Ghosting Inside the Machine:
Student Cheating, Online Education
and the Omertà of Institutional Liars

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ABSTRACT

'Ghosting' or the unethical practice of having someone other than the student registered in the course take the student's exams, complete their assignments and write their essays has become a common method of cheating in today's online higher education learning environment. Internet-based teaching technology and deceit go hand-in-hand because the technology establishes a set of perverse incentives for students to cheat and institutions to either tolerate or encourage this highly unethical form of behavior. For students, cheating becomes an increasingly attractive option as pre-digital safeguards—for instance, in-person exam proctoring requirements and face-to-face mentoring—are quietly phased out and eventually eliminated altogether. Also, as the punishments for violating academic integrity policies are relaxed, the temptation to cheat increases accordingly. For institutions, tolerating, normalizing and encouraging one type of student cheating, ghosting, improves the profitability of their online divisions by bolstering student enrolments and retention. In universities and colleges across the globe, online divisions and programs have become thriving profit centers, not because of the commonly attributed reasons (student ease, safety during health crