Chapter 24
Academic Dishonesty in Online Courses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cheating and other dishonest behaviors are found at all universities, in both face-to-face and online courses. This chapter highlights an instance of cheating in an online course. The case is from the perspectives of both the student and the professor. The student's perspective explains how and why she/he cheated on the final paper, and the professor explains how she/he suspected the individual and her/his thoughts on academic integrity in the online format. The student's reasons for cheating include increasing course demands, pressures from work and family to do well, and lack of time due to full-time employment. The fraud triangle is also introduced in this chapter and questions for consideration are posed at the end. The hope is that this case study will illuminate one of the many challenges of online learning in higher education and how one academic dishonesty case was resolved. Because of the increase in cheating—at all levels, not just online—this discussion is timely and important.

BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUE

"My problem with online degrees is it is way too easy to cheat. You can get other people to do your work for you online. … How can you ensure no cheating online? It's almost impossible." - Blog post from "Heidegger" on Campus Confidential, Nov. 2008. From bloggers to authors to campus administrators, the question of academic integrity in the online college classroom has incited a lot of discussion and concern. Even late-night television found fault (and humor) with the variety of online cheating options: Television host Jon Stewart poked fun at Harvard University's

cheating scandal earlier this year. In the segment, Stewart questioned the validity of an exam that was open-book and open-Internet. The scandal resulted in dozens of forced student withdrawals from the institution. (For the full clip, see: http://www. thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-february-11-2013/crimson-lied).

In higher education, cheating is broadly defined as an offense against the academic integrity of an institution. More specifically, Mullens (2000) describes cheating as "anything that gives a student an unearned advantage over another. It includes any of the following: purchasing an essay; plagiarizing paragraphs or whole texts; impersonating another to take a test; sneaking a peek at another student's answers; smuggling crib notes into a test; padding a bibliography; fudging laboratory results; collaborating on an assignment when the professor asks for individual work; or asking for a deadline extension by citing a bogus excuse" (p. 23). This list by Mullens is far from exhaustive and neglects to incorporate technological options for cheating. The case study that follows will provide one example of cheating within an online course and provide discussion points and recommendations for academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty is an all-too-common occurrence in the higher education setting (Harmon & Lambrinos, 2008; McCabe, 2005; Raines et al., 2011; Watson & Sottile, 2010). In McCabe's 2005 study of more than 50,000 undergraduates, an alarming 70 percent of students surveyed admitted to cheating. Additional empirical research supports the 70 percent rate (Roig & Caso, 2005), whereas another study indicates the extent of cheating among college students is as high as 85 percent (Genereux & McLeod, 1995). Numbers like these should be interpreted cautiously, as they are typically self-reported and cheating is defined and understood differently among students (McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012). Plagiarism, for example, may be interpreted by one student as copying a few words from a text, whereas another student may see it as copying an entire paper verbatim. Regardless, academic misconduct is a serious issue and an important point for discussion among university officials, faculty, and students.

Recent surveys indicate similarly high levels of cheating in online courses as compared with traditional classroom settings (e.g., McNabb & Olmstead, 2009). Empirical evidence does not indicate greater levels of cheating within online courses; however the perception is that cheating is easier in the online course format. For instance, King, Guyette, and Piotrowski (2009) reported that "73.6% of students in their sample held the perception that it is easier to cheat in an online versus traditional course" (p. 1). Another study suggested that technology has "broadened the ways by which people can achieve the goal of cheating" (Curran, Middleton, & Doherty, 2011, p. 55). The variety of options for academic dishonesty is great. The same study by Curran, Middleton, and Doherty (2011) indicated that because technology can make cheating easier—and harder to get caught –students who might otherwise have been honest are now tempted by the ease of finding answers via technological

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