

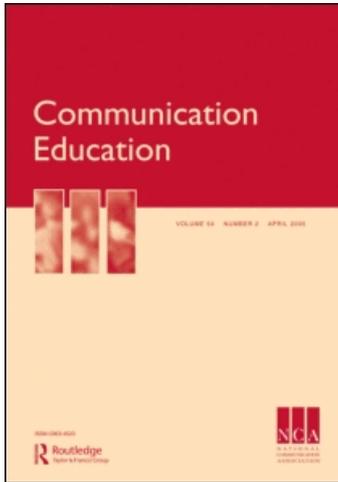
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Forgive Me Now, Fire Me Later: Mass Communication Students' Ethics Gap Concerning School and Journalism

Mike Conway & Jacob Groshek

Survey data on mass communication students' perceptions of plagiarism and fabrication indicate an ethics gap in which students are more concerned about ethical breaches in journalism than in academics. Further analyses found that the ethics gap increases among students near graduation who had higher levels of concern and suggested harsher penalties for unethical journalistic behavior, as did students with experience in student media or internships, specifically journalistic ones. Results from the study reported here demonstrate that applied media experiences and coursework are crucial in developing future journalists' perceptions of fundamental ethical behavior.

Keywords: Ethics; Journalism; Academics; Plagiarism; Fabrication; Education

Katie Couric leaned closer to her interview subject while her facial expression and body language revealed revulsion for the person sitting across from her. The person being interviewed looked even less comfortable, bent over in his chair awkwardly with his hands clasped between his folded legs, as if he were trying to disappear into a fetal position. In her snow-white turtleneck sweater, Couric stared at the man and said “what you did was pretty disgusting by anybody’s standards.” For close to an hour, in a special edition of NBC’s *Dateline*, Couric referred to her guest, in descriptions mostly attributed to unnamed sources, as a “pathological liar,” “complete con artist,” “disgraceful,” “oily charmer, a slob, a busybody, and a bad boy,” “completely amoral,” “has no integrity, has no character,” and “an obnoxious jerk” (NBC, 2004).

The special hour of network television prime time programming was not dealing with a mass murderer, a rapist, a brutal dictator, or a corrupt corporate executive. Katie Couric reserved the above comments for a much different societal outcast: a plagiarist. NBC presented a special *Dateline* titled “A Question of Trust” on disgraced

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New York Times reporter Jayson Blair. Blair is only one of a spate of high profile plagiarism and fabrication cases in this country in recent years, including Jack Kelley of *USA Today* and Stephen Glass of *The New Republic*.

Among the people who have absorbed these stories are journalism students. They might have watched the special *Dateline* or read the *New York Times* massive retraction at the time of Blair's deceptions (Times Reporter Who Resigned, 2003; Witnesses and Documents, 2003), or their journalism instructors may have brought the material into the classroom for discussion. If they work for student media or have had professional internships, those students would also get an up-close look at how journalists talk about and respond to these ethical issues.

Meanwhile, a professor at a journalism school realizes a student has plagiarized material for a term paper. The professor meets with the student, who admits to the ethical lapse. The professor fails the student for the course and the case is passed on to university administration. There is no public event. The school does not post the student's picture in the lobby as a plagiarist. Fellow students may not even notice the student is missing from class. National journalism ethics cases are high profile news stories while individual acts of academic dishonesty are usually private ordeals.

This study is an attempt to measure mass communication students' attitudes on the importance of ethics, both in the journalism profession and in academics. Through survey research of both beginning and graduating students at a Midwestern journalism school, the focus of this study is on ethical issues that involve both the work those students are doing in college and the work they will do as media professionals: instances of plagiarism and fabrication. It is expected that students believe in a higher level of ethical behavior for working journalists than for college students, partly because of the powerful soapbox professional journalists can use to ostracize plagiarists and fabricators in their profession. In addition, it is anticipated that students involved in student media or professional journalism internships, since they have begun the socialization process into their careers, will believe in stronger penalties for unethical behavior than their classmates without those experiences.

Ethics Cases in Academics and Journalism

Ethics encompasses a wide variety of specific behaviors in both academic and journalistic settings. In college, the concern may be for copying from another student during a test, combining efforts in an individual project, or buying a term paper. In journalism, ethics discussions can center on practices such as paying for sources, assuming a false identity, or using a hidden camera. However, there are two broad areas of unethical behavior that are shared by both education and journalism, areas that allow for direct comparisons of students' attitudes: plagiarism and fabrication. Stealing another person's work and inventing facts or sources are considered major breaches of ethical behavior both in college and in journalism.

In higher education, instructors are encouraged or even required to include a section on academic misconduct in each syllabus. At many schools, students have their own code of conduct. For instance, at Indiana University, two of the six

sections under the academic misconduct portion of the *Code of Students Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct* are dedicated to plagiarism and fabrication (Indiana University, 2005). Universities such as Duke, Georgetown, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania have their own centers dedicated to the study of some area of ethics (Poynter Center, 2009). The University of Michigan even publishes a journal dedicated to research regarding stealing another's ideas, called *Plagiary* (Plagiary, 2009).

By the time students enter college, they have already spent most of their lives in school, where issues of plagiarism and fabrication are part of the culture. In a survey of first-year students at 11 Canadian colleges, at least half of the respondents admitted to fabricating or falsifying data, material, and/or copying a few sentences from print or electronic sources while they were in high school. But 88% of the first-year students from one of the universities believed cheating in college would result in significant penalties. Overall, students expected a higher standard of behavior for themselves and fellow students once they get into college (Bennett, 2003; St. Mary's University, 2005).

