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In era of online exams, concerns over cheating develop new nuances

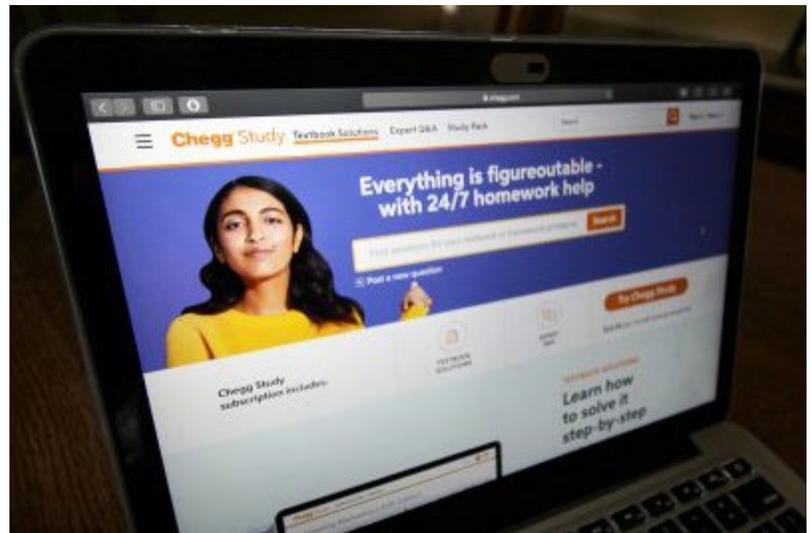
December 9, 2020 11:25 pm by Angela Yang

When Gus Betts-O'Rourke received a mass email from his professor announcing the entirety of his class's second midterm had been posted to the online tutoring service Chegg, he wasn't too surprised.

For the College of Engineering sophomore and his peers, the incident felt like a repeat of another Chegg scandal that occurred in the Spring after Boston University first pivoted to remote learning.

"After so many people got in trouble last semester for using Chegg and other services, why do people keep doing it?" Betts-O'Rourke said. "But it's expected that something like that is going to happen when you have online tests."

His professor, Selim Ünlü, had discovered the unauthorized posting over Thanksgiving break. Ünlü said his first reaction was disappointment, likening the situation to betrayal in a romantic relationship.



For Boston University students having difficulties managing school because of COVID-19, the morality of cheating during online exams is far from black-and-white. ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH YOSHINAGA/ DAILY FREE PRESS STAFF

“You think you have a good connection with the students, and you trust them,” Ünlü said. “And they cheat on you.”

Ünlü’s exam was open-note and open-textbook, and students had up to 110 minutes to finish the test once they began working.

“The only thing I told them is don’t get help from other people, do not get help online,” Ünlü said. “I think that’s fair.”

Betts-O’Rourke said he felt the exam was “very, very fair,” and that many questions were similar to ones the class reviewed during lecture.

Students at BU generally demonstrate high levels of integrity, Ünlü said, which makes him inclined to trust them enough to walk out of the room during a typical exam.

Ünlü said he caught the cheating in his Electric Circuits class accidentally: a colleague teaching the same course alerted him to possible cheating on a different section’s exam, held weeks after Ünlü’s, prompting him to search for his own questions online.

He found all of the test questions posted to Chegg within the eight to 10 hours the test was available for download and submission.

BU can collaborate with Chegg’s Honor Code Policy desk, as [demonstrated last semester](#), to reveal details about these postings. Additional circumstantial evidence then allows professors to build cases against the most likely perpetrators, even if they had used false identities online.

Breadcrumbs are always left behind, Ünlü said. Two of the solutions provided by Chegg experts, for example, were inaccurate, and students who submitted these solutions thus reveal themselves to have copied from the online resource.

In his Nov. 29 email to students, Ünlü urged the perpetrators to reveal themselves to him before they are found out by the University, in which case their penalty would rise in severity.

In a followup email the next day, he announced to the class two students were identified, and that the investigation now extends to the first midterm.

Ünlü said he plans to meet with both students who admitted to cheating and those who didn’t — but were caught by the University — to discuss disciplinary measures.

For first-time offenders who don’t dispute their violation, Ünlü said he is willing to recommend a grade reduction to their dean’s office, which will handle the case. Possible penalties, however, include expulsion and revocation of a student’s degree.

Although Ünlü wrote in his initial email he will have to modify the course’s final exam if the cheating issue is not fully resolved, he said he does not believe this will happen. To add new restrictions during tests, he said, would unfairly burden his

students.

“A couple of bad apples is going to ruin it for everyone,” Ünlü said. “Making strict arrangements such as having proctors monitoring every student on a webcam during the exams, effectively looking over their shoulders, will not help those that have exam anxiety.”

Rather than reformat his testing procedures, Ünlü said he hopes to convince his students not to cheat. Engineers must abide by a code of ethics, he said, and many architectural disasters have resulted from those who failed to follow these codes.

“If you cheat when you are working as an engineer,” Ünlü said, “you may do real harm and may even cost lives, eventually.”

