EDUCATION

Reports Of Cheating At Colleges Soar During The Pandemic

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SNEHA DEY

LA Johnson/NPR

Mariam Aly, an assistant professor at Columbia University, has tried everything to keep her students from cheating. In her cognitive neuroscience class, she gives her students a week to complete an open-book exam. And, as part of that exam, the nearly 180 students in the class have to sign an honor code.

But they're still cheating. And dealing with student misconduct, she says, is the worst part of her job. "It's just awkward and painful for everybody involved," Aly says. "And it's really hard to blame them for it. You do feel disappointed and frustrated."

Her students are facing unprecedented levels of stress and uncertainty, she says, and she gets that. "I didn't go to school during a pandemic."

As college moved online in the COVID-19 crisis, many universities are reporting increases, sometimes dramatic ones, in academic misconduct. At Virginia Commonwealth University, reports of academic misconduct soared during the 2020-21 school year, to 1,077 — more than three times the previous year's number. At the University of Georgia, cases more than doubled; from 228 in the fall of 2019 to more than 600 last fall. And, at The Ohio State University, reported incidents of cheating were up more than 50% over the year before.

But while students may have had new and different opportunities for cutting corners in the online learning environment, it's unclear how much cheating actually increased. Some educators note that there are other factors at play, such as an increased ability to identify misconduct.

"There was probably increased cheating because there were more temptations and opportunities and stress and pressure. And, faculty were probably detecting it more,"

says Tricia Bertram Gallant, who researches academic integrity at the University of California, San Diego. "It's easier to catch in the virtual world, in many ways, than it is in the in-person world."

When collaboration morphs into cheating

When colleges shut down or restricted in-person access, students were taking exams in their bedrooms, with unfettered access to cellphones and other technology. This, educators say, spurred cheating to take on new and different forms.

One student at Middle Tennessee State University used his smart speaker to find answers during an exam, according to Michael Baily, the school's director of academic integrity. California State University, Los Angeles, had a large-scale cheating scandal early on in the pandemic, after one student alleged that her peers were sharing exam answers through a GroupMe chat.

Unauthorized collaboration was a big factor in reports of misconduct at Virginia Commonwealth, says Karen Belanger, the university's director of student conduct and academic integrity. "They were so desperate to connect that they were using — or in some courses being encouraged to create — group chats," she says. "Those chats then became a place where they may talk about homework or talk about exam questions."

Students were confused about what was permitted and what wasn't during an exam, Belanger adds. "Sometimes, people just lost track of where the guardrails were in the virtual environment."'

Faculty at the University of Georgia gave more open-book exams during the pandemic. Some students then turned to third-party study sites to complete those exams, which is considered a misconduct violation, explains Phillip Griffeth, the school's director of academic honesty.

"There was a miscommunication. Some students might have saw 'open-book, open-note' as 'open-Internet, open-resources,' " Griffeth explains.

Ohio State also saw a large increase in cases where students shared information during the exam or used unauthorized materials, according to an annual report from the

school's committee on academic misconduct.

Schools, including the University of Georgia and Ohio State, are now trying to educate students on what constitutes an academic misconduct violation.

"The university is taking several steps to enhance the resources available related to academic integrity so that students continue to be fully aware of expectations and to support instructors in dealing with this issue," an Ohio State spokesman wrote to NPR.

When cheating feels like the only option

Annie Stearns will be a sophomore this fall at St. Mary's College of California, where misconduct reports doubled last fall over the previous year. During the pandemic, the challenges of learning online were entwined with social isolation and additional family responsibilities, she says.

On top of that, tutoring services and academic resources scaled back or moved online. Some students, facing Zoom burnout, stopped asking for help altogether.

"If you're in class, and then you have to go to office hours, that's another Zoom meeting. And if you have to go to the writing center, that's another Zoom meeting," Stearns explains. "People would get too overwhelmed with being on video calls and just opt out."

Stearns, who logged onto classes from her family's home last year, faced the pressures of online classes herself, but she sits on her school's academic honor council. For other students, she says, cheating can feel like the only option.

"We're going through such an unprecedented time that (cheating is) bound to happen," Stearns says. "They prefer to take the shortcut and risk getting caught, than have an email conversation with their professor because they're too ashamed to be like, 'I need assistance.' "

More cheating? Or just better tracking?

Many factors are at play in the rise in reports of cheating and misconduct, and, in interviews with NPR, experts across the higher education spectrum say they aren't at all certain whether, or how much, cheating actually increased.

"Just because there's an increase in reports of academic misconduct doesn't mean that there's more cheating occurring," says James Orr, a board member of the International Center for Academic Integrity. "In the online environment, I think that faculty across the country are more vigilant in looking for academic misconduct."

Data from before the pandemic showed similar rates of cheating when comparing online and face-to-face learning environments.

And at least one school, the University of Texas at Austin, found that reports of academic misconduct cases actually declined during the pandemic. Katie McGee, the executive director for student conduct and academic integrity there, explains that before the pandemic, UT-Austin had toughened its ability, through software, to detect cheating.

With online learning, educators are using third-party tools, which can make cheating easier to detect. Middle Tennessee State, for example, rolled out an online proctoring tool, Examity, at the start of the pandemic. The tool records testing sessions on students' webcams and uses software to flag possible cheating. The university has seen reports of cheating jump by more than 79% from fall of 2019 to spring of 2021.

"I don't believe that more students started cheating during the pandemic," said Baily. "What I believe is that we then put in place these proctoring systems that enabled us to find these students who were cheating."

And Baily says Examity is here to stay at Middle Tennessee State. Orr calls remote, third-party proctoring tools a "new industry standard."

That could be a problem for some students and faculty who have raised privacy and equity concerns around such services. At the start of the pandemic, students at Florida State University petitioned the school to stop using Honorlock. The petition says using Honorlock "blatantly violates privacy rights."

And at Miami University, in Ohio, petitioners argue that yet another service, Proctorio, discriminates against some students, "as it tracks a student's gaze, and flags students who look away from the screen as 'suspicious' too, which negatively impacts people who have ADHD-like symptoms." The petition also goes on to note, "students with black or brown skin have been asked to shine more light on their faces, as the software had difficulty recognizing them or tracking their movements."

At the University of Minnesota, students are also petitioning against the use of Proctorio, calling the service a "huge invasion of privacy."

Mike Olsen, the head of Proctorio, wrote in a statement to NPR that humans make all final determinations regarding exam integrity. He added that the company has partnered with third-party data security auditors, and an analysis of Proctorio's latest face-detection models found no measurable bias.

Honorlock declined NPR's request for comment.

Ken Leopold, a chemistry professor at the University of Minnesota, says he and other faculty must balance privacy concerns with the need to guard against cheating. He says he has avoided using Proctorio in his classes, saying the software "didn't sit right" with him. But then came the pandemic.

The school is having conversations with students about remote proctoring. But, he says, "I can't see Proctorio or some equivalent entirely vanishing from the university at this point."

"We're sensitive to the students' concerns, but at the same time, we have to uphold academic integrity," says Leopold, who advises the university on remote proctoring and academic misconduct. "If you're going to give an exam remotely, you have very little choice."

Correction

Aug. 27, 2021

A previous version of this story incorrectly said Tricia Bertram Gallant was affiliated with the University of California, Santa Barbara. In fact, she researches academic integrity at the University of California, San Diego.