While higher education has increased the visibility of ethical issues through mentions in syllabi, student codes of conduct, and other approaches, the message is still somewhat opaque. Mallon (2001) noticed this haziness while working on his book on plagiarism, *Stolen Words*, by stating "The inability of the literary and academic worlds adequately to define, much less reasonably punish, instances of plagiarism was something I observed again and again" (p. xii). Mallon profiled a suspected plagiarism case at Texas Tech University in which the accused professor was allowed to finish the school year and quietly resign, then continue his career in a similar field. His manuscript under suspicion was even published, partly because the university never made the case public (Mallon, 2001). At Ohio University, an engineering school graduate student came across dozens of examples of plagiarism in masters' theses but was repeatedly stonewalled by administrators as he tried to raise the issue, until finally the student newspaper publicized the case, forcing the university to act (Wasley, 2006a,b). The Internet has also become a major factor in academic cheating. Online material can be easily cut and pasted and the prevalence of "free" content leads students to devalue ownership issues (Young, 2005).

Concerning professional journalism, individual cases of plagiarism or fabrication receive considerable publicity. In the past few decades, the media ethics scandals that have received the most attention have involved the mainstream news media, such scandals have included: Jayson Blair at the *New York Times*, Janet Cooke at the *Washington Post*, Jack Kelley at *USA Today*, Stephen Glass at *The New Republic*, and deceptive truck crashes on *NBC News' Dateline*. In each case, the news organization, either quickly or eventually, used the same channels normally reserved for its news coverage to present its version of a mea culpa. Such channels can be powerful at disseminating the message of how plagiarism, fabrication, or other forms of deception are viewed in the journalistic community. For example, the *New York Times* devoted 14,000 words to Blair's deceptions in its Mother's Day Sunday edition in May 2003 (Times Reporter Who Resigned, 2003; Witnesses and Documents, 2003).

The New Republic scoured Glass' work and presented findings to its readers. Other news media, from broadcast news magazines to bloggers, spread the message even further (Carter, 1993; CBS, 2003; Foroohar, 1998; NBC, 2004; Scocca, 1998; Shafer, 1998;). Some believe the response to these individual cases has been excessive. Noted journalist Anna Quindlen said she wished the *New York Times* would have spent less time and space on Jayson Blair and more on why the paper led the readers to believe Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the war (Jennings, 2004).

Literature Review and Hypotheses

By the time students are working through their first year of college, they have been exposed to a variety of messages about academic dishonesty. In a study of students in a freshman English composition class at a United States university, the top reasons students considered plagiarism to be wrong included individual responsibility, ownership, and fairness (Kroll, 1988). In the case of business schools, high percentages of students who said they cheated are linked to the culture of maximizing profits at all costs, with ethics as a secondary attribute (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006). The social norms theory has also been used to explain academic ethical behavior. If students believe their peers are cheating and getting away with it, they are more likely to try it themselves. One study showed students overestimate how many of their classmates are cheating. At the same time, faculty members are loath to lodge formal charges against student cheaters. The university judicial process deters faculty from making the cases public; instead, instructors tend to deal with ethical cases quickly and quietly (Hand, Conway, & Moran, 2006).

Focusing on journalism and mass communication programs, ethics instruction began to emerge as an important area of the curriculum in the 1970s. Many programs included ethics as subsections of other classes, but the last part of the twentieth century saw a move towards offering a separate ethics course as part of the curriculum (Christians, 1978, 1985). From 1993 to 2002, the number of schools or departments requiring students to take an ethics course increased from 25.5% to 37.2%, leading the authors of one study to conclude that such classes have "gained an 'essential place' in the curriculum of the major programs of journalism and mass communication" (Lambeth, Christians, Fleming, & Lee, 2004, p. 245).

Instructors are rarely at a loss for high-profile examples of suspected or actual ethical lapses in the mainstream media. Blair at the *New York Times*, Glass at *The New Republic*, and Kelley at *USA Today* received considerable attention for their actions and were publicly repudiated and fired (Hanson, Picard, & McMasters, 2004). Even in the case of CBS *60 Minutes II* using questionable documents for a story on President George Bush's National Guard service in 2004, editorials focused on the importance of telling the truth, even though it has never been proven that the documents were fake (Hindman, 2008). Hindman (2005) calls public apologies and indictments of individual journalist's examples of paradigm repair. The journalistic community must demonize the individual plagiarist or fabricator to prove the situation was an aberration. By singling out the person, the media organization and

the profession do not have to take a serious look at the newsroom culture, including the way they gather news.

No matter the overt or hidden intention, these ethical cases in mainstream news media are disseminated far and wide, in the paper, over the air, online, and just as important, in the classroom where students learn about acceptable and unacceptable practices in the profession. The increased attention on ethics instruction in journalism and mass communication programs as well as the mixed signals sent by higher education on academic cheating, leads to the first set of hypotheses:

- H1a: Students will show a greater level of concern for journalistic unethical behavior than for academic unethical behavior.
- H1b: Students will expect stronger penalties for journalistic unethical behavior than for academic unethical behavior.

Overall views of students on journalism and academic ethics are enlightening, but more important for insight into the journalism and mass communication college experience are any change in attitudes on ethics during the college years. Some journalism students enter higher education with a strong background in journalism, which influences their views on journalistic ethics (Fischman & Lam, 2000). Even in their first year of journalism school, students across the world have definite attitudes about the role and responsibility of the profession (Ball, Hanna, & Sanders, 2006; Sanders, Hanna, Berganza, & Aranda, 2008; Splichal & Sparks, 1994).

Yet during the intervening years, between the introductory course and the final senior course, journalism students have a variety of experiences related to media careers both inside and out of the classroom. Some students are working for student media, others are experiencing the professional world through internships, and many are doing both. These extracurricular activities involve situations and questions revolving around ethical issues. In a survey of mass communication students at Bowling Green State University, students considered plagiarism as the top ethical violation in journalism. Upper class students expected harsher penalties for plagiarizing journalists when compared to freshmen (Kostyu, 1990). In addition, the increase in ethics instruction in journalism and mass communication curriculum and the focus on effective ways to teach in these areas translates to more exposure for students over the past two decades (Gibson & Hester, 2000; Lee & Padgett, 2000; Plaisance, 2007). In fact, more than 80% of teachers and 70% of administrators said “significant progress” had been made in increasing the “breadth and quality of media ethics instruction” during that period (Lambeth et al., 2004, p. 249).

