

## Academic Misconduct by University Students: Faculty Perceptions and Responses

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### Abstract

A number of factors influence student behavior including the moral development of students, student-faculty interactions, and academic codes of conduct. Previous investigations on classroom misconduct have focused on student characteristics and perceptions. Relatively few studies have focused on faculty members' views of student misconduct and faculty responses to suspicions of wrongdoing. The current study examines the types of academic misbehavior faculty members suspect occur in their classrooms, methods they use to deter such misconduct, and the factors that influence instructors' decisions to act on suspected inappropriate behavior. Data was collected using surveys from faculty members. Findings suggest that academic dishonesty is a concern to many educators in university classrooms. Faculty members indicate that they use a variety of measures to improve student behavior. However, some teachers did not act on suspected academic dishonesty due in part to their anxiety about the process. Drawing from these findings, suggestions are given toward positively influencing student behavior in higher education contexts.

### Introduction to Student Conduct Issues

Every day students face ethical questions and choices. Frequent concerns include whether or not they should behave ethically during testing, participate in unauthorized group homework, and/or plagiarize from the Internet (Szabo & Underwood, 2004). Many factors influence students' decision making processes (Taylor, Paterson, Usick, Thordarson, & Smith, 2006). Variables related to cognitive development and environment affect how they choose to behave (Bandura, 1991a).

Some students act ethically because they are worried about being "caught" by faculty members. Others choose more ethical behavior because they realize that dishonesty harms themselves, their instructors, and other students (Bennett, 2005). Unfortunately, not all students choose to act ethically and this a cause of great concern among educators (Levy & Rakovski, 2006). In order to understand factors related to academic honesty, this current study focuses on faculty members' perceptions of student behavior, faculty reactions to suspected misconduct, and faculty concerns about dealing with academic dishonesty.

### Previous Research

Various qualitative and quantitative studies have focused on student actions and moral decision-making. Exploratory studies indicate that many variables affect student behavior. For instance, age, gender, and level of moral development have been shown to be important variables (Bennett, 2005); individual cognition and environmental factors also influence student decision-making (Pulvers & Dierkhoff, 1999).

While students have received much attention in previous research in this area, relatively few studies have examined faculty members and their influence on student conduct (Flint, Clegg, & MacDonald, 2006). Teachers exert significant influence in the classroom environment and thus influence student behavior. Research by Pulvers and Dierkhoff (1999) examined the relationship

between internal student variables, classroom environments, and academic dishonesty. Their findings suggest that both internal and external factors influence the decision-making processes relating to inappropriate behavior. Dishonest students found their classes to be impersonal and less satisfying; they also felt that they received less individual attention than more honest students. Pulvers and Dierkhoff speculated that depersonalization reduced the students' interest in pleasing the teachers. In addition, students devalued the course and this made it easier in such students' minds to justify their misconduct. This being a non-experimental study, it is impossible to conclude the existence of a causal relationship. However, Pulver and Dierkhoff's work suggests that there is a connection between students' unethical behavior and students' perceptions of the classroom environment.

Institutional honor codes are another environmental factor that plays a role in academic honesty (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino; 2003; McCabe & Pavela, 2004; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Honor codes seem to affect students' moral development through increasing feelings of responsibility and accountability to themselves and others. As a result, when collegiate honor codes are used, students act in a more appropriate manner and are more likely to report other students for honor code violations (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

In addition to affecting students, honor codes also seem to affect faculty. Teachers working in institutions with honor codes have "more positive attitudes towards their schools' academic integrity policies and are more willing to allow the system to take care of monitoring and disciplinary activities" than those institutions without honor codes (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2003, p. 367). This effect on faculty members may also have an indirect effect on student behavior. Students who have a greater fear of being caught and punished are less likely to violate honor codes (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002).

In conducting another study, Love and Simmons (1998) used interviews and survey data to identify factors that influenced graduate students' behaviors. Internal and external factors were related to academic dishonesty. The external variables included pressure, probability of being caught, and aspects of professors' behavior. Students reported that their propensity to act in a dishonest manner was related to instructors' leniency and the perceived probability of a faculty member's acting on observed misconduct. Interestingly, some students blamed the teachers for inappropriate behavior because they felt that certain faculty allowed students opportunities to be dishonest and thus were culpable for the students' actions.

Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne's (1997) research data indicate that students are often uncertain regarding expected behavior. Many were not clear about what plagiarism was or when to use citations. Thus, the lines between academically honest and dishonest behavior were not clear to students. What teachers defined as dishonest was not congruent with the students' perceptions. The study findings also suggest that environmental factors such as the following are significant: large classrooms; lack of communication with staff (resulting in feelings of alienation); reliance on group learning (resulting in "facilitation" and justification of inappropriate student behavior).

A study performed by Simon, Carr, McCullough, Morgan, Oleson, and Reese (2003) also found an association between the environment and academic honesty issues. In this current research project, faculty at a public university were surveyed. Questions focused on how faculty dealt with unethical behavior, their views on dealing with dishonesty, and their beliefs about the university's academic honesty policies and practices. The survey results indicate that educators were concerned about academic integrity, particularly about how to respond when inappropriate behavior was suspected in their classrooms.

Fortunately, actions to improve student ethical behavior are effective (Taylor et al., 2006). McCabe and Pavela (1997) have defined many activities that support higher levels of student integrity. Principle driven interventions include:

1. Realizing and affirming academic integrity as an institutional core value.
2. Promoting a commitment to lifelong learning
3. Establishing the role of teachers as both guides and mentors
4. Assisting students in understanding how the Internet can help and also hurt them
5. Encouraging students to take responsibility for academic integrity
6. Providing assurance that students know and understand expectations
7. Creating and using fair forms of assessment
8. Decreasing the opportunities students have to be academically dishonest
9. Dealing with academic dishonesty when it happens
10. Assisting with defining and supporting campus-wide academic standards for behavior.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, (2005) also suggest that interventions can be implemented that promote student development and honest behavior. Many actions relate to creating an environment that fosters personal growth through caring and support.

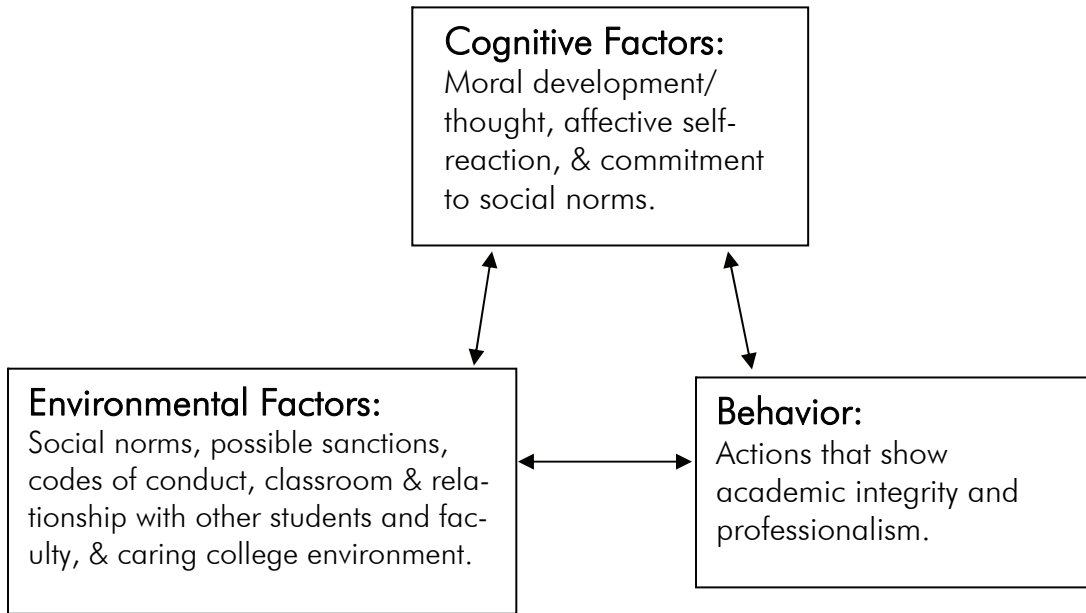
Similar work by Noddings (2002, 2003) encourages educators to foster ethical behavior through the development of a nurturing environment for

students. In such a place, students can bond with their role models, and develop ethical decision-making skills and behavior. To support development, teachers need to be emotionally and physically available to their students (Noddings, 2003). Fostering self-knowledge, meeting physical and emotional needs, and acting in an ethical manner are other key issues that instructors must consider when building environments that promote student growth and moral development (Noddings, 2002).

