

Strategies to Address Cheating in Online Courses

A common misconception about online learning is that there is more cheating in this learning environment than there is in traditional face-to-face courses. However, the research is mixed on the question of whether or not this is true. See [Cheating in the Digital Age: Do Students Cheat More in Online Courses?](#) For further background information on the issue, we encourage you to read [Academic Dishonesty and Online Education \(Part 1\): Understanding the Problem](#), which identifies key concerns in this area, along with relevant research.

Why do People Cheat?

The Simple Model of Rational Crime (SMORC) proposed by University of Chicago Economist, Gary Becker, argues that we decide whether or not to cheat based on an internal cost-benefit analysis involving 3 factors:

- The rewards you gain from cheating
- The probability of getting caught cheating
- The extent of the expected punishment if you are caught cheating

Research by Duke University Behavioral Economist Dan Ariely, argues that the impulse to cheat relies heavily on the way in which we see ourselves, and is a struggle between two competing desires:

- The desire to get ahead
- The desire to think of ourselves as a good person

Read more about [The Science of Lying](#).

In a [2018 study](#), Harris, Brown, and Dargusch proposed cheating as an act of student agency. Whereas students exercised adaptive agency during assessments when they self-regulated, asked questions or sought help, or set academic goals, they expressed “maladaptive agency” (p. 126) by cheating and other acts of noncompliance. Harris et al. (2018) found that students often took part in these types of activities to:

- protect themselves from incurring negative consequences like poor grades or being forced to acknowledge that their efforts produced low quality results

- prioritize time spent on assessments strategically by spending more time studying for assessments that they felt were more relevant and less time on assessments they found confusing or on which they thought they would receive unclear or unhelpful feedback.
- Exerted the lowest quantity of effort possible to reap their desired result.

These theories provide a framework for understanding why people cheat. So, what can you do about it?

Mitigate the Potential for Cheating

Recognize that it's unlikely that you can create an environment in any learning setting where there is no potential for cheating. Students who are determined to cheat will find creative ways to do so in any course delivery format. However, *there are* strategies that you should consider adopting in your online courses to mitigate the potential for cheating:

1. Help students to recognize the value of authentic academic work and model academic integrity
2. Highlight the consequences for cheating and dishonest behavior
3. Create lower incentives for cheating and
4. Make it more difficult to cheat.

Become Familiar with University Guidelines

Begin by becoming familiar with the University of Pittsburgh's [Guidelines on Academic Integrity](#) as well any additional policies that apply School or program . This resource outlines the historical context of Academic Integrity, a suggested list of Student Obligations, and relevant processes and procedures related to academic integrity violations.

Set Expectations for your Students

Setting clear expectations is pivotal to teaching online. You won't be in the same physical space as your students so you'll need to make overt emphasis of policies and guidelines to be sure that your students understand their importance. In your syllabus it's important that you proactively address cheating and academic dishonesty. Include a link to the [Guidelines on Academic Integrity](#), as well a customized statement describing how academic integrity applies to your particular program and course (e.g. is group work allowed? Can students share resources? etc.). Consider what academic integrity means in your discipline or profession and explain its importance to students. Be clear to emphasize that academic dishonesty

will not be tolerated; communicate consequences for policy violations. Consider creating a brief video on the importance of academic integrity or linking university resources like [Academic Integrity module](#) developed by the library or the [academic integrity libguide](#). You might also require that students affirm their understanding of such policies through a brief quiz, or a written acknowledgment.

Use Low-Stakes Assessments

Student learning is facilitated from the opportunity to engage in many low-stakes comprehension checkpoints. It's good practice to offer many self-assessments and/or weekly or unit-based checkup quizzes throughout your course for formative assessment of student learning. Assign an aggregate value toward the final grade of 10% or less for these assessments. These low-weight assessments dis-incentivize the appeal of cheating because they occur so frequently.

