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Preventing Online Shopping for Completed Assessments: Protecting Students by Blocking Access to Contract Cheating Websites on Institutional Networks

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Abstract

Contract cheating or "the outsourcing of student work to third parties" (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639) is a type of academic misconduct that is growing and changing due to advancements in technology and the emergence of a lucrative, multi-million dollar per year industry that targets students relentlessly (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016). In an effort to protect students from engaging in contract cheating, three postsecondary institutions in Manitoba (i.e., Assiniboine Community College, Red River College, and the University of Manitoba) launched initiatives to block access to websites that offer contract cheating services from their networks. This initiative facilitated a preliminary examination of student activity on institutional networks. In any given month, a relatively large number of students (i.e., up to 3,519 unique users) were attempting to access websites identified as providing contract cheating services. We recognize that a single initiative will not eliminate academic misconduct, however, by combining various educational, protective, and preventative strategies, the likelihood that students will make ethical decisions regarding their academic work can be increased.

Keywords: academic integrity, Canada, cheating, college, contract cheating, intervention, Manitoba, university

Introduction

Contract cheating (also known as *essay mills*, *paper mills*, or *ghostwriting*) is defined as "the outsourcing of student work to third parties" and is a type of academic misconduct that is both growing and changing rapidly (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639). Contract cheating often involves "the act of payment [which makes it] deliberate, pre-planned and intentional" (Newton, 2018, p. 2). Outsourcing work, however, does not always involve

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formal contracts or the exchange of money (Bretag et al., 2019), but can involve students asking classmates, parents, siblings, former students, tutors, and students in similar programs at other educational institutions to write their assignments for them in exchange for favours or halting bullying. To make matters worse, academic staff (at all educational levels) are largely unaware of the enormity of the problem (Awdry & Newton, 2019; Eaton, Chibry, Toye, & Rossi, 2019) and effective technologies for detecting contract cheating are not yet broadly available (see Rogerson, 2017) making this type of cheating an attractive option for some students.

Contract cheating is not new to academia. However, the speed and ease with which students worldwide are able to access pre-written assessments or people willing to complete their work for them instantly is a more recent phenomenon. The internet greatly facilitates the locating and purchasing of contract cheating services from any country around the globe. For example, Kenya has been identified as a country from which contract cheating services are often sold to students in other countries (Bertram Gallant, 2019). Canada was once among the top four "countries from which students bought academic work online" and it is currently tied for second place for "countries where students engage in contract cheating" (Toye et al., 2019).

Sophisticated business models (Ellis et al., 2018; Yorke et al., 2020) in this illicit industry play an important role in the rapidly changing landscape of outsourcing scholarly work. The issue of contract cheating is further complicated in Canada because such companies are not considered illegal. In other jurisdictions (Australian Government, 2017; Newton & Lang, 2016; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2017), however, legislation making the provision of these services illegal has been introduced or passed in an attempt to curb contract cheating. Adding fuel to the fire is the aggressive advertising of contract cheating providers (Kaktins, 2018), often through social media (Lancaster, 2019), and particularly targeting the growing number of international students in Canada. These students may already face several hurdles in their educational journeys because of language barriers and other challenges related to moving to a different country to study (e.g., Bretag et al., 2017). Not only do all students run the risk of not learning the required knowledge and skills for their chosen fields and future professions, they risk being blackmailed by the contract cheating service providers that they have hired to complete their academic work for them (see Yorke et al., 2020).

WHAT can we do?

Hatfield and Wise (2015) stated that practitioners "appreciate learning about what they can do right now or what has worked at other institutions to address common challenges" (p. 42). At an institutional level, blocking access to website URLs of contract cheating

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companies on campus networks to protect students from making poor decisions regarding their academic work is fairly simple, concrete, and can be done "right now." This recommended strategy (Australian Government: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2017; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2017), when used in combination with other campus-wide and classroom educational and preventative approaches, can also be used to educate students that outsourcing their assessments is unacceptable and can have dire consequences. Education and prevention strategies for faculty can also be offered for faculty and administration, tying in a wide variety of factors from assessment design to policy review. In the sections that follow, we outline how the initiatives at each of our three postsecondary institutions unfolded, what we learned during the process, and how we plan to move forward in our approaches to promote academic integrity and discourage academic misconduct in Manitoba's postsecondary institutions.

