

## Chair's Commentary 1710.1: Academic Dishonesty in the Digital Age <sup>1</sup>

In the classic 1986 comedy, *Back to School*, starring Rodney Dangerfield, the main character is a rich and successful entrepreneur who returns to school to finish his degree. Although it portrays academic dishonesty as humorous, it was prophetic in predicting academic dishonesty in the digital age. Tutors who are surrogates for the student and paper mills that write papers for students were depicted humorously in the movie and unfortunately, they are a staple on the internet today. More on this in later commentaries.

The EdPolicy Committee of CUSF has raised the issue of academic dishonesty in the digital age. The issue has been identified for inclusion as an action item by CUSF this year. The purpose of this commentary is to introduce the problem and to begin addressing the issue by increasing awareness of the problem. Increasing awareness is the first step toward determining solutions. It didn't take much of an internet search to gain an insight regarding the problem. Unlike the comedy, *Back to School*, academic dishonesty in the digital age is a serious issue.

The first question is whether there is a problem and whether it is pervasive. In her study, Dorothy Jones of Norfolk State University asked the question whether more students are cheating today? In the abstract to her study, her summary of the literature suggests that academic dishonesty in the digital age is more pervasive.

Academic Dishonesty, with Internet plagiarism as one of the most common forms, is a concern on college and university campuses more than ever before. A review of the literature validates these concerns. According to a 2003 nationwide research study of 23 public and private colleges and universities conducted by Donald L. McCabe, Internet plagiarism is on the rise. Thirty-eight percent of the undergraduate students surveyed indicated that they had engaged in Internet plagiarism (as cited in Rimer, 2003). Brown, Weible, and Olmosk (2010) found that 49% of the students in undergraduate marketing classes admitted cheating in 1988 versus 100% of the students in an undergraduate management class in 2008; a national survey published in *Education Week* found that 54% of the students surveyed admitted to Internet plagiarism and 76% admitted to cheating; and the Center for academic Integrity found almost 80% of the college students surveyed admitted to cheating at least once ("Facts About Plagiarism," 2011). In May 2006, Ohio University's Department of Mechanical Engineering plagiarism scandal garnered national attention when a review panel found "rampant and flagrant" forms of plagiarism in 34 master's theses (Grose, 2006); and in November 2010, more than 200 of the 600 students in a University of Central Florida business class confessed that they benefited from accessing online test questions prior to taking their mid-term exam (The Ticker, 2010). These findings help corroborate the assertion that academic dishonesty – cheating and Internet plagiarism – is on the rise; consequently, these concerns have sparked numerous debates about academic dishonesty at institutions of higher education throughout the United States. (Source: Dorothy Jones, Academic Dishonesty: Are More Students Cheating? *Business Communication Quarterly*, Volume 74, Number 2, June 2011)

It is not difficult finding studies supporting the conclusion that there is academic dishonesty in the digital age. Conducting a two year study at a small liberal arts university, Kidwell, et.al. (2003) found that

---

<sup>1</sup> The following commentary was written by Robert B. Kauffman, Ph.D., CUSF Chair as part of his October 2017 CUSF chair's report. The entire Chair's Report can be found on the CUSF (Council of University System Faculty) website [<https://www.usmd.edu/usm/workgroups/SystemFaculty/ChairReports>]. Its content is solely his views.

*“Over seventy percent of the students surveyed reported that they were habitual cheaters, i.e., they had cheated on exams, plagiarized papers, or committed other forms of academic dishonesty on multiple occasions.”* It is hard not to conclude that academic dishonesty is pervasive.

Academic dishonesty may be more prevalent in the digital age. In a survey of 1,262 students at a large state-funded university Mark Lanier (2006) examined the differences between cheating between traditional lecture courses and online courses. He found that cheating was much more prevalent in the online courses. However, not all studies support this conclusion. Analyzing 368 dissertations, Ison (2014) studied the differences between brick-and-mortar institutions and those attending online programs. He found no significant differences in plagiarism between the two types of institutions.

