Attitudes Toward, and Intentions to Report, Academic Cheating Among Students in Singapore

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In this study, we examined students' attitudes toward cheating and whether they would report instances of cheating they witnessed. Data were collected from three educational institutions in Singapore. A total of 518 students participated in the study. Findings suggest that students perceived cheating behaviors involving exam-related situations to be serious, whereas plagiarism was rated as less serious. Cheating in the form of not contributing one's fair share in a group project was also perceived as a serious form of academic misconduct, although a majority of the students admitted having engaged in such behavior. With regard to the prevalence of academic cheating, our findings suggest that students are morally ambivalent about academic cheating and are rather tolerant of dishonesty among their peers. On the issue of whether cheating behaviors should be reported, our findings revealed that a majority of students chose to take the expedient measure of ignoring the problem rather than to blow the whistle on their peers. Implications of our findings are discussed.

Key words: academic dishonesty, cheating, Singapore

Student dishonesty, a prevalent and perennial phenomenon, has been an issue of considerable interest among researchers in ethics, psychology, sociology, and higher education (e.g., Ameen, Guffey, & McMillan, 1996; Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley, & Washburn, 1998; Tom & Borin, 1988; Wryobeck & Whit-

ley, 1999). The impetus for understanding the underlying dynamics of dishonest behavior among students stems from the conviction that, apart from assuming the role of an educational and credentialing agency, the primary focus of an academic institution is to provide an environment for personal development of our youth in the moral, cognitive, physical, social, and aesthetic spheres. An atmosphere that promotes academic honesty and integrity is a precondition for generating, evaluating, and discussing ideas in the pursuit of truth, which are at the very heart of academic life.

Research has shown that dishonesty in college, cheating in particular, is a predictor of unethical behavior in subsequent professional settings (e.g., Sierles, Hendrickx, & Circel, 1980). More recently, Sims (1993) also found academic dishonesty to be significantly related to employee theft and other forms of dishonesty at the workplace. Sim's findings suggest that people who engaged in dishonest behaviors during their college days continue to do so in their professional careers. Furthermore, Sim's findings indicate that people who engaged in dishonest behaviors during college are more likely to commit dishonest acts of greater severity at work.

Existing research on academic dishonesty has largely been conducted in Europe and North America. The results of these studies suggest that a large percentage of university students indulge in some form of cheating behaviors during their undergraduate studies (e.g., Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996). Survey findings also suggest that not only is student cheating pervasive, it is also accepted by students as typical behavior (e.g., Faulkender et al., 1994).

Although the research conducted in the Western context has increased our understanding of academic dishonesty among students, the relevance of these results to the Asian context is questionable. Differences in sociocultural settings, demographic composition, and specific educational policies may render some comparisons meaningless. Different colleges also vary widely in fundamental ways, such as size, admission criteria, and learning climate. These factors render the comparability of results obtained from different campuses difficult. Cross-cultural studies conducted to examine students' attitudes toward academic dishonesty have found evidence that students of different nationalities and of different cultures vary significantly in their perceptions of cheating (e.g., Burns, Davis, Hoshino, & Miller, 1998; Davis, Noble, Zak, & Dreyer, 1994; Waugh, Godfrey, Evans, & Craig, 1995). For example, in their study of U.S., Japanese, and South African students, Burns et al. found evidence suggesting that the South Africans exhibited fewer cheating behaviors than the Americans but more than the Japanese at the high school level. However, at the college level, the cheating rates for South African students were lower compared to both their American and Japanese counterparts.

In another cross-national study on academic dishonesty, Waugh et al. (1995) examined cheating behaviors and attitudes among students from six countries (Australia, the former East and West Germany, Costa Rica, the United States, and Austria) and found significant differences in their perceptions of cheating. Stu-

dents from Australia exhibited the strongest anticheating perceptions and students from West Germany the weakest.

In view of findings from these comparative studies, information on the topic of academic dishonesty in other countries, particularly Asian societies, is required to evaluate the applicability of findings and explanations of why this occurs in other cultures. This is especially important in an era in which school populations are becoming more diverse and student exchange programs are becoming more common. This study represents such an initial attempt.

