



Are Your Online Students Really the Ones Registered for the Course? Student Authentication Requirements for Distance Education Providers

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Are Your Online Students Really the Ones Registered for the Course? Much attention has been focused on the accountability, student learning outcomes, transfer of credit, and illegal file sharing provisions of the two related bills that have moved through the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives to amend and extend the provisions of the 1965 Higher Education Act (S. 1642 and H.R. 4137). One of the provisions that appears in both versions should be of particular interest to institutions and programs that offer distance education. The proposed legislation requires ***“an institution that offers distance education to have processes through which the institution establishes that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit.”***

The current language casts a broad and loosely defined obligation on distance education programs, raising questions about the perceived “problem” being targeted. Is the provision aimed at stopping unaccredited diploma mills? Would the provision apply to just fully online distance education courses and programs? Does the provision aim to address student cheating and, if so, is it predicated on an assumption that cheating occurs more frequently or more easily in a web-based learning environment than in a large lecture setting?

The online/distance education segment of higher education perhaps has done more to align pedagogy, assessments, and learning objectives than many traditional postsecondary programs. Concerns about the lack of face-to-face faculty-student interactions have forced online and distance education providers to continuously examine their programs and develop sophisticated approaches to ensure the integrity of their academic programs. As a result, the student authentication requirement, as currently proposed by federal lawmakers, would not be overly onerous to the majority of accredited online and distance learning providers. It could, however, depending on the eventual reporting requirements, drive up the cost of these important educational programs if expensive student authentication procedures are mandated.

WCET’s Steering Committee, representing some of the country’s leading online higher education institutions and programs, have prepared this briefing paper to inform its members about this impending development, solicit additional approaches and strategies for academic integrity, assist the WCET community in continuing to provide high quality online education, as well as contribute to the development of appropriate federal guidelines (if the legislation is adopted).

Some Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Distance Education

“Prevention” Approaches to Academic Integrity

- **Use of multiple assessment techniques in place of high stakes exams.** Most distance learning providers use multi-faceted assessment strategies rather than high stakes proctored exams. Assessments are designed to be frequent, varied, and authentic to the application of learning. Instructors rely on interactive discussions, writing assignments, quizzes, capstone projects, group work, and online exams. Assessments are often modified from semester to semester.
- **Greater reliance on written assignments and threaded discussion.** Students demonstrate learning outcomes through written assignments and interaction with the instructor via discussions. Instructors become familiar with students' writing styles through online discussions. Many online instructors report that they have greater confidence in the authenticity of their online students' work than their classroom students.
- **Use of test banks, and timed test delivery.** Test questions are randomly drawn from banks of questions, so each student gets a different set of questions. Most tests are designed to be open-book, but once a student begins a test, they have a limited amount of time to complete it, and usually only one attempt.
- **Raising awareness among students about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate academic behavior in an online course.** Many cases of academic dishonesty arise from students' lack of awareness, such as when it is okay and not okay to collaborate on coursework. Many providers now include in course syllabi a college's academic integrity statement and a link to campus policies; a description of academic dishonesty and information on repercussions for academic dishonesty; links to plagiarism information as well as acceptable sources, and descriptions of permissible and non-permissible collaboration. Some colleges use an honor code approach where communities of learners discuss and agree upon honor codes for courses or programs and the use of ethical decision-making case studies as a part the curriculum.

“Compliance” Approaches to Academic Integrity

- **Plagiarism detection software and browser lock-downs.** Plagiarism detection software can be used for both written assignments and class discussion. Faculty members can simply cut and paste a discussion board post or any written work into the software. This approach is commonly used by instructors in face-to-face courses as well as for online courses. Some instructors use browser lock-down software so the student cannot open additional screens during a test. A weakness to this approach is that the student could have another computer running, but experience has shown that if the student is not familiar with the material, it is very difficult to demonstrate the learning outcomes.

- **Physical proctoring centers for exam delivery.** If a course is designed with a high stakes exam, then physical proctoring may be appropriate and required. However, most distance learning courses are not designed this way. Physical proctoring in many ways defeats the purpose of distance learning. There are some students for whom getting to a proctoring site would not be practical or even feasible.
- **Remote proctoring devices.** An example of this is found at Troy University where online students are required to purchase a monitoring device that connects to their computer and "watches" them take an exam. It requires periodic finger-print scanning, and turns on a microphone and 360 degree camera if noise or movement thresholds are reached. Students purchase these devices for \$150 through the online bookstore. The use of remote proctor devices is an expensive option for students, especially those taking a single course, as well as for many institutions due to the associated costs of maintaining security for student biometric data. Most importantly, such an approach would place a heavy emphasis on testing which could greatly affect the richness of the learning environment.
- **Other student identity technologies.** Large companies that provide data security for the banking industry have data mining systems that are being used with distance learning students. Students are presented with multiple choice questions about their personal history, such as last street address, name of elementary school, or mother's maiden name. The student must answer the personal question in order to proceed with an assessment, and such questions also may appear randomly during an exam.

But Can The Student Still Cheat?

It is important to note that even if an institution carefully implements a combination of the approaches outlined above, a student who is determined to cheat may still succeed in doing so. Little research exists that compares the cheating behaviors of on-campus and online students. There is, however, some research into faculty opinions about the cheating behaviors of online students compared to on-campus students. Faculty members who have experience teaching online see no difference between the two methodologies when it comes to student cheating.

WCET will continue this examination of online course design, assessment practices, technology applications, and other strategies used to deter cheating and to promote the academic integrity of the online program. In February 2008, WCET will launch a Working Group on Student Authentication to be led by Dr. Rhonda Epper of the Colorado Community College System. Contact Mollie McGill at mmcgill@wcet.info for more information.

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