The increased exposure to journalism ethics during college years, both in and out of the classroom, should increase the ethics gap between beginning and graduating students, which leads to the second set of hypotheses:

- H2a: Students at the end of their journalism education will show higher levels of concern and expect harsher penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those at the start of the program.

- H2b: Students at the end of their journalism education will *not* show higher levels of concern or expect harsher penalties for unethical academic practices than those at the start of the program.

While much of the research on student media ethics has focused on the need for, and effectiveness of, ethics instruction, an important part of the learning process is happening outside the classroom. With the vocational nature of journalism and other media careers and the reluctance of the industry to invest in programs to educate and train college graduates, students are encouraged, and often required, to work in professional internships and/or student media during their college years.

Through these experiences, students begin or continue their socialization process into a media career. Research has shown that work routines, coworkers, and the journalism profession itself are strong influences on individual media workers (Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). Students involved in internships at media companies are not immune to these influences, and student media often mimic professional practices partly to help prepare those workers for their future careers. Twenty years of research into journalism practice shows that “newsroom learning” is the number one influence on journalists for their ethical views, being chosen by more than eight out of ten journalists as an influence in three separate surveys. Media superiors and coworkers also rank high among journalists, above teachers and professors, for influence on ethical behavior (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007, p. 159).

When it comes to ethical issues, the debate among journalists and researchers tends to focus on specific practices such as protecting confidential sources, naming rape victims, or using re-creations in the news (Ball, Hanna, & Sanders, 2006; Weaver et al., 2007). Plagiarism and fabrication are not even included in these lists of questionable ethical practices, as if they are beyond any kind of debate on degrees of acceptance. Lewis (2008) believes little research has been done on plagiarism or fabrication in journalism partially because it is considered an “individual moral failing” (p. 353). Therefore, the violator can be easily vilified and fired, sometimes followed by a debate centering on how the act was allowed to happen and what steps need to be taken to avoid future problems (Hanson, Picard, & McMasters, 2004). But at least one study found individual influence to have a limited role in making ethical decisions. In that study, journalists instead relied on legal ramifications, occupational norms, competition, and other social determinants (Voakes, 1997).

Combining the socialization process of journalism, the influence of coworkers on ethical issues, and the unequivocal stance on plagiarism and fabrication in the journalistic community, at least in high-profile cases, it is expected that these experiences will contribute to students being increasingly concerned about unethical professional journalistic behavior. It is uncertain whether or not applied media experience will transfer into increased concern for academic dishonesty, which is less likely to be emphasized in professional environments. Even though the same practices are being investigated, there is little theoretical or practical basis to assume student concern for academic misconduct will increase as the result of having interned or worked in student media. Thus, the next two sets of hypotheses separate those

students who have worked in student media and internships from those without those experiences:

- H3a: Students with experience in student media will show higher levels of concern and expect harsher penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those without experience in student media.
- H3b: Students with experience in student media will *not* show higher levels of concern or expect stronger penalties for unethical academic behavior than those without experience in student media.
- H4a: Students with media internships will show higher levels of concern and expect harsher penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those without media internships.
- H4b: Students with media internships will *not* show higher levels of concern or expect stronger penalties for unethical academic behavior than those without media internships.

When investigating the journalism and mass communication school experience, one must keep in mind the myriad of student interests, classes, and work/internship opportunities. Even if enrolled in a journalism school, the majority of students are not interested in a career in traditional journalism. In many of these programs, public relations and advertising have become as popular as newspaper, magazine, and broadcast journalism. In a 2007 study of journalism and mass communication programs, just under 32% of students were focused on core journalistic areas including news editorials and broadcast news. Meanwhile, 24.7% of the students were enrolled in some form of public relations or advertising (Becker, Vlad, Vogel, Wilcox, & Hanisak, 2008).

While public relations, advertising, journalism, and other media classes are taught within the same program, the differences between the areas make it difficult to teach courses designed for all of the students, including in the area of ethics (Barney & Black, 1994; Bivens, 1991; Harrison, 1990; Tucker & Stout, 1999). The students in these different areas have different views on media, including the role of the communicators themselves (Culbertson, 1986). Students interested in public relations are more likely to focus on efforts to minimize harm than journalism students when confronted with ethical dilemmas (Yoder & Bleske, 1997). In a previous study of the same journalism program, results showed that students interested in journalism careers (newspapers, photojournalism, broadcast, magazine, and online) were more concerned about plagiarism and fabrication than students interested in public relations, advertising, and graphic design (Conway & Groshek, 2008).

The variety of media interests of mass communication students combined with the concentration of coverage of ethical lapses in traditional journalism leads to the final hypotheses:

- H5a: Students who have had journalistic internships will show higher levels of concern and expect harsher penalties for unethical journalistic practices than students who have had nonjournalistic internships.

- H5b: Students who have had journalistic internships will *not* show higher levels of concern and expect stronger penalties for unethical academic behavior than students who have had nonjournalistic internships.

Method

This static-group comparison (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) involved administering surveys to students in a school of journalism¹ at a major Midwest state university for six consecutive semesters. In keeping with university human subjects research guidelines, the surveys were voluntary, anonymous, and neither the researchers nor the course instructors were in the classroom when the surveys were administered. The surveys were conducted longitudinally in two ways, to track student attitudes across a semester, as well as across their journalism school experience. Students were given the survey at the start of the semester and then again during the final week of classes.

