MAINTAINING ACADEMIC HONESTY IN ONLINE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Today, more and more students are enrolling in online courses because of the flexibility and convenience of having the Internet provide them with the course content. While most faculty agree that using the Internet as a tool for delivering course content may be more convenient for students and provide greater flexibility than teaching in a traditional format, many of these same faculty are concerned about maintaining academic honesty in online courses. In this paper, we first determine what technologies and techniques are available and are actually being used by instructors at different universities in the United States to maintain academic honesty in online courses. Second, we assess the perceptions of online educators about cheating in online courses. Additionally, we recommend ways to preserve the integrity of online degrees.

INTRODUCTION

In today's economy, more and more people find themselves realizing the value of an education for advancement in the job market. When these people enter into an educational environment, they must do so while maintaining their current jobs and other responsibilities. These students realize the most sensible way to fulfill their goals of obtaining college degrees is to take courses online. Once registered, some may find that the burdens of taking classes while juggling home and work are more than they were prepared to handle. They may feel it would be easy to resort to dishonest methods such as cheating, plagiarism, and collusion to complete the coursework and take the required exams (Young, 2012). Some may even have others take the classes for them. While there is disagreement regarding whether academic dishonesty occurs more often in online classes compared to traditional classes, there is agreement that cheating on exams or assignments dilutes the quality of learning. Also, it must be taken into consideration that online cheating methods are varied and complex (Stuber-McEwen, et al., 2009). Student perceptions of cheating

behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs play a significant role in the assessment of academic dishonesty, which has mostly been self-reported (Stuber-McEwen et al., 2009).

Some researchers believe that our culture contributes to academic dishonesty. Kitahara and Westfall (2009) write about a growing problem in online courses in which students cheat on exams and assignments, then seek redress for wrongs against them when they are caught. A study by Raine et al. (2011) found that some students did not even consider any dishonest academic behavior to be cheating unless they were caught. Kitahara and Westfall (2009) found that up to 75 percent of students reported engaging in some form of academic dishonesty. McCabe et al. (2006) reported that "graduate students in general are cheating at an alarming rate, and business school students are cheating even more than others" (p. 304). Prior research has pointed out several reasons for cheating, such as the desire to get a better grade, the need to pass the class, the desire to help others, procrastination, the difficulty of the course, etc. (Moten et al., 2013). Whatever the reasons for cheating are, academic dishonesty costs institutions administrative time, loss of integrity within the school, and student lack of respect for ethics and values (Boehm et al., 2009).

Campuses offering online courses must find ways to prevent students from engaging in cheating behaviors. Schools and instructors need to establish preventive measures to ensure academic integrity in the courses they offer (Apampa et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2014; Paullet et al., 2014). By having administrators use procedural techniques at their disposal and by requiring the use of specific hardware and software that force students to identify them upon sign-in and periodically throughout the curriculum, educational institutions and professors can serve as "watchdogs" to oversee and control student activity.

The purpose of this research is to investigate what technologies and techniques are available and are actually being used by instructors in maintaining academic honesty in online courses. Via survey research, we examined the methods used to deliver course content in an online environment. We assessed the use of interactive tools and the identification process of online students. We investigated what percentage of the students' final grades were determined by various evaluation methods, such as exams, projects, quizzes, assignments, discussions, research papers, etc. We also examined the use of proctoring services for assessment. In cases where proctoring was not used, we inquired about the methods that were used to deliver unproctored exams and the reasons for not using proctoring. We also investigated the perceptions of educators about different aspects of cheating in an online environment. Following the results of our survey research, we propose several recommendations to promote academic integrity in online courses.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data were collected using survey research. The link to an online survey was e-mailed to deans at several U.S. Universities. The deans were requested to forward the link to all faculty members in their colleges who had ever taught an online course. The survey included questions relating to the online instructors' perceptions and experiences relating to maintaining academic integrity in

online courses. Altogether, 435 usable responses to the survey were received. The results of the data analysis are presented next.

DATA ANALYSIS

The relevant general characteristics of the survey respondents are presented first. Table 1 shows the number of respondents with various academic ranks.

