

Sat, Mar 01, 2003

Students dial up trouble in new twist to cheating

Exam takers use the text-messaging feature of cell phones to get answers posted online
From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

As if using the internet to plagiarize term papers isn't enough for today's teachers to be concerned about, six University of Maryland students have admitted to a new wrinkle in the realm of technology-aided cheating: using their cell phones to access answer keys while taking an exam.

In a case that surprised university officials, a total of 12 students were accused of using the text messaging functions on their cell phones to receive messages from people outside the College Park, Md., campus exam hall during a December accounting exam. Those aiding the students accessed answer keys posted on the internet by a professor once the exam began.

But the students unwittingly fell into a sting set up faculty members, who suspected exam-takers were accessing the answer key. The business school professors posted a fake answer key, then checked the exams to see which matched the bogus answers.

It appears most of the 12 students hatched the plan independently of each other and were not connected, said John Zacker, head of the university's office of judicial programs. The school has seen a few similar cases before, but Zacker said this is the largest scheme uncovered on campus involving cell phones.

"We've had isolated cases in past semesters, but not in these numbers," he said. The case highlights the ongoing struggle schools face as they try to keep up with technologically savvy students. Some students, for example, troll the internet to find prewritten papers and other material to copy and pass off as their own.

Hitotsubashi University in Japan failed 26 students in December for receiving eMailed exam answers on their cell phones, the Associated Press reported. And in Taiwan, a man was caught Jan. 24 receiving questions from students taking a university admissions exam. The man wanted to use the questions to start a school to train students for the test.

The scope of the University of Maryland case is unprecedented nationally, said Diane Waryold, executive director of Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity. It's also a sign that students might have a technological edge on their older instructors.

"It's a generational issue," she said. "It's safe to say our students are far more [technologically] sophisticated."

The six University of Maryland students who confessed will fail the class and have a mark placed on their transcript that indicates they cheated. Five others either met with school officials or are awaiting trial by the school's student honor council.

The 12th student died over the winter break. Zacker did not know the circumstances surrounding the death and would not release the student's name, citing privacy laws.

The council is also looking for the people who sent the text messages to exam-takers. Some of those found so far were not university students, Zacker said.

The number of students caught cheating at the university has risen recently, from 97 cases in the fall semester of 2001 to 156 cases in the fall semester of 2002, Zacker said.

But the use of cell phones—many of which allow users to communicate using text messages—is a relatively new twist. Many phones allow the messages to be passed back and forth silently to avoid detection. The accounting exam, for example, was monitored by proctors walking the aisles who failed to notice the cheating.

Howard Frank, dean of the business school, said the fake test was posted after professors suspected students were using similar tactics during exams earlier in the semester. In response to the cheating, Maryland Provost William Destler sent a letter to faculty recommending they not post answer keys while an exam is ongoing. However, the school has no plans to bar students from bringing cell phones to class, Zacker said.