Chapter 7.16
When Distance Technologies Meet the Student Code

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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
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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 contin-
uous 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 correspon-
dence 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 class-
mates. 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 instruc-
tors 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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