HOW did the initiatives unfold?

University of Manitoba

The University of Manitoba (enrolment $\cong$ 30,000 students) has a history of approaching academic integrity with a teaching and learning approach (Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2008), which has been described elsewhere (Stoesz et al., accepted). Stoesz, along with assistance from academic integrity experts at other postsecondary institutions in Canada and Australia (S. E. Eaton, personal communication, May 9, 2019; T. Bretag, personal communication, May 9, 2019), populated a list of companies providing contract cheating services. Searching for contract cheating companies was accomplished using phrases such as "write my essay for me" and locating blatant statements on website landing pages that advertised services for completing students' assessments for them (see Figure 1). A list consisting of over 930 URLs was then shared with authors Seeland at Assiniboine Community College and Vogt at Red River College.

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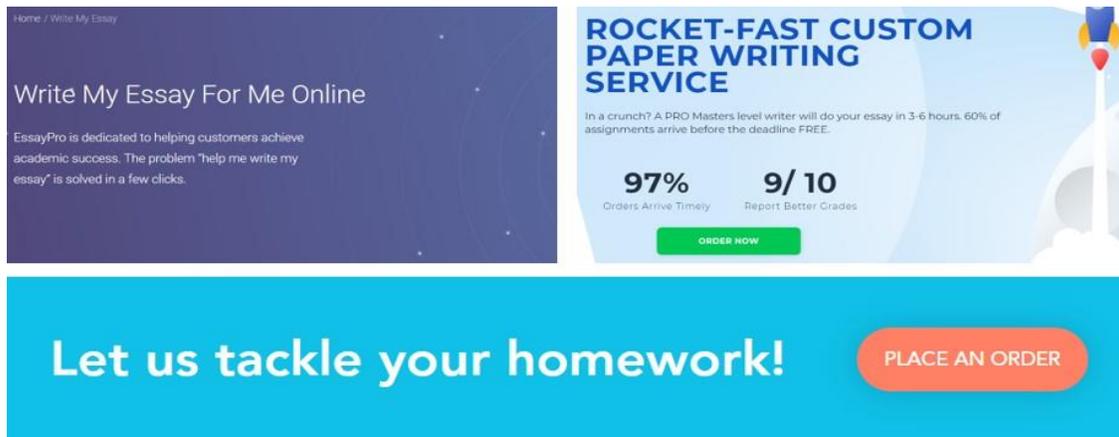
Figure 1. Screenshots of messages on the landing pages used to identify contract cheating websites. Searches for sites were conducted using Google and phrases such as "write my essay for me."

After conversations about the 2019 Canadian Symposium for Academic Integrity, contract cheating, and URL blocking with members of the leadership team at The Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, University of Manitoba, the decision was made to request support from the IST department to block access to the identified URLs from on-campus network connections. A pop-up message was also written to communicate to students that the URLs that they were attempting to access were in violation of the academic integrity policy. The message also included a link directing students to learn more at the university's academic integrity website (see Figure 2). Blocking access to identified websites began in August 2019 and a high-level report of activity (unique users per month) during the months of September through December 2019 was generated.
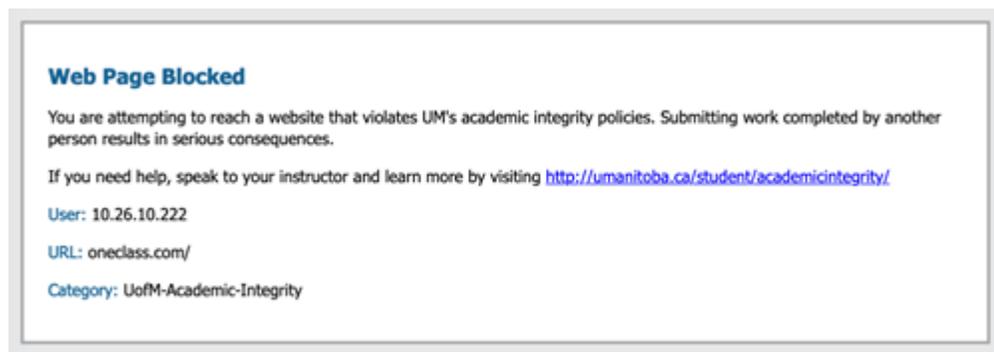
Figure 2. The message that users see when they attempt to access a site identified as a contract cheating website. The message included a link directing users to learn more at the university's academic integrity website.

