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**THE ELECTRONIC RESOURCES POLICY AND ETHICAL  
UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENT BEHAVIOR: COVID-19  
PANDEMIC EFFECTS**

**Abstract:**

Electronic resource policies are implemented to provide user guidelines, minimize negative activities, and encourage positive ethical behavior. This study was therefore conducted to longitudinally examine policy effectiveness for undergraduate business students and, in particular, examine possible COVID-19 pandemic effects. Results demonstrate that during the pandemic, unethical student behavior such as cheating on online exams greatly increased. However, by the end of the pandemic, behaviors nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels and the electronic resources policies are now increasingly perceived as being an effective deterrent to unethical behavior both for the student and others.

**Keywords:**

Electronic Resource Policies, Ethics, Cheating, Undergraduate Business Students

**JEL Classification:** Z00, L86, M19

## Introduction

The number of Internet users worldwide reached 5.16 billion in 2023 or approximately 65% of the population (Statista.com, 2023). While the bridging of the digital divide has provided more of the world access to information, it has also created challenges for businesses. For example, a study of businesses in India found that 82% of employees used social media in the workplace during working hours for non-work-related purposes wasting 52 minutes per day or causing a 9% loss in productivity for these employees on a daily basis (Ahmad, Hussain, & Ahmad, 2022). Moreover, a Digital.com survey of 1,250 Americans who primarily work from home found that 62% shop online during virtual work meetings (Nguyen, 2021).

Academia has also not been immune to problems. A March 2020 study of 840 students across multiple college campuses found that more than 25% of undergraduate university students freely admitted to using unauthorized electronic resources such as articles, Wikipedia, YouTube and so on for a paper, project, homework, or other assignment (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2020). Moreover, an authors' conducted study found from 2018 to 2023 a relatively steady transition with respect to the student perception that it is getting less difficult to cheat on an online exam. In the Fall 2020, for example, it was found that many of the more than 800 students at Texas A&M University cheated on multiple online finance exams using Chegg, an online homework site (Adams, 2021).

Further complicating the problems have been the effects associated with the 2020-23 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Studies of undergraduate business students demonstrate changes from 2017 to 2021. One U.S. study found a large increase in both social media utilization minutes (from 181 minutes to 282 minutes per day) and the percentage of students being trolled (from 34% to 58% of students) (Case & King, 2021). In addition, a mental health study of 709 university students in Indonesia universities in June 2020 during the pandemic found that students with higher social media addiction scores had a greater likelihood of experiencing mild depression (Sujarwoto & Yumarni, 2023). Another authors' conducted study demonstrated participation percent and participation minutes increased for social/communication activities (chatroom visitation, texting with friends/family, and online gaming) and recreational activities (online gambling, online shopping, and downloading music) with the number of minutes per week growing from 304 minutes (5 hours) in 2017 to 660 minutes (11 hours) in 2021 (Case & King, 2023).

To combat these challenges, businesses and universities implement electronic resources policies such as the template provided by the State of Michigan (Michigan.gov, 2023). These policies, also known as acceptable usage policies, define employee responsibilities and serve as guiding policy for employee expected behavior when using the organization's information assets in an effort to protect the business or not expose it to danger (Flack, Kritzing, & Loock, 2021). An analysis of 176 of the top 200 universities as denoted by *U.S. News*, for example, found the greatest commonality in policies related to state and federal law statements with 80% of the universities providing statements or sections about legal compliance (Weidman and Grossklags, 2017).

This study examines several questions:

- Do students perceive the electronic resources policy as an effective deterrent for himself/herself and for others in appropriately using the Internet?
- What are student predispositions toward ethical actions?
- What is the incidence of unethical behavior?
- Importantly, has the March 11, 2020 World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic changed perceptions and behavior (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020)?
- And, what has been the effect with the WHO declaration on May 5, 2023 of the end of the pandemic (Mundasad & Roxby, 2023)?

Results are important in determining if there is a need for proactive education with respect to ethical and responsible electronic behavior.

