

Online cheating: The case of the emperor's clothing, elephant in the room, and the 800 lb. gorilla

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growth in online classes, along with the potential for cheating and the reasons why six distinct groups with differing self-interests are turning a blind eye to this problem; students, faculty, higher education administrators, legislatures, parents and student support groups, and for-profit institutions. The possible negative repercussions to the higher educational system and society in general are many. Assessment is central to education because the main purpose of an educational institution is to validate student knowledge. Not being able to do that adequately or correctly is an indictment of all involved. A good place to start to deal with the problem is by acknowledging that it exists, however humiliating that might be. In the meantime, it appears the cheaters are winning the battle because of the 800 pound gorilla in the room.

Keywords: Online cheating, distance education, online learning, web-based instruction, academic honesty

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INTRODUCTION

It is the authors' belief that the amount of potential for cheating in online college and university courses is largely being ignored by the industry, and that turning a blind eye to this problem can lead to serious negative consequences for all involved, including society as a whole. First, an explanation of the three metaphors referenced in the title of the article. The phrase "emperor's new clothes" has become a standard for anything that smacks of pretentiousness, pomposity, social hypocrisy, collective denial, or hollow ostentatiousness. The "800 pound gorilla" is a similar idiomatic expression that refers to a large, unstoppable individual or organization that can exert its will as it desires; even if people do their best to ignore it. An example would be: "where does an 800 pound gorilla sleep - anywhere it wants to". The "elephant in the room" expression may be the best metaphor for cheating in online classes. It is a metaphorical idiom for an obvious truth that is being ignored or goes unaddressed. The expression also refers to an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss.

THE BLIND EYES

So, more specifically, how do these three metaphors apply to the problem of cheating in higher education? There are at least six distinct groups with differing self-interests that are turning a blind eye to this problem.

The first group willing to turn a blind eye to cheating is the students. Who wants to admit to cheating, anyway? They love the convenience of online classes, being able to take a class at their schedule, whenever and wherever. Most are already experienced with today's technology and feel very comfortable using it. Combine that with the potential for getting a better grade by cutting corners, and one can see why the demand for these classes has soared. The faculty who teach online classes also have a stake in not upsetting the apple cart by complaining too loudly about student cheating. While it does take a significant amount of time upfront when designing an online class, it subsequently becomes significantly easier than most face-to-face classes. Faculty, like students, enjoy the convenience of being able to monitor a class at their schedule, anytime, anyplace. Besides confronting a student over cheating, without a smoking gun, can be very messy.

A third group is the higher education administrators. There is no geographical boundary with online education. Universities needing to retain current, or gain new students, and the dollars they bring, see it as an unlimited opportunity. In a 2007 survey of why universities offer online education, 82% said it was to increase enrollment (Parsad & Lewis, 2008) and in a 2011 study of 2500 colleges and universities, 65% reported that online learning was a critical part of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Southern New Hampshire University is an excellent example of how non-profit universities can benefit from online education. The 80 year-old college in 2007 had barely 2000 students. Currently it has, in addition to the 2,000+ residential students, over 11,000 online students enrolled in over 120 graduate and undergraduate programs. School revenue went from \$10 million in 2007 to approximately \$75 million in 2012. The money generated by the online operation subsidizes a residential operating loss (Kamenetz, 2012). Another reason for administrators who prefer to turn a blind eye is that many are of the expressed opinion that surely "our" students wouldn't cheat; would they? While 41% of Americans consider cheating to be a serious problem in higher education, only 34% of college officials do (8 Astonishing Stats on Academic Cheating, 2012).

The fourth group is legislators, both state and federal, who are in love with online education because of the cost savings and the ability to bring higher education to those who might otherwise not be able to pursue a degree. Almost every state in America is faced with the dim prospect of cutting higher education funding at a time when enrollment is rapidly growing. In most states, cuts to higher education funding generate fewer protests than cutting most other areas of state expenditures. Any cuts to higher education can be passed on to the students and parents who are paying the tuition. The percentage of college graduates per state also is a bragging right for state officials. It's easier to measure quantity than quality.

The fifth group is comprised of some parents and other student support groups who view getting a college diploma simply as a process akin to punching a card that gives their children a better shot at the American Dream. Just get the degree; whatever it takes. We live in a society that seems to be over-accepting of this downward ethical trend where most do not consider copying on a test or paper to be a serious issue (Varvel, Jr., 2005).

The sixth group, perhaps the largest driver of online education, and the one having the most dollars at risk, is the for-profit online universities. Most are publically traded companies that are in the business for profits that can be generated for their shareholders. These for-profits brought in \$26 billion dollars in 2009 - most of that was earned by the big 13 largely publicly traded companies that now dominate the market. For-profits now educate somewhere between 7% and 10% of the nation's roughly 19 million students who enroll at degree-granting institutions (Wilson, 2010). With over 455,600 students enrolled in 2010, the University of Phoenix is the second largest higher-education system in the country, only the State University of New York system is larger (Wilson, 2010). It is even more remarkable when one considers that the University of Phoenix had only 25,000 students in 1995. It is now larger than the entire undergraduate enrollment of the Big Ten, with 200 campuses in 39 states, Canada, Mexico, Netherlands, and Puerto Rico (Wilson, 2010). As one example of the dollars at stake is that the top 30 for-profit universities paid their CEO's an average of \$7.3 million in 2009 (For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success, 2012). A 2010 report reported in their profile of 30 for-profit higher education universities had a combined enrollment of well over 1 million (For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success, 2012).

