

# Naples Daily News

## Tougher to catch college online test takers, educators say

By Katherine Lewis

Sunday, July 15, 2007

The number of students taking online courses is surging, which is making things very difficult for educators who want to prevent cheating.

“We have gone from testing with paper and pencil to almost exclusively online,” said John Pribanic, a testing specialist at Edison College in East Naples.

An estimated 3.2 million U.S. students took online classes in fall 2005, according to the most recent figures from the Sloan Consortium, a group of online learning providers that studies trends in the field, and that figure is almost certainly substantially higher today.

Anna Coppola, an instructional leader for Florida Virtual School, said communication with students and parents is part of the key to preventing cheating.

Still, she said Florida Virtual School does have some procedures in place to prevent cheating. She said each student communicates with the teacher during class to ensure the material is being understood. She said it also is imperative that students and parents are aware of the consequences of cheating.

At Beacon High School, the Collier County School District’s Internet-based high school program, the solution to the cheating problem is simple.

“All students take the test here under direct supervision of an instructor,” said Jack Staples, assistant principal of alternative education and summer school for the district.

Staples said once a student finishes an exam at Beacon, the test is closed and students do not have access to open the test again.

Coppola said students can also be asked to take proctored exams at a library or school site.

“We have probably given 50 proctored exams in the last three months,” she said.

Edison College will be rolling out software that will allow a proctor to log into a student’s computer to ensure the student is working on the test and is not searching the Internet for answers, Pribanic said. But, for now, proctors have to monitor students with their eyes, he said.

“The students know we are watching them,” he said.

Florida Virtual School also uses a software program called Turn It In, which is a computer program that can identify plagiarized material in students' papers. The program can identify both material that was on the Web and material that has been put into the system before.

The program is also used at the University of Florida and Miami Dade College, according to the company's Web site.

But some schools are taking the technology to the next level. This fall, Troy University in Alabama will begin rolling out new camera technology for many of its approximately 11,000 online students, about a third of whom are at U.S. military installations around the world.

The device, made by Cambridge, Mass.-based Software Secure, is similar in many respects to other test-taking software. It locks down a computer while the test is being taken, preventing students from searching files or the Internet. The latest version also includes fingerprint authentication, to help ensure the person taking the test isn't a ringer.

But the new development is a small Web cam and microphone that is set up where a student takes the exam. The camera points into a reflective ball, which allows it to capture a full 360-degree image. (The first prototype was made with a Christmas ornament.)

When the exam begins, the device records audio and video. Software detects significant noises and motions and flags them in the recording. An instructor can go back and watch only the portions flagged by the software to see if anything untoward is going on — a student making a phone call, leaving the room — and if there is a sudden surge in performance afterward.

The inventors admit it's far from a perfect defense against a determined cheater. But a human test proctor isn't necessarily better. And the camera at least ensures that those people taking classes at a distance are on a level playing field, said Douglas Winneg, Software Secures president and CEO.

Troy graduate students will start using the device this fall, and undergraduates a year later. Software Secure says it has talked to other distance learning providers, too.

A potential future market is the standardized testing industry, which has struggled to find enough secure testing sites to accommodate growing worldwide demand for tests like the SAT college entrance exam and the GMAT for graduate school.

The cost to Troy students will be \$125 for the device.

Proponents of the device said it would eliminate many of the testing portions that are less than ideal for students now, including getting a proctor from a list of acceptable exam monitors such as clergy or commanding officers or arranging a proctored exam with a testing company and asking students to travel to one of their centers.

Coppola said she is not sure that a program could be invented to stop cheating completely.

“If students want to do something to get answers to an exam, they will find a way to do it,” she said.

Richard Garrett, a senior research analyst at Eduventures who closely follows online learning, said he finds the technology promising, particularly for large companies trying to streamline a now-messy part of their operation.

“The great unknown is, Will it be seen as too invasive?” he said.

Clearly, it won't be a good idea for everyone.

Stephen Slavin, dean of corporate and professional education at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, said his institution is always looking at new technologies, but recording students by camera probably would be pushing the boundary of their comfort level.

*Associated Press reporter Justin Pope contributed to this report.*

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