## **Previous Research**

To examine policy perceptions, the authors conducted an exploratory study of undergraduate business students in 2001 (Case and King, 2002). The researchers found that 32% of respondents indicated that the university Internet Use Policy was an effective deterrent for him/her and 29% indicated that it effectively deterred others. In terms of academic class, 46% of freshmen, 35% of sophomores, 23% of juniors, and 27% of seniors indicated the policy was effective. Moreover, 43% of females and 26% of males indicated the policy was effective.

A study of business executives further found that 40% indicated that their company Internet Use Policy was effective (Case and Young, 2002). Of the organizations requiring an employee acknowledgement signature, 53% indicated that the policy was an effective deterrent with an average of 4.22 employees disciplined-only, .22 employees terminated-only, and .22 employees both disciplined and ultimately terminated because of a policy violation. Of the organizations not requiring an employee signature, only 13% indicated that the policy was an effective deterrent with an average of 2.5 employees disciplined-only, 1.63 employees terminated-only, and .75 employees both disciplined and ultimately terminated.

In 2013, the authors conducted a follow-up study to better understand the relationship of Internet Use Policy perceptions and risky online behavior (Case and King, 2014). Online activities included downloading/viewing pornography, gambling, visiting chatrooms, and cybersex. This longitudinal analysis of undergraduate business students found that during the five-year study, 15% to 25% of students per year indicated participating in at least one of the behaviors. The most common activity was downloading/viewing pornography (10% to 19% per year), and the least common activity was cybersex (0% to 3% per year). With respect to Internet Use Policy effectiveness, 43% to 57% of students per year perceived the policy to be a strong or mild

deterrent with respect to negative electronic behavior for him or her. A lesser percentage, 36% to 52% of students per year, perceived the policy to be a strong or mild deterrent for others.

However, an updated authors' study from 2013 to 2017 found that the electronic resources policy was becoming less effective (Case & King, 2018). With respect to policy effectiveness perception, the percentage of students with this belief was trending downward or decreasing. This was evident with the perception that the policy is an effective deterrent both for the respondent and for other students. Results also found that freshmen were more likely to download a paper and submit it for his/her own and seniors were more likely to cheat on an online exam. Moreover, cheating using information technology (IT), downloading papers as his/her own, and not citing information cut/pasted from the Internet was statistically correlated with males.

## **Electronic Resources Policy**

The study university utilizes a signed policy for the responsible and acceptable use of electronic resources. Upon enrollment, students review the policy and sign a form acknowledging his/her acceptance of the policy. The purpose of the policy is to require the ethical, legal, and secure use of computing and electronic communication by all members of the university community. A fundamental aspect of the policy relates to appropriate use requiring users of university electronic resources to utilize such resources in a responsible, ethical and legal manner consistent with the university's mission and policies. Categories of inappropriate and prohibited use of electronic resources include:

- violating university policies such as those in the student handbook;
- propagating chain letters or virus hoaxes;
- spamming (spreading email or postings widely and without good purpose);
- commercial use of university systems for non-university purposes;
- behavior that may cause excessive network traffic or computing load;
- email that threatens another with bodily harm;
- violating civil or criminal law at the federal, state, or local levels; and so on.

## **Research Design**

This study employs a survey research design and was conducted at a private, northeastern U.S. university. A Student Electronic Resources Usage instrument was developed by the authors and administered to undergraduate students enrolled in a School of Business course. The courses included a variety of subjects such as Business Information Systems, Introduction to Financial Accounting, Macroeconomics, and Business Policy. The surveys were collected during a five-consecutive year or 9 semester period (from Spring 2019 until Spring 2023). However, because of the university's unexpected face-to-face instruction discontinuance midway through the spring of 2020, no data were collected during that semester. A convenience sample of class sections and faculty members was selected and to ensure consistency, the same questions were asked during each of the semesters. Because of the sensitivity of the subject and to encourage honesty, no personally identifiable data were collected and respondents were informed that surveys were

anonymous, participation was voluntary, and responses would have no effect on his/her course grade. As a result, the response rate was over 80% each semester. Prior to the pandemic, the surveys were completed via paper in an academic classroom. Subsequent to the beginning of the pandemic, the surveys were completed via an online link.

