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Academic Integrity During COVID-19: Reflections From the University of Calgary

Sarah Elaine Eaton

Abstract: *In this paper I document and reflect on our institutional response to the coronavirus crisis from an academic integrity perspective. I contemplate how the rapid transition to remote learning impacted academic misconduct, including how assessment of student learning played a role. I explore the proliferation of commercial file-sharing and contract cheating companies during the pandemic, situating Canada within broader global contexts. Finally, I consider how to address concerns around academic integrity as remote and online delivery continue into the fall 2020 semester and beyond.*

Keywords: Academic integrity, COVID-19, emergency conditions, higher education, contract cheating, file-sharing

Introduction

In July 2019 the University of Calgary launched the Educational Leader in Residence (ELR) programme. Faculty members were seconded on a part-time basis to undertake special assignments in priority areas such as graduate supervision and mentorship, online learning and the portfolio I was seconded to, academic integrity. The ELR programme is situated within the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning and is intended to provide support across campus. Little did any of us know when we began our secondment roles how essential our work would become during the COVID-19 crisis that hit during the first year of our assignments. In this paper I document and reflect on our institutional response to the coronavirus crisis from an academic integrity perspective, through the lens of a newly-appointed educational leader in residence whose research programme centres around academic integrity in higher education contexts.

The school of education where I am based has had a robust professional graduate programme which is offered in a variety of formats, with the main focus being blended and online delivery. Over the course of my career I have taught more than 100 online credit and continuing education courses, so I already had extensive experience teaching in an online

environment. When the university announced its transition to remote and online learning in March 2020, I worked alongside colleagues at the institute for teaching and learning to help faculty members transition more than 6000 courses from face-to-face to remote delivery formats in a matter of days. The intensity of the work was unlike anything any of us had ever experienced.

In terms of academic integrity, there is a robust body of literature to show that contrary to popular myths, there is actually *less* academic misconduct in online courses compared with face-to-face delivery (Bretag et al. 2019; Davis, Drinan & Bertram Gallant 2009; Hart & Morgan 2010; Stuber-McEwen, Wiseley & Hoggatt 2009). Studies comparing academic misconduct in face-to-face versus online courses have consistently shown there are higher rates of self-reported misconduct in traditional face-to-face classes (Hart & Morgan 2010; Kidwell & Kent 2008; Stuber-McEwen et al. 2009). However, these same studies also show that students enrolled in online courses were typically older than their face-to-face counterparts and were taking the e-learning versions of the courses voluntarily. Maturity levels of students has been identified as a factor putting students at risk of committing academic misconduct, with the probability decreasing as students mature (Bertram Gallant, Binkin & Donohue 2015). When classes rapidly transitioned from face-to-face to alternate delivery during the coronavirus pandemic, the nature of teaching and learning online was unlike what those with experience with e-learning knew it to be. The technological tools used for delivery may have been the same, but suddenly we had thousands of students and educators working in online environments who had little to no training, experience, or in some cases, willingness. Let's be clear: emergency remote learning is not the same thing as online learning. In the former, panic underpins a rapid response to ensure learning continuity in an uncertain environment. In the latter, students receive orientations to the learning environment and professors receive training and mentoring to think through how to assess students in appropriate and effective ways, and everyone who takes part consents to doing so, at least to some extent.

In the transition to emergency remote delivery during the coronavirus pandemic, the result was that many faculty members kept their assessment practices exactly the same as they had done in face-to-face classes. When this involved administering timed exams in an online environment, the situation quickly became complicated. Suddenly, students were getting higher grades on tests, particularly multiple choice tests, than they ever would have in face-to-face classes. At the time, our university did not have an e-proctoring service for remote online exam invigilation. This led to experimental approaches in invigilation, such as professors using Zoom to try and proctor online exams occurring in real time for up to 800 students at a time; a solution that a couple of us quickly recommended be dropped for a variety of reasons (Eaton 2020; Norman 2020). Although Zoom and other video-conferencing systems have many appropriate uses for online learning, exam invigilation is not one of them (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2020).

When class averages on these types of tests shot up, it triggered an escalation in finger pointing and adversarial stances between some professors and their students, a position that can exacerbate academic misconduct (Eisner & Vicinus 2008). During a university-wide update delivered via webinar in mid-March, the Provost and Vice-President Academic, commented specifically on academic integrity, saying, 'I want us to start from a place of trust. It is not the majority of students who cheat… We have to start from a position of trust' (Marshall, D., March 19, 2020, webinar address). Our executive leaders signalled to faculty members, students and other campus stakeholders that starting with an assumption of guilt regarding academic misconduct was not going to be the official stance and nor would it be endorsed.