The objective of this study was to examine the prevalence and perceived severity of academic cheating among students in Singapore. In this study, we also investigated the extent to which students would be willing to report incidences of cheating that they observe to the relevant authority.

The educational system in Singapore is one of the most competitive in the world. A major concern of many parents in Singapore is how well their children will perform on the national examinations and whether they will be able to gain admission to the university. Parents do not spare any efforts or cost to ensure that their children gain a head start in the educational process. They devote considerable amounts of time and money in hiring tutors to provide their children with additional coaching in their academic studies. We thought it would be interesting to examine students' attitudes toward cheating and whether they would report instances of cheating they witnessed in the context of such an intensely competitive academic environment.

METHOD

Prior to the design of the questionnaire, interviews and pretests were conducted with 44 undergraduate students to ensure that the academic cheating items were applicable to the local context. Issues, concerns, and suggestions raised by the students were noted. Comments and suggestions obtained from the pilot test were used to refine the academic cheating scale and to fine-tune the presentation of the questionnaire.

Three educational institutions in Singapore (a local university and two polytechnics) agreed to participate in the study. The liaison persons at each institution randomly selected the classes in which the surveys were administered. Respondents were given a 10-min briefing on the aims and background of the study and instructions for the survey. The researchers were present during the survey administration to answer any questions raised by the respondents. Each administration lasted an average of 45 min.

A total of 518 respondents participated in the survey (135 men and 383 women). The average age of respondents was about 20 years. Chinese comprised the majority of respondents (94%), whereas the remaining 6% were composed of Malays, Indians, and other ethnic minorities. This percentage is representative of the ethnic composition of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Singapore.

INSTRUMENTATION

Self-Reported Cheating

Cheating was assessed with a 21-item scale adapted from Newstead et al. (1996). Based on students' feedback from the pilot study, the original item, "Taking an examination for someone else or having someone else take an examination for you," was removed because all students interviewed unanimously agreed that it is extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible, to commit such an offense. The presence of strict control processes in the local educational system requires students to provide documentary proof (usually in the form of a matriculation card bearing the student's photograph) to identify themselves as the designated candidates for the particular examination they are taking. Two additional items, "Copying another student's coursework with their knowledge" and "Copying another student's coursework without their knowledge," were combined to form a single item. Two new items, which were more applicable to the local context, were added: "Working together with one or more students on a homework assignment when the instructor does not allow it" and "Not contributing one's fair share in a group project for which all the members will be given the same grade." Items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*). The 21 items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .86, indicating high interitem consistency.

Perceived Seriousness of Cheating

This variable was assessed with the same 21 items used to measure academic cheating. Respondents were asked to rate the 21 cheating behaviors in terms of their degree of seriousness as perceived by the respondents. Items were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*not cheating*) to 5 (*most serious*). These items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .90, indicating a high degree of interitem consistency.

Perceived prevalence of cheating. This variable was assessed by asking respondents to indicate if they had seen someone engaged in cheating. They responded yes or no. Respondents also were asked, "In your opinion, how many of your friends cheat, at least occasionally?" Response categories were scored on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 3 (*quite a lot*).

Willingness to report cheating. We asked respondents, "If you discover a friend cheating, how would you respond?" The response categories were 1 (*report him or her*), 2 (*ignore it*), and 3 (*others*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attitudes Toward Cheating

Table 1 summarizes the mean perceived seriousness ratings for items pertaining to respondents' attitudes toward academic cheating. Not all behaviors were perceived to be equally serious. Specifically, 8 of the 21 of the cheating behaviors surveyed had means below the midpoint of 2.5, suggesting that these activities were considered only as mildly serious.

The findings indicate that respondents surveyed generally perceived cheating behaviors involving exam-related situations to be quite serious. Respondents perceived cheating behaviors such as taking unauthorized material to a quiz, a test, or an exam to be most serious. Such findings are consistent with those obtained in research on academic cheating conducted in the West. Existing research on academic cheating reveals that majority of students perceive cheating "during" or "on" an exam to be very serious. For example, Nuss (1984) found that three of five forms of academic dishonesty perceived by students to be most serious were related to examinations. Sims (1995) also found that students perceived exam-related cheating behaviors to be most serious. These include asking another student to take an exam using his or her name and using crib notes during an exam.