The surveys targeted two courses designed to gauge students' attitudes at the start of their journalism school experience and then again before they graduated. The survey was first administered in a beginning reporting, writing, and editing course, which is the initial required course after students have been admitted into the journalism school. This beginning course is filled with mostly freshmen and sophomores. The course averaged 15.38 students per class section during the survey period with an average of 15.30 completed surveys per class, which constituted a 99.5% response rate. The same survey was also given to students in a media and society class, which is a required senior capstone seminar usually taken by student in their last year of school. The average class size of this course was 30.38 students during the study period with an average of 26.52 surveys completed per class for an 87.3% response ratio.²

As a result of this approach, the data includes students' attitudes after they entered the journalism school and then again just before they graduate and has resulted in 2,925 completed surveys. Since the hypotheses in this research project involved change in attitudes from the beginning to the end of students' college experience, and not during a single semester, we have combined the survey results from the start and end of the semester of both the reporting class and the senior capstone seminar. This approach means that many of the students are counted twice a semester, at the start and again at the end of the course. To ensure this combination did not compromise the study, the survey results from the end of the first course and the beginning of the senior course were temporarily eliminated and the data were analyzed again, with no significant changes to the results. Therefore, the decision was made to use all of the surveys.

The survey questionnaire was designed to assess students' attitudes on plagiarism and fabrication pertaining both to their academic career as well as the journalism profession. The queries ranged from simple yes/no questions to ordinal-level Likert scale questions. To differentiate the students by potential careers, they were asked to name their one or two top interest areas including graphic communication, magazine, advertising, broadcast news, newspaper, photojournalism, public relations,

education, online, and other/undecided. They were given the same choices when asked in what area of media they had completed an internship during college. Students were also asked if they had worked in student media during college, and if so, which particular media outlet. While the surveys were anonymous, they did include demographic information such as gender, age, and year in school.

Results

To begin, the level of concern students showed for unethical academic and journalistic behavior was established as a simple baseline. This was examined using a series of percentages of student responses based on 4-point scales ranging from “not at all” concerned to “somewhat” to “quite” to “very” concerned. When considering academics, 55.7% of students were “quite” or “very” concerned about their fellow students inventing sources. However, students’ concern regarding journalists’ unethical behaviors was noticeably higher, where 76.3% of student respondents were “quite” or “very” concerned about journalistic plagiarism. When measured with a difference of proportions test, the changes observed in these percentages were statistically significant ($Z = 16.5, p < .001$).

Similarly, while 56.3% of students surveyed were “quite” or “very” concerned that other students were making up quotes, a much more robust 79.5% of students reported the same level of concern for the practice of journalists making up sources. This difference in proportions was also statistically significant ($Z = 18.8, p < .001$), which again identifies a trend in students’ assigning less importance to their own ethical behavior as students than that of media professionals. This pattern became even more evident when noting that only 43.6% of students were “quite” or “very” concerned that students steal information from the Internet, which pales in comparison to the 83.2% of students who felt that way regarding the incidents of journalistic misconduct. This difference was also statistically significant ($Z = 31.2, p < .001$) and to us, though the figures for academic dishonesty are rather modest when compared to journalistic infractions, they indicate a general disdain for practices students know are unacceptable. Here, it is also worth noting that nearly 68.9% of students reported that pressure does “not at all” justify unethical behavior on the part of other students.

Moreover, student views on the penalties for journalistic unethical behavior were shown to be quite severe in comparison to that of academic unethical behavior. For example, on a 4-point scale of penalties including “do nothing,” “reprimand in some other way,” “move person to another beat/position,” and “fire the journalist,” 64.1% of students reported that professionals found guilty of plagiarism should be fired and only one student responded that nothing should be done. On the other hand, given a similar 4-point scale that included “do nothing,” “reprimand,” “retake class with incident on record,” and “expel,” a mere 4.5% of students indicated that students found guilty of inventing sources should be expelled. The difference between these proportions was statistically significant ($Z = 28.5, p < .001$).

Given the option of deciding a journalist's fate for making up sources, 61.4% of students agreed that journalists should be fired for making up sources but only 3.1% of students reported that students should be expelled for the making up quotes. Here again, comparing these two proportions resulted in a statistically significant difference ($Z = 27.8$, $p < .001$) where it was quite clear that students have generally adopted the broad philosophy of being forgiven now for acts that would later warrant harsh penalties.

Along these same lines, 65.5% of students also suggested that journalists should be fired for fabricating, but when provided a comparable option of determining the course of action appropriate for students found to have been stealing or not properly attributing information from the Internet, just 2.1% considered expulsion an appropriate consequence. This finding was also statistically significant ($Z = 30.3$, $p < .001$) and when taken together, these results suggest that students are concerned about plagiarism and fabrication in academic and journalistic environments but more so in professional settings.

In addition, students rather uniformly agree that such practices should be punished—but only severely in the case of professional journalists, not fellow students. Thus, it is quite clear that students are far more concerned about professional journalists behaving badly than they are about students failing to meet fundamental ethical standards.

This very proposition was the basis of Hypotheses 1a and 1b, which predicted that journalism students would show a greater level of concern and expect stronger penalties for journalistic unethical behavior than for academic unethical behavior. The survey used in this study incorporated three questions related to academic dishonesty that can be directly compared to three questions concerning journalistic ethics. The first of these comparisons included one item that measured students' concern about students inventing sources and another that estimated students' concern about journalists making up sources. When examined using a paired samples *t*-test, the difference between the means of these items (based on identical 4-point scales) was statistically significant. Specifically, the average level of concern for students inventing sources was 2.71 compared to an average level of concern of 3.24 for journalists inventing sources ($t(2,808) = 29.16$, $p < .001$).

