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An Assessment of Corruption and Academic Dishonesty in Romanian Universities

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

The main purpose of this research is to examine student perceptions of academic integrity and corruption among faculty, administrators, and students at Bucharest's main public institutions of higher education. A related goal is to explore the factors that influence academic dishonesty among students, and determine the relative importance of quality of teaching, student engagement, and academic integrity during high school years.

The travel grant allowed me to set up the survey project, train a team of students who helped with the administration of the survey, and administer the survey at nine institutions of higher education in Bucharest. During the visit to Romania, I also held informal interviews with higher education leaders (rectors, pro-rectors, and higher education researchers) to discuss current issues related to quality and academic integrity in public higher education.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

Corruption is one of the most serious problems affecting the Romanian society. In the International Corruption Perception Index, published in 2005 by the U.S.-based Transparency International, Romania occupies the 85th place with 3 points of transparency on a 0 to 10 scale. The report places Romania among the former Eastern-European states with the highest level of corruption.

Corrupt practices have infected almost every sphere of life: government, customs, the judicial system, hospitals, public administration, and the education system. Proportionally, corruption in higher education is less prevalent than, say, in the public administration or the hospitals. But, in terms of long-term effects, it is much more destructive because it directly impacts the attitude and the work ethic of those students who witness cases of corruption and academic dishonesty in the education system. If the ethical climate in universities does not change, it would be difficult to combat corruption elsewhere, because corruption will be an entrenched the dominant culture for cohorts of graduates.

The main purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which corruption and cheating have affected the public higher education institutions in Romania's capital, Bucharest. Recent reports in the media indicate that in several private universities across the country faculty members charge students for exam grades; administrators charge for admissions, and institutions sell diplomas to foreign students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that corruption may be a problem not only the private sector, but also in some state universities.

Unlike previous studies of corruption in higher education, this study examines corruption among faculty and administrators and cheating among students as two interdependent phenomena. A central hypothesis to be tested is that corruption among faculty and administrators breeds student cheating and vice versa. That is, institutions that turn a blind eye to corruption among faculty are more likely to witness cases of academic cheating and plagiarism among students.

The study also differs from the extant literature on corruption in that it examines the degree to which the quality of the educational experience (methods of teaching, involvement of students in class discussion, availability of faculty outside the classes) influences the academic integrity among students. It also hypothesizes that a student's ethical values are influenced by the integrity of his or her peers in high school and college.

Approach and Research Methodology

To develop the survey instrument, I conducted a review of articles published in the Romanian media on corruption cases in higher education. The emerging questionnaire was piloted during spring of 2005 by a group of undergraduate students at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. During my visit to Bucharest in November, I was able to obtain permission to administer the survey from all the universities included in the sample and collected data from all but one institution.

The study employs a two stage cluster sample that includes approximately 1,400 undergraduate students and has an estimated margin error of $\pm 3\%$. The distribution of students in the sample by profile of study (i.e., engineering, economic, law, agriculture, etc.) mirrors the distribution in the population of study. In the first stage, a random group of faculties (schools) was selected within each university. In the second stage, a group of classrooms was selected from each faculty identified during the first stage. First-year undergraduates were excluded from the study since they have not had sufficient time to form an opinion about the academic integrity at their institution. All students present in the classrooms selected were invited to complete the questionnaire at the end or the beginning of the class.

Thus far 1,050 questionnaires have been collected and the remaining 340 are yet to be completed by engineering students. Data collection is expected to be completed by mid-December. A customized report will be prepared in January for all rectors comparing responses at their institution with responses for all public universities in Bucharest.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Since data collection has not yet been completed for the entire sample, the following conclusions are preliminary and should therefore be treated with caution. Initial exploration of the survey data collected thus far indicates that students are most dissatisfied with the integrity of their administrative staff (i.e., secretaries, residence life administrators, etc.). A majority of students, for instance, report having witnessed cases where administrators accepted or required bribes from students to guarantee them a room in a dormitory.

The data also reveal that increasingly more students from outside Bucharest have to work during the day to support themselves throughout the college years. As a result, they miss classes and are less engaged in academic work than their non-working colleagues. The study will examine whether these students are more likely than the other students to view cheating and corruption as acceptable behaviors.

The preliminary findings reveal a general feeling of passivity among students regarding the state of academic integrity at their institutions. When asked if they would report students who cheat during exams or faculty and administrators who take bribes from students, most students indicate that they would not do so. Many think that it is not their responsibility to report such behaviors. Others consider that even if they report dishonest behaviors, the leadership will not take the necessary measures. A third category of students are afraid to report such cases. Overall, the general attitude is one of detachment from and acceptance and protection of the status quo.

Despite the pervasive attitude of tacit acceptance of academic dishonesty among students, there is hope that the ethical climate in Romanian universities will soon improve. In summer of 2005, the Minister of Education asked that all accredited universities draft, debate and adopt a Code of Ethics at their campuses by December 20, 2005. The document is expected to function as a moral contract between students, faculty, and staff, establishing ethical standards to be followed by the entire university community and prescribing penalties for various cases of academic dishonesty. The Minister also asked each institution to set up a Commission of Ethics by October 1, 2005, which will be charged with writing the Code of Ethics, analyzing and solving all cases of academic dishonesty, and presenting an annual report to the University Senate. Each Commission will be comprised of 5-9 members known for their moral authority and professional accomplishments, representing in equal proportions students, faculty, and administrators. Members of the commission will be nominated and approved by the university senate and will exclude persons who occupy leadership positions at the university or faculty level.

Suggestions for Future Research

Aside from painting a snapshot of academic integrity in Bucharest's public universities, the data collected in this survey will make it possible to explore a number of related research questions: To what extent does the quality of teaching influence cheating during exams among students? What is the relationship between student dishonesty in high school and cheating during college? Do attitudes toward cheating vary between the students who work and those who do not, or between the students who live in the dormitories and those who live off campus? Which methods of examination are most likely to facilitate cheating?

In addition, an educational researcher in Romania recommended administering the questionnaire on a nationwide scale to determine if there are regional differences in attitudes toward and incidence of cases of academic dishonesty among students and faculty. It was also recommended that the questionnaire be re-administered in late 2006, one year after each university has adopted a Code of Ethics and established a Commission of Ethics, as requested by the Ministry of Education. It would be interesting to see if the new structural changes will bring about the necessary cultural changes, by altering behaviors and attitudes related to academic integrity.

Recommendation for the US Policy Community

American colleges and universities have a long tradition in using and enforcing codes of ethics on their campuses. The academic culture on many campuses is one that encourages honesty and meritocracy and exposes and penalizes unethical behaviors among students, faculty, and administrators. The emerging commissions of ethics in Romanian universities could learn a lot from the American counterparts if more exchanges and conferences were organized around the topic of ethics in universities. Members of these commissions should be offered the opportunity to visit and observe how ethics councils work at American universities.

The well intentioned structural changes will not succeed if the commissions of ethics do not hold faculty and students to higher ethical standards. Strong leadership within these commissions is essential to eradicating dishonest behaviors. To become a living document, the Code of Ethics will need to be widely disseminated every year to the university community. But strong leadership alone, however, will not suffice to guarantee the success of the newly proposed Code of Ethics. Romanian universities need to hire and promote faculty who are exemplary role models for their students. Again, by working collaboratively with and observing the ways in which American scholars teach, research, and perform service activities on their campuses, Romanian academics could benefit enormously.