

# **Clever Methods Students Use to Cheat and Ways to Neutralize Them**

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*An action research design was employed at a major university over a two-year period to explore and identify methods of student academic misconduct in order to gain a greater understanding of how to neutralize cheating in college. The research team consisted of a full-time engineering professor and an official in the university's Office of Academic Integrity who bore witness to and adjudicated cases of student academic misconduct. Several real-life examples of creative methods that students use in cases of academic misconduct, along with proven solutions to neutralize them, are provided in this paper.*

*Keywords: academic misconduct, academic integrity, cheating websites, group chats, smart watches*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper represents a partnership of research and practice, authored by an academic faculty member and an administrative professional. Our goal is to foster a collective effort of strengths and expertise to promote the integrity of learning on college campuses.

Our home institution, Kennesaw State University, is working to both identify ways in which students attempt to gain an academic advantage, while also brainstorming ways in which we can quell the number of incidents. We believe that educating the campus community and closing the window of opportunity to engage in misconduct is the first line of defense. Realistically, we know that detection is necessary as well, but that entrapment is never the goal. We seek to create a learning environment that creates fair opportunities for success with clear policies that students can understand and follow. The way in which students seek to gain an academic advantage has evolved with the availability of technology and the endless ways students make connections with their peers. While it is a noble goal to influence culture in a way that encourages students to earn degrees honestly, we also recognize that realism requires our attention in identifying and managing tangible components.

An action research design was employed at a major university over a two-year period? to explore and identify methods of student academic misconduct in order to gain a greater understanding of how to overcome academic misconduct behaviors in college. The research team consisted of a full-time professor in the university's College of Engineering who witnessed academic misconduct in the classroom and an official in the university's Office of Academic Integrity who adjudicated cases of student academic misconduct. This particular research design was selected because it allowed the researchers to focus on exploring various methods of academic misconduct and providing pragmatic and solution-driven research

outcomes in their advocacy for change rather than testing theories via quantitative analysis techniques. The significance of this study is that academic practitioners around the world who encounter similar circumstances as those presented in this research will be enlightened by proven solutions to overcome student academic misconduct behavior.

Our research questions are as follows:

**RQ1:** *What methods of academic misconduct are currently used by college students?*

**RQ2:** *What proven solutions can be administered to neutralize these methods of academic misconduct?*

A large body of literature exists pertaining to academic dishonesty, or cheating, in colleges and universities (Yang, Huang, & Chen, 2013; Khalid, 2015). Not only is cheating prevalent while in college, cheating is also a duplicitous means of gaining acceptance into colleges; particularly, the elite universities. Examples include the recent admissions scandal involving wealthy parents who allegedly paid others to take their children's SAT exams (Caplan, 2019), the SAT cheating scandal by a growing number of international students applying to U.S. schools (Rauhala & Youngqiang, 2015), and providing fraudulent information on online college admissions applications with lax identity requirements to obtain financial aid in the U.S. to remain in college (Owen, 2016).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Student Perceptions About Cheating

Student perceptions about cheating varies. Within an experimental paradigm, Yachison, Okoshken, & Talwar (2018) discovered that the prevalence of students reporting another student's act of cheating increases in accord with more direct questions about the cheating incident. They also discovered a possible gender bias. In their study, whereas female students may choose to report others for cheating or cheat themselves depending on how the assignment is marked, this same set of circumstances does not seem to affect male students. In a study at a Ghanaian polytechnic university, Mensah, Azila-Gbettor, & Appietu (2016) conclude that students who exhibit a high tolerance for academic dishonesty are likely to have a higher intention to cheat during exams since most students allow others to copy their answers during exams. Students may be indifferent toward reporting observed peer cheating with the feeling that it is not their responsibility to report such behaviors (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). Ironically, the perception that cheating in online courses is more prevalent than in face-to-face (F2F) courses has proven false according to the literature (Tolman, 2017; Beck, 2014; Miller & Young-Jones, 2012; Watson, Sottile, & Liang, 2014; Black, Greaser, & Dawson, 2008). Lang (2013) concludes that neither the rates of cheating nor the practices for addressing cheating differ greatly between online courses and F2F courses. However, the literature also reveals that students who admit to cheating or plagiarism via the internet is on the rise (Brown, Weible, & Olmosk, 2010). Therefore, one might reasonably conclude that, while cheating in online courses is *not* more prevalent than cheating in F2F courses – it is *just* as, or perhaps even less, prevalent.

### Why Do Students Cheat?

Reasons for cheating include the difficulty of courses, intensity of assignments, pressure for attaining high grades, laziness, and poorly given instructions by some professors (Tabsh, El-Kadi, & Abdelfatah, 2016), stress and tension (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2012), level of difficulty on exams and scarcity of time to complete assignments (Bachore, 2016), meeting GPA, scholarship, or financial aid requirements (Khalid, 2015). Neutralization techniques, first discovered in research of juvenile delinquents by Sykes & Matza (1957) is seen as rationalizing the violation of rules, such as cheating and plagiarism, given specific conditions. From a student's perspective when caught in a violation of academic integrity, this rationalization includes denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and condemning the condemners (Olafson, Schraw, Nadelson, & Kehrwald, 2013; Brent & Atkisson, 2011). Blum (2009) argues that a dichotomy exists resulting from a lack of communication between two distinct cultures within a university classroom

– the mismatch between professors who regard plagiarism as a serious academic offense and students who delight in sharing their accomplishments with friends, bringing them closer to pursuing other personal interests.

### **What Are the Contributing Factors to Cheating?**

Studies have proven that peer involvement and social bonds (Gentina, Tang, & Gu, 2017), and group identification (Stephens, 2017) promote academic cheating. Monteiro, Silva-Pereira, & Severo (2018) suggest that a possible social network phenomenon exists whereby groups of students collude to obtain and share exam answers in advance. On an individual level, Miller, Murdock, Anderman, & Poindexter (2007) acknowledge that a relationship exists between demographic variables such as age, gender, culture, and religion with cheating behavior. Yu, Glanzer, Sriram, Johnson, & Moore (2017) contend that demographic characteristics, character qualities, college experience, and student perceptions and attitudes are significant contributors to violations of academic integrity.

### **Reasons Not to Cheat**

Whereas the literature reveals many reasons why students choose to cheat as the rates of cheating have escalated in recent decades (McCabe & Trevino, 1996; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1999; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2012, recent scholarship has also revealed why students choose not to cheat. Primary examples include fear of the consequences of cheating and internalized ethical beliefs (Kolb, Longest, & Singer, 2015; Miller, Shoptaugh, & Wooldridge, 2011).

### **How Do Students Cheat?**

Examples of how students cheat include various forms of plagiarism, such as sharing exam answers and using impermissible technology-facilitated devices (Murdock & Anderman, 2007) and e-cheating via the internet (Bain, 2015) using Google and Wikipedia (Waghid & Davids, 2019). Other academic integrity violations include submitting work that is not one's own original work, permitting others to complete an assignment on one's behalf, and improper use of group work, such as receiving or providing services for payment (Watson, Sottile, & Liang, 2014; Bachore, 2016; Khalid, 2015) and ghost-writing services (Lancaster, 2019). Cronan, Mullins, & Douglas (2018) cite inappropriately sharing homework when asked not to share, and copying from other sources without citing these sources as other ways that students cheat.

## **CLEVER WAYS HOW STUDENTS CHEAT AND HOW TO NEUTRALIZE THEM**

### **Group Chats (1)**

When students enroll in a course, whether it's online or F2F, they are often given access to a website like D2L or Blackboard. This allows the professor to post documents, make announcements, and allows students to connect with their peers through discussion boards and email messaging. D2L specifically allows any enrolled student to send messages to "All Students" on the roster, with collaborative learning as the goal. Students use this function to invite the course to a non-institution technology like GroupMe or WhatsApp. These chat functions alone are not the issue, but the anonymity of a group chat in which you can choose an alias often breeds boldness. Students will ask questions and share answers of graded assignments, quizzes, and tests, often without reasonable concern of detection. Not surprisingly, the behavior has been seen to grow more bold as the semester progresses and their misconduct has gone undetected.