The survey instrument was utilized to collect student demographic data such as gender and academic class. In addition, the survey examined student Internet attitudes regarding student electronic resources policies. Specifically, each student was prompted to rate how effective the electronic resources policy that he/she signed at the study university was in deterring inappropriate behavior for him/her and others. The effectiveness questions were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate his/her participation in a variety of unethical academic practices. Results were summarized by calendar year and correlation statistics were calculated to determine potential relationships between study variables and unethical behaviors. Calendar year was utilized because it fit well with the pandemic duration and survey administration timing.

## Results

A sample of 846 usable surveys was obtained. Table 1 indicates that 63% of the respondents were male and 37% were female.

**Table 1: Gender Response Rate by Year**

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Male	59%	68%	59%	70%	65%	63%
Female	41%	32%	41%	30%	35%	37%
Count	321	80	149	156	140	846

*Source: Own based upon survey data*

The response rate by academic class was relatively equally distributed. Table 2 illustrates that 18% of respondents were freshmen, 33% were sophomores, 33% were juniors, and 16% were seniors.

**Table 2: Academic Class Response Rate by Year**

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Freshmen	29%	0%	4%	12%	26%	18%
Sophomore	31%	23%	42%	37%	29%	33%

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Junior	17%	69%	45%	38%	28%	33%
Senior	23%	8%	9%	13%	17%	16%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Responses were first examined to determine the level of effectiveness of the electronic resource policy as a deterrent for the respondent. Table 3 illustrates that in 2019, 44% perceived the policy to be a strong or mild deterrent with respect to negative electronic behavior. The percentage from 2020 to 2023 was 35%, 37%, 37%, and 48%, respectively. On the other hand, in 2019, only 22% mildly or strongly disagreed that the policy was a deterrent. The disagreement percentage from 2020 to 2023 was 22%, 17%, 22%, and 15%, respectively. Finally, the percentage of students with a neutral rating from 2019 to 2023 was 34%, 44%, 46%, 41%, and 37%, respectively.

**Table 3: Electronic Resources Policy Effectiveness for You**

Deterrent Level For YOU	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Strongly Disagree	14%	8%	8%	7%	6%
Mildly Disagree	8%	14%	9%	15%	9%
Neutral	34%	44%	46%	41%	37%
Mildly Agree	23%	16%	26%	24%	29%
Strongly Agree	21%	19%	11%	13%	19%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Table 4 depicts respondent perception of the level of effectiveness of the electronic resource policy as a deterrent for others. Results demonstrate that in 2019, 40% perceived the policy to be a strong or mild deterrent with respect to negative electronic behavior. The percentage from 2020 to 2023 was 31%, 30%, 29%, and 43%, respectively. On the other hand, in 2019, 24% mildly or strongly disagreed that the policy is a deterrent. The disagreement percentage from 2020 to 2023 was 30%, 22%, 24%, and 22%, respectively. Finally, the percentage of students with a neutral rating from 2019 to 2023 was 36%, 40%, 48%, 46%, and 36%, respectively.

**Table 4: Electronic Resources Policy Effectiveness for Others**

Deterrent Level For OTHERS	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023

<b>Deterrent Level For OTHERS</b>	<b>Year</b>				
	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Strongly Disagree	14%	5%	9%	10%	4%
Mildly Disagree	10%	25%	13%	14%	18%
Neutral	36%	40%	48%	46%	36%
Mildly Agree	23%	13%	21%	15%	30%
Strongly Agree	17%	18%	9%	14%	13%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Table 5 illustrates respondent perception of the percentage of students that cheat in various activities at the study university. Results show that overall, from 2019 to 2023, 45%, 36%, 34%, 32%, and 15% of students, respectively, were perceived to cheat on homework. Moreover, from 2019 to 2023, 22%, 31%, 25%, 23%, and 18%, respectively, of students were perceived to cheat on exams. In addition, from 2019 to 2023, 20%, 20%, 19%, 17%, and 16%, respectively, of students were perceived to cheat on term papers. And, from 2019 to 2023, 33%, 25%, 24%, 24%, and 23%, respectively, of students were perceived to cheat on Internet projects.