The second pair of items measured student concern that students make up quotes and that journalists fabricate. The mean level of concern reported by students about students making up quotes was 2.72 and the mean level of concern about journalists fabricating was 3.29, both again on identical four point scales. The difference in means of this paired sample was .57, which was also statistically significant ($t(2,827) = 32.19$, $p < .001$). The third pair of directly comparable items identified students' concern about students using information from the Internet without attribution and their concern about journalists plagiarizing. A paired samples *t*-test again yielded a statistically meaningful difference, where the average level of student concern about students stealing information from the Internet ($M = 2.47$) was significantly less than student concern about journalists plagiarizing ($M = 3.17$) when measured by the same four point scale ($t(2,814) = 39.79$, $p < .001$).

The significant differences between student and journalist behavior are also evident when the suggested penalties for these ethical infractions are compared, the subject of Hypothesis 1b. Concerning inventing sources, the average penalty level for students was 2.57 and 3.42 for journalists, a difference of .85. For students making up quotes, the student penalty averaged 2.45 but jumps over a point to 3.51 for journalists who fabricate material. The largest difference is seen when comparing the use of material from the Internet without permission or attribution. Students think they should be penalized at an average level of 2.28 on a 4-point scale while journalists are held to a much higher level of punishment, 3.51. All three of these comparisons are significant. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 1.

Though these results are useful and provide evidence supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b, they are not highly parsimonious measures. Therefore, a factor analysis procedure examined items that might be combined to generate indexes of student concern about academic dishonesty and journalistic ethics. Four factors—concern about academic ethics, concern about journalistic ethics, penalties for students' misconduct, and penalties for journalists' misconduct—were identified when calculating factor loadings using Varimax rotation.

Factor 1, concern about student cheating, was constructed by adding the three student items already used to examine H1a and then dividing by three to maintain the distribution of responses on its original four point scale. Once calculated, this factor showed a Cronbach alpha reliability score of .89, which indicates a very strong relationship where respondents ranked items similarly (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). Concern about journalistic ethics, Factor 2, was also a three-item factor created using the same procedure, and included the journalistic set of items used to examine the

Table 1 Students' Levels of Concern for Academic Dishonesty and Journalistic Ethics

	Inventing or making up sources	Making up quotes or fabricating	Stealing information or plagiarizing
Mean level of concern about the academic dishonesty of students	2.71	2.72	2.47
Mean level of concern about ethics of journalists	3.24	3.29	3.17
Differences in mean levels of concern about students' and journalists' behavior	0.53***	0.57***	0.70***
Mean level of penalties for unethical students	2.57	2.45	2.28
Mean level of penalties for unethical journalists	3.42	3.51	3.51
Differences in mean levels of penalties for students' and journalists' behavior	0.85***	1.06***	1.23***

Note. Reported means were based on 4-point Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 (not at all concerned/do nothing) to 4 (very concerned/fire or expel) for all items.

*** $p \leq .001$.

second hypothesis. Here, $\alpha = .90$, again indicating these items are generally measuring the same concept from slightly different angles. Notably, Factor 1 and Factor 2 are directly comparable multidimensional indexes and were thus used as a test of H1a. As before, a paired samples *t*-test demonstrated statistically significant results. The average score of Factor 1 was 2.65 and the average score of Factor 2 was 3.24, thereby unambiguously supporting H1a ($t(2,750) = 39.34, p < .001$).

Factor 3 (penalties for students' misconduct) and Factor 4 (penalties for journalists' misconduct) are also three-item factors and included items that reported how students felt students and journalists should be penalized for having plagiarized, fabricated material, or made up sources for a story (H1b). These factors were based on items with 4-point scales and generated using the same additive process delineated for previously identified factors to maintain a metric equivalent to original scales and those of the other factors. The reliability of the scales used for both Factor 3 and Factor 4 was $\alpha = .78$, which again indicates that the items used to construct each of these factors group together quite well. As in all other cases, a paired samples *t* test demonstrated statistically significant results. The average score of Factor 3 was 2.43 and the average score of Factor 4 was 3.48, which therefore supported H1b ($t(696) = 38.85, p < .001$). The results of each of these four tests also lend credence to the notion that students often believe their actions in college have little relation to their job performance and habits after graduation. All factors are summarized in Table 2 with their index components, reliability scores, and averages.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted that students at the end of their journalism education would show higher levels of concern and stronger penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those at the start of the program, but students' levels of concern and suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior will not show the same effect over time. The propositions of these hypotheses were investigated using a series of independent samples *t* tests. First, the change in the level of students' concern for journalistic ethics, Factor 2, was examined across the beginning and end of their academic careers. The mean level of student concern was shown to increase from 3.15 among students in the introductory journalism course to 3.32 for students enrolled in the capstone journalism course. Thus, there is a significant effect between time and student concern for journalistic ethics ($t(2,875) = 6.19, p < .001$). Next, the increase in Factor 4 from 3.22 reported by students at the beginning of their journalism coursework to 3.44 by students at the end of their coursework was examined. This test demonstrated a statistically significant relationship where time intersected with student beliefs of the severity of penalties for journalists behaving unethically ($t(2,882) = 7.62, p < .001$). The results of both of these statistical procedures support Hypothesis 2a—students at the end of their journalistic training are increasingly critical and concerned about unethical practices by professional journalists.