While we cannot (and should not) stop students from creating group chats, we can attempt to set up spaces in which students can interact in appropriate ways. Through adjudicating cases of group chat cheating, the involved students were asked what they were seeking in creating the large group chat. A majority of students answered that they wanted a space to ask questions about assignment and course requirements and remind each other of due dates. Consider creating a discussion forum within the institution learning platform where students can ask questions of others and of the instructor. The instructor could check this every 48 hours and answer the questions publicly so that students with similar questions could

see the answer. As an instructor, note common questions that students have and use it as feedback to make syllabus requirements easier to find (or encourage students to read the syllabus in its entirety at the beginning of the semester, perhaps through a syllabus quiz).

Another tangible way to prevent the group chat from occurring is to “hide” the course roster from public view. Connect with IT services at your institution to see if this is possible with your institution’s learning platform.

As an aside, the group chat also allows a space for students to vent frustrations about the course, other students, and the instructor, and the audience of a large group of peers and the anonymity of a screen emboldens students to be harsher than they might be otherwise. [The toxic culture of this space often bleeds into the culture of the classroom, creating a space ill-suited for learning and openness.

### **Smart Watches (2)**

Smart watches put out by companies like Apple and Google allow users to send and receive messages, check email, and even translate languages. When students are instructed to clear their desks and put away phones/electronic devices, students may feel their smart watches do not fall under this instruction.

While an academic integrity code’s broad definition of the use of “electronic devices” may cover this type of technology, it may be worth an instructor’s time to specifically name this technology as prohibited either in class verbally or in writing in the syllabus. When students are instructed to clear their desks and put away all non-authorized resources, take a moment to ask students to remove watches.

### **Modifying Documents (3)**

Though this may not be a new technique, it’s worth mentioning the diversity of ways in which document modification occurs. Students will modify scantrons or answers on a written test to then inquire why they were marked points off. If instructors haven’t made copies of their graded assignments, it could create a stalemate of “one word against another’s.” Another method of students questioning already recorded grades or assignment submissions is to state that they turned something in, and produce the assignment with what seems to be instructor graded marks on it. Upon closer inspection, the instructor may find that the student fabricated the marks themselves. In one scenario, the student had marked answers that were incorrect as correct, and vice versa, making the misconduct rather obvious. In other less obvious instances, the grading may be consistent with answer keys, but the handwritten grading on the assignment is inconsistent with the instructor’s. Lastly, students are also often required to supply their own scantrons, and will bring the scantrons into class with notes scribbled into the margins, which they erase before turning the scantron in.

Making physical copies of assignments can be costly, wasteful, and difficult to file and retain. However, scanning documents can be easy and quick. After grading a round of assignments, consider scanning the entirety of the assignments into a folder for each course and assignment. This allows you the assurance of knowing who submitted what and when, and allows you to quickly reference the documents if ever called into question.

### **Well-Meaning Websites (4)**

Websites like Chegg and Course Hero, among others, allow students to organize content and study materials by course, subject, and institution. This organizational structure can be helpful when students are using authorized resources available in textbooks, or content that instructors have “released” for students to use. However, this also allows a student to search their specific course and institution so that they can find old assignments and tests that they wouldn’t otherwise have access to. Instructors have become increasingly aware of these depositories and have begun seeking out their course’s and department’s materials to have them removed, but sometimes the content is found due to student error. In one instance, the student found an assignment answer key that they believed to be identical to their current semester’s course, but a small component of the assignment had changed. When the student submitted the older version of the similar assignment, the instructor recognized the old assignment and addressed it with the student.

