

Deterrents To Online Academic Dishonesty

Joni Adkins

Department of Computer Science/Information System
Instructor of Computer Science/Information System
Northwest Missouri State University

Cindy Kenkel

Department of Marketing/Management
Instructor of Management
Northwest Missouri State University

Chi Lo Lim

Department of Marketing/Management
Assistant Professor of Management
Northwest Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

Technological innovation offers numerous opportunities to the 21st century. In a knowledge-based society, employers are increasingly demanding their workforce to achieve further education. Educational institutions in the nation and around the world strive to meet the needs of employers with online delivery of courses and programs. The flexibility of online courses offers a number of benefits but with it comes some downsides that need to be addressed. One of the most prevalent difficulties encountered by online faculty members is the problem of maintaining academic integrity.

Online courses offer unique opportunities for students to commit acts of academic dishonesty. Nationwide, the increase in cheating in our schools has received significant press. While the research is mixed as to how prevalent cheating is in online courses in comparison to the traditional classroom, it is an issue that requires a proactive rather than reactive response. Faculty members at Northwest Missouri State University have met this challenge head on. This paper offers measures proven to prevent and deter academic dishonesty in online courses.

CHEATING: AN EPIDEMIC ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Cheating on college campuses is a long-standing problem that is intensifying. The number of students reporting that they have engaged in serious cheating continues to increase at an alarming rate. Research by Niels found evidence of correlation between academic dishonesty and academic practices around the nation (Niels, 1997). Olt reported an alarming 10-point increase from a previous survey conducted 15 years ago from *Who's Who Among American High School Students* indicating 80 percent of the 3,123 students surveyed admitted to cheating on an exam (Olt, 2002). U.S. News & World Report presented a disturbing story in the November 1999 cover page entitled "A New Epidemic of Fraud is Sweeping Through Our Schools" (Kleiner & Lord, 1999). Bushweller offered an astonishing 50 percent of the students surveyed did not perceive cheating as necessarily wrong, and 95 percent of those who had cheated stated that they have never been caught (Bushweller, 1999). The Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University found similar results when 75 percent of all college students confessed to cheating at least once (Kleiner & Lord, 1999). The Rutgers' Management Education Center conducted a national survey and found three quarters of the 4,500 high school students they polled admitted to engaging in serious cheating (Slobogin, 2002). McCabe of Rutgers University found that cheating at colleges had doubled since the early 1960s (Carroll, 2002). Koch offered the most staggering statistic of 20 – 30% of college undergrads cheat on a regular basis (Koch, 2002). Based on the literature, it appeared

that McCabe's conclusion was once again proven right "...that these results indicate that dishonesty appear to not carry the stigma that it used to (McCabe, 1999).

A major reason students continue to cheat is that they rarely get caught. In 1999, McCabe interviewed 1,000 faculty members from 21 campuses and nearly a third admitted to observing cheating in their classes yet doing nothing about it (Koch, 2002). Even schools with strict honor codes are not exempt from the tendency to avoid taking action against academic dishonesty. At the University of Virginia, two surveys indicated "significant number of students and professors who'd be unlikely to take action if they suspected cheating" (Cheating Thrive, USA Today, May, 2001). Fear of lawsuits, time required to handle cheating incidents, and lack of institutional rewards for catching cheating are all listed as rationalizations for this behavior (Koch 2002).

ONLINE CHEATING

Carneval posits that advancement of technology offers students more efficient ways to cheat, but fortunately, the same technology also affords instructors with new tools to identify acts of academic dishonesty (Carneval, 1999). The inception of online education led to the rapid growth of dotcoms involved in the sales of pre-written and custom tailored term papers or the so-called digital paper mills. Paper mills such as Schoolsucks.com, PaperTopics.com, and Cheathouse.com offer recycled papers and custom tailor assignments to students at a rate of \$20 to \$35 per page (Heberling,

2002). The Paper Store Enterprises Inc. doing business under www.termpapers-on-file.com claims to offer “the largest catalog of expertly-researched model term papers all written by our company after 1995” (Heberling, 2002). The Paper Store Enterprises Inc. offers their service at \$9.95 per page for pre-existing papers to \$19.95 per page for custom research (Heberling, 2002). It does not matter if the price per page is \$9.95 or \$35, paper mills are lucrative businesses and one such paper mill, Schoolsucks.com, professes to have been profitable “from Day 1” (Groark, Oblinger, & Choa, 2001). Several of these sites claim their papers are guaranteed to beat plagiarism software programs and services. According to Anderson, although paper mills do not outwardly endorse cheating, the message they are sending is that it is acceptable to cut corners and cheat (Anderson, 2001). To make matters worse, some digital paper mills generate revenue by providing advertisements on their websites and offer papers for free papers” (Heberling, 2002).