It is interesting that cheating in the form of failing to contribute one's fair share in a group project was among those behaviors perceived by respondents to be serious. This is a noteworthy finding in that it departs from results of previous studies conducted in the West. Generally, previous research on academic cheating found that free-riding is perceived to be considerably less serious compared to other forms of cheating (e.g., Ameen et al., 1996; Sims, 1993). One possible explanation for this finding is that respondents in our study were drawn from an Asian society. In a collectivistic Asian culture, people are more concerned with the preservation of group harmony, and self-interests are subsidiary to the group's welfare. Hence, they may perceive free-riding as more serious because it threatens group functioning and compromises members' welfare, both of which are central to collectivistic values. In addition, previous writers also have suggested that in a collectivistic culture, a greater value is attached to "face" (e.g., Earley & Randel, 1997). Unlike their counterparts from the West, in which an individualistic culture prevails, Asians are more concerned with the maintaining of face across a range of social settings, particularly among in-group members. Thus, failing to contribute what is expected may be perceived as a relatively serious offense because of the possible stigmatization of being labeled as a "free rider." Conceivably, the effect of such a stigma on one's reputation is especially repugnant to an individual who is concerned with one's face.

Qualitative data obtained from the focus group interviews corroborate the finding that free-riding is perceived to be quite serious. Generally, respondents

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings of Perceived Seriousness of Cheating

Items	M
Taking unauthorized material into a quiz, a test or an exam	4.04
Using unfair means to gain advance information about the contents of a quiz, test, or exam	3.76
Attempting to obtain special consideration by offering or receiving favors	3.64
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get special consideration by lecturers or examiners (e.g., the Exam Board to take a more lenient view of results; extra time to complete a quiz, test, or exam)	3.63
Not contributing one's fair share in a group project for which all the members will be given the same grade	3.62
Cooperating with one or more students to communicate answers to each other during a quiz, test, or exam	3.40
Submitting a piece of coursework as an individual piece of work when actually it has been written jointly with another student (e.g., a previous group project)	3.35
Submitting coursework from an outside source (e.g., a former student offers to sell pre-prepared essays; "essay banks")	3.27
Ensuring that books or articles cannot be found in the library by deliberately misshelving them, or by cutting out the relevant article or chapter	3.27
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get an extended deadline or exemption from a piece of work	3.13
Copying from a neighbor during a quiz, test, or exam without him or her realizing	3.11
Copying another student's coursework with or without their knowledge (e.g., a senior student's paper or project)	2.86
Awarding oneself or another student more marks when grading one's own or each other's work	2.66
Doing other students' coursework for them	2.48
Inventing data (i.e., entering nonexistent results into the database)	2.34
Altering data (e.g., adjusting data to obtain a significant result)	2.22
Working with one or more students on a homework assignment when the instructor does not allow it	2.10
Listing unread, unused, or nonexistent sources and references that one has not referred to	2.02
Copying material for coursework from a book or other publication without acknowledging the source	2.00
Paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author	1.87
Allowing own coursework to be copied by another student	1.86

Note. $N = 518$. Missing values have been excluded. Response scores ranged from 0 (*not cheating*) to 5 (*most serious*).

commented that free riders were, in effect, cheating their group members when they failed to contribute their fair share of work toward the project. Here are a few examples:

> If there is a free-rider in the group, tutors normally ignore it, feeling that it is the group's problem. Nothing is being done at all. It is very unfair and I feel very cheated.

> Sometimes, students do not put in their fair share of work in a group project. As a result, other group members have to do their share. I feel it is quite unfair that if the rest of the members put in a lot of effort and obtain an A, those students who did not contribute also get the same grade.

> There should be no free-riders in a group. The institution should do something about it.

> With regard to my learning experience in this institution, I am most dissatisfied with the system of awarding equal marks to all members of a group because not all members put in comparable amounts of effort. Social loafers are the most disgusting people and the institution should revise its policy on the awarding of group project grades.