Respondent Characteristics

TABLE 1: ACADEMIC RANK OF ONLINE INSTRUCTORS

Rank	Frequency	Percent
Assistant Professor	99	23
Associate Professor	110	25
Professor	94	22
Chair/Administrator	24	5
Adjunct Instructor	55	13
Full-Time Instructor	53	12
Total	435	100

Figure 1 shows the experience of the respondents in teaching online classes. We found that 32% (143) percent of the respondents taught online courses between 1 and 5 times, 20% (89) have taught between 6 and 10 times, and 47% (203) taught online courses more than 10 times.
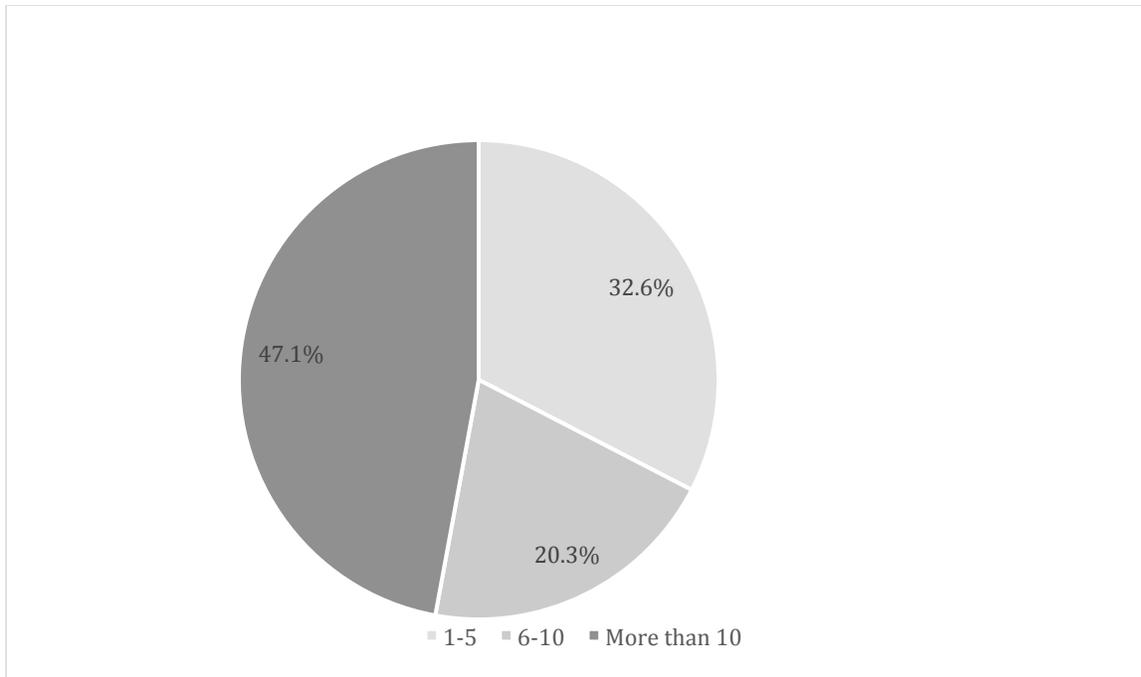
FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY OF ONLINE TEACHING

Tools and Methods Used in Online Courses

Figure 2 shows the frequencies of different online course delivery methods used by the respondents. The sum of the percentages exceed 100 because multiple course delivery methods were used by many instructors. The most common method used was e-mail (82.5%), followed by discussion boards (77.2%), and Blackboard (74.7%).
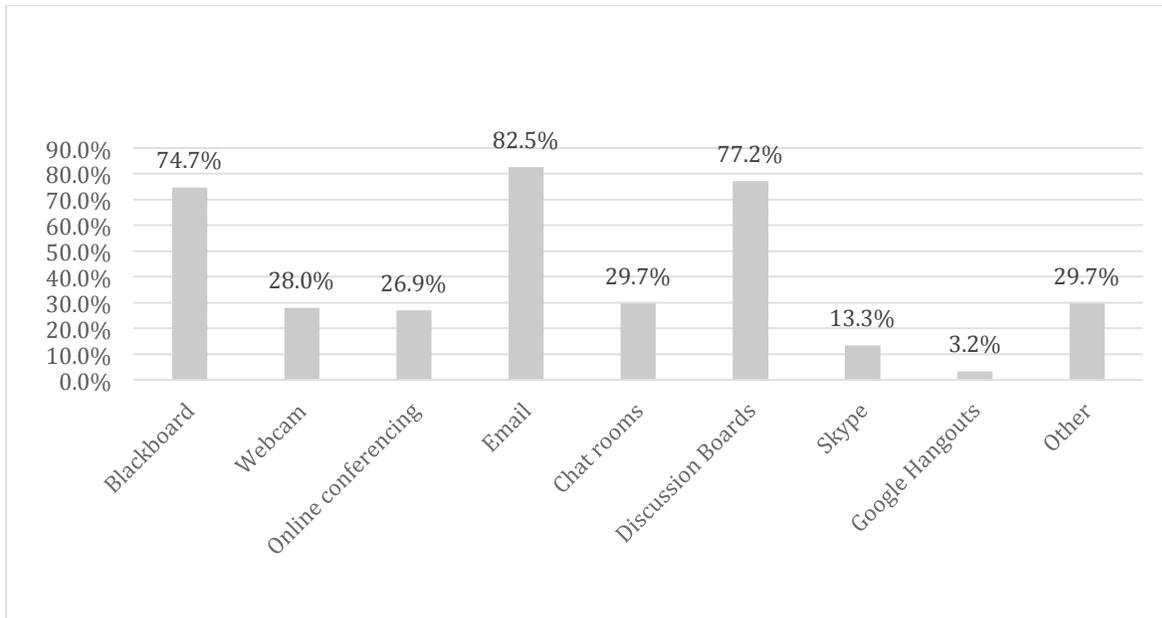
FIGURE 2: METHODS FOR ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