**Table 5: Percentage of Students Perceived that Cheat by Activity**

<b>Deterrent Level Activity</b>	<b>Year</b>				
	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Homework	45%	36%	34%	32%	15%
Exams	22%	31%	25%	23%	18%
Term Papers	20%	20%	19%	17%	16%
Internet Projects	33%	25%	24%	24%	23%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Students were next prompted to indicate his/her propensity to commit unethical behavior. Results show that overall, from 2019 to 2023, 9%, 5%, 10%, 8%, and 5%, respectively, of students would lie on a resume or during an interview to get a job (Table 6). Moreover, from 2019 to 2023, 3%, 9%, 5%, 7%, and 4%, respectively, of students have visited a web site to learn how to cheat. Overall, from 2019 to 2023, 11%, 11%, 13%, 11% and 8%, respectively, of students indicated at least one of these unethical beliefs.

**Table 6: Unethical Belief (Percentage of Students)**

Belief	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Would lie on resume/interview	9%	5%	10%	8%	5%
Visited web site to learn how to cheat	3%	9%	5%	7%	4%
Overall	11%	11%	13%	11%	8%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Respondents were also asked to indicate if he/she participated in activities that are both violations of electronic use policies and generally deemed unethical. Results show that overall, from 2019 to 2023, 25%, 33%, 37%, 21%, and 19%, respectively, of students participated in at least one of the behaviors (Table 7). In terms of cheating on an exam using information technology (IT) from 2019 to 2023, 9%, 30%, 23%, 11%, and 9%, respectively, indicated this behavior. In terms of downloading a paper and claiming it as his/her own work, from 2019 to 2023, 4%, 0%, 8%, 8%, and 2%, respectively, indicated this behavior. In terms of cheating on an online exam, from 2019 to 2023, 10%, 31%, 25%, 11%, and 13%, respectively, indicated this behavior. In terms of cutting and pasting information from the Internet and not citing the information in his/her student paper, from 2019 to 2023, 7%, 0%, 12%, 3%, and 4%, respectively, indicated this behavior.

**Table 7: Unethical Internet Behavior (Percentage of Students)**

Internet Behavior	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Cheated on an exam using IT	9%	30%	23%	11%	9%
Downloaded a paper as one's own	4%	0%	8%	8%	2%
Cheated on an online exam	10%	31%	25%	11%	13%
Cut/Paste without citation	7%	0%	12%	3%	4%
Overall	25%	33%	37%	21%	19%

Source: Own based upon survey data

Table 8 depicts the occurrence per student per year of the various unethical activities for those students participating in that activity. Results show that during the five-year study period,



students cheated on 1-2 exams per year per student using IT. Moreover, students downloaded 3, 0, 7, 4, and 4 papers, respectively, per year from 2019 to 2023. In addition, students cheated on 3, 2, 2, 1, and 3 online exams, respectively, per year from 2019 to 2023. And, students cut and pasted from the Internet on papers with no citation on 0, 0, 1, 1, and 3 papers, respectively, per year from 2019 to 2023.

**Table 8: Unethical Internet Behavior (Volume Per Student)**

Internet Behavior	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Exams cheated using IT	1	2	2	2	2
Papers downloaded as own	3	0	7	4	4
Online exams cheated	3	2	2	1	3
Papers cut/pasted without citation	0	0	1	1	3

*Source: Own based upon survey data*

Finally, Spearman Rho correlation statistics were calculated to determine relationships between study variables and the various unethical behaviors (Table 9). The electronic resources policy and gender had no statistically significant correlations with cheating on exams with IT, downloading papers as one’s own, cheating on online exams, and not-citing information. However, academic class had a statistically significant negative correlation with downloading papers as one’s own (significant at the .05 level) and a statistically significant positive correlation with cheating on online exams (significant at the .05 level). In other words, as academic class increases, students are less likely to download papers as one’s own but more likely to cheat on online exams.