The use of technology to cheat does not end with purchasing paper from digital paper mills. A Rutgers’ survey found that half of the students had plagiarized work they found on the Internet (Slobogin, 2002). An in depth ABC News Primetime report “Cheaters Amok: A Crisis in America’s Schools – How It’s Done and Why It’s Happening” depicted high tech alternatives to crib notes placed under a book bag. Today’s students are downloading material to graphic calculators and palm pilots. Cell phones are used to record pictures of test questions or notes and answers to multiple choice questions can be text-messaged to fellow classmates (Cheaters Amok, ABC, 2004).

Using deterrence technique such as random seating assignments and proctoring the room during a test do not normally apply to online classes. Since there is no face-to-face interaction between the instructors and students, it becomes a challenge for instructors to ascertain academic honesty in their online classes. In the information-based society, old ways to deter students from committing acts of academic dishonesty are not always applicable or suitable. Additional measures to minimize academic dishonesty in online classes need to be explored. A comparative study conducted at Northwest Missouri State University found that 14% more of the students taking online classes admitted to receiving unauthorized help on an assignment than their classmates who are not taking online classes (Kenkel, 2004).

Another major concern of academic dishonesty in online courses is the use of “ringers” or experts who stand in to take test for others. According to Wein, at the University of Arizona campus, a flyer was circulated offering services of attending classes and taking exams for a fee (Wein, 1994). The U.S. Department of Education reported that having someone else take exams for students is one of the more prominent cheating activities in colleges (Maramark & Maline, 1993). In a survey conducted by Nuss, faculty members considered having someone take exams for someone else among the most serious forms of academic dishonesty (Nuss, 1994). The use of “ringers” in online classes can be more severe as it is harder for faculty to identify who is actually taking the course and completing the assignments for the course.

Many might wonder whether or not it is truly easier to commit acts of academic dishonesty in online classes. Heberling offers an optimistic perspective and points out that, “ironically, a strong case can be made that it is actually hard to cheat online and that it is also easier to detect” (Heberling, 2002). Chapman et al. offers some support in their research that found 26% of students admit that they had at least sometimes used “stolen” exam, 92% of these students felt that others would cheat in a this situation, but only a mere 2% of all students in the sample admitted to working together

on an electronic exam when it was prohibited (Chapman, Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004).

CHEATING: THE FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

Kenkel conducted a survey to find out how faculty members who teach online courses perceive academic honesty online. She found 37.5% or 9 out of 24 faculty members considered academic honesty as their number one concern regarding online teaching (Kenkel, 2004). It is interesting to learn that majority of faculty members surveyed do not consider academic honesty as a major concern. Nevertheless, the findings of Kenkel’s research were in accordance with Kaczmarczyk report that professors of distance education do not perceive cheating as a major problem (Kaczmarczyk, 2001). It is disconcerting and bewildering to know that in the aftermath of the corporate ethical scandals, faculty members are not more wary of academic dishonesty in their courses.

McCabe and Trevino found early on that faculty members in general are reluctant to enforce academic integrity rules. McCabe and Trevino’s study showed that 40% of the 200 instructors surveyed have never enforced their institution’s academic integrity rules; 54% reported they seldom enforce the rules; and only 6% indicated that they often enforce the academic integrity rules (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). It is noteworthy that faculty members at honor code institutions enforce academic integrity rules twice as often as those faculty members from non honor code institutions (McCabe and Trevino, 1993).

The majority of the researchers continue to seek ways to ensure that academic dishonesty temptations are kept at a minimum. Numerous researchers (McCabe & Pavela, 2000; McMurtry, 2001; and Rowe, 2004) advocate discussion of academic integrity with students as a major factor to deter academic dishonesty. Although sharing the importance of academic integrity with students appears vital to establishing an environment reed of dishonestly, Olt found very few online faculty members actually discuss academic integrity with their students (Olt, 2002). Dirks found only 15% of faculty members actually had an academic honesty policy in their syllabus. Dirks conclude that faculty lack enthusiasm because cheating is extremely difficult to prove and they are solely responsible to show unequivocal proof (Dirks, 1998).