The last measure involving Hypotheses 2b, looked at the degree to which time and coursework interacted with the level of concern students showed for academic dishonesty in Factors 1 and 3. As predicted, students did not show higher levels of concern for their fellow students' cheating over time. Although students in this survey

Table 2 Reliabilities and Averages of Factors Identifying Students' Levels of Concern for Academic Dishonesty, Journalistic Ethics, and Penalties for Professional Misconduct

Description of factor loadings and scales	Reliability of factor loadings	Mean level of concern or penalties
Factor 1: Concern about academic ethics Three-item index measuring student concern that other students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● invent sources ● make up quotes ● steal information from the internet 	$\alpha = .89$	2.65
Factor 2: Concern about journalistic ethics Three-item index measuring student concern that journalists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make up sources ● fabricate ● plagiarize 	$\alpha = .90$	3.24
Factor 3: Penalties for student misconduct Three-item index measuring student perceptions of the severity of punishments appropriate for students who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● invent sources ● make up quotes ● steal information from the internet 	$\alpha = .78$	2.43
Factor 4: Penalties for professional misconduct Three-item index measuring student perceptions of the severity of punishments appropriate for journalists who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make up sources ● fabricate ● plagiarize 	$\alpha = .78$	3.48

Note. Reported means were based on 4-point Likert-type scales that ranged from one (not at all concerned) to four (very concerned) for Factors 1 and 2. The means of Factor 3 and Factor 4 was also based on a 4-point Likert-type scale with a range of 1 (do nothing) to 4 (expel student or fire journalist, as appropriate).

actually did indicate higher levels of concern about academic honesty at the end of their academic careers (2.67) than at the start (2.62), this relationship was not statistically significant ($t(2,787) = 1.62, p > .05$). Similarly, students in this survey also reported higher levels of penalties for academic dishonesty at the end of their academic careers (2.55) than at the start (2.37). Here, however, this relationship was statistically significant ($t(704) = 4.60, p < .001$). Thus, it is worth noting that Hypothesis 2b was only partially supported because there was no positive effect over time in Factor 1. All of these relationships are summarized in relation to one another in Table 3.

This study next proceeded to investigate what effects on student concern for unethical behavior might be the result of students having worked in student media or interned at professional media organizations. Specifically, Hypotheses 3a and 3b predicted that students with experience in student media would show higher levels of

Table 3 Observed Changes in the Mean Levels of Student Concern for Academic Dishonesty, Journalistic Ethics, and Penalties for Professional Misconduct over Time and across Students with or without Student Media and Internship Experiences

Average of Reported:	Hypotheses 2a and 2b: Course and Time Effects		Hypotheses 3a and 3b: Student Media Effects		Hypotheses 4a and 4b: Internship Effects	
	Entry Course	Capstone Course	No Student Media	Student Media	No Internship	Some Internship
Academic Ethics (Factor 1)	2.62	2.67	2.55	2.78***	2.63	2.66
Journalistic Ethics (Factor 2)	3.15	3.32***	3.14	3.37***	3.16	3.30***
Student Penalties (Factor 3)	2.37	2.55***	2.38	2.53***	2.42	2.45
Professional Penalties (Factor 4)	3.22	3.44***	3.23	3.45***	3.23	3.40***

Note. Reported means were based on 4-point Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 (not at all concerned) to 4 (very concerned) for Academic Dishonesty and Journalistic Ethics. The mean of Professional Penalties was also based on a 4-point Likert-type scale with a range of 1 (do nothing) to 4 (fire journalist).

*** $p < .001$.

concern and expect stronger penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those without experience in student media, but students' levels of concern and suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior would not show the same effect across groups. These hypotheses were also tested using a series of independent samples t-tests.

The change in the level of student concern for journalistic ethics identified in Factor 2 was measured among students who had no student media experience and those who reported being involved with at least one (but possibly more) student media organizations. The mean level of student concern was shown to increase significantly from 3.14 among students with no student media experience to 3.37 for students who had reported working at one or more student media organization ($t(2,875) = 8.54, p < .001$). A similar statistically significant increase in the average level of Factor 4 (student beliefs in the severity of penalties for journalistic misconduct) from 3.23 reported by students without student media experience to 3.45 among students with experience in student media was observed ($t(2,882) = 7.44, p < .001$). These findings clearly support Hypothesis 3a. It can therefore be noted that students with experience in student media were more concerned about professional journalistic misconduct, and more likely to suggest harsher penalties for journalists who plagiarized or fabricated.

Hypotheses 3b—students' levels of concern for academic dishonesty described in Factor 1 would be unaffected by participation in student media—was not supported by the data. Contrary to expectations, students who worked in student media *did*

show higher average levels of concern for their fellow students' cheating (2.78) than those that did not have any student media affiliation (2.55) to a significant degree ($t(2,787) = 6.82, p < .001$). By the same token in Factor 3, students who worked in student media also showed higher average levels of penalties for their fellow students' cheating (2.53) than those that did not have any student media affiliation (2.38) to a significant degree ($t(704) = 3.85, p < .001$). Even though the findings reported here did not support Hypothesis 3b, they nonetheless revealed an interesting relationship that suggests experience with student media organizations may have an overall effect that is not specific to environments, but rather practices. The results of the statistical analyses can be seen in Table 3.

In an attempt to more specifically identify why certain students show higher levels of concern for journalistic and academic ethics, Hypotheses 4a and 4b predicted that students who have had media internships would show higher levels of concern and expect harsher penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those who have not had media internships, but students' levels of concern and suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior will not show the same effect across groups. This analysis again began with Factor 2, where the mean level of student concern for journalistic ethics among students who had no media internships was 3.16 and increased to 3.30 among students who reported having at least one internship in a media organization. The difference between groups (.14) indicated a statistically significant relationship ($t(2,875) = 5.13, p < .001$). In Factor 4, students with media internships on average reported significantly stronger penalties for journalistic misconduct (3.40) than students who had no internship experience (3.23), ($t(2,882) = 5.73, p < .001$), both results supporting Hypothesis 4a. Thus, it is quite clear that internship experiences do have a demonstrable influence on increasing students' perceptions of the importance and consequences for fabricating or plagiarizing material as a professional journalist.