**Table 9: Spearman Rho Correlations Between Study Variables and Practice**

Variable	Exams cheated using IT	Downloading Papers	Online exams cheated	Cutting and Pasting
The electronic resources policy is an effective	-.054	.030	.013	.124

Variable	Exams cheated using IT	Downloading Papers	Online exams cheated	Cutting and Pasting
deterrent for me				
Gender	-.164	.019	-.033	.007
Academic class	.116	-.248*	.189*	.147

Source: Own based upon survey data

\* Correlation is significant at .05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at .01 level (2-tailed).

## Conclusions

Results indicate the university electronic resources policy is generally perceived to be an effective deterrent both for the student and other students. From 2019 to 2023, 35% to 48% of students per year perceived the policy to be a strong or mild deterrent with respect to his/her negative electronic behavior. A slightly lower percentage of students, however, perceived the policy to be a strong or mild deterrent for other students during each of the study years. This percentage ranged from 29% to 43% per year from 2019 to 2023.

Relative to the perception of all students' behavior at the study university, in 2019, students perceived that the most common cheating activities were related to homework (45% of students) and Internet projects (33% of students). By 2023, the most common activities were related to Internet projects (23% of students) and exam cheating (18%).

Moreover, the propensity to commit unethical behavior was not commonly indicated. Only 5-10% of respondents per year reported that he/she would lie on a resume or during an interview to get a job. In addition, only 3-9% of respondents per year reported that he/she had visited a web site to learn how to cheat.

Findings further demonstrate that unethical activity among the student population varies by type of behavior. From 2019 to 2023, 9% to 30% of students per year indicated cheating on an exam using IT. Moreover, 0% to 8% per year downloaded papers as his/her own, 10% to 31% cheated on an online exam, and 0% to 12% cut/pasted information from the Internet without citing the material. Overall, from 2019 to 2023, 19% to 37% indicated participating in at least one of the unethical behaviors in a year. The volume per activity per year was relatively low and consistent across the study years. For students reporting a given behavior, these students indicated cheating on 1-2 exams per year using IT, downloading 0-7 papers as his/her own, cheating on 1-

3 online exams, and submitting 0-3 papers containing non-cited information that was cut/pasted from the Internet.

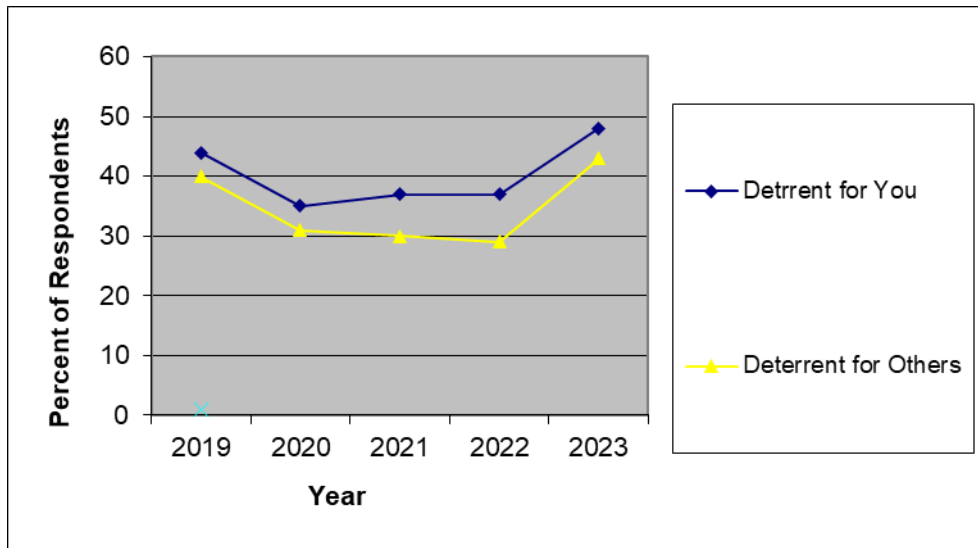
When examining study variables, electronic use policy effectiveness and gender were not statistically significantly correlated with any of the four unethical activities. However, academic class was significantly correlated with downloading papers as one's own and cheating on online exams. In particular, freshmen, relative to seniors, were more likely to download papers and seniors more likely to cheat on online exams.