Educators have a responsibility to teach but moreover, they must guide their students towards an ethical life and career. Educators can begin by explaining to students the importance of academic integrity and by encouraging them not to cheat (Nonis & Swift, 2001). According to Sims, there appear to be strong similarities between school and work related cheating behaviors. Sims found that the propensity of people to behave honestly or dishonestly depends on their general attitude toward dishonesty. He recommends that although universities are not responsible for the morality of their students, they are nevertheless responsible to establish and enforce behavioral guidelines to their students (Sims, 1993).

DETERRENCE TO ONLINE CHEATING

Northwest Missouri State University started offering online courses in the fall of 1999. Since its inception, online courses have been very popular with students for reasons ranging from flexibility to the misconception that online courses are easier. At the time of this writing, Northwest Missouri State University offers over 100 online classes each academic year. Aside from offering online courses, Northwest Missouri State University offers degree completion

programs in business management, accounting, and a master degree in geography. Faculty members at Northwest Missouri State University recognize and address the issues associated with academic dishonesty in the online environment. Ten methods that have worked for faculty members at Northwest Missouri State University are discussed and shared in the following paragraphs.

DEVELOP RAPPORT WITH YOUR ONLINE STUDENTS

According to James, people find it easier to cheat what is perceived as a large, faceless entity like a corporation or the government than to cheat a friend or acquaintance (James, 2002). Developing rapport with students is one of the primary means to encourage academic honesty. In 1999, George and Carlson found that cheating tends to increase as the bandwidth (information per second) of the communications channel between assessor and assessee decreases: that is people who feel more “distant” cheat more (George & Carlson, 1999). On the other hand, Graham et al. posit that effective online teaching can be achieved by encouraging student-faculty contact. They propose that frequent student-instructor communication allow instructors to get a better sense of a student’s ability and increase the difficulty for students to find consistent help to respond to classroom activities (Rowe, 2004). Furthermore, Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, and Chapman et al. concur that students were less likely to cheat if they respected, and felt respected by their faculty. The feeling that cheating would betray the trust their instructor had bestowed on them serves as a deterrent to cheating (Graham et al., 2001, and Chapman et al., 2004).

Northwest online faculty members ascertain that they establish a solid flow of communication with their online students. Faculty members establish communication and rapport with students long before the academic year starts. One of the most common topics for the first threaded discussion is self introduction. Some faculty members also require their students to upload their pictures to help students create a more personal atmosphere. Faculty members also communicate with students on a regular basis through threaded discussions, emails, and face-to-face visits with students who are on campus.

Discuss the Importance of Academic Dishonesty

Discussing the importance of academic dishonesty is supported by research done by McCabe and Trevino who found a strong relationship between a student’s propensity to cheat and their perception of their peers’ level of cheat. Furthermore, McCabe and Trevino posit that students rationalized their behavior to cheat based on overestimated cheating frequency by their peers (McCabe & Trevino, 1993). Chapman et al. found that 42.6% of high frequency cheaters believe their peers would also cheat (Chapman et al., 2004).

Northwest faculty members make it clear that appropriate actions will be applied to everyone involved in academic dishonesty. Faculty members are encouraged to include a clear academic dishonesty policy in their syllabus. Discussion of academic integrity can be posted as a topic for threaded discussions. Faculty member can share different scenarios and teach students the severity of consequences of academic dishonesty. It is always better to preempt acts of dishonesty than to implement punishment in its aftermath.

Develop an Online Academic Honesty Contract

Olt indicates that providing students with an academic honesty policy can minimize academic dishonesty (Olt, 2002). McCabe and Pavela identified 10 principles of academic integrity including defining and supporting campus-wide academic integrity standards and affirming the importance of academic integrity (McCade & Pavela, 2000). Taylor concurs with the need of an academic policy but stresses the importance of mutual accountability by students and instructors (Taylor, 2001).