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Assiniboine Community College

At Assiniboine Community College (enrolment ≅ 2,200 students), the Library has long offered group instruction for students on plagiarism and citing, whereas the Academic Support Centre delivered writing workshops and individual assistance for students. Recent growth in recruiting international students served as a catalyst to contextualize these issues within academic integrity, and to move from what research dubbed a negative, punitive, and reactive approach to one of integrity (Bertram Gallant, 2011; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Rather than focus on the issues in a solely academic context, academic integrity education and promotion centred around both the related values and the context of societal safety, which was especially suitable for students in programs such as nursing, early childhood education, civil technology, and trades programs, where properly trained workers perform their jobs safely for the benefit of all. As Okoro (2011) suggests, "academic integrity is critical to the sustainability of a civil society and to the democratic process" (p. 177). Students learned about appropriate/inappropriate collaboration, plagiarism, cheating, duplicate submissions, fabrication of data, and facilitating academic misconduct. An early survey showed that many students appreciated "open dialogue [as it] reassure[d] the diligent student that academic integrity is taken seriously" (Rogerson, 2017, p. 14) at the college, and that policy is enforced fairly. Faculty and staff, meanwhile, were provided with professional development sessions on reducing plagiarism through assessment design as well as general awareness on academic integrity.

Contract cheating was specifically addressed with students at the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year in the form of proactive interventions unique to different programs and assignments. The industry's illicit nature, marketing techniques, questionable products, propensity for blackmail, and subsequent risks to both student and institutional reputation, along with society at large (Khan et al., 2020), were discussed using anonymized case studies and student application of school policy to them (as per Rogerson, 2017). Professional development opportunities were also offered to faculty and administration to help them understand the issues, and how to detect and differentiate plagiarism, purchased, and traded work (collusion), and mistakes in citing (Rogerson & Bretag, 2015; Sharkey & Culp, 2005). Professional development on academic integrity is crucial for identifying competency gaps and developing ways to promote best practice in teaching and learning among staff and faculty (Lofstrom et al., 2015; Sefcik et al., 2019). Over time, academic integrity has become a collaborative platform for the entire Learning Commons team at Assiniboine Community College, which now includes not only the Library and Academic Support Center, but faculty development coaches and educational technologists.

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During this time, plans to block access to contract cheating websites were in development. The combination of the list of URLs from the University of Manitoba and existing filter modules on "plagiarism" and "illegal/immoral" on the Assiniboine Community College network were used to track access for the month of September 2019. Once the names of specific sites and volume of access were gathered, instructors whose assignments were found online were contacted. This began to generate interest for professional development in the area, and these instructors along with many of their administrators and others gathered for a session at Assiniboine Community College's first event recognizing the *International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating* (https://www.academicintegrity.org/day-against-contract-cheating/) in October 2019. Here, institutional statistics were shared, best practices for designing assessments with reduced opportunities for cheating were delivered, and an overview of the contract cheating industry was given. Blocking began later the same week with messaging that included the ability to request the addition or deletion of individual sites. Network activity statistics are now delivered on a monthly basis.

Red River College

Red River College (enrolment $\cong$ 27,259 students) provides free academic support to students through the Academic Success Centre and Library Services. A range of individual, small group, and classroom-embedded supports are offered to complement specific courses and programs. With a growing number of students speaking a first language other than English, a team of English as a Second Language (EAL) specialists and tutors has developed English for specific purposes tutoring to assist students within specific programs. Staff at the Academic Success Centre look for opportunities to teach and fine-tune skills needed by students to demonstrate academic integrity, including time management, study skills, paraphrasing, summarizing, and citations. Library Services also offers workshops on research practices for students and classrooms.