To one computer engineering sophomore who requested anonymity, prohibiting online resources during exams does not seem realistic to what the field would require. She said her classes consistently taught her to seek answers online when working in a professional setting.

“To expect students to be tested on knowledge that we’re supposed to apply in the industry without the resources that we’d have in the industry,” she said, “seems so unreasonable and just so ineffective that I can see why a lot of students are quote-unquote cheating.”

She said, however, posting exam answers to Chegg is different and should not be tolerated, because students who submit these solutions are simply representing someone else’s work as their own.

But if a student discovers information online that helps them reach their answer, she said she believes there is no reason to bar them from using it, as long as they cite their sources and genuinely learn.

Many of her professors have turned to open-note exams, the student said, which has helped alleviate her test-taking stress — but learning class material from home has proved difficult regardless of these accommodations.

Her logic design class requires students to work with field-programmable gate arrays. Though she purchased one of her own, she said the board didn’t match up to the FPGAs at BU.

“The FPGA is very expensive, and unless you have the exact one used in the lab at school,” she said, “it is very difficult to write code and test what you have to test in a timely manner.”

While learning remotely, she also cannot access research laboratories, school computers and manufacturing facilities. Subject-specific tutoring centers, she added, cannot operate as effectively now as they did pre-pandemic.

“The reason I chose [BU] was because of the resources, and now they’re not being provided to me,” she said. “My grades are suffering as a result.”

Because of these factors, the student said, professors should act from a place of empathy. She said they should consider asking

— after penalizing a student — why they felt compelled to cheat, then work with them to address the root of the problem.

“Very few people go into an exam and say, ‘I’m just going to cheat. I’m just going to do it because I want to,’” she said.

“People want to know information. They want to prove that they have the skills to pass the class and to succeed and to graduate.”

While Ünlü’s Electric Circuits course typically hosts sophomores, engineering professor Irving Bigio is teaching a course this semester taken primarily by seniors and graduate students. He said cheating is less of a concern in his class.

Because the course is a specialized elective, the answers to its test questions are harder to answer through services such as Chegg, he said. Like Ünlü’s, Bigio’s exams are open-note and open-book.

“I tell them, I almost don’t care if you do a web search to find an answer to the problem,” Bigio said. “But I prefer you not do so, because you’re likely to be misled and you’re likely to not do as well as if you simply put your mind to using what you learned in the class.”

Bigio said he alters his exam problems every semester to prevent answers from surfacing on the internet, but the process is “very” time-consuming.

“It’s a lot of time and effort to come up with good exam problems that are sufficiently challenging,” Bigio said, “and yet not so hard as to be unfair: something that a good proportion of them can actually do it, if they actually prepared for the exam.”

The subject matter in a 200-level course such as Ünlü’s, however, is “quite simple,” which Ünlü said makes it difficult to change exam questions.

Some students have criticized professors for not modifying their exams each term, but Ünlü said he and his colleagues have been putting in more work than before classes turned remote. Aside from recording and uploading asynchronous content, he said, he also experimented with new exam formats to accommodate remote students.

“One of the comments that I’ve noticed on Reddit was, ‘Oh, the faculty don’t care and are lazy. They’re recycling their past exams with no changes,’” Ünlü said. “I resent that comment. Faculty are working hard ... to cope with challenges of Learn from Anywhere.”

Betts-O’Rourke said he has seen similar comments on Reddit expressing students might be cheating because professors are creating unnecessarily difficult exams.

“I kind of see that as an issue if we’re going to blame the faculty for something that’s really a student problem,” Betts-O’Rourke said. “That seems like just trying to avoid blame and trying to deflect responsibility in a way that isn’t fair to the faculty who’s trying their hardest.”

Another student who requested anonymity, a freshman in the College of Arts and Sciences, said she has cheated on multiple

exams this semester.

She said the morality of cheating has become less black-and-white in the wake of new challenges both students and faculty face this year, but that everyone must become more understanding of each other.

“As a student, I feel like we are attacking teachers way too harshly,” she said. “Just as students are experiencing this for the first time, so are teachers.”

What instructors should keep in mind, she said, is that students who have never suffered from mental health issues before are now more prone to depression — a condition she has lived with throughout her life.

“I know what it’s like to not be able to get into bed, to not be motivated, to not do any of that,” she said. “I’ve learned to deal with that while still being functional, but not everybody has that ability.”

Students with learning styles that don’t adapt well to remote work also struggle under LfA, she said. While some study best through reading a textbook, others rely on hands-on learning.

The student said BU students who depend on scholarships to stay in school — like herself — become more likely to cheat because, regardless of these challenges, they must keep their grades above a threshold.

However, she said, cheating should be less tolerable in some subjects than others. She said students planning to work in medicine or law, for example, would ultimately hurt others if they cheated in exams. But much of the time, she added, cheating affects the student alone.

“The fact that a choice that I’m making that’s only going to harm myself can get me kicked out in some instances kind of is crazy to me,” the student said. “People are literally just trying to survive.”

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article misstated that students uploaded their full test to Chegg and provided incorrect solutions to two questions. The article has been updated to reflect these changes.



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