The prediction that internship experiences will not demonstrate a positive effect on students' levels of concern or suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior, Hypothesis 4b, was also supported. In Factor 1, students with internship experience showed higher mean levels of concern (2.66) for student cheating and plagiarism than students without an internship (2.63), but this difference was not significant ($t(2,787) = 0.99, p > .05$). Similarly, when analyzed with Factor 3, students with internship experience also showed higher mean levels of penalties (2.45) for student cheating and plagiarism than students without an internship (2.42) and a nonsignificant the difference ($t(704) = .74, p > .05$). Unlike the previous finding regarding student media experience, students with media internships do *not* appear to transfer their concern about unethical practices within the journalistic profession to other arenas like academics, as shown in Table 3.

The final area of this study, Hypotheses 5a and 5b, predicted that students who have had journalistic internships will show higher levels of concern and expect stronger penalties for unethical journalistic behavior than students who have had nonjournalistic internships (H5a), but students' levels of concern and suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior will not show the same effect across groups

(H5b). These hypotheses were tested using each of the three factors as before, but also included four groups that defined differing levels and types of internship experiences. These four groups were: (1) students who have had no internship experience, (2) students with nonjournalistic internship experience only, (3) students who had only journalistic internship experience, and (4) students who reported having both a nonjournalistic and a journalistic internship. A journalistic internship encompassed the categories of broadcast news, magazines, newspapers, online and photojournalism. Nonjournalistic internships included advertising, public relations, graphic communication, education, and other (Conway & Groshek, 2008).

The change in the mean level of student concern for journalistic ethics (Factor 2) was lowest for students with no internship experience at 3.16 and increased somewhat among students who had a nonjournalistic internship to 3.20. The most noticeable jump in concern about journalistic ethics was shown by students who reported having an internship in some area of journalism. Their average level of concern was 3.40, which was nearly equivalent to the mean level of 3.41 shown by students who indicated they had internships in both nonjournalistic and journalistic organizations. Thus, it appears that students with journalistic internships were driving the distinctions between groups where there was a significant effect between the type and level of internship experience and student concern for journalistic ethics ($F(3, 2,783) = 18.28, p < .001$).

The ANOVA of Factor 4 showed similar, but less remarkable results for student beliefs of the severity of penalties for journalistic misconduct. Students with no internship experience again demonstrated the baseline with the lowest average penalty score of 3.23 and were again followed by the mean penalty level of 3.32 shown by students who had only a nonjournalistic internship. Students who had only a journalistic internship showed a slightly greater average score of 3.49 than students who had both nonjournalistic and journalistic internships, whose average level of suggested penalties was 3.46. The severity of penalties for journalists behaving unethically also showed a statistically significant relationship ($F(3, 2,880) = 16.92, p < .001$) where the beliefs of students with journalistic internships were distinctly more severe than other students. These results support Hypothesis 5a that students with journalistic internship experience are more critical and concerned about unethical practices by professional journalists than are students with nonjournalistic internship experience.

Hypothesis 5b predicted that student concern about academic dishonesty would not be related to students' internship experiences. These internships, however, interacted with the level of concern students showed for academic dishonesty in Factor 1 in several unique ways. Students who *never* had an internship actually had *higher* levels of concern for academic dishonesty (2.63) than did students who had nonjournalistic internships only (2.55), which was the group with the lowest level of concern. Students with internships in journalism organizations had higher levels of concern (2.78) than either of the two previous groups and students with both types of internships (2.75). Moreover, these disparate levels of concern were statistically significant, $F(3, 2,785) = 8.10, p < .001$, and thus did not support Hypothesis 5b.

The results of Factor 3, students' suggested penalties for unethical academic behavior, found the same pattern of results, but were not statistically significant ($F(3, 702) = 1.53, p > .05$). Here again, students who never had an internship actually had higher levels of penalties for academic dishonesty (2.42) than did students who only had nonjournalistic internships (2.40) or both types of internships (2.40), the two groups that showed the lowest level of penalties among students. Interestingly, students with internships only in journalism organizations had the highest levels of suggested penalties for their fellow students, (2.51). Taken together, it is important to note that these results provide more evidence of a distinct pattern of journalistic internships being linked to increasing level of student concern in both areas of ethics under investigation and harsher penalties for professionals who deviate from the foundations of journalistic integrity. These relationships are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into college students' attitudes on ethical behavior in their college experience as well as in their future media careers. These results consistently show an ethics gap between academic and journalistic work. Concern about student cheating is lower in every statistical test and procedure used in this study, even when increases are shown, they do not equal the lowest levels of

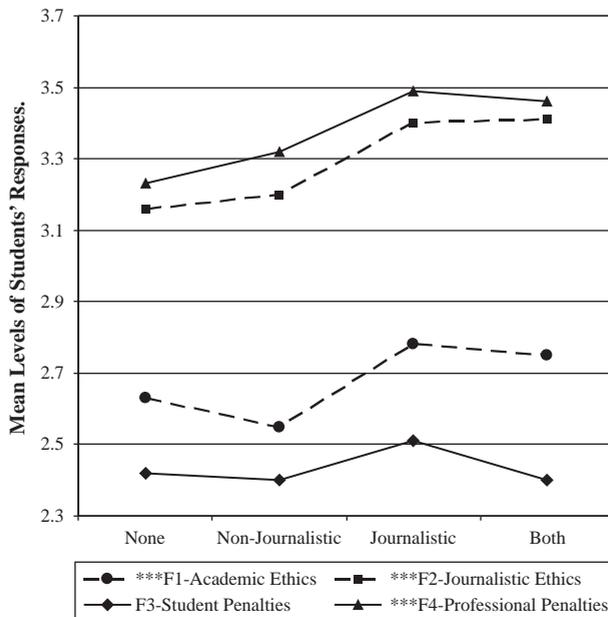


Figure 1. Journalism internship effects. Observed changes among students with non-journalistic, journalistic, or both types of internship experiences in levels of journalism students' concern for academic and journalistic ethics as well as penalties for students' and professional journalists' misconduct. *** $p < .001$.

concern for journalistic plagiarism. The ethics gap clearly shows that students are holding professional journalists to a higher ethical standard in plagiarism and fabrication than the students themselves in their academic work (H1a and H1b). More than 60% of all respondents felt that journalists should be fired for plagiarizing or fabricating information while less than 5% of students thought that expelling students for similar violations was appropriate.