In April 2019, Vogt (an EAL specialist) attended the Canadian Symposium on Academic Integrity and heard keynote speaker Tracey Bretag describe file sharing websites, such as Course Hero. Further investigation showed that Red River College students were actively using these sites to share course materials. Realizing the extent to which online services were drawing students into a fee-structure on the premise of "helping," a discussion session was held to help educate faculty at Red River College about this growing industry, and that many of their assessments could likely be found on contract cheating websites. Further professional development is needed.

In the fall of 2019, the Red River College IST department reported that contract cheating and file sharing websites were not being blocked, but they were investigating file sharing

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websites with a faculty group. All parties were concerned that students were sharing completed coursework, often revealing students' names and the names of courses and instructors within the documents. IST was already blocking several categories identified by the network security system, Cisco Sourcefire, that are deemed inappropriate for the college environment, including gambling and pornography. An option was available to also block websites identified as "cheating" by simply checking a box. However, file sharing websites Chegg and Course Hero, would not be blocked by this category because they were identified as "online shopping." These findings were communicated to the Senior Academic Committee, with details on the content available through contract cheating and file sharing websites, as well as the number of unique IP addresses accessing these sites from the Red River College network. Additionally, comparable data obtained through collaboration with MAIN institutions (i.e., University of Manitoba and Assiniboine Community College) was shared, pointing to the need for all institutions to act. The Senior Academic Committee approved the initiative and the blocking of contract cheating websites identified through the "cheating" filter beginning in March 2020. Although the network security system used at Red River College is unable to generate a tailored message for students attempting to access these sites, the plan is to promote support for students through the Academic Success Centre.

Staff were notified of the site blocking initiative through the daily *Staff News*. Feedback from instructors indicated uncertainty over the definition of a "contract cheating" website and whether citation generating websites were allowable tools. Others wanted to retain access to file sharing websites so they could check if their course materials had been shared. These questions highlight a need for professional development on the constantly evolving range of websites and services that offer academic help to students and the context for which certain services and tools would be permitted in a given course.

WHAT did we learn?

Our three-institution initiative allowed us to take a preliminary look at student activity on our institutional networks. We found that a relatively large number of students (i.e., unique users) were accessing the websites that we had identified as providing contract cheating services. We present the number of unique users who attempted to access contract cheating services by institution and month in Figure 3. Red River College also specifically tracked attempts to access the file-sharing sites known as Course Hero and Chegg (see Figure 4).

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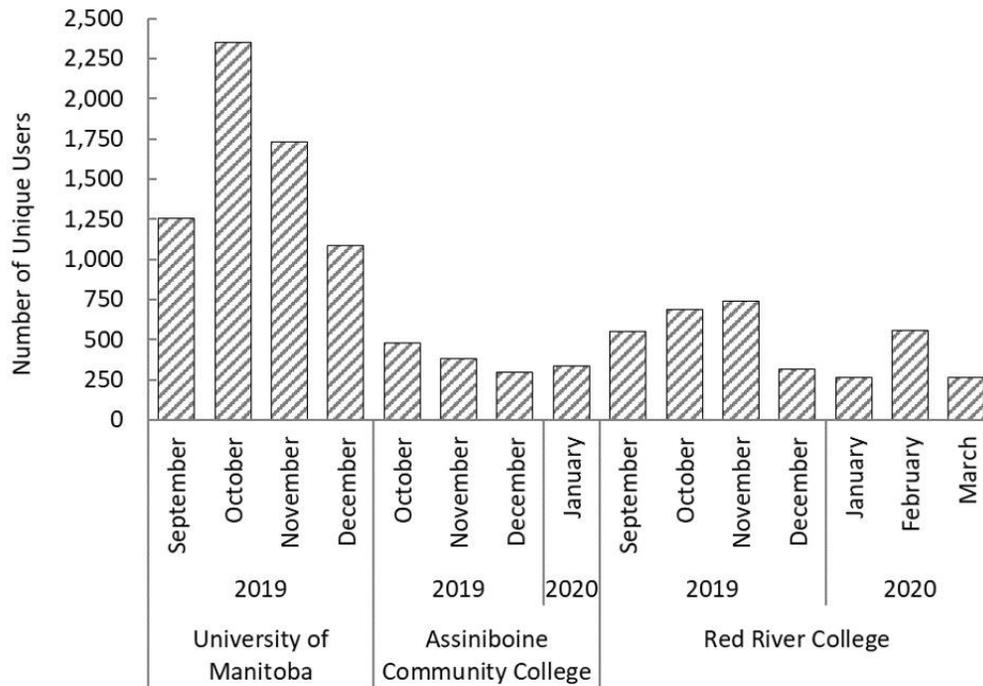
Figure 3. The number of unique users accessing websites classified as contract cheating (Assiniboine Community College and University of Manitoba) or cheating (Red River College) websites. Blocking these attempts was active for Assiniboine Community College and University of Manitoba during the months illustrated. Red River College tracked the number of users without blocking websites coded as cheating websites.