Next, Figure 3 shows the frequency of use of various methods by online instructors to interact or communicate with their students.
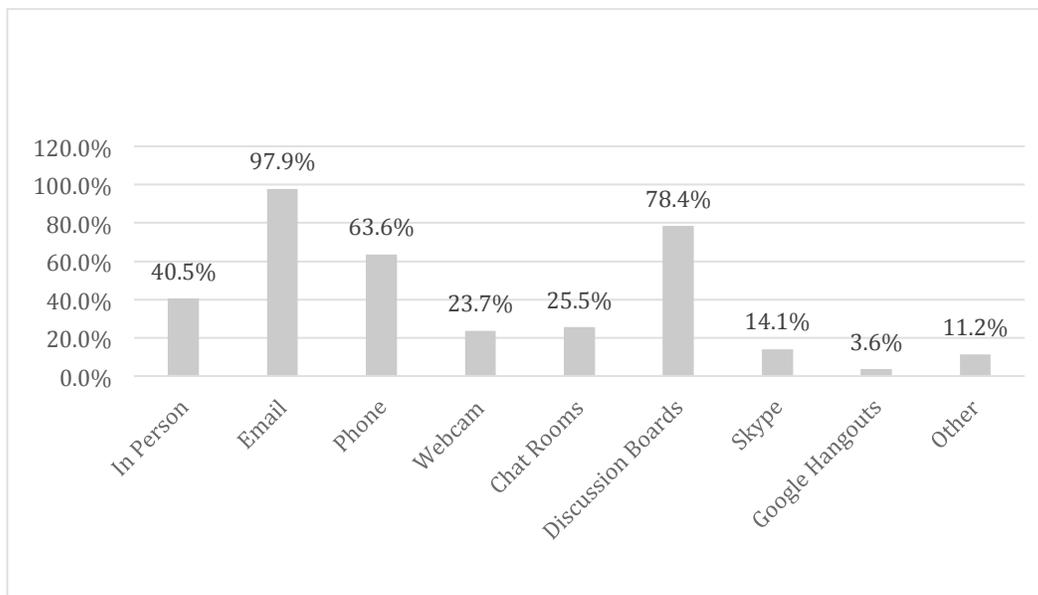

FIGURE 3: METHODS OF INTERACTION WITH ONLINE STUDENTS

Almost 98 percent of the instructors used email to communicate with their online students, but a big majority of 78.4 percent also used discussion boards. Over 63 percent used the phone. A relatively smaller percentage of instructors used chat rooms (25.5%), webcams (23.7%), and Skype (14.1%). More than 40 percent of the instructors met with their students face-to-face.

Figure 4 presents the frequency of methods used by instructors to identify their online students.
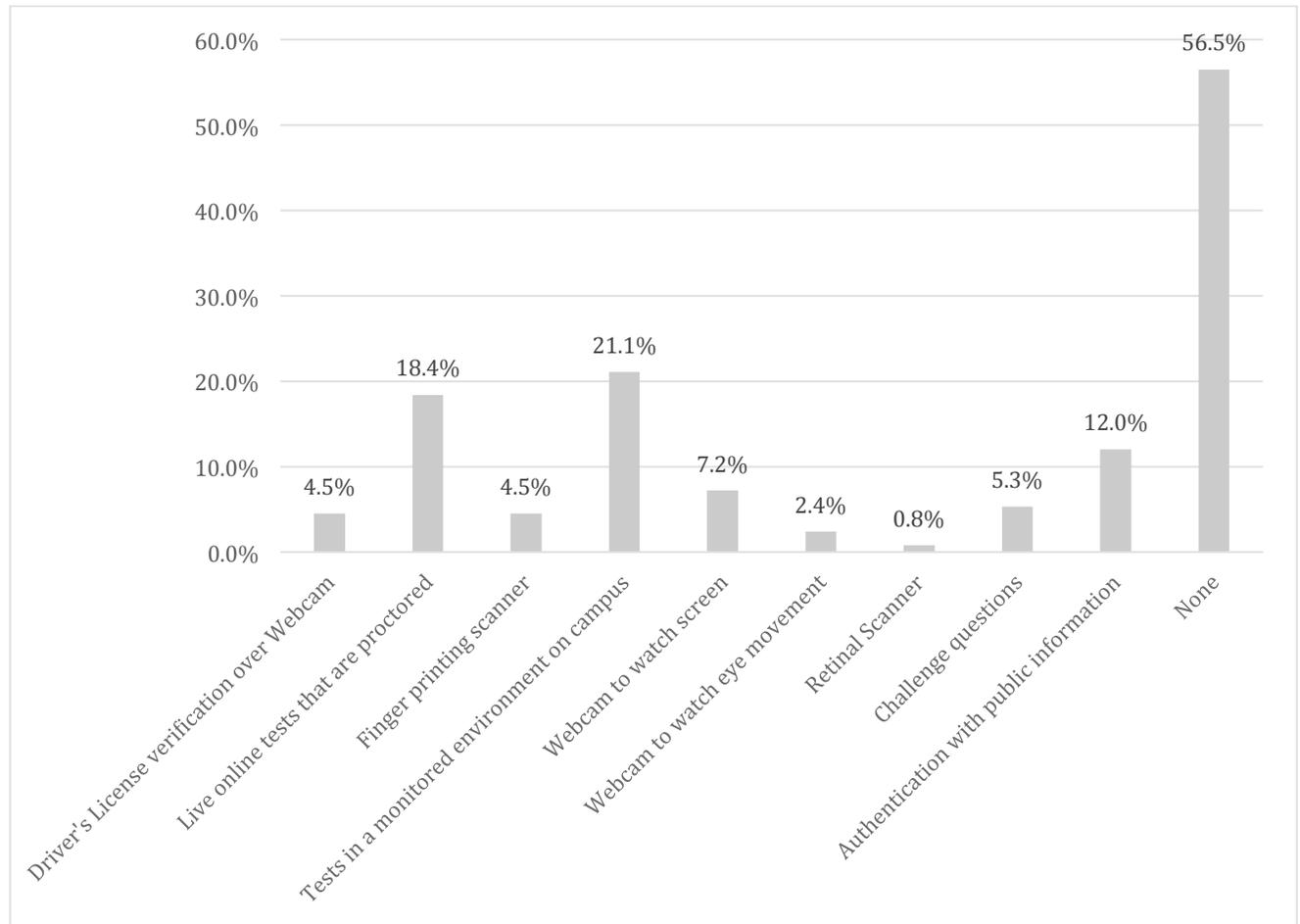

FIGURE 4: METHODS USED FOR ONLINE STUDENT IDENTIFICATION

The possible methods available for verifying the identity of an online student were: using a webcam to monitor the student, using a retinal scanner, using a fingerprint scanner, having a monitor in the room when exams are given, using challenge questions, and a variety of other techniques. As illustrated in Figure 4, the majority, or 56 percent, did not use any kind of method for verifying student identity. Less than one-third conducted exams in a monitored environment. The fewest percentage of respondents, less than 1 percent, used retinal scanners.

Next, we addressed methods of evaluating online students. We mentioned several evaluation methods, such as exams, projects, quizzes, assignments, and research papers. We asked the respondents to confirm the specific evaluation methods they used. The results are shown in Figure 5.
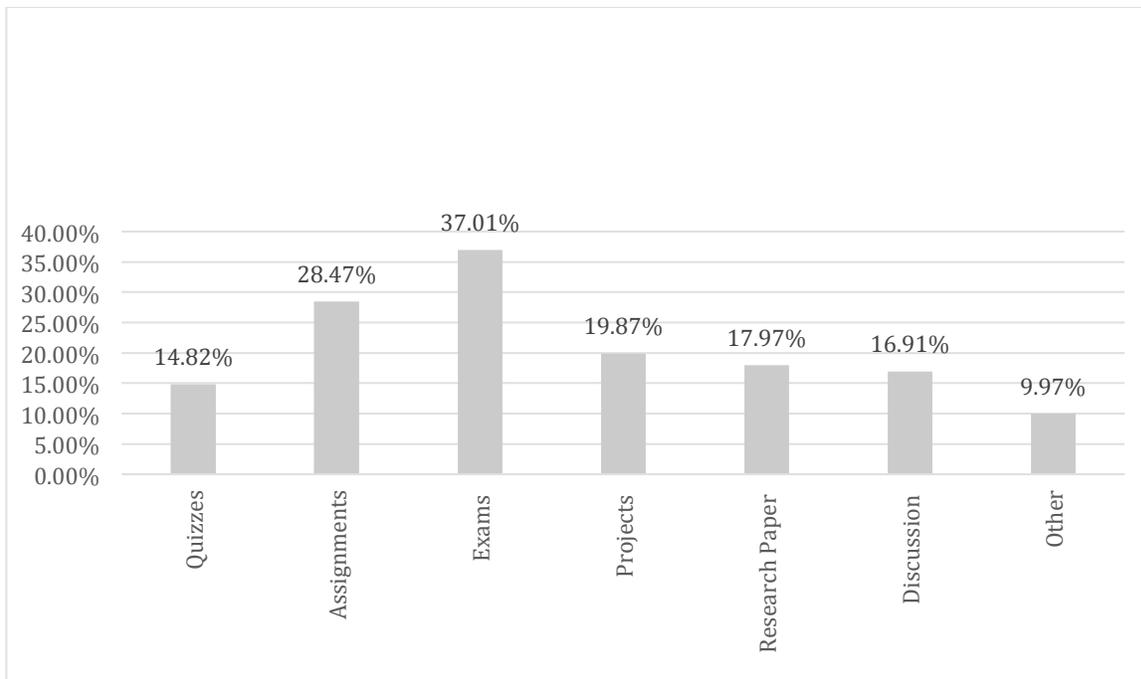
FIGURE 5: EVALUATION METHODS FOR ONLINE STUDENTS

As can be seen, the largest proportion of respondents, almost 37 percent, used exams as their evaluation method. The second most popular evaluation method was assignments, used by 28 percent of the respondents. The third most popular method of evaluating students was the use of projects, as indicated by almost 20 percent of the respondents.

Following the evaluation methods, the respondents were asked if they used any type of proctoring service in their online classes. The results are presented in Figure 6.
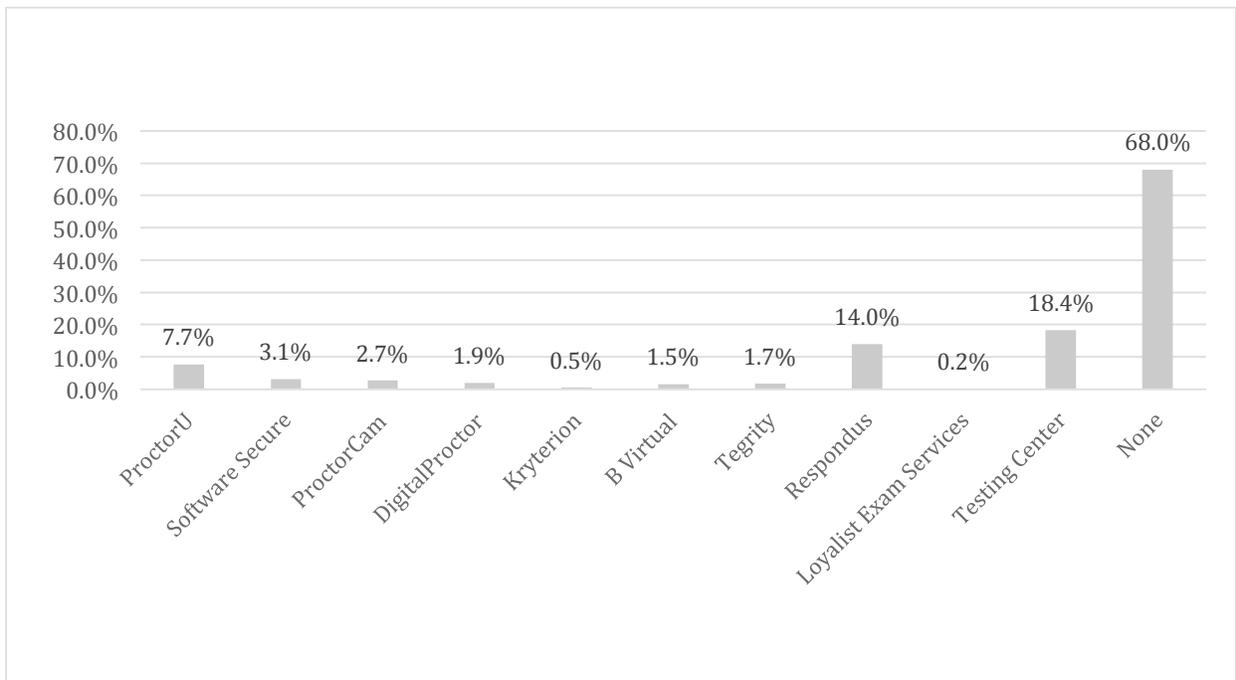
FIGURE 6: PROCTORING SERVICES USED IN ONLINE COURSES

It was found that the vast majority (68%) did not use any proctoring service. Over 18 percent used a testing center, 14 percent used Respondus, and 8 percent used ProctorU. Several other proctoring services are noted in Figure 6, but only a very small percentage of respondents used them.

A follow-up question asked the respondents how their online exams were administered if they did not use any kind of proctoring service. Figure 7 presents the results.
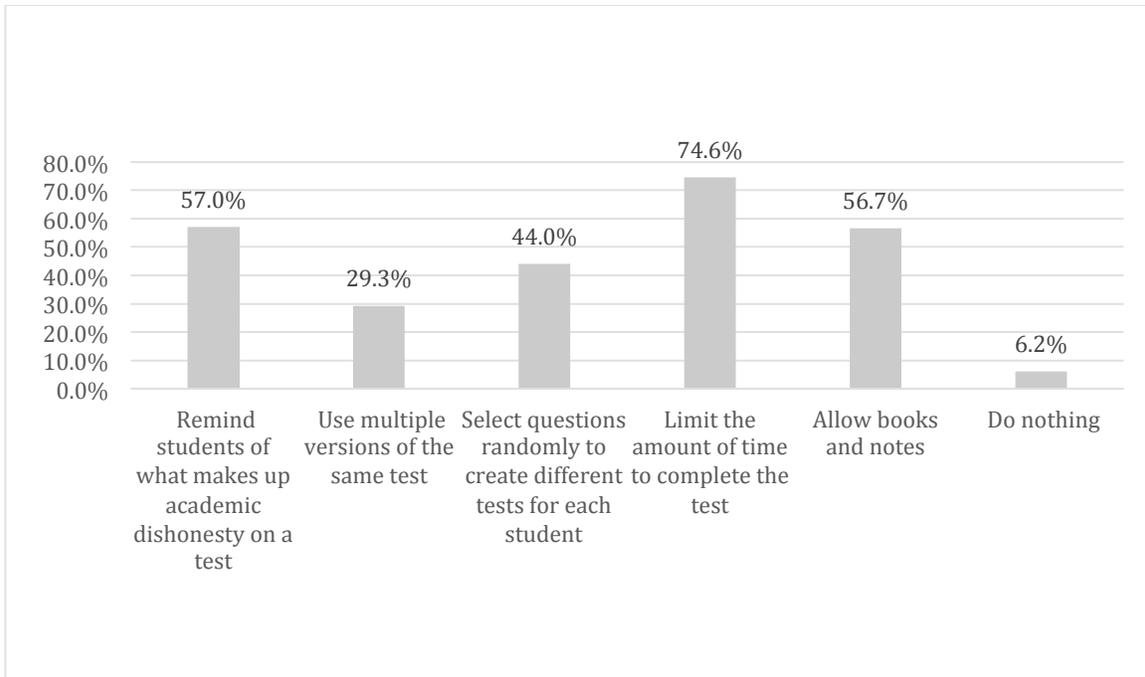
FIGURE 7: METHODS USED TO ADMINISTER UNPROCTORED ONLINE EXAMS

The largest percentage of respondents (74.6%) indicated they limited the amount of time to complete the exam. The second most popular method, as expressed by 56.7 percent of the respondents, was to allow the students to use their book or notes. Fifty seven percent of the respondents told their students what academic dishonesty on an exam meant. About 6 percent did not do anything when giving exams.

Figure 8 illustrates the results when the respondents who had indicated that they did not use any proctoring services for their online exams stated the reasons for doing so.
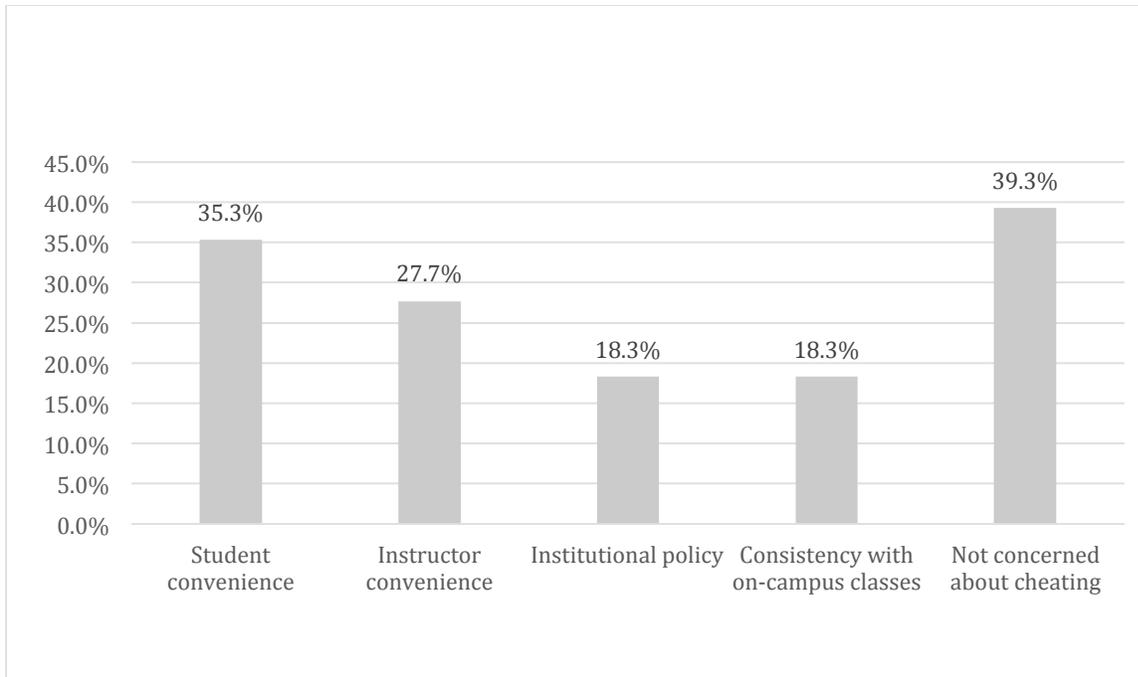
FIGURE 8: REASONS FOR UNPROCTORED TESTING

Thirty-nine percent of the faculty responding said they were not concerned about the cheating that may take place in their online course. Another 35 percent said they did not proctor the assessment in order to make it more convenient to the student. Eighteen percent said they were following their institutional policy.

Perceptions Regarding Cheating in Online Courses

The respondents were asked to give us their opinion to several statements concerning cheating in online courses. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree). The results are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2: INSTRUCTOR PERCEPTIONS OF CHEATING IN ONLINE COURSES

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. The way the test is designed plays a large part in whether the student will be able to cheat.	3%	6%	16%	49%	26%
B. There is really no way to stop a student from cheating if he/she really wants to do so.	5%	9%	16%	42%	16%
C. Universities MUST use more modern technology if they want to curb the cheating problem in online classes.	3%	38	29%	38%	21%
D. Having classes online negates the integrity of a college degree since online cheating is more widespread.	21%	33%	24%	16%	5%
E. From a percentage standpoint, as many students cheat in traditional classes as they do online.	7%	21%	37%	16%	6%
F. Proctoring of online students should be utilized to minimize cheating in online classes.	3%	13%	36%	33%	15%
G. Students know they can easily cheat on assignments and tests. That is why online classes are growing in popularity.	15%	39%	27%	13%	6%
H. It is a violation of privacy to require online students to use webcams and other intrusive equipment in their homes.	27%	32%	28%	10%	3%
I. As an instructor, I am concerned about students' cheating in online classes.	4%	16%	21%	39%	19%
J. A student is less likely to cheat in an online class.	19%	38%	37%	5%	0%

Seventy-five percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the way the exam is designed plays a large part in whether the students will be able to cheat. About 58 percent agreed or strongly agreed that there really is no way to stop a student from cheating if he or she really wants to cheat. Fifty-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that universities must

use more modern technology if they want to deter the cheating problem in online courses. About 54 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that having online classes negates the honesty of a college degree. A large majority of respondents, or 37 percent, were neutral to the statement that from a percentage viewpoint, as many students cheat in a traditional class as in an online class. About 48 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that proctoring of online students should be done in an online class, but about 36 percent were neutral about this statement. The largest percentage of respondents, 39 percent, disagreed with the statement that online classes are popular because students can easily cheat in them. Almost 59 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that it was a violation of the student's privacy to use a webcam or other intrusive equipment for assessment purposes in online classes. As high as 58% of the instructors surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they were concerned with students' cheating in online courses. Only 4% strongly disagreed. Also, 57% either strongly disagreed or disagreed that a student is less likely to cheat in an online class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of a literature review (Barnes & Paris, 2013; Farisi, 2013; Michael & Williams, 2013; McAllister & Watkins, 2012; Miller, 2012; Royer, 2013; Tovani, 2014), careful analysis of our nationally collected data, and comments from the survey respondents, several recommendations are proposed to promote academic integrity in online courses by simultaneously preventing cheating and enhancing student learning skills. These are:

1. Spell out exactly what constitutes plagiarism and honor declarations.
2. Create student awareness about the importance of honesty in online courses.
3. Make use of discussion boards in every online course. Make a discussion on plagiarism so that the students understand what constitutes plagiarism. Also, ask students to reflect on the academic integrity policy and how it relates to online education.
4. Make the students watch a plagiarism tutorial, such as (http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php)
5. Compare student writing on the discussion board with that on assignments. A writing sample collected at the beginning of the semester can be helpful.
6. Use plagiarism detection services such as Turnitin, Google phrases, SafeAssign, etc.
7. Give each student a different version of the exam. Change at least one-third of the exam questions each semester.
8. Time all exams.
9. Lock down the student's browser during testing.
10. Use online proctoring services.
11. Require the use of web cams in online courses.
12. Design assignments that require creative analysis.
13. Enhance student learning skills. Students and professors should have online forum sessions where they can discuss about the course content. Students should be reminded of the due dates of assignments so that they do not have to rush at the last minute for submission. Rushing at the last minute may lead to copying and cheating from their friends or from the Internet.

14. Provide feedback to students on their submitted assignments and the exams so that students will be motivated to do better the next time.
15. If students need help regarding course work, then professors must make themselves available on specific days and times. This helps students to work on the assignments on their own with the help of professors and to improve in areas where needed.

CONCLUSION

The online movement can have a positive impact on all stakeholders of the education system if instructors maintain the integrity of the courses they offer while giving students the convenience they seek. Online cheating affects everyone. Online classes present many challenges for instructors wanting to maintain academic honesty (Moten et al., Leonard, & Brown, 2013). Many techniques are, however, available to minimize cheating while allowing the students to have the flexibility they desire (Hill, 2010).

According to The University Professional and Continuing Education Association's Center for Research and Consulting (2013), the credibility of the online/distance learning field is at stake when controls and standards are not put in place. For example, in 2005, the U.S. Department of Education reported just 16 cases of fraud regarding online learning. In 2011, the department had over one hundred open cases, potentially representing thousands of potential fraud participants.

In trying to deliver quality in online education, if even a single case of cheating or fraud happens and spreads through the media, it can hurt the entire distance education community as administrators, lawmakers, the media, faculty, and others question the viability and quality of online instruction. More recently, a number of for-profit institutions were investigated for questionable practices that were driven by federal financial funding motivations where they "raced" their online students through courses (The University Professional and Continuing Education Association's Center for Research and Consulting, 2013).

Academic integrity and reputation are a university's most influential tools for attracting committed, high-caliber students. This translates into improved graduation rates, leading to a stronger program and consistent accreditation. Ensuring the integrity of online education programs is essential for ensuring the integrity of the university itself. The online movement could be seen as both a blessing and a curse, depending on how the instructors maintain the integrity of the courses or degrees they offer while giving the students the convenience they seek. As has been pointed out, online classes present many challenges for instructors wanting to maintain academic honesty. However, many techniques are available for accomplishing this goal while also balancing the needs of the students. Online cheating affects everyone. From the incoming freshman to the student working toward a doctoral degree, cheating negates the integrity of what a college degree means to the students, the college, and society in general. If the online instructor incorporates some or many of the techniques available, online courses should be easier to manage and cheating in online classes may become less prevalent in the future. This will help maintain the honesty and integrity of the degree and what it means to those who actually earn one.
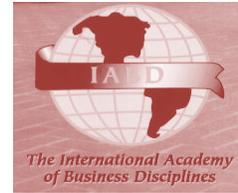
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