Our study also suggests that respondents generally perceived activities involving plagiarism and manipulation of data to be relatively nonserious. For example, in this study, respondents perceived practices involving paraphrasing material without acknowledging the source to be least serious. Such findings are rather disturbing in that they may reflect an uncertainty over what constitutes academic cheating, possibly due to a lack of student awareness regarding academic integrity. These findings are also congruent with those of previous research. For example, in a study on the ethical inclinations of business undergraduates, Stevens and Stevens (1987) found that the majority of students do not perceive plagiarism to be serious. In a similar vein, Barnett and Dalton (1981) found that more than half of the students surveyed did not consider fabricating a bibliography to be cheating.

Prevalence of Cheating Behaviors

Table 2 summarizes the percentages of respondents who admitted to having engaged on at least one occasion in each cheating activity surveyed. Results of our study are rather disturbing in that they suggest that cheating is indeed prevalent. Almost all respondents reported that they committed one form of cheating at least once.

Descriptive statistics depicted in Table 2 suggest that a high percentage of respondents (about 94%) reported having allowed their own coursework to be cop-

TABLE 2
Prevalence of Cheating Behaviors

Items	%
Allowing own coursework to be copied by another student	94.4
Paraphrasing material from another source without acknowledging the original author	89.8
Copying material for coursework from a book or other publication without acknowledging the source	85.1
Altering data (e.g., adjusting data to obtain a significant result)	81.4
Inventing data (i.e., entering nonexistent results into the database)	81.1
Working with one or more students on a homework assignment when the instructor does not allow it	76.4
Listing unread, unused, or nonexistent sources and references that one has not referred to	68.4
Not contributing one's fair share in a group project for which all the members will be given the same grade	58.4
Copying other students' coursework with or without their knowledge (e.g., a senior student's paper or project)	56.5
Copying from a neighbor during a quiz, test, or exam without him or her realizing	54.2
Doing other students' coursework for them	54.0
Cooperating with one or more students to communicate answers to each other during a quiz, test, or exam	52.3
Awarding oneself or another student more marks when grading one's own or each other's work	51.3
Ensuring that books or articles cannot be found in the library by deliberately misshelving them, or by cutting out the relevant article or chapter	36.3
Submitting a piece of coursework as an individual piece of work when actually it has been written jointly with another student (e.g., a previous group project)	32.6
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get an extended deadline or exemption from a piece of work	25.1
Using unfair means to gain advance information about the contents of a quiz, test, or exam	24.2
Submitting coursework from an outside source (e.g., a former student offers to sell pre-prepared essays; "essay banks")	21.4
Attempting to obtain special consideration by offering or receiving favors	20.8
Lying about medical or other circumstances to get special consideration by lecturers or examiners (e.g., the Exam Board to take a more lenient view of results; extra time to complete a quiz, test, or exam)	15.9
Taking unauthorized material into a quiz, test, or exam	15.6

Note. $N = 518$. Missing values have been excluded.

ied by another student. Approximately 90% admitted to having paraphrased material from another source without acknowledging the original author. More than 80% had either altered data or entered nonexistent results into a database. The majority of the respondents (about 53%) had cooperated with other students to communicate answers during an examination. Generally, findings of this study, although rather disconcerting, are consistent with those of past research that suggest that academic cheating is a prevalent phenomenon.

Comments obtained from the focus group interviews also lend support to our finding that cheating is prevalent:

> A lot of students cheat when they are having exams in lecture theatres because they sit too close to each other.

> Cheating, submitting another person's work and other unethical acts are quite often observed as far as projects are concerned. Some are even willing to spend a considerable amount of money just to turn in a piece of work.

> It is really a "norm" to cheat sometimes. If your friends do it, you'll do it also. Since you think that everyone is doing it, why not do it also.

> Cheating is very prevalent here. Sometimes, we are desperate and left with no choice because we really do not understand the quiz or test. We have to cheat by communicating answers with friends in order to pass.

We performed correlational analyses to examine the relation between students' perceived seriousness of cheating and their actual cheating behaviors. Correlations ranged from $r = -.20$ to $r = -.47$, with a mean r of $-.33$.