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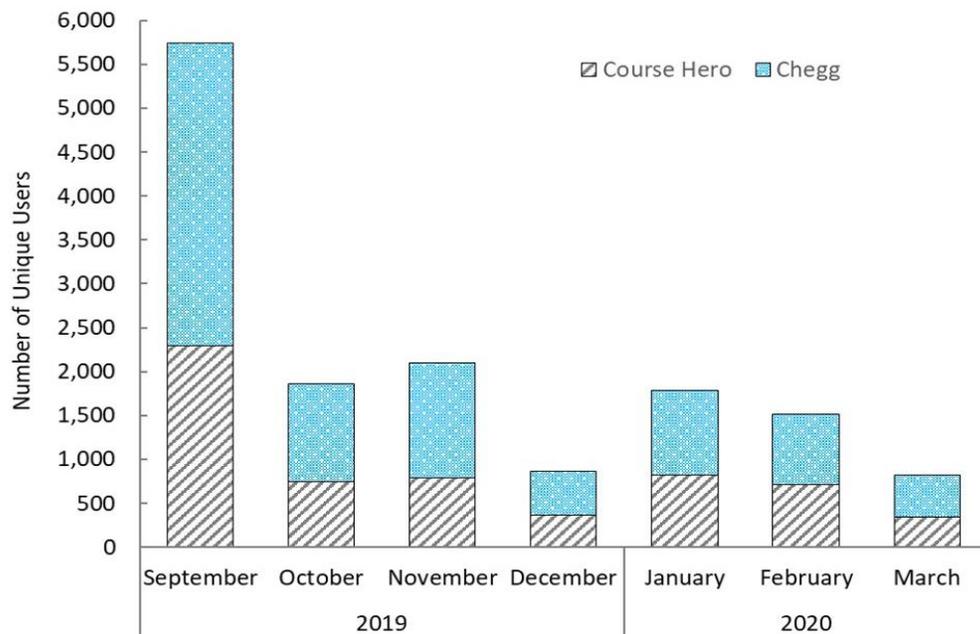
Figure 4. Attempts to access the file-sharing sites known as Course Hero and Chegg using the network at Red River College.

WHERE do we go from here?

Given that URL blocking is a practical way to protect students from making poor decisions regarding contract cheating, we embarked on an initiative at our three post-secondary institutions to block access to these websites from our campus network connections. Where possible, we worked closely with our respective IST departments to block access and to develop messages to educate students. These were grassroots initiatives (raised by staff working in the area of academic integrity) that received top-down support at each of our post-secondary institutions. Bertram Gallant (2011) argued that "the most successful on-campus integrity movements begin at the grassroots level and not by administrative fiat. Those with the motivation, inclination, and energy to begin a movement can couple that with smart strategies to involve the right people who will act as champions" (p. 28).

