

# Chapter 106

## Opportunities for Enhancing Ethical Climates in Online Courses: Best Practices for Reducing Student Cheating

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### ABSTRACT

*This case study outlines issues with student academic integrity in an online undergraduate program and explains how faculty can play an important role in reducing the likelihood that students will decide to cheat. The study describes possible motivations for student misconduct, student acceptance of academic dishonesty, and administrative/faculty responses to violations of published academic integrity policies. It also presents a model of online course climate in which both faculty and students have responsibilities to the classroom and ethical facilitation of course content. This case looks at one institution's effort to integrate integrity into a curriculum by instilling a culture of trust from which lessons beyond the classroom can be learned.*

### ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Department of Professional Studies was created at Austin Peay State University to meet the needs of the soldier/student assigned to duty at the Fort Campbell, Kentucky Army Post. Established specifically as a degree completion program, the major is offered entirely via the Desire2Learn

course management system and was developed for facilitation long before the university as a whole embraced online learning as an acceptable course delivery method. As the institution innovators in online learning, the faculty has been challenged by the administration to create learning opportunities for students in which success can be achieved without minimizing the integrity of the curriculum.

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To this end, the faculty believe tools and resources for raising ethical standards in online management courses are essential for maintaining integrity in management education. Perceived integrity of the educational institution, accrediting bodies, future employers, and students influence the value of a degree that students receive. Academic integrity in online education impacts each of these stakeholders as well as the ethics of the businesses employing graduates. A key role in promoting academic integrity in online courses is played by instructors in the design and conduct of their courses.

Management education can indirectly teach business ethics by making it imperative that students continually practice being ethical while studying. Case studies, scenarios, and simulations are often used to reveal insights and teach concepts. However, it is also essential to create an ethical climate in which students participate. Students who consistently participate in and help to create ethical course climates may be more successful in the business sector in spreading and supporting an ethical climate there. Establishing best practices for creating ethical course climates becomes increasingly essential as online management education programs grow.

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

It is a sure bet that at any given time in a suite of faculty offices someone is going to be engaged in a discussion of student cheating regardless of whether such acts are labeled as plagiarism, academic dishonesty, or lack of academic integrity. As faculty, and particularly online faculty, we are acutely aware of the more obvious signs of plagiarism: unnecessary shifts in font; professional-level research; changes in formatting (MLA instead of APA); title page with student's name and someone else's name on subsequent pages; website address (e.g. [www.iamacheater.com](http://www.iamacheater.com)) in body of paper; and/or anachronistic references (e.g. 'In his speech

this week, President Clinton'). Not as obvious, but almost as easy to detect, are such student cheating strategies as: a paper is only tangentially related to the assigned topic; odd sentences have been inserted into an otherwise well-written paper; the age of the references are all older than three years; the student cannot summarize the research in an oral presentation; or, the work is cut and pasted from several sources to create one (results in variations in tone, diction, and citation style).

Cheating in higher education has been a concern of educators since the early twentieth century when academic dishonesty was looked upon as an honorable transgression. The problem continues to grow as students place more emphasis on competition for grades rather than academic integrity (Nuss, 1984; McCabe, 1992; McCabe, 2001; Center For Academic Integrity, 2002). Adding to the erosion of integrity is the much written about decline in ethical standards among leaders in both the public and private sectors. While the Enron debacle (2001) is heralded as the epitome of ethical malfeasance, the deterioration of an ethical society continues. Recent high profile cases such as the thirty year investment fraud perpetrated by Bernard Madoff, support the position of Robbins et al. (2005) that "In the United States, many believe we are currently suffering from an ethics crisis. Behaviors that were once thought unacceptable—lying, cheating, misrepresenting, and covering up mistakes—have become in many people's eyes acceptable or necessary practices. Managers profit from illegal use of insider stock information and members of Congress write hundreds of bad checks" (p. 23). College students cheating more often include business students that are future business leaders (Hulsart & McCarthy, 2009).

In their 1994 report, Gehring and Pavela defined academic dishonesty as "an intentional act of fraud, in which a student seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization, or uses unauthorized materials or fabricated information in any academic exercise. We also consider academic dishonesty to include

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