Throughout the reviewed literature, themes emerge regarding academic honesty and improving student misbehavior. A recurring premise is the role that environment plays in decision-making. One can conclude that the setting does influence—and even facilitate—ethical and unethical behavior within a college or university through the creation and maintenance of an academic integrity milieu. Another theme is faculty uncertainty regarding best practices that promote moral behavior.

### Theoretical Framework

Several theories of moral development that can help educators understand their influence on students have been widely studied (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). The Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action by Bandura (1991a) receives considerable attention. This theory provides an understanding of the many interactions that affect students' thought, the environment, and behavior (see Figure 1). Bandura simplifies the complex concepts related to student moral development into a three-part model. In defining this theory, Bandura (1991b) explained that moral behavior is affected by both cognitive and environmental factors. Cognitive aspects include intellectual and moral developmental level, reaction to situations, and commitment to social norms.



**Figure 1. Adapted from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action (1991b).**

According to Bandura, the main environmental variables in higher education include social norms, codes of conduct, and modeling by others. By social norms, Bandura refers to perceived acceptable behavior. These norms influence what people feel they should or should not be doing. Codes of conduct also affect behavior by providing a better understanding of social norms and expectations. Finally, modeling presents people with visual cues regarding what is—or is not—acceptable behavior. Bandura's research indicates that providing people with opportunities to explore their own understanding and the world around them enhances moral reasoning skills and intellectual abilities.

#### *Application to Higher Education Student Learning*

Bandura's model is applicable to higher educational settings (Nadelson, 2006). In terms of behavior, student cognitive factors include their level of moral reasoning and intelligence. These features influence students' environmental perceptions. As a result, students interpret right and wrong very differently (Chickering et al, 1993).

Some see the world as very dichotomous with rules and actions being either right or wrong, while others believe that context affects the situation and decision-making.

According to Bandura's theory, social norms and students' commitment to them play a part in determining academic behavior. The awareness of academic rules influences behavior. This can impact faculty members' emphasis on expectations of classroom conduct and the consequences of not conforming to such expectations.

In addition, students' desire to align themselves with the norms of an institution will affect their behavior (Bandura, 1991b). Some students strongly desire to "fit in" while others do not feel that adhering to social norms is important. The behaviors between the two groups will differ considerably. Likewise, students' affinity with their instructors plays a part in behavior (Bandura, 1991b). If students feel close to their professors and believe that faculty members care about them, they are more likely to want to please instructors and model the expected behaviors.

Bandura’s theory concludes that cognitive processes and the environment influence student behavior. Therefore, changes in conduct are made by affecting students’ situations through codes of conduct, college and classroom environments, and working to develop social norms that are consistent with character development.

The body of literature in the area of student conduct is growing. However, Bandura’s theory and the above cited studies do not give a complete understanding of how faculty can promote ethical behavior in classrooms. In addition, knowledge is lacking regarding environmental factors that direct faculty actions in their classroom activities. The current study will hopefully give further insights on these important variables relating to academic integrity.

**Research Procedure**

A quantitative, case study method using surveys was the basis of this investigation. The survey questions were similar to those developed and used in the above reported study by Simon, et al. (2003).

Information about full-time graduate and undergraduate faculty members was obtained from the directory at a large, public university. Because there were over 900 full-time faculty members in this population, only one third of the faculty was randomly sampled. Surveys were sent to nearly 300 educators. Approximately 5% of the people selected had either left employment at the institution, were on sabbatical, or were not available. A total of 72 surveys were returned via mail at a response rate of approximately 21%.