Many Northwest faculty members have required students to sign a binding contract to abide by the University’s and Department’s policies. This is particularly necessary in the Computer Science/ Information Systems department since students needed clear guidelines and examples to address content specific situations (i.e. programming and computer assignments) so they created a document that gives examples of what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, and how to document help received on assignments. It is vital that students are aware of the consequences of their actions and that the online instructor has given thought to academic integrity issues.

Walk the talk

Chapman et al. strongly supported what faculty members have known for quite a while, students are less likely to cheat if they fear they may actually get caught. When they asked students about their likelihood to cheat on a web-based exam, the number of students who indicated they would dropped from 42% to 14% after they were told that electronic surveillance would be used and students from an earlier class were caught cheating (Chapman et al., 2004).

At Northwest Missouri State University faculty members are vigilant about upholding academic integrity. The university had revisited the Academic Honesty policy and revised it accordingly to ensure that students can fully understand what it entails. Northwest Missouri State University takes academic honesty seriously and any student who is charged with an act academic dishonesty is automatically punishable by an “F” for the course. If a student is charged a second time, it would mean termination from the university.

Guard Against Plagiarism

While the ease of copying, pasting, and downloading electronic files have contributed to academic dishonesty, they can also provide useful file history information. McMurtry advises instructors to require their students to electronically submit their assignments so that they can be archived for future reference (McMurtry, 2001). Furthermore McMurtry stresses a proactive approach to designing assignments can lessen plagiarism in the classroom. She recommends instructor give clear instructions and specific goals for assignments. She urges instructors to be familiar with what is available online before assigning a paper (McMurtry, 2001).

At Northwest Missouri State University, most online instructors require students to write in a variety of settings. This allows an instructor to get to know a student’s writing style better and decreases the chance of someone else contributing for a student. Making threaded discussions a significant part of the class where students are required to log in and participate more than once weekly can do this. Also including short answer and essay questions on exams and requiring other written assignments are other ways to guard against plagiarism. Customized writing assignments that

require current sources and unique topics related to class material can also deter students from patronizing paper mills.

Inform students that you have spent time familiarizing yourself with the cheat sites inventory. Require students to upload articles that they have used in their research. Make sure that you check the file properties for creation date, revision dates, etc. Some of these file properties may be lost when files are downloaded from the online class websites but some are still available. You may want to use a text search engine such as AltaVista or Advanced Google to quickly identify unoriginal writing. Consider subscribing to paid services such as Turnitin.com. Just letting students know that you have electronic copies and know techniques to track down academic honesty may make the students think twice before using someone else's file.

Develop Meaningful Assessments

While using all objective questions is easy for online grading, students who see exams as being worthless, too hard, or too easy will be more likely to cheat because they do not see the point of the exam (Rowe, 2004). Writing and grading application questions are certainly more difficult and time consuming than objective questions but may make the exam seem more significant as the students have a chance to write and show how they can apply the material to a new situation. Students can stand out from others because their thoughts will be read and analyzed by the instructor. If the importance of writing and thoughtful discussion has been introduced with threaded discussions, students will have a better idea of what is expected in this type of question and can be rewarded for their efforts on the exam.

Protect the Test Bank Integrity

There are a variety of ways to protect the integrity of a test bank. Some of the methods to ensure test bank integrity include by rotating the test banks in different class terms, and to periodically rewording questions and changing the order of the answers. By rotating the questions, every student will take a different assessment through randomized question pools. Requiring the students to justify their multiple choice answer selection or writing application objective questions are other ways to call for higher-level thinking and preventing cheating. Whether to allow the students to view their objective questions and the correct answers after the exam is an issue where faculty are divided as there are clearly two sides to the issue. To allow the students to have feedback and to learn from their errors, it is necessary to let them see the questions and answers. The obvious downside to this is that the questions may be printed or viewed by other students, which could jeopardize the integrity of the test bank. One possible option is to use software that limits students' actions when they take and later view the exam.

Northwest Missouri State University use the eCollege Course Management which incorporates the ExamGuard that can prohibit students from having other programs open, to copy and paste, or to print an exam either during the exam or when viewing the results later. Another way to protect the integrity is to limit students' access time to view their graded exams.