The survey project was also designed as an ongoing static-group comparison that assessed student attitudes both at the beginning of their journalism school experience and then again just before they graduate. Through factor analysis, four areas of student attitudes emerged: concern about student ethics, concern about journalism ethics, and penalties for students' misconduct, and penalties for journalists' misconduct.

The two indexes involving journalists—concern for ethics and penalties for misconduct—both registered significant increases from the start to the end of the students' journalism school experience (H2a). Notably, concern about student cheating and penalties for academic dishonesty (H2b) also increased but these shifts were only statistically significant for the student penalties factor, which still had the lowest level overall. These results clearly demonstrate that students become more concerned about journalism ethics than academic misconduct during their time in school.

Much of the research on journalism education ethics focuses on the classroom instruction (Gibson & Hester, 2000; Lee & Padgett, 2000; Plaisance, 2007) since this is the main point of contact between instructors and students. But college is more than classes, and students are influenced by a variety of experiences, including interaction with friends, school organizations, and other opportunities on campus. For journalism students, working in student media and completing professional media internships can be defining moments in a nascent media career.

To gain insight on how those early media experiences may influence ethical attitudes, students who worked in student media and/or professional internships were compared with students without those experiences. Concerning student media experience (including the college newspaper, radio station, television station, yearbook and other outlets), students who had worked in student media had significantly higher levels of concern for all four ethical factors: journalistic ethics and penalties (H3a), and academic ethics and penalties (H3b). Students who had completed professional internships also showed significantly higher levels of concern and expected penalties for journalism ethics violations (H4a). But that concern did not include academic ethics or penalties, neither of which reached a statistically significant level (H4b).

Finally, the data were analyzed to reflect the changing interests of students who pick journalism as a major. Journalism programs are increasingly diverse, with a large percentage of students interested in areas such as public relations and advertising. The students were separated into those with journalistic internship experience, nonjournalistic internship experience, both, or no internship. For both the journalistic ethics and penalties for journalists' misconduct factors, those students with journalistic

internships had the highest levels of concern (H5a). Students with only nonjournalistic internships had roughly the same or slightly higher concern for journalism ethics than those students without any internship experience. Surprisingly, focusing on the factor involving academic ethics (H5b), the students with only nonjournalistic internships showed less concern for academic dishonesty and penalties than those students with no internship experience. As with the other two factors, students with journalistic internship experience had the highest levels of concern for academic ethics and penalties.

When we consider these young adults as apprentice journalists, instead of students, the results resonate with previous research in a variety of areas. Sociologists and mass communication scholars have studied the power of the socialization process on newsroom employees to follow an explicit or implicit set of rules (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Weaver et al., 2007). These apprentice journalists are spending a significant amount of time working with more seasoned news people and those newsroom experiences are impacting how they feel about their profession. Plus, the demonizing of Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Janet Cooke, and countless other errant journalists sends a powerful message on what behavior will not be tolerated. It is important to keep in mind that this research focuses solely on plagiarism and fabrication, and not on more nuanced potential violations of journalism ethics.

The results of this study align with three decades of research into *The American Journalist* by Weaver et al. (2007) concerning the link between ethics and the newsroom. “Newsroom learning” has been the top influence on journalists’ ethics in all three surveys, cited by more than eight out of ten people surveyed. In addition, “senior editors, reporters, directors,” came in third in the 2002 survey, just behind “family upbringing” (Weaver et al., p. 159).

Though this is a static-group study, it is possible that certain students may have filled out the survey as entry-level students and as graduating seniors. However, in keeping with university human subjects regulations, the respondents are anonymous, so it is not possible to chart a specific student’s change in attitude over time and show causality. Instead, different influences on the aggregate change were the focus. So while the results indicate students are increasing their concern for journalism ethics through internships and student media, an alternate explanation is that certain students are predisposed to feel strongly about plagiarism and fabrication and they are drawn to the student media and professional media internship experience.

The ethics gap between students with journalistic and nonjournalistic internships points out the continued efforts that need to be made in understanding the different motivations, interests, and beliefs of students in today’s journalism and mass communication programs. The issues of journalistic plagiarism and fabrication clearly do not resonate as strongly for those students who are not experiencing journalism internships. As Culbertson (1986) found in comparisons of students with various interests in a journalism program, the students in public relations and advertising had different views from students in traditional journalism in areas such as the role of the communicator and the importance of research.

The results of this study mainly highlighted the influence of internships and student media work. But the significant increase in concern about journalistic ethics from the start to the end of the students' college career (Table 3) also signals the positive role of class instruction during this period. When taken as a whole, these results suggest that the socialization process cultivated in practical media environments (student media and internships) is quite potent in positively influencing students' ethical perceptions. Similarly, coursework at this university, even without a stand-alone ethics class, also showed a meaningful effect in increasing students' levels of concern about academic dishonesty and journalistic ethics and its penalties. Since student media experiences and internships—specifically journalistic ones—occur over the course students' academic training, there appears to be a significant interactive effect on the importance students attach to ethical breaches, most notably in the profession. Thus, both coursework *and* applied media experiences are crucial to integrating and improving the ethical decision making of future journalists.

Notes

- [1] Even though the unit is called a journalism school, it involves curriculum for a variety of mass communication careers. The most popular areas of study for the students are public relations (32.1%), magazine reporting (32.1%), newspaper reporting (18.6), and broadcast news (15.5%). Students could choose more than one area.
- [2] The authors have taught 3 of the 78 class sections included in the data set.

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