Through this initiative, we were able to learn more about the extent of the issue on our respective campuses, and plan to use this information to communicate with administrators that contract cheating is an important problem that deserves more attention and resources. We stress that a single initiative such as blocking access to websites is not enough to have a significant impact, as individuals who decide to take short-cuts will find other means to access these services. Indeed, in recent months, the novel coronavirus has changed

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education in ways that we might never have imagined. Students are no longer on physical campuses and are completing coursework largely in the virtual world. Contract cheating companies may be taking advantage of the world's health crisis and capitalizing on students' stress levels by increasing their marketing tactics (see Figure 5). Our education of contract cheating needs to ramp up. Students need more information about the short and long-term consequences of engaging in cheating practices with these companies, and to think critically about the choices they may make if tempted to engage in this or other forms of academic misconduct.
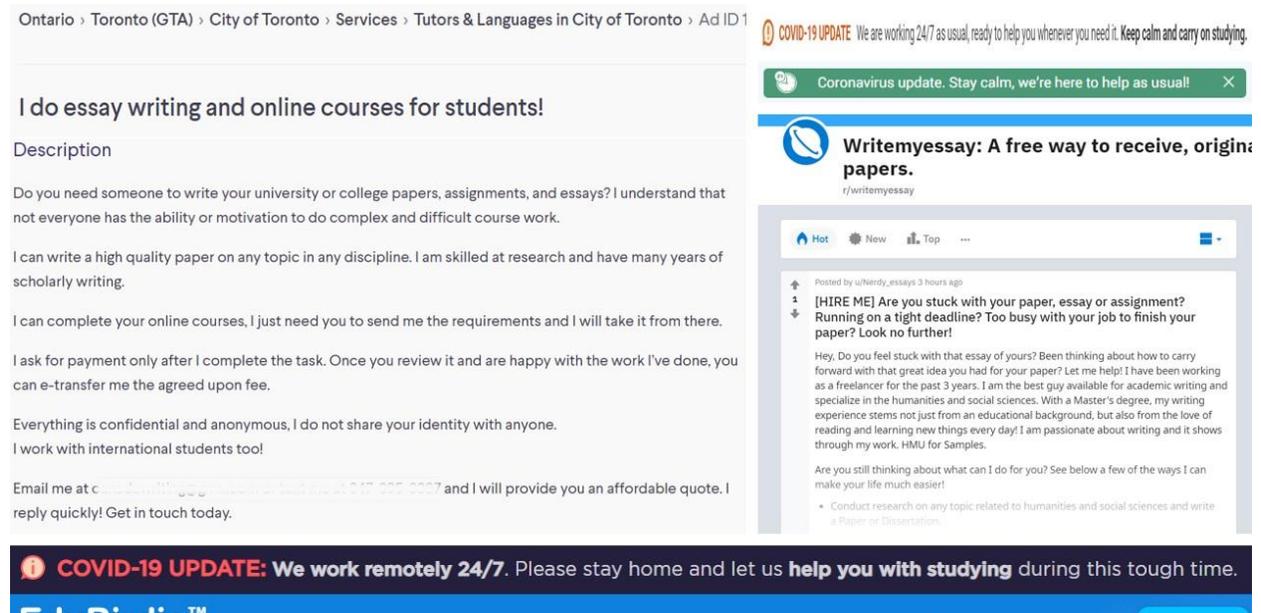
Figure 5. Screenshots of advertising for contract cheating services (images captured on April 3, 2020). Contract cheating companies are taking advantage of the covid-19 pandemic increasing their marketing tactics to remind students that these companies work remotely and they are here to help. Independent contract cheating providers use Kijiji and Reddit to advertise their services.

Academic integrity scholars recommend strongly that multi-faceted approaches involving institution-wide education, context-specific prevention strategies, and individual remediation are necessary to successfully promote academic integrity and prevent academic misconduct (e.g., Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006; Stephens, 2016). Therefore, a URL blocking initiative cannot be the sole strategy to prevent contract cheating. It is important for academic staff who have content knowledge in academic integrity and related topics to "provide a practical and real application of academic policies,

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and allow students to ask questions about them to gain a deeper understanding of the principles and application of academic integrity" (Rogerson, 2017, p. 15). There is much confusion surrounding the nature of the contract cheating industry for both students and faculty, thus academic staff can also benefit from professional development in academic integrity, teaching and learning (more generally), and the tools and strategies to support both (Huffman, 2014) to improve their course and assessment designs.