## **Implications**

There are three important implications from these findings:

1. One implication relates to the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, 44% indicated that the electronic resources policy was an effective deterrent for himself/herself and 40% indicated that the policy was effective for others (Chart 1). During the pandemic, effectiveness for self dropped to 35-37% per year and effectiveness for others dropped to 29-31% per year. Post-pandemic, effectiveness for self rebounded to 48% and effectiveness for others increased to 43%. In terms of cheating perceptions, after the pandemic began, homework cheating decreased, exam cheating increased, term paper cheating remained consistent, and Internet project cheating decreased. Moreover, although overall unethical beliefs remained consistent, the percentage of students visiting web sites to learn how to cheat initially tripled (from 3% to 9%). And, behaviors changed dramatically during the first year of the pandemic (2020) with respect to cheating on exams with IT (increased from 9% to 30%), cheating on online exams (increased from 10% to 31%), and overall cheating (increased from 25% to 33%). By the end of the pandemic, these percentages nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels. The implication is because there will likely be unplanned global events in the future that affect student behavior, educators need to be prepared in advance to implement educational pedagogies and techniques to minimize potential unethical student behavior. This may entail increased ethical emphasis in education, implementation of electronic monitoring tools to evaluate cheating, and preventative techniques such as biometric analysis during exams. The emergence of products such as ChatGPT, however, may further complicate this challenge as these tools provide a new, extensive, and not currently fully understood mechanism for student cheating. ChatGPT may be particularly challenging in that with 100 million new users within the first two months of implementation, it has become the fastest growing computer application in history (IDX, 2023).

**Chart 1: Policy Effectiveness Trends**



*Source: Own based upon survey data*

2. A second implication is that the electronic resources policy may be becoming a more effective deterrent to unethical student behavior. Currently, 48% of students indicate that the policy is an effective deterrent for him/her and 43% believe that it is a deterrent for others. These are the highest percentages during the five-year study. In addition, overall student cheating (homework, exams, term papers, and Internet projects), lying on a resume or during an interview, overall unethical beliefs, and nearly all unethical Internet behaviors (e.g., cheating on an exam with IT) are at the lowest levels. This trend is in stark contrast to the authors' 2013-17 study that found policies were becoming less effective. It is possible that ethics education, policy reinforcement, reprimands, enforcement methodologies, or punishments may be reaping benefits and should be continued.
3. Finally, results suggest that academic class continues to be a factor with respect to unethical behavior. Freshmen were more likely to download a paper and submit it as his/her own and seniors were more likely to cheat on an online exam. This is consistent with the 2013-2017 authors' conducted study. If academic class is used as a proxy for age, it appears that possibly maturation and/or education may affect the level of paper download cheating. It is further possible that seniors are more likely to cheat on online exams given that online courses are generally offered in more classes as the student progresses through his/her academic career. Results suggest the further need for educational efforts directed at upperclassmen with respect to online course ethics and possible changes in online pedagogy in order to minimize the cheating.

The limitations of this study are primarily a function of the sample, sample distribution, and type of research. The instrument relies on self-reporting so there could be recency effects and underreporting of activity. Moreover, the research was conducted using a sample from one university. Finally, although academic class was relatively equally distributed, there were less

freshmen and seniors surveyed. As a result, replication at multiple universities and the inclusion of more freshmen and seniors would increase the research robustness. Future research needs to examine if these results are indeed trends and if educational efforts can be effectively employed to mitigate negative activities. The study does, however, further clarify the state of Internet ethics and associated pandemic effects upon undergraduate business student attitude and behavior.

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