Keeping materials off of websites can be a departmental effort as well as an individual one. In some departments, materials for a required course are standardized, making it easy for one instructor within the

department to keep an eye on websites. Keep a list of the websites where materials have been found in the past, and scan them as often as you feel necessary, perhaps once a month. Search the course name, instructor name, institution name, and if you're feeling lucky, the general subject. Scan to see what exists, and contact the website directly if there are issues with the content posted. Support teams of the websites have been responsive and cooperative when unauthorized material is found, and will remove the offending information and often give the name of the user that posted it. In some cases, the user is banned from using the website (at least from that particular email address/account).

### **Paraphrasing Tools (5)**

Similarity detection resources like Turn It In have made it easier for institutions to identify incidents of plagiarism. Students have responded by writing papers that merely replace key words with synonyms so that it may fly under the radar of the similarity detection. If the paper sounds non-sensical in this way, it is possible that the student may have done this manually, or used a paraphrasing tool.

Consider scaffolding assignments, especially larger papers, so that the student is slowly working on the assignment throughout the semester. You could first require a topic proposal with an annotated bibliography, a "low stakes" draft that includes a reference page, and the final paper. Check when the document was created and edited, who the document belongs to. You could even require that the student make their edits in Google doc, which tracks what has been added to a paper on what day and time. The document auto-saves these different "versions" of the paper, so that you can click back to a past day and time and see what the paper looked like at that time. Merely setting up these checks would likely dissuade students from taking shortcuts.

### **Online Testing (6)**

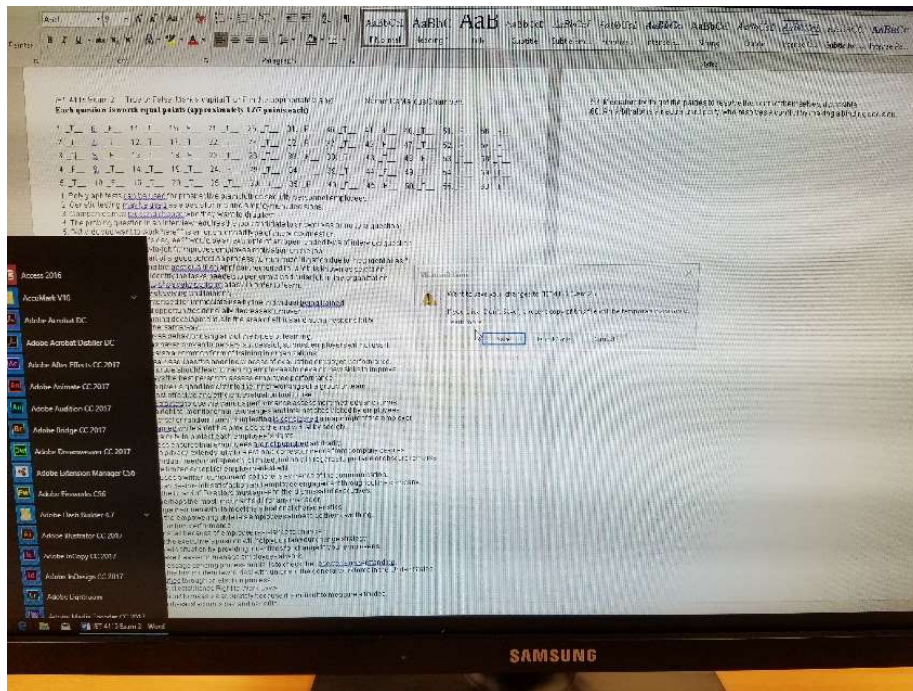
Students are using the freedom that online education affords to meet with other students to take exams together, as well as referencing unauthorized materials while testing.

Students will connect with each other often through the aforementioned group chats, and designate times to "meet" on the group chat, and sometimes physically in the same space at home or on campus. They then take the test at the same time, helping each other answer and look up answers, usually made obvious by their corresponding start and ending times, as well as test progression. Students that have been caught with identical testing times in the past have evolved to then take one test at a time. Once the first student's test is completed, they log onto the second student's test to complete it with what they learned through the first test attempt.

