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Ethics and distance education

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Ethics—right and wrong! Most students think they are ethical, yet a very high number admit they have cheated. Most know that it is improper to copy the work of others, yet plagiarism is reported to be widespread. And, one often heard criticism of distance education is the fear that "it is too easy for students to cheat! How do you know who is taking the test?"
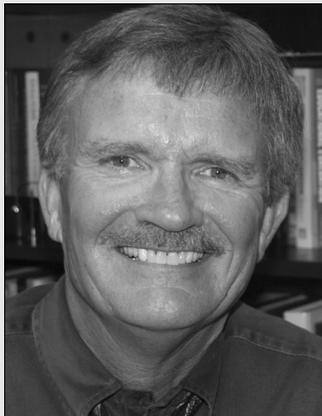
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Ethical behavior has long been a concern of educators. The United States Bureau of Education published the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education" in 1928 in an attempt to clarify right and wrong in teaching and learning, and to promote ethical behavior. More recently, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University (n.d.) has provided extensive information about ethical behavior and the meaning of right versus wrong.

As distance education has become a mainstream approach in schools and colleges, there has been an increased concern about cheating, plagiarism, disruptive behavior, respect of others, and proper use of resources—online and local. These concerns have generally not been faced head-on by distance education leaders. Rather, right and wrong behaviors have been delegated to the background, pushed aside by more exotic concepts such as bandwidth, learning management systems, and operating systems.

Studying ethics for most would require a return to college to attend one of the core classes in philosophy that used to be required of all students (but which apparently have been replaced more recently by classes in business—which may explain in part why ethical behavior of students is of

such a concern to professors and teachers). At any rate, if distance education is to be accepted, and not just tolerated, it is important that rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning systems must be in place—and ethical behavior is at the core of rigor and quality.

Two options that promote ethical behavior, mutually supportive, might be considered by distance education leaders. First is the study of what is right and wrong when participating in online classes—a study of ethical behavior. A taxonomy of study includes:

1. knowledge of what is ethical and what is not;
2. understanding of proper actions of students; and
3. application of ethical behaviors to the teaching and learning process.

Next, distance education policy manuals should include sections dealing with ethical behavior, including:

1. development of an institutional code of ethical behavior;
2. explanation of student responsibilities related to the categories of unethical behavior, including:

- plagiarism,
- cheating,
- disruptive behaviors, and
- deceptive actions;
3. establishment of a process of enforcement, including sanctions for violations of ethical behavior; and
4. implementation of training and remediation systems for instructors and students.

While it is unclear if cheating and plagiarism are more widespread in online courses than traditional ones, it is obvious that the perception held by many is that distance education courses and programs seem more likely to provide opportunities for unethical behavior. Distance educators should face this issue head-on.

And finally, as Proust said centuries ago, when "we cheat other people, we exist alone."

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