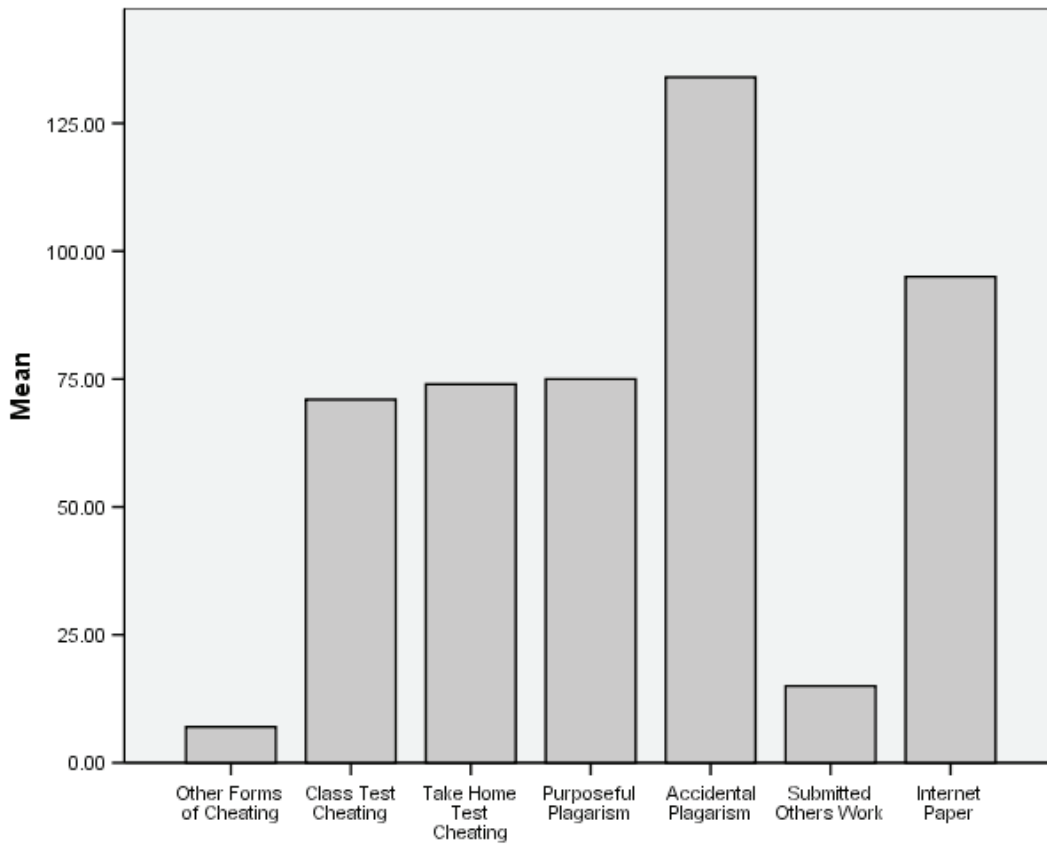


Figure 2. Types of suspected undergraduate incidents of academic dishonesty

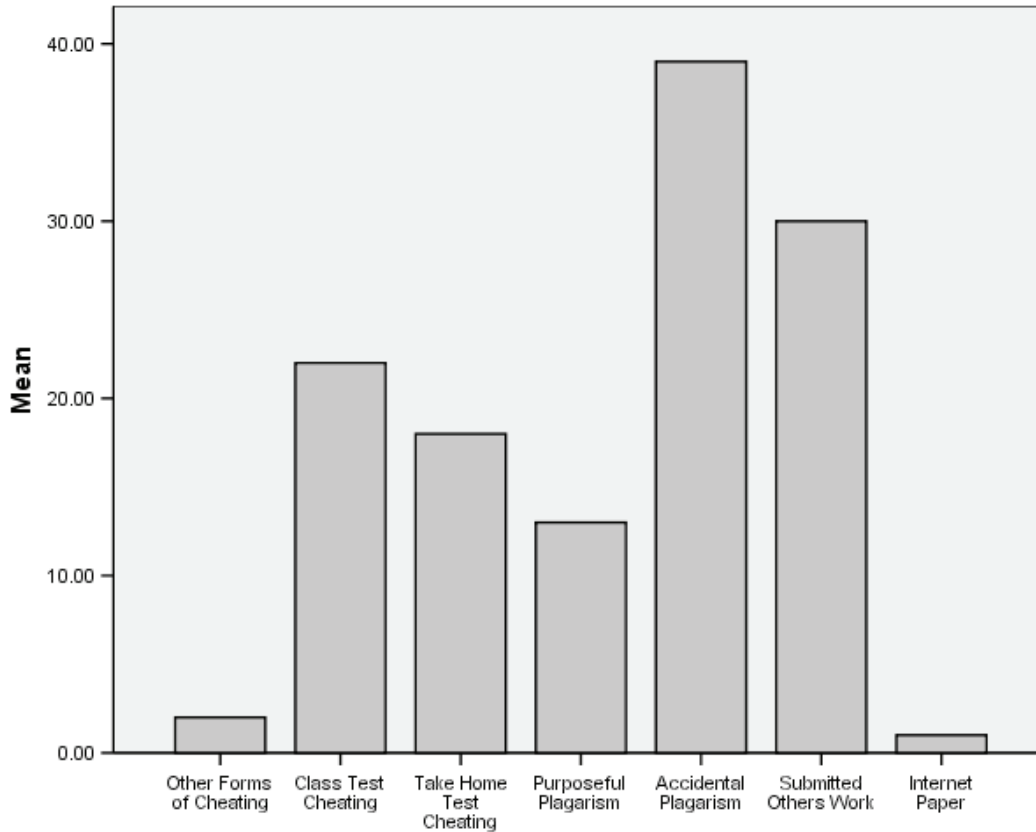


Figure 3. Types of suspected graduate incidents of academic dishonesty

The data from the completed survey data were entered into SPSS and statistical analysis was performed. Descriptive statistics calculations on the data were performed and followed by correlational analysis.

### Results & Conclusions

#### *Types of Unethical Behavior Reported*

In completing the survey, faculty were asked to recall suspected or known incidences of academic dishonesty that had occurred over the previous year. The seventy-two respondents reported over 460 incidents of suspected misconduct by undergraduate students and over 110 suspected situations with graduate students. On average, each faculty member suspected eight occurrences of unethical behavior within the last year. The majority classified suspected behavioral problems as “accidental/unintentional pla-

giarism” with 134 of those involving undergraduate students (see figure 2) and 39 involving graduate students (see figure 3). In addition, many faculty members thought that students submitted papers that were copied from the Internet. Other common types of suspected dishonest actions occurred during test taking. Approximately 90 episodes of suspected misconduct happened during in-classroom tests and 95 with take-home testing.

Of the over 460 suspected events of undergraduate misconduct, 176 were “dealt with.” In the cases of graduate student misconduct, faculty took action in 49 of the 110 situations.

Statistically, faculty “dealt with” about 38% of situations where dishonesty was suspected at the undergraduate level and approximately 45% at the graduate level. By using a t-test analysis, it