Consider having a larger test bank of questions than students will be tested on, and select an option that randomly samples questions from the test bank to be administered to each student. Consider also how much time students may need to complete the test and add time limits. Additionally, you can require that an answer be submitted and saved before a student is able to move to the next question, not allowing students to move freely between questions. For example, this would prevent two students that may be test-taking together from matching their randomized questions. And lastly, of course, consider utilizing tools like Lockdown Browser, Lockdown Monitor, or a live online proctoring service if your institution provides one. Individual academic programs sometimes also require that students submit themselves to in-person proctoring, either on-campus or through a municipality's local library.

Students may take online exams in an on-campus setting like a computer lab or library and leave their computer monitor on when they exit the room with exam answers in full view for other students as indicated in Figure 1. This can be negated by requiring proctored online exams.

**TABLE 1**  
**COMPLETED ONLINE EXAM WITH COMPUTER MONITOR LEFT ON IN**  
**COMPUTER LAB**



**Large Class Sizes (7)**

As class sizes become larger, quiz and test proctoring becomes more difficult and students feel emboldened by anonymity. The classic example of looking at another student’s assignment becomes easier, as well as personal phone use in a student’s lap. One such example of this included a student using her phone to list final exam questions on a “tutoring” website they had a subscription to. A “tutor” then answered their questions almost instantly, but unfortunately for the student, the answers were incorrect in a unique way, and the offending student shared her answers with other students in their testing row. The incorrect similarities were noted, alerting the instructor, and the post was traced to one of the aforementioned websites.

Instruct students to put all electronic devices, including phones and watches, into their bags and place them at the front of the class. Desks must be completely clear before testing materials are passed out. At the conclusion of a test, students will turn all testing materials and scratch paper to the instructor or proctor. After they have turned all of their materials in, they may collect their belongings and leave. This may go without saying, but instruct test proctors to circle the classroom often, or even continually.

Students can also insert a page of their own notes into the shuffle of testing documents. Having desks clear and backpacks, etc. at the front or back of the class before testing materials are passed out can alleviate these last two concerns.

**Contract Cheating (8)**

If a student submits an assignment that is written above their previously demonstrated writing level, it may be an incident of contract cheating. While contract cheating can be an evasive form of misconduct to catch, there are a few tells you can check easily. First, check the properties of a document to see who the author of the document is, to whom the file belongs, the date it was created, etc. Often simply addressing the inconsistency with the student will spur them to admit responsibility. In other cases when a student begins writing at about their level, it may simply be plagiarism that Turn It In wasn’t able to detect. In these

cases, it is recommended that instructors pick sentences here and there throughout the paper and search them through Google to see what turns up. You can also check the properties of the document to see when it was created, last edited, and to whom the document belongs.

Scaffold assignments and papers throughout the semester so that papers are written a little at a time. Start by assigning students to write an annotated bibliography on their chosen topic, submit a rough draft for which instructors give considerable feedback, and require that students make changes to the paper before the final draft is due.

### **Tutoring Centers (9)**

Students can intentionally and sometimes unintentionally misuse a tutoring center on campus. Most tutoring centers will have a policy that precludes tutors from assisting students on graded work. Students will sometimes turn a blind eye to this, or misrepresent the assignment for which they are asking for assistance. Tutors on campus should be well-trained and informed to ask the right questions to students that visit the center. Students should also be instructed in the course syllabus that graded assignments are not to be taken to the tutoring center.

### **Webcam Proctoring (10)**

An increase in online education brings with it the need to legitimize and protect the learning that is done there. Three of the most popular online “proctoring” tools are Lockdown Browser, Lockdown Monitor, and online “live proctoring” sessions.

Lockdown Browser is an older technology that prevents navigation away from a testing screen, as well as prevents printing of materials on the screen. Though it may seem obsolete, preventing students from looking up answers on their computer would require students seeking to cheat to use another technology. This function of Lockdown Browser becomes helpful when using the webcam proctoring, because the student’s attempt to use another device would be recorded. Preventing printing of materials protects the content from being taken and distributed.