Set Strict Time Limits on Tests

A proven method utilized by online faculty members at Northwest Missouri State University is to set strict time limits on tests. Students are made aware of the time remaining for them to complete

a particular test. In addition, faculty members have the options to choose whether or not the test will be automatically closed when the time elapsed or penalize students for exceeding the time allowed for the test. Whichever option the faculty member decides upon should, nevertheless, be made crystal clear to the students in the syllabus and remind the students of the consequence of exceeding the time set forth for each test. More faculty members preferred to shut the exam because students often ignore or forget about the timer and exceed the time limit if they are not automatically exited when the time has elapsed. If one should choose to allow students to complete their test after the time has elapsed is to devise a suitable penalty rubric for each minute over. To establish a time limit, give a similar exam in a live, proctored class setting and see how much time students need for the exam.

Use Proctored Settings or One-on-One Chats for Tests

Northwest faculty members utilize a proctored setting that requires online students who live within 30-45 miles from the school to come to school at a set time to take a test. Although this creates some benefits similar to a classroom assessment, the difficulty encountered is finding a time that will work for most or all of students. Furthermore, students have shown resentment of having to come on campus to take an online test, especially for those who are juggling work, family, and school. Kenkel successfully incorporates a face-to-face final exam with her student by requiring her online students who live within the 30-45 miles radius to take the test in her office during finals week. This afforded her a unique opportunity to meet the students and also gave her students the flexibility they experienced online.

Another method is to have the online students find a proctor. This can be a local community college teacher or perhaps a work supervisor. The instructor then emails, mails, or faxes the exam or password and the proctor agrees to supervise the exam. Yet another innovative way to deter academic dishonesty in online testing is a unique method utilized by Dr. Janet Marta, a faculty member teaching International Business online at Northwest. The faculty member requires her students take their final exam in a private chat room at a designated time. While time-consuming, the faculty believes this method ensures academic honesty and provides immediate feedback.

Recognize and Account for the "Friend Factor"

If your typical online student lives within close proximity to other students enrolled in the same courses the likelihood they may be cheating is greater. Chapman et al. found that students are much more likely to cheat with friends (Chapman et al., 2004). While traditional classroom cheating is often limited to the confines of the classroom, online courses open the parameters to an entire host of accomplices. Chapman et al. offers statistical support of the "friend factor" that found a substantial difference between information sharing between friends and acquaintances. Table 1 reflects the finding from the study by Chapman et al. and showed that the likelihood of students to cheat drops dramatically when an acquaintance versus a friend is involved (Chapman et al., 2004).

Northwest faculty members often hear stories of group test taking, collaboration among students enrolled in the same on-campus course, and sharing of test materials from students who took the same course in previous semesters. One measure that faculty members have implemented is to create pools of multiple

questions that allow random selection of questions every time a student logs in to take a test or quiz. Furthermore, some faculty members require a qualitative rationale for multiple choice

Table 1

Scenario	Friend	Acquaintance
Give answers to someone on a test	37%	8%
Use "stolen" copy of an exam to study	63%	40%
Participate in group involved in e-cheating	42%	14%
Participate in e-cheating when the instructor had warned of electronic surveillance and students were led to believe the instructor had punished others	14%	4%

assessments. Another measure is to ensure that correct answers to tests were not given out before all students from all the sections had taken the particular test. In addition, faculty members had utilized pools of essay questions that require personal applications.

CONCLUSION

Faculty members have a moral obligation to curtail cheating. According to McCabe and Trevino, high school graduates go to college prepared to follow the rules, and they generally believe that the atmosphere for cheaters will be tougher than it was in high school (McCabe, 1993). Unfortunately, when students see cheating in the classrooms and professors ignoring it, they feel that they too can cheat. As a consequence, cheating can spread like wildfire (Koch, 2000). Online courses offer unique opportunities for students to commit academic dishonesty. Instructors of online courses must be more vigilant as the nature of the delivery mode requires unique solutions to ensure academic honesty.

This paper offers measures that have been applied and proven to work for numerous online faculty members at Northwest Missouri State University to curtail academic dishonesty. Although the list is by no means exhaustive, it is definitely a good start for educators who believe that education is lost if the student learner can take another's work as their own. Academic integrity is an integral part of quality education that is losing ground in an ever changing information-based society. Whether education is delivered in the classroom or online, educators must be vigilant and relentless in upholding academic honesty. Educators must take advantage of the benefits technological advancement offers and use it to enhance academic quality and integrity.

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