

Reflections on COVID-19 and Academic Integrity

Nazanin Teymouri, NorQuest College

Sheryl Boisvert, NorQuest College

Keywords: academic integrity, assessment, Canada, COVID-19, reflection

Reflecting on our individual experiences and the effects of COVID-19 on academic integrity at NorQuest College, common themes were uncertainty, unforeseen challenges, and eventually, innovation. Within the business programs, instructors were quick to come together and to offer one another support and ideas to ensure the integrity of evaluations. Although factors such as delivery platforms and assessment types posed different issues for each instructor based on their specific courses, eventually the College stepped in with guidelines on how to collectively make it through the semester.

Initially, there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether courses would move to full on-line delivery and what would come of final exams. The conversation between instructors immediately turned to assessments and discussions on how to maintain the integrity of assignments and exams. Initially, nearly all instructors requested to have online proctoring services for the remaining exams. It soon became clear that would not happen. Everyone knew that with little time to plan for changes to course delivery and the shift to online exams, academic integrity was at risk. Two distinct perspectives came out of these discussions: those who believed there was no point in stressing over managing academic integrity and those who were not prepared to let it be compromised.

The challenge of finding a middle ground between these two perspectives was new to all of us as educators and the institution. Some instructors contacted publishers to ask if it was possible to strengthen controls on assessments offered through their online platforms, others simply prepared paper exams to be taken online. The issue of controlling cheating and plagiarism was just a small part of the discussion. Instructors worried that factors such as a lack of devices between students, allowing for extensions, and the inability to meet with students would compromise the integrity of their assignments. How could a student be expected to submit an assignment online if they did not have a reliable device at home? How could we know they were telling the truth or if they taking advantage of the situation? Arguments over how to maintain fairness between evaluations turned to a discussion of how to manage the specific challenges faced by each student within each class.

Before final exams, the College stepped in with unprecedented policies and guidelines on managing courses and assessments. The aim was to ensure that no student would be left behind. All programs were told to allow for extensions and deferrals on assignments. Our department was directed to allow for open books on all assessments. The controls that were suggested for evaluations were timing, shuffling, and randomizing questions. Some instructors used alternative assessments such as presentations instead of exams. While this seemed like a terrible idea, we noted there was little to no noticeable change in scores on evaluations compared to previous semesters. However, some instructors noticed their class average increase substantially.

We are still in the process of trying new services, procedures, and tactics to limit the possibility of misconduct. The most certain lesson from this experience is that when the well-being of learners and instructors came before the need to police our assessments, the system did not break down. Our students continued to learn and our efforts as educators did not go to waste.