Complicating the issue is that faculty and administrators may not perceive that there is pervasive academic dishonesty. Writing in the JALN, Kelly and Bonner (2005) found that *“When we examined question four (i.e., in your opinion, how pervasive is academic dishonesty among students at your institution?) for the entire sample, 62.6% of respondents [faculty and administrators] reported that academic dishonesty was either not pervasive or only somewhat pervasive (p.47).”* This may suggest a disconnect between the actual pervasiveness of the problem and the faculty and administration’s perception that there is a problem. It may also suggest the need to bring this issue to the forefront with faculty and administrators.

In addition, Kelly and Bonner found that there were differences between faculty and administrators who perceived academic dishonesty as pervasive and those who didn’t. The following is from the conclusion of their study. It suggests that it may be necessary to change the perception and norms of faculty and administrators. Personally, I found the third point *“3) consider the procedures or policies for pursuing formal charges of academic dishonesty to be overly time consuming,”* most interesting and perhaps problematic.

The majority of our respondents [faculty and administrators] did not perceive academic dishonesty to be a pervasive problem. In view of this, it is not surprising that the majority of faculty and administrators also reported that they tend to handle academic dishonesty issues with the student individually, and they do not pursue the issue further through formal channels. At the same time, we found that when faculty and administrators perceive that academic dishonesty is pervasive, they have significantly different attitudes about and responses to the problem. Those faculty and administrators who perceived academic dishonesty to be a pervasive problem were significantly more likely to: 1) perceive that the availability of digital text was a problem, 2) have used a detection device, 3) consider the procedures or policies for pursuing formal charges of academic dishonesty to be overly time consuming, and 4) report that academic dishonesty was a serious problem in their classes. These findings suggest that once a faculty member perceives the problem is significant, he/she changes his/her behavior and takes a more proactive stance toward deterring academic dishonesty. (Source: Kimberly Kelly and Kimberly Bonner, Digital Text, Distance Education and Academic Dishonesty: Faculty and Administrator Perceptions and Responses, JALN, Volume 9, Issue 1, March 2005, p.49)

The purpose of this commentary was to suggest that there may be a problem and to raise consciousness regarding the issue. A preliminary survey suggests that the problem is pervasive. Compounding the problem, one study suggests that faculty and administrators may be downplaying the pervasiveness of the issue. I don’t profess that this is a comprehensive review of the problem. It isn’t. However, my brief review suggests that there is a plethora of information on the topic and that it is an issue.

This is the first of a series of commentaries on this topic. CUSF has taken the initiative on this issue and at the recent AAAC meeting of Provosts, CUSF's role in taking the initiative was reinforced. CUSF is planning to invite several faculty members familiar with the topic to speak on the topic at the December CUSF meeting. This is an issue affecting all institutions with online courses and programs. It is an issue affecting traditional brick and mortar schools too. The internet provides easy access to information including cut and paste plagiarism as well as hiring ghost writers to write papers. Also, it is an issue that will need the collaboration and support of the student, staff and even the President's Councils. *Back to School* was a humorous and entertaining movie. Unfortunately, academic dishonesty in the digital age is not a laughing matter.

#### References:

- Jones, D., (2011). Academic Dishonesty: Are More Students Cheating? *Business Communication Quarterly*, Volume 74, Number 2, June.
- Ison, D., (2014). Does the Online Environment Promote Plagiarism? A Comparative Study of Dissertations from Brick-and-Mortar versus Online Institutions. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, Volume 10, No. 2, June.
- Kelly, K., and Bonner, K., (2005). Digital Text, Distance Education and Academic Dishonesty: Faculty and Administrator Perceptions and Responses, *JALN*, Volume 9, Issue 1, March 2005.
- Kidwell, L., Wozniak, K., and Laurel, J., (2003). Student Reports and Faculty Perceptions on Academic Dishonesty, *Teaching Business Ethics*, Volume 7, Issue 3, August.
- Lanier, M., (2006). Academic Integrity and Distant Learning. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, Volume 17, 2006 - Issue 2.