These results are consistent with those of past studies on academic cheating that also suggest that individuals are more likely to engage in cheating behaviors that they perceived as less serious (e.g., McLaughlin & Ross, 1989; Tom & Borin, 1988). One possible explanation for this is that students generally perceive the risk of punishment associated with the commission of trivial cheating offenses to be minimal. Such a perception is often reinforced when faculty members take less severe actions against students who engage in cheating behaviors considered to be relatively nonserious (Nuss, 1984). Indeed, previous research has shown that faculty members often do not report minor violations to the university administration (e.g., Sims, 1995).

A notable exception to the previous generality is failing to contribute one's fair share to a project. Although, this behavior was perceived to be quite serious ($M = 3.62$ on a scale of 0 [*not cheating*] to 5 [*most serious*]), about 60% of respondents

admitted to having engaged in such behavior despite the stigma associated with free-riding that we discussed earlier. One possible explanation for this finding is that respondents in this study were under tremendous pressure to meet the demands of an excessive workload. Hence, although loafing on a group project was perceived to be dishonest, respondents may be compelled to use it as a strategy to cope with the demands of the school curriculum. Comments elicited from respondents during interviews lend further corroboration to this reasoning:

> The school term is packed with assignments and projects. Students have very little time to complete them, let alone tutorials. As a result, students resort to cheating in one or more ways to get things done.

> I've had bad experiences in group projects where team members excuse themselves from contributing their share by quoting reasons such as falling sick and being too stressed or busy with other work. In the end, I have to do almost all the work.

> My group mates are not cooperative which results in many disagreements. Some simply absent themselves conveniently during project meetings. This cannot be helped because we have too many projects!

Our results indicate that more men (47%) reported having cheated than did women (32.7%), $\chi^2(1, 522) = 8.78$, $p < .001$. However, the strength of association is relatively weak, equivalent to a correlation of $r = .13$. The results of previous research on the relation between gender and cheating behaviors have been mixed. Although some studies have found that women report less cheating than men (e.g., Baird, 1980; Calabrese & Cochran, 1990), others have found that women tend to engage in more cheating than men (e.g., DePalmer, Madey, & Bornschein, 1995; Stern & Havlicek, 1986). Yet, other research has found no gender difference in cheating behaviors (e.g., Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986; Houston, 1983). Although the results of our analyses suggest that there is a significant statistical association between gender and cheating behaviors, this finding is at best suggestive, and further research needs to be carried out before conclusive findings can be drawn.

Perceived Prevalence of Cheating by Others

Respondents in this study were asked to indicate if they had seen someone engaged in cheating. The majority of respondents (77.1%) reported that they had witnessed someone engage in cheating behaviors. However, this result is not

surprising given our finding that most respondents reported that they had engaged in some form of cheating.

Students who reported having seen others cheat were more likely to report having cheated themselves (45.5%) than students who did not report having seen others cheat (5.9%), $\chi^2(1, 521) = 62.27$, $p < .001$.

Respondents also were asked, "In your opinion, how many of your friends cheat at least occasionally?" The majority of respondents (73.7%) reported that at least some of their friends cheated occasionally. Students who reported having no friends who cheated reported their own cheating at the lowest rate (14.0%), followed by those who had a few friends who cheated (38%), and students who reported having quite a lot of friends who cheated themselves cheated at the highest rate (70.1%), $\chi^2(2, 518) = 67.8$, $p < .001$. Thus, there is a significant statistical association between involvement in cheating activities and the number of friends respondents believed have cheated.

Because the majority of our respondents admitted that they had engaged in various forms of academic cheating, it is not surprising that a large proportion of them had seen others committing acts of academic dishonesty. In addition, some of these cheating acts involved colluding with friends or other students. As such, respondents are also likely to report that their friends cheat, possibly because they themselves have participated in it.

Willingness to Report Cheating

Respondents also were asked to indicate how they would respond if they discovered that a friend of theirs cheats. Only 1.7% of respondents in our sample were willing to report a friend found cheating. Majority of respondents chose to ignore it (about 82%). The remaining 16.3% reported that they would engage in other responses, such as telling their other friends about the incident and saying something in private to those who they saw cheating. This result is generally consistent with those found in previous research on whistle-blowing. For example, Burton and Near (1995) found that only 3% of their sample reported a cheating incident to someone official. In another study, Nuss (1984) also found that only 3% of respondents would report someone found cheating, whereas 43% indicated that they would ignore it. Reasons commonly cited as deterring one from reporting cheating include the stigma of being labeled as a whistle-blower and the possibility of retaliation from a fellow student. Conceivably, respondents would be even less willing to report their friends, possibly because of fear of jeopardizing their relationships with them.

