

How do you solve a problem like contract cheating?

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It's easier than ever for students to buy assignments. Until universities have better measures for rooting out this kind of cheating, professors are focusing on prevention.

How do you deal with cheating if you can't be sure it's happening? For universities across the country, it's an important question as online services and message boards have made it increasingly easy for students to buy whole, made-to-order essays and pass them off as their own. It's very difficult for professors to catch, and no one is sure just how big an issue it is.

One study published in 2015 suggested that half of all students surveyed at three universities in the U.K. would consider purchasing assignments, with men slightly more willing to take the risk than women. Students don't have to search very far for essay-writing services, either. Websites like bestessays.com, gonerdify.com, boomessays.com and EduBirdie.com advertise unique, original essays with turn-around in just a few days. Writers also advertise their services on Upwork and Kijiji, allowing buyers to negotiate prices directly. Depending on the length, subject and complexity of the piece, students could have a finished essay in their hands for a few hundred dollars, or a PhD thesis for a few thousand. (*University Affairs* contacted EduBirdie.com, one of the highest user-rated essay services in the country, for an interview, but received no response.)

And in the past few years the advertising has become more blatant, said Sarah Elaine Eaton, an assistant professor in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. "You walk in the classroom and you find the flyers [advertising essay-writing services] on the seats or you find the flyers on a ledge by the white board, or you find them tucked away on a table somewhere where students can see them and profs might not pay attention to them." Dr. Eaton said she's confident you'd find a similar situation at "any Canadian campus."

"It makes me feel powerless that this is a thing and we don't know what to do about it," Dr. Eaton said. "My heart goes out to students who think that paying for a paper is ultimately going to help them. Because we're sending the wrong message. The message we should be sending is 'You're here to learn,' not 'You need to give me an assignment.'"

Dr. Eaton said, currently, many universities don't have enough supports in place to help professors root out contract cheating. Those will likely come as institutions begin to rewrite their academic integrity policies, she said. For now, she hopes to continue formal conversations with students and educators, to bring the issue out of the shadows.

Alyson King, an assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, created an online course to teach students about academic integrity. But Dr. King said the website is designed mainly to deal with accidental plagiarism, where students "don't know what they don't know."

The only time Dr. King is certain a student was purchasing work was when the self-described ghostwriter contacted the school after the student neglected to pay her. Even then, Dr. King said the situation was hard to prove. “[The ghostwriter] disconnected that particular email address, so we had no way of following up, getting more evidence, or any of that information,” Dr. King said. “I’m not even sure if that student handed in the paper, which was apparently purchased, because the ghostwriter also cc’d the student, so the student knew.”

Aside from vengeful ghostwriters exposing dishonest students, there isn’t much professors can do to check for contract cheating. Resources like [Turnitin](#) can root out plagiarized sections of essays or reused papers, but can’t identify original works done on contract.

Since it’s difficult to prove an essay has been purchased, Shirley McDonald has overhauled her coursework to simply make it not worth the student’s time. Dr. McDonald, who teaches English and writing at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus, has mostly done away with the single, end-of-term project worth a significant portion of the final grade. Instead, she gives several small assignments throughout the term, each building on the last.

“By the time they’ve gotten down to writing the essay, they’ve done it all, they’ve got it all there,” Dr. McDonald said. “I engage my students in many low-stakes exercises, and I weight their formal assignments with such little amounts that it doesn’t do them any service to pay someone a thousand dollars to write an essay. It’s worth only five percent of their mark in my classes.”

It’s a trick that Dr. King uses as well. “I started doing a reflection paper, where [students] have to talk about what happens in the course as well as research. That kind of thing can help determine ‘Is this actually their own work or not?’”

Dr. McDonald said much of the responsibility for preventing plagiarism falls to teachers. The majority of students, she said, don’t cheat because of a lack of integrity, but a lack of skill.

“I think that professors who weight ... one assignment worth 50 percent or sometimes 100 percent, then the stakes are so high that the students are scrambling. There’s so much pressure on them to do well that there’s kind of a moral dilemma. We create a moral dilemma for them,” Dr. McDonald said.

She noted that the pressure can be especially high on international students, who are already facing the added challenges of moving to a new city and perhaps also learning a new language. “I believe that if we’re going to continue to actively recruit international students to Canadian universities,” Dr. McDonald said, “we have an ethical obligation ... to teach them academic literacy. And part of that means teaching them the values that members of the community here share.”

An international discussion

At the International Centre for Academic Integrity's annual conference, held in early March in Richmond, Virginia, participants discussed contract cheating and possible responses to it. On one panel was Christopher Lang, director of appeals, discipline and faculty grievances at the University of Toronto and past-president of the ICAI advisory board. In his work with the ICAI, Mr. Lang has helped to institute an annual day of action against contract cheating, and works with educators to look at prevention techniques like the ones used by Drs. McDonald and King.

But Mr. Lang's focus is no longer just on students and instructors – it's now on the sellers, too. "We view these companies as basically perpetuating academic fraud," said Mr. Lang. Many websites include a disclaimer that students are to use the provided essays as reference materials, and that the companies cannot be held accountable if students knowingly pass them off as their own work. But Mr. Lang says those disclaimers aren't worth much.

"If [students are] really using [the essay] as a study aid, why do these companies ask you what font you want the paper in? How many words would you like the paper? What style guide? What grade would you like to get? These are questions on these websites that indicate they know exactly what is happening," Mr. Lang said. "We believe [the companies] are turning a blind eye. They are making fistfuls of money, and they know what it's being used for."

Mr. Lang is working with the ICAI to develop legislation that would allow institutions to go after the sellers of these essays, on the basis of causing institutional harm. "It devalues the degrees of students who legitimately worked and got their degree with their own smarts, their own work," said Mr. Lang. "You wouldn't want to drive over a bridge if it was built by an engineer who bought their way to a degree. It affects society writ large."