ON CHEATING IN HIGHER EDUCATION ONLINE CLASSES

Cheating is not unique to online classes; it has been, and continues to be a problem in traditional classes. Cheating takes place in every educational setting, if there is a debate here, it is over the extent of cheating. There are some rather remarkable research statistics on cheating in general in higher education. Consider the following: a 2007 poll found that 60.8% of college students admitted to cheating; 16.5% of them didn't regret it; 95% of the cheaters never get caught; and one top-tier paper mill website (SchoolSucks.com) averages about 8,000 hits a day (8 Astonishing Stats on Academic Cheating, 2012). Particularly disturbing to the authors of the article is that, according to several studies, business students are one of the groups most likely to cheat. In one study, 87% of undergraduate business students admit to cheating on exams; 85% of the students surveyed responded that cheating is necessary to get ahead; and 90% of them said "they don't believe that cheaters will ever be caught" (Williams, Tanner, & Beard, 2012). A 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article suggests that as online enrollment increases, so does the number of people who find ways to cheat the system (Young, 2012).

There is a three-legged stool analogy that states in order for a theft (cheating) to take place, there must be three elements present - the opportunity, the need, and the attitude. There are several aspects of online education that increases the opportunity leg for cheating. When there is relative anonymity and a separation between instructor and student, as in online classes, the opportunity is increased (Varvel, Jr., 2005). A common problem in online testing is verifying that the person at the keyboard is the actual student registered. According to Rowe (2004) "from a practical standpoint, it is often easier to cheat online (since what or who the assesse brings to the assessment cannot be seen), which increases temptation". If tests are administered online, outside of an instructor monitored class or a testing center, it becomes by practicality an openbooktest. One has to question the value of an open-book exam - are you really testing what they know or what they can look up? A recent article highlighted how technology contributed to the problem of cheating noting that "With the rise of social media and mobile connectivity, dishonest sharing via technology has become a major problem" (Academic Integrity and Tech Cheating, 2012). This was illustrated aptly in the 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article which detailed how five friends were easily able to share online tests (Young, 2012). Another issue, not necessarily unique to online testing, is the fact that many courses, faculty, and universities allow for multiple attempts at taking an exam. Students just have to keep taking an exam until they get a good grade.

From an instructor's standpoint it is difficult to give feedback on test results without compromising an online test. An often suggested remedy is to change the questions, but there are only so many good questions that can be used in some fields. Randomized questions are also suggested to curtail cheating, but then an issue of fairness arises in that each student has a different set of questions.

In addition to creating more opportunities for cheating, a significant number of students taking online classes are already experiencing time-management issues. The typical nontraditional student who has a job and a family is often the one taking these classes. Time pressures combined with potential procrastination can sometimes create a rationale for cheating.

There are ways that an instructor and the university can curb online cheating, but most of these techniques involve larger amounts of a faculty member's time. As one example, there are things an instructor can do with a class of 10-15 to more honestly assess their capabilities that cannot be done in larger classes. Faculty time is the scarcest resource on any college or university campus.

POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION CHEATING

The possible negative repercussions to the higher educational system and society in general are many. Assessment is central to education because the main purpose of an educational institution is to validate student knowledge. Not being able to do that adequately or correctly is an indictment of all involved. An institution's reputation is very important; students' abilities once they graduate are a prime source of that reputation.

Cheaters have higher GPA's. A poll at Fordham University found cheaters boast a 3.41 GPA, while non-cheaters average 2.85 (8 Astonishing Stats On Academic Cheating, 2012). Think of the consequences for future employers that value higher GPA's. Today's cheaters in business classes could be the insider traders of tomorrow, as if those numbers need to be increased. In a recent survey of 500 senior financial executives in the US and UK, 24% "reported a belief that financial services professionals may need to engage in unethical or illegal

conduct in order to be successful,” 26% “indicated they had observed or had first-hand knowledge of wrongdoing in the workplace,” and 16% said they “would commit a crime - insider trading - if they could get away with it” (Many on Wall Street Say Greed Isn't Just Good - It's Necessary, 2012).

CLOSING REMARKS

“There is a tsunami coming” says Stanford President John Hennessy as universities move toward online classes (Auletta, 2012). In 2010, 6.1 million students representing almost one-third of college students were enrolled in at least one online class and the numbers are growing each year. Online classes grew at a rate of 10%, while the overall higher education student population grew at less than 1% (Allen & Seaman, 2011). David Brooks a New York columnist, predicts “what happened to the newspaper and magazine business is about to happen to higher education: a re-scrambling around the Web” (Brooks, 2012). This tsunami of online education will continue, its growth may slow but there is too much demand for it not to grow. Today even the elite universities are embracing the internet: Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Yale, Carnegie Mellon. When one professor at Stanford can teach an online artificial-intelligence course to more than 160,000 students (Auletta, 2012), universities and society cannot ignore the cost benefits.

With online education growth comes the possibility of increased cheating and the negative consequences that would bring. Maybe the authors' fears about online assessment cheating are overstated; on the other hand the problem could be even greater than suggested.

Likewise, the expression "it only takes a few bad apples to spoil the bunch" and ruin the public support that our nation's higher education system depends so heavily upon. When cheating becomes commonplace and acceptable, the integrity of the entire higher educational system is at risk.

One bright note is that some accrediting agencies (SACS) are asking universities how they are verifying student identity in distance education. On the down side of that is the lack of any truly currently effective ways of doing that. Perhaps future technology will substantially reduce the opportunities for cheating. On the other hand devious students always seem to find a way of beating the system. A good place to start to deal with the problem is by acknowledging that it exists, however humiliating that might be. In the meantime, it appears the cheaters are winning the battle because of the 800 pound gorilla in the room.

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