Build Intrinsic Motivation by Creating Authentic Assessments, Emphasizing Relevance and/or Giving Choices

Students are less likely to cheat if they find an assessment to be valuable and engaging. There are several ways to create these types of assessments:

- Develop an assessment that requires the student to create or do something realistic, as they would if they were working in your discipline. The value of completing an authentic project, creating a product, or even completing an exam that is designed in the same format as a national credentialing exam is immediately apparent to students.
- Explain the relevance of assessments by describing when students might use the knowledge and skills they use for assessments in their disciplines or future careers.
- Offer students choices in assignment topic to address or artifact to create also increases the likelihood that students will perceive the assessment as interesting and lower motivation to cheat. For instance, you could offer students a list of essay topics to choose from or give students the choice of posting a discussion board reply as a text-based response, a short video, or a graphic. Giving students choices is also an equitable practice because it allows a diverse group of learners to choose how to express their learning.

Use Effective Questioning Strategies

Avoid asking discussion questions, assigning papers, using quiz questions, and other questioning or assessment strategies that allow students to easily look up or regurgitate information. Use questions and challenge students to apply and

synthesize what they know in ways that are unique to themselves. These types of questions are difficult for students to copy or cheat from, as there is no clear correct answer. The student often recognizes that he or she can complete the assignment in as much time as it would take to formulate a plan to cheat. And even if the student was able to cheat and use someone else's work, the response might be misaligned with the question that the instructor posed, or the work might clearly not reflect the background of the author, making it easier to recognize a dishonest attempt.

Scaffold Assignments

For summative assessments that measure student achievement of one or more course learning objectives, we strongly encourage that you scaffold assignments. Start with assignments and activities that focus on lower level skills and understanding and then have students work their way up to higher-order work as the course proceeds and the assessment's steps become more complex.

This is done through the use of projects, capstone assignments, term papers, and comprehensive efforts that require the student to show progress at several sequential points along the way toward completion of complex tasks. For example, a term paper might include a topic proposal, an outline, a first and second draft, a submission, and even a revision. At each point of the process the instructor is able to evaluate student performance and offer feedback. Perhaps more important in this context, it affords the instructor the opportunity to triangulate data points and observe each individual student's progress through the assignment. Instructors can even schedule virtual meetings or have conversations with students to discuss their progress. You can also use tools like discussion boards to incorporate peer review and feedback into scaffolded assessments. This type of assessment strategy makes it very difficult to cheat, and is shown to strongly support student learning.

Use Plagiarism Detection Software

[SafeAssign](#) and [Turnitin](#) are plagiarism detection programs that can be used to review student papers. SafeAssign is integrated with Blackboard and Turnitin is integrated with both Blackboard and Canvas. Depending on the LMS you are using, one of these tools can easily be set up in your courses. We recommend that you primarily use these products as educational tools to help students better understand plagiarism and proper citation, rather than as a punitive mechanism. For instance, to help students better understand how to prevent, detect and

remedy plagiarism, have students submit their *drafts* through SafeAssign rather than only using it for final paper submissions.

Limit the Use of High-Stakes Testing

If an exam (commonly a final exam or midterm) carries with it a high percentage of the final grade for the course, there is increased incentive for student cheating. In particular the potential for cheating is even greater if questions are written in a way that doesn't require synthesis or application (*see earlier: Use Effective Questioning Strategies*).

Generally, instructors teaching online courses should take a step back and reconsider ways other than high-stakes exams to assess student achievement of learning. Through the help of a teaching consultant, it's likely you can create a better summative assessment strategy that requires students to demonstrate higher-order learning that is actually much more valuable toward their learning and development. Often, high-stakes exams have been the default assessment strategy, however, when designing a new online assessment, or revising an existing assessment, the instructor has a great opportunity to create an assessment that is more meaningful and effective at evaluating student learning.

Use Remote Proctoring Solutions (if you must)

The previous section emphasized the reason why high-stakes testing should be avoided in online courses. However, there are instances where the academic program, licensure requirement, or other needs dictate their use.

Several companies offer products and services, mostly for use with high-stakes exams, that provide identify verification and digital remote proctoring for online students. While these tools are not fool-proof, they make it more difficult for students to cheat. Remote proctoring options can be cost-prohibitive, so their use is not recommended universally. Contact your academic program chair or an instructional designer for further information on using remote proctoring.

Summary

There is no fool-proof approach to eliminating cheating, either in face-to-face or online courses. However, there are many steps that you can take as an instructor to reduce the possibility of cheating in the courses that you design and teach. We encourage you to work with an instructional designer, an online learning specialist

and other campus partners to ensure that your course design and delivery process reflects an approach that minimizes the appeal of cheating.