was determined that faculty were as likely to deal with misconduct by graduate students as misconduct by undergraduate students ( $p>0.30$ ).

*Faculty Responses to Suspected Misconduct*

Most faculty members reported using at least two methods of intervention to encourage ethical behavior. Over half of the faculty instructed students on proper methods of referencing papers and discussed penalties for misconduct. In addition, about 46% used informal counseling when misconduct was suspected.

The results indicate that faculty prefer to keep suspicions from going outside of the classroom. Only twelve of the seventy-two faculty members reported making formal charges against students at the department level. Eight reported issues to Student Services for further evaluation and possible student sanctioning.

*Faculty Views on Academic Dishonesty*

Faculty members' opinions about academic dishonesty were gathered using a seven point Likert scale. As mentioned above, the majority of faculty indicated that they wanted to deal with suspected unethical behavior informally and not bring issues out of the classroom (mean of 4.11 with one representing strongly disagree and

seven indicating strongly agree). Many denoted at least some discomfort with the university's formal processes for dealing with students suspected of misconduct (mean = 3.11).

Many teachers believed that insufficient evidence prevented them from bringing the issue out in the open (mean = 4.86). This may have led to some of the uneasiness regarding reporting the situation to the administration. Another issue that may have played a small role seemed to be a lack of trust of the administration (mean = 3.01).

