

Chapter 1

Academic Integrity and Student Satisfaction in an Online Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities are experiencing continued growth in the demand for online course offerings. Increasingly, students expect convenience and ready access. In response, institutions are developing policies to support courses that are being designed to maximize learning in an environment that preserves academic integrity. To determine how effectively both goals are being met at one institution, researchers surveyed students in multiple courses over a period of two years. With regard to the level of satisfaction with online learning, students liked the convenience but were not satisfied with the amount and quality of interaction. With regard to student attitudes toward what constitutes acceptable behavior in online learning, results raised concerns about what constitutes academic integrity in the online learning environment.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Robert Morris University (RMU) is a private nonprofit institution located in Western Pennsylvania with a student body of approximately 5,000 undergraduates and 500 graduate students. Founded in 1921 as the Pittsburgh School of Accountancy, RMU now offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, engineering, nursing, communications and information systems, and education. Since its first online offerings in 1999, Robert Morris University has added more than 250 new online and partially online course offerings. In academic year 2009-10, there were 121 totally online courses university-wide with an enrollment of 3,603. In 2010, the University established an office of Online and Off-Campus Programs under the direction of the Vice-President for Online and Off-Campus Programs. The University currently offers seven undergraduate degree programs online and nine graduate degree programs. From September, 2010 to January, 2012, enrollment in the undergraduate programs grew 365%. Graduate enrollment grew 297% in the same period.

As the University expands its offerings and more and more instructors and students become involved in online education, ensuring instructional quality and learning effectiveness assumes the central role in course planning.

Fundamental differences between teaching online and teaching in the traditional classroom pose major challenges and concerns for course instructors and educational institutions. Increasingly, concerns of maintaining academic integrity in the online learning environment are added to those of ensuring student learning and maintaining student satisfaction with e-learning.

Setting the Stage

The Sloan Consortium (2009) reports that enrollment in online courses at American colleges and universities more than doubled in the five years from 2002 to 2007, growing from 1.6 million students in 2002 to 3.94 million students taking online courses in 2007. There can be no doubt that online learning is being integrated into higher education. The Sloan Consortium review of *Online Learning as a Strategic Asset* quotes Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, “During the past decade, online learning has begun to weave into the fabric of higher education and has become the fastest growing segment. . . All indications are that this growth will continue” (2009). Since that time, online courses have been offered at higher education institutions at an accelerated rate, increasing to 5.6 million in 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

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