Final Report for Undergraduate Research Grant

Dr. Rettinger, Caitlin Brady, Megan Hess, Frank Knizner, Caroline Lupsha

Fall 2011

Our $200 Undergraduate Research Grant was used to purchase two $50 Amazon gift cards and a paper shredder. The gift cards are serving as incentives in a national survey examining the emotional roots of cheating behavior, and the shredder will be used in a follow-up experiment on the same topic. In the Fall of 2011, our team created a survey that asked participants questions regarding their emotions and attitudes toward school and academic dishonesty. Participants were asked about how often they cheated and whether or not they developed neutralizing attitudes. Neutralizing attitudes are the attitudes that otherwise moral people adopt to justify immoral behavior. By adopting neutralizing attitudes towards cheating in particular situations, people may justify this immoral act. The ability to win one of two $50 Amazon gift cards served as an incentive for students to participate in our survey.

In the Spring of 2012, our research team has planned an experiment based on the tentative results of this survey. This experiment will be completed by participants recruited from the Psychology Department’s subject pool and will try to induce empathy with the goal of reducing cheating in a laboratory setting. The participants will be told that they are going to be completing a writing section and a math section for a study to test cognitive abilities. They will then be given an image and asked to write a paragraph telling a story based on the image. The image will either be neutral, empathy-evoking, or selfishness-evoking. For the math section the participants will be receiving Chick-Fil-A coupons. In the scarcity condition they will be informed that those who fall within the top 50% of scores will receive coupons. They will be told that, in the past, average scores on the test were 4 correct answers. Those who are in the control condition will be informed that every participant who answers 4 or more questions correctly will receive coupons. Participants will then receive a paper with a series of math problems. Upon the completion of the math section, participants will be asked to write the number of correct answers on their packets and to shred the math problem sheets. We hypothesize that in the non-scarcity condition, the cheating rates for empathy-induced, selfishness-induced, and neutral participants will not differ significantly. In the scarcity condition we hypothesize that empathy-induced participants will cheat significantly less and selfishness-induced participants will cheat significantly more than participants in the neutral condition.

We purchased a shredder so that it would appear as if the students were shredding their papers, making them feel more comfortable to engage in academically dishonest behavior when reporting the number of questions that they got right, replicating a method used with great success by other researchers. Participants will be told that they will be awarded prizes based on the correct number of responses. The shredder that we purchased has been modified so that it does not shred but only appears to shred. Thus, we will be able to see if participants were cheating by lying about the number of questions they answered correctly. The knowledge gained from the study will further our understanding of the importance of empathy in cheating behavior. This information can be utilized so that improved measures can be taken to prevent academic dishonesty in the future.

The gift cards and shredder were important to our study and we thank you for the money to further our research and possibly prevent academic dishonesty in the future.