

## Chapter 7.16

# When Distance Technologies Meet the Student Code

**Peg Wherry**

*Montana State University, USA*

**Deborah Lundberg Windes**

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study outlines problems with student conduct in an online undergraduate program and explains how a student code was applied to resolve the issues and institute procedures to reduce future incidents of academic dishonesty and incivility. The study describes several instances of student misconduct and explains how online program administrators responded by improving communication with both students and faculty and by modifying course design and development processes as well as instructional practices. It also reports on how other administrators assisted in handling resolution and discipline. While technology itself may both complicate the maintenance of conduct standards and provide new ways to protect academic integrity, this study demonstrates that the introduction of technology should not change the rules.

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### BACKGROUND

Administrators and instructors in distance and online education programs often encounter the assumption that technology changes everything, whether the change is due to the technology itself or due to new or different administrative structures supporting technology. For example, most online learning administrators have received the panicked question from an online instructor: “What do I do if I think a student in my online class is cheating?” The response, as we will discuss, should closely replicate the answer to the question: “What do you do if you suspect cheating in your campus classroom?” The following case study is based on the assumption that the more we hold online students to the same standards required in the classroom, the more students will benefit, and thus the reputation of online education will be enhanced. While technology itself may offer challenges to maintaining academic and conduct standards as well as providing

new ways to protect academic integrity, we hope to demonstrate that the introduction of technology should not change the rules.

Our purpose in this study by administrators of a distance learning program is to outline problems with academic integrity and student conduct that emerged over a two-year period in an online undergraduate program. This series of incidents made us familiar with “chapter and verse” of our University’s *Student Code* of conduct (<http://www.admin.uiuc.edu/policy/code/>) and helped us see how valuable such a student code can be in addressing conduct issues. We will explain how we applied our *Student Code* both to resolve the issues and to institute procedures to reduce future incidents. Our case study will present instances of two types of student conduct: academic dishonesty and incivility. We then discuss how the student code is applied and the changes we made to our procedures as a result.

Academic integrity in both on-ground and online courses receives a great deal of attention in professional circles; a wide range of sources are available on topics such as preventing cheating, whether and how use of technology encourages or defeats cheating, etc. This chapter will touch on those issues, but we will also discuss “what happens next” when student misconduct occurs, in cases of both civility and integrity. We will discuss the importance of dealing proactively with these issues, both for the sake of our program and to improve the image of academic integrity in online learning. To give some indication of the level of difficulty inspiring us to share our experiences, we will mention one case, not used here, in which we consulted the office of the Dean of Students. She not only recognized the names of the students (on a campus of 42,000) but added that “no matter what you do, it will be a nightmare.” This was not exactly comforting, though she did offer excellent advice. Details of all instances have been modified in the interest of anonymity.

Guided Individual Study (GIS) offers continuous enrollment, self-paced undergraduate courses

through the Office of Continuing Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Starting seventy-five years ago as a correspondence program with print-based courses mailed to non-traditional students, it is now a predominantly online program focusing on general education courses in multiple disciplines. Enrollment is open year-round, and a student has six months from the date of enrollment to complete the course. Thus, each student works independently, often—but not always—in isolation from classmates. While students need not be admitted to a degree program at the University of Illinois in order to enroll, 90% of enrollments are from degree-seeking students at one of the three U of I campuses (Urbana-Champaign, Chicago, and Springfield). Roughly 40 courses are currently offered, with enrollments at around 1,200 per year. GIS courses are designed and taught by instructors appointed by the academic department which “owns” the course; all academic credit is given by the department itself. However, GIS staff provide guidance in course development and instruction, and mediate when student disciplinary problems arise. Instructors are paid per capita based on student enrollment, with payment occurring at three points during the student’s enrollment (in most cases, at the beginning, mid-term and final). All instances we present in this study occurred within the GIS program.

In most institutions, distance learning faculty and staff have many resources to draw on when dealing with student conduct issues. At Illinois, we encourage our instructors to work with the academic department head, or departmental director of undergraduate studies, and to adhere to departmental policies. At the same time, we offer to have a GIS staff member present at any meetings between the student and instructor. This assures that the two offices are acting in concert, reinforcing the institutional commitment to good conduct, and eliminating the opportunity for a student to play offices against one another. As we articulate advice for faculty who encounter

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