Part of the problem was that faculty members who had never taught online before had little time to consider how assessment in e-learning contexts can, and should, differ from how we assess students in face-to-face environments. This challenged some faculty members' sensibilities around assessment, particularly for those who had been assessing the same way for many years. The general principles of academic freedom point to faculty members' autonomy and authority in how they assess their students, based on their subject matter expertise. However, the impact of these choices, in terms of enabling student academic misconduct was an angle that some of my colleagues had never considered. Some professors had simply never considered that offering an unproctored online multiple-choice exam might make it easy for students to look up the answers online during the exam. There was also a general lack of awareness about the extent to which students engage in online academic file-sharing, which can include sharing exam questions and answers (see Blum 2016; Rogerson & Bassanta 2016). This resulted in an almost immediate escalation of agitation and dismay among some colleagues.

Although universities have yet to collect data, student behaviours related to academic file-sharing and academic outsourcing (also known as contract cheating; Clarke & Lancaster 2006) during the coronavirus pandemic may have increased during the shift to emergency remote learning (White 2020). One reason for this might be that, in addition to maturity levels, another factor influencing student cheating behaviours is stress (McCabe 2016). When students are under extreme stress, such as during exam conditions, they can make poor choices that lead to academic misconduct. The typical levels of stress students were under during the coronavirus pandemic were further escalated as they were moved to emergency remote learning delivered, especially as, in some cases, these were led by professors who had little experience delivering classes in anything other than a face-to-face. The whole world was turned upside down and sometimes the effect on students, in terms of stress and the impact that can have on their behaviour in terms of academic integrity, was a variable that was not fully considered. Another reason might be that the aggressive marketing practices of commercial contract cheating and academic file-sharing companies has exploded during the pandemic (White 2020). Students who previously might not have been tempted to engage

with these companies have found themselves bombarded with offers of 'help' on social media from predatory commercial enterprises wanting to make the most of a stressful situation.

In countries such as Australia and the UK, large-scale efforts have been underway to combat contract cheating (QAA 2016, 2017; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) 2017). In Europe, there have been multi-country initiatives underway to examine and address academic integrity, including contract cheating, at a macro-level (Glendinning, Foltýnek, Dlabolová, Linkeschová & Lancaster 2017). Meanwhile, in other countries, such as Canada, efforts to address commercial contract cheating have been limited to local or regional efforts and quality assurance bodies have been all but silent on the topic. At my own institution, I regularly interact with academic colleagues and administrators who have little awareness about the industry or how it operates. When I talk about it, some have dismissed contract cheating as hyperbole or sensationalism, or claim that it simply does not happen in Canada, even though there is increasing evidence to show that the industry is quite active in Canada (Eaton & Dressler 2019; Lancaster 2019; Stoesz & Los 2019).

During the COVID-19 crisis, we have certainly seen increases in violations of academic integrity. In keeping with modern approaches that call for a multi-stakeholder response to academic integrity (Morris & Carroll 2016; TEQSA 2017), students are not the only ones who should be held responsible. Of course we want students to conduct themselves in ethical ways and learn with integrity. At the same time, we must recognise that faculty members play a role in ensuring the integrity of assessments can be upheld, and this includes adapting assessments in ways that are appropriate for the learning environment.

As we look towards a fall 2020 semester that will be delivered mostly online, I worry that adversarial stances of some faculty members towards students will not dissipate. Although there are many of us working at full capacity to support academic colleagues to adapt to online contexts into the next academic year, I fear that students will be the ones who lose out. Meanwhile, the predatory commercial contract cheating industry remains poised to make massive profit as they greedily feed off students who continue to find themselves caught in the middle between a higher education system that has not yet fully adapted to online learning, and the cheating cartels ready to seduce them with false promises of 'help'.

My second and final year in the secondment role of educational leader in residence for academic integrity for the university is about to get underway. To say that I anticipate that it will be a busy and challenging year is an understatement. The biggest challenge might come from colleagues who continue to resist adapting their assessment practices to ones that are more appropriate for online learning and persist in their belief that students are the only ones responsible for maintaining academic integrity. I intend to forge ahead with conversations about how and why instructional integrity is an essential component of academic integrity, as well as continue to provide evidence about how commercial contract cheating cartels operate and present a threat to our students, but also to the integrity of our institutions.

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