-course-at-a-time approach by moving through their own assessment or curriculum framework.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project provides useful reflections and recommendations to assist faculty as they explore options for creative assignments for e-leadership development and/or develop a manageable plan for a new or re-designed portfolio system; however, limitations exist in this example. The sample size for this project was quite small. Smaller class sizes in our elective courses make them ideal for more easily implementing new ideas or strategies. Our total enrollment in the graduate program is typically between 70 and 80, and the researcher recognizes that larger programs would require more resources to implement significant changes.

As always, insights gained beget more questions for future projects. Could this practice be used to inform/develop a new concentration within a program, or perhaps a new micro-credential (such as a graduate certificate or a digital badge)? Could this concept be scaled to serve specific employers or organizations who are shifting to a virtual format for their employees/teams? In this instance, we are exploring the bigger concept of building an “e-leadership toolbox” by starting with the assignment discussed here. Perhaps other programs would identify a different thread that runs across their curriculum and could build a toolbox with a different focus. What value could/would that focus add for students?

Online enrollment for graduate-level social science programs and the number of employees who work from home are both still trending upward. Creating an e-leadership “toolbox” for students to use indefinitely after their program could have benefits for employees and employers for years to come.

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