Comments obtained from our study suggest that respondents were not very willing to report cheating incidents for a variety of reasons:

We need to be flexible in whatever we do, be it projects, tutorials, or other assignments. Nobody will report another student for cheating as you may be the one cheating someday.

There is such a thing as moral cheating and immoral cheating. So long as others are not harmed, it's OK!

I think if someone finds out that others are cheating, they will not report them. So, I don't think I should.

The reasons cited suggest that a general unwillingness to report could be due to an attitude of indifference as well as a self-interested motivation to prevent one from being reported if one were to cheat also.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that students are rather morally ambivalent about academic cheating and are tolerant of dishonesty among their peers. Although they seem to recognize that certain academic practices are dishonest, their feelings of wrongfulness were not sufficiently strong enough to deter them from engaging in such behaviors.

Our findings are also instructive in that a large percentage of respondents reported that they engaged in behaviors that are tantamount to plagiarism and perceived such practices to be nonserious. Part of this perception stems from students' beliefs that they generally are not causing harm to another person by not acknowledging the original author or by altering and inventing data. Clearly, such beliefs highlight the need for educational interventions that generate awareness among students that such practices infringe on the author's intellectual rights. In view of such findings, faculty members need to provide clear definitions of cheating and explanation of rules.

A clear stance regarding the institution's or instructor's policy against student dishonesty is a good deterrent. Providing guidelines to students at the initial stage of the semester regarding the faculty member's expectations with respect to behavior during tests, quizzes, and assignments may deter academic dishonesty. Faculty members in institutions without clear policies against student dishonesty can start a dialogue with students to discuss what constitutes cheating and other relevant issues. By making efforts to hold such dialogues, the school is sending a strong signal to the student body that the faculty is committed and concerned about cheating behavior and integrity. There also should be opportunities for discussions on academic integrity among students and faculty members. Such discussions can be facilitated through the initial class session of each semester.

Our findings also suggest that steps need to be taken to curb the phenomenon of free-riding. Faculty members should state succinctly that free-riding will not be tolerated. Faculty members could consider awarding grades to students based on the individual effort that they put into their group assignments. Faculty members could require students within a group to write a report of their contributions to the group project. At the same time, students could be required to grade the performance of group members in terms of effort and contribution. Taken together, these self-reports and peer appraisals would allow faculty members to have an objective overview of students' individual performance. Marks for group assignments could then be allocated to students based on the overall performance of the group on their assignment and the individual contribution of each group member as determined from both self-reports and reports from group members. Granted, such a procedure is not without drawbacks. However, clear and specific guidelines regarding how students should rate their own performance as well as their peers, and on how faculty members will assign grades to students based on such a procedure, will enable faculty members to implement these steps to minimize students' propensity to engage in irresponsible behavior.

Although much controversy surrounds the issue of whether cheating behaviors should be reported, our study's findings suggest that the majority of students choose to take the expedient measure of ignoring the phenomenon. Schools will not be able to compel individuals to report their peers because of the complexities involved. However, the least they can do is to create an open and supportive environment in which students will feel safe enough to either report cheating behaviors or seek advice regarding the dilemmas they may be faced with should they discover that a friend of theirs is cheating. For example, faculty members could serve as counselors whom students can approach for advice with complete anonymity.

In summary, results of our study suggest that cheating constitutes a serious problem in higher education. Such findings are consistent with results of studies conducted in the West. Cheating is not only unethical but also compromises learning and undermines the evaluation process. It also provides cheaters with an unfair advantage over those who do not cheat. In addition, cheating to receive institutional rewards may also generalize to other organizational settings after graduation, as cheaters may subsequently rely on similar techniques to achieve their professional goals. As such, research efforts that enhance our understanding of people's attitudes toward cheating can contribute significantly in the design and implementation of organizational interventions to curb such behaviors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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