In Lockdown Monitor, the camera and microphone pick up on irregularities in the testing environment like noise, voices, and the lack of facial recognition on the screen. Student behavior that violates policy may appear in the form of students who will stretch boundaries that are not specifically defined, and if they get away with little behaviors, they will continue to try to push the boundary.

Institutions can also employ the use of live-proctoring companies, which allow a student’s test sessions to be proctored by a person that monitors test-taking students through a webcam. The formerly mentioned Lockdown technologies are more common than live proctoring sessions, which can be expensive to both the student and the institution. However, this may become more common as online learning continues to grow.

When utilizing Lockdown Monitor, give students specific policies in the syllabus and in the test instructions. For example, instruct students to scan their environment thoroughly, not to move from their original testing place or walk away the computer, not to talk to others, as best they can to not look away from the screen, not wear head coverings that shield a view of their face and eyes, ensure during the “Tech check” that a bright light in front of the camera does not shield view of face, etc. Soon after the beginning of the semester, send the class feedback from the first and second quizzes specific to how well students followed testing environment requirements. This shows students that they are truly being proctored and could dissuade students from taking the risk of attempting to cheat.

### **Calculators (11)**

Any calculator brings the risk of students writing or taping information on the inside cover of it, some even opt to write their notes in graphite so that it’s only visible from a particular angle. Additionally, students can program notes into more advanced calculators, as well as modify the physical components of the calculator to insert a phone into the calculator where the calculator’s keypad was previously as indicated in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2**  
**CELL PHONE EMBEDDED IN GRAPHING CALCULATOR**



Inspecting and clearing out student's calculators before tests begin, or using departmental issued calculators, can alleviate concerns with nefarious calculator use.

### **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The research team comprised a full-time engineering professor and an official with the Office of Academic Integrity who adjudicated cases of academic misconduct over a two-year period. Whereas this study consists of real-life examples from a major university with a student enrollment of over 40,000 students in the state of Georgia, a research limitation may be whether these examples and associated solutions can be generalized across all academic institutions.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Deterrents for violations of academic integrity suggested by students include catching violators, allowing more time to complete given assignments, providing a reasonable amount of work, and reducing the level of difficulty on exams (Tabsh, El-Kadi, & Abdelfatah, 2016), religion – with a continuous reminder that God is always watching (Yusof & Ismail, 2018), and close monitoring of testing environments and suffering severe consequences if caught (Khalid, 2015)). Researchers suggest that teachers should adopt motivational practices, such as emphasizing mastery of course materials through formative assessments, discuss and clearly communicate both expectations and consequences about cheating with students, and promote self-efficacy (Anderman & Koenka, 2017) as means of discouraging cheating. A written academic integrity policy or honor code as part of the course syllabus, using plagiarism detection software, and teaching students how to use citation tools should be included in instructional strategies (Tatum & Schwartz, 2017; Gallant, 2017; Winrow, 2015; Jones, 2011; Hall, 2011). Ensuring that your syllabus is up to date on academic policy and procedures is vital to preventing and responding to incidents of academic misconduct. Reach out to the administrative office on your campus that handles these



matters to review your syllabus for updated policies and to solicit feedback. Whereas Gelfand (2016) advocates professors teaching students about the different factors that may affect ethical decision-making, Watson, Sottile, & Liang (2014) suggest that professors stress the ethical responsibilities of completing assignments in addition to the requirements of assigned work. Parental involvement, a commitment to academics, and moral values have also been proven to reduce cheating (Gentina, Tang, & Gu, 2017). Teodorescu & Andrei (2009) assert that improving both the quality and relevance of instruction may reduce students' cheating behaviors. Lastly, ensure that students understand that the jurisdiction of academic policy covers people, not places, and that behavior even in non-institutional technologies are subject to charges.

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