Limitations of the Initiative and Considerations

We recognize that there are several limitations of our URL blocking initiatives. For example, some have argued that implementing this type of strategy is like playing "whack-a-mole;" that is, a continual cycle of blocking one URL only to find that others pop up. While this may be true to some extent and suggests a never-ending cycle of regular identification of new websites and URLs, doing so is not as time-consuming as one might imagine (e.g., 15 minutes to identify 100 URLs). A second limitation is that we did not block online shopping, advertising, and social media platforms that have allowed individuals to post their assessment completion services. For example, one can readily find advertisements from users of Reddit and Kijiji advertising their services to complete others' academic work (see Figure 5) and we did not block access to these platforms.

Another limitation of our initiative is that file-sharing sites were not originally identified as contract cheating services. For example, Course Hero and Chegg, both of which are extremely popular with students, market their services to students as providing benign resources and study help (Figure 6), and being an "education technology company" (Mckenzie, 2019, n.p). Exploration of the websites suggests that completed assessments and answers are available upon request to students who subscribe to the services or upload their copies of course documents. Their recent partnership with Purdue's popular Online Writing Lab (OWL) has generated both concern and controversy. These types of companies have also recently begun to market to adjunct professors (known as sessional instructors in Canada) who, like students, are described as busy and in need of fast solutions to their educational and instructional needs (Lederman, 2020). Some of these "study assistance" companies elude existing IT filter software and some are viewed by academic and support staff as appropriate learning resources (Lederman, 2020; McKenzie, 2019), which then requires their individual consideration for being added to the list of blocked URLs.

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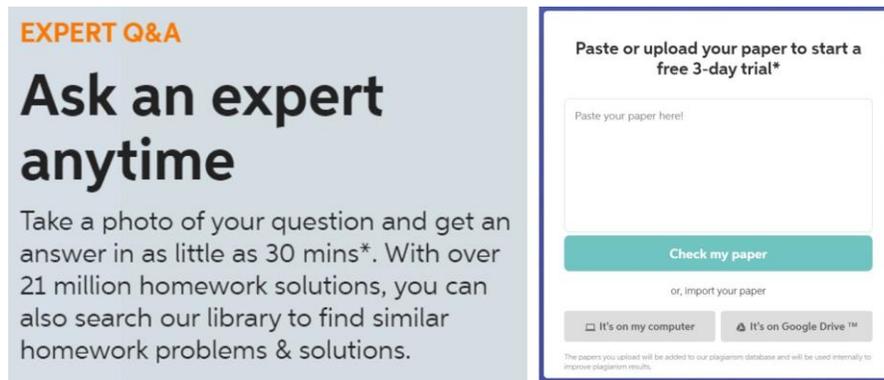
Figure 6. File-sharing and homework help websites advertising instant homework help.

What some of these file-sharing sites were identified as, however, and which allowed them to elude the filters at one institution, were "online shopping". This ties into the theory of the commodification of higher education. Bretag (2019) cautions against having education sold as a product to students who are viewed as mere consumers. Earlier research (e.g., Ajoku, 2015) described this same mindset as being transactional rather than transformational in the fact that the focus is simply on receiving grades and credentials rather than appreciating the learning process. A final way of viewing this commodification is by saying that some students are more results-orientated than they are process-orientated (Piascik & Brazeau, 2010), viewing learning as obstacles to overcome in graduating rather than the reason they are students. All these concepts describe an environment where students could feel enabled to simply retrieve their completed coursework from a contract cheating provider. Finally, we were unable to determine the number of students who attempted to access the contract cheating services but ultimately decided against their use.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Although blocking access to contract cheating websites on campus networks does not prevent students from seeking out and accessing these services using other means, doing so on the networks that we can control is one concrete institutional level strategy to communicate that such behaviour may violate academic integrity policies. We recognize that a single initiative will not eliminate academic misconduct. Moreover, the methods used to detect contract cheating (and plagiarism) "do not and cannot prevent students from cheating, but can discourage the practice while being successful in reducing the use of contract cheating behaviours" (Rogerson, 2017, p. 4). As educators, it is also important for us to focus more on the values and ethics of education than rules and policies when we discuss these matters with our students (Morris, 2018; Sefcik et al., 2019). By combining

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various educational, protective, and preventative strategies, however, we can increase the likelihood that students will make ethical decisions regarding their academic work.

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