*Relationships Between Variables*

Statistical analyses were performed to identify relationships between variables. Results indicate that the faculty members most likely to avoid issues of suspected dishonesty were more uncomfortable with presenting a case ( $P<.001$ ) and uneasy about the formal process ( $p<.01$ ) (see Table 1).

Anxious faculty were also more likely to deal with situations on an informal basis ( $p<.001$ ). Being uncomfortable also related to the belief that there was not enough evidence to report situations ( $p<.001$ ) and that formal academic misconduct proceedings would reflect negatively on their performance ( $P<.001$ ). These findings are consistent with those of the Simon, et al. study (2003).

Table 1. Correlations of Faculty Members' Views of Process

	1	2	3	4
<b>1. Not Enough Evidence</b>	—			
<b>2. Uncomfortable with Formal Process</b>	.323 (**)	—		
<b>3. Concern Reflect Negatively</b>	.047	.485 (**)	—	
<b>4. Prefer Informal Process</b>	.267 (*)	.419 (**)	.307 (*)	—

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).; \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). N = 71 for items 1, 2, and 3. N = 69 for item 4.

Table 2. *Correlations of Sanctions*

	1	2	3	4
<b>1. Disregard unless others aware</b>	—			
<b>2. Number suspected undergraduate</b>	.281 (*)	—		
<b>3. Failing grade paper</b>	-.014	.243 (*)	—	
<b>4. Failing grade course</b>	.024	.245 (*)	.499 (**)	—

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). N = 71 for all items.

Not all of the findings were foreseen. Results relating to the total measures used and the number of suspected occurrences of undergraduate misconduct were not expected. The faculty who used more measures to deal with suspected dishonest behavior also reported more suspected incidents. Because of the nature of the study methods, it is impossible to know whether using additional methods resulted in student confusion about the faculty members' expectations and sanctions. Perplexity may have led to more acts of dishonesty. It is also possible that some teachers were more aware or suspicious of academic dishonesty and chose to use additional deterrence measures. Further study in this area is needed.

The results demonstrate significant relationships between types of sanctions used against suspected acts of dishonesty and the number of perceived cases (see Table 2). As expected, faculty who disregarded questionable behavior--unless other students were aware of such--had a higher level of suspected dishonest behavior ( $p < .01$ ). In addition, higher numbers of severe sanctions did not seem to reduce the incidences of perceived dishonest behavior. In fact, it seemed to increase their prevalence. Data indicate a significant positive relationship between faculty who used failing grades to deal with in-

appropriate behavior and the number of suspected cases of misconduct ( $p < 0.01$ ). This finding was not anticipated by this researcher.

*Research Conclusions*

Undergraduate and graduate (mis)conduct is a concern of faculty members. In order to promote academic honesty, the educators surveyed used a variety of interventions. The faculty also voiced apprehension regarding how to deal with suspected misconduct. Nevertheless, the majority did take action in order to improve student behavior. However, educators were not consistent in how they fostered academic honesty and reacted to suspected wrongdoing. No one intervention seemed to be the most effective. In fact, a greater number of student sanctions was related to more reported incidents of misconduct.

The findings of this study seem to be consistent with previous research. Although the majority of research focuses on students' actions and perceptions, there is some work that indicates faculty members do influence students' classroom behavior (McCabe et al, 2002). Research also indicates that educators have anxiety related to dealing with misconduct (Simon et al, 2003).



### Implications for Practice and Further Study

This study adds to the growing body of research regarding student conduct by surveying faculty perspectives on academic honesty and their reported encounters with academic misconduct in a higher education environment. In addition, the study supports Bandura's theory that the environment does influence student behavior. Since the environment is important and can be manipulated, there are interventions that can be used to improve student behavior. Unfortunately, as identified in this study, more than just one or two actions are needed for faculty responses to be effective in promoting ethical behavior. However, one can conclude from the literature and the current research findings, that providing more simple and direct information to students about expected behavior can help reduce student confusion and hopefully improve behavior. In addition, faculty members taking action on suspected misconduct, and thus fostering an environment of student accountability—an academic integrity milieu—seems to also have a positive influence on behavior.

Future research that focuses on what faculty interventions are most effective in promoting academic honesty would be helpful. In addition, examining how to reduce faculty anxiety related to fostering ethical behavior also seems to be warranted.

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