Best Practices to Minimize Academic Dishonesty in Distance Learning

Distance Learning Sub-committee Summary

The sub-committee to research and recommend best practices to minimize academic dishonesty in distance learning conducted a literature review on the topic and created a spreadsheet of best practices to submit to the Distance Learning Committee. Our findings cover five areas that should be addressed 1) the syllabus, 2) presentation of the content, 3) the relationship between the instructor and student, 4) the design of assessment, and 5) monitoring (Christe, 2003).

Academic integrity policies must be incorporated into the syllabus and thoroughly communicated verbally and in writing to the students (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Chiesl, 2007; Olt, 2002). Communications with students should include explicit descriptions and instructions regarding dishonesty and explicit penalties for dishonest practices (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Christe, 2003; Gray, 1998). Contracts and honor code statements may be included in the syllabus and/or included with every assignment and exam (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Chiesl, 2007; Christe, 2003). Instructors should inform students of their qualifications and experience (Chiesl, 2007). Instructors should explain that by identifying the work of others with citations students indicate their level of research; and instructors should communicate the importance and reasons for honest behavior, such as life-long learning and employment needs (Christe, 2003; Gray, 1998; Roe, 2004; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, 1978).

Content presentation best practices include making assignments clear and specific (Christe, 2003; Harris, 2009); clearly emphasizing important material (Christe, 2003); and identifying supplemental resources that are required (Christe, 2003); discussing the relevance of the course material (Christe, 2003; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, 1978); including activities that promote inter-student communication (Christe, 2003); establishing clear deadlines (Christe, 2003); and
providing an exact list of requirements necessary to obtain specific grades, including student time and activity requirements (Harris, 2009). Additional best practices for content presentation directed specifically toward distance learning include assessing student preparedness to begin the class (Christe, 2003; Gagne, Briggs, & Wager, 1987); instructor knowledge of how to use technology reliably, considering the different levels of computer capability, connection, and access (Christe, 2003); and providing clear communication on policies, procedures and consequences of technical issues that may arise in distance learning coursework (Christe, 2003).

The third area of importance in best practices for minimizing academic dishonesty in distance learning is faculty-student interaction and communication. Christe suggests facilitating good student-instructor communication by using a variety of contact methods, such as email, discussion board messages, telephone contact, and face-to-face contact where applicable. Obtaining work and home telephone numbers and contact with students by telephone helps to develop a more personal level of contact with students (Gray, 1998). Email and message board communications foster a familiarity with student writing styles (Christe, 2003). Tips for more efficient use of email communications include setting email messages to notify the instructor when read; using a separate email account for distance learning classes or using email filtering functions in order to keep student communications separate from day-to-day email; and maintaining a folder of replies to frequently asked questions (Gray, 1998).

The importance of assessment design is emphasized by the number of best practices found that center on this topic. An initial writing assignment is useful for comparison to later works (Baron & Crooks, 2005). Requiring that assignments be completed in steps is recommended by several sources to prevent the use of purchased or borrowed papers. If a student is asked to present their assignment in steps: stating the topic or problem, a preliminary bibliography, a prospectus, copies of research material or annotated bibliography, outline, rough draft, final draft, etc., it is more difficult to use a paper from another source (Gray, 1998; Harris, 2009; Olt, 2002). Other suggestions for papers and
projects highlight electronic portfolios to emphasize student progress (Christe, 2003); assessment by project (Baron & Crooks, 2005); requiring electronically submitted assignments (Chiesl, 2007); and integration of collaborative elements into assignments (Gray, 1998). In assessments through testing in distance learning, assume that students will have every resource available all the time, in other words all tests are open book (Christe, 2003). There are methods that can curtail the use of books and other sources, such as: time limits on testing (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Chiesl, 2007; Christe, 2003; Gray, 1998; Olt, 2002); creation of a nonsequential chapter question assortment (Chiesl, 2007); designing questions that make online searching difficult (Christe, 2003); using essay questions instead of multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank (Baron & Crooks, 2005); and randomized question pools (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Chiesl, 2007; Christe, 2003; Gray, 1998; Olt, 2002). Through the use of course management tools, such as D2L, Blackboard, etc. instructors can set time limits for testing; limit the number of times a test or exam can be accessed (Olt, 2002; Rowe 2004); allow multiple testing attempts that allow students to retake the exam with randomized questions; set testing to disallow backtracking; and setting tests and exams to show only one question at a time to prevent copy/paste of exam to share with other students (Chiesl, 2007). Other assessment suggestions include embedding quizzes in exercises and readings (Gray, 1998); requiring a large number of tests or exams throughout the semester ; using a point system for grading versus a bell curve; and setting a low point value for each exam (Chiesl, 2007). Revising and reworking classes each semester, paper topics, class discussion points, and variable assessment tools are additional suggestions offered to minimize dishonesty through assessment design(Christe, 2003; Baron & Crooks, 2005).

The final group of best practices deals with monitoring. Beginning with communication, it is recommended that instructors inform and describe the types of monitoring and technology tools that are available and used (Christe, 2003) and instructors emphasize enforcement of course/college policies (Lanier, 2006). Commercial services, such as Turnitin, IntegriGuard and others are recommended (Baron
& Crooks, 2005; Harris, 2009), along with direct Internet searches on phrases from submitted papers (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Harris, 2009). Technology within distance learning programs, such as D2L, may be used to track or constrain IP addresses, administer synchronous testing using video or text conferencing (Gray, 1998); and used to track student activity statistics (Christe, 2003). Proctored exams and use of testing centers are advised where feasible (Baron & Crooks, 2005; Gray, 1998; Kitahara & Westfall, 2007), providing photographs of students to proctors (Gray, 1998), and use of web cams or commercial programs developed for proctoring, such as Securexam Remote Proctor™ (Kitahara & Westfall, 2007). Teaching assistants may provide insight in verifying student works due to increased interaction between assistant and student (Baron & Crooks, 2005). Creation of a fake student enrolled in a class helps to monitor the possibility of students sharing answers (Christe, 2003), and the creation of inaccurate information online or fake tests set as traps is suggested (Christe, 2003; Rowe, 2004). Other suggestions for monitoring dishonesty in distance learning encompass standard detection strategies in grading, looking for mixed citation styles, lack of references or quotations, unusual formatting, off topic, dated information, anachronisms, anomalies of diction, anomalies of style, and other obvious mistakes (Harris, 2009).

After review and editing by the sub-committee and the Distance Learning committee, a document with the suggestions garnered from this literature review may be useful as a handout, web page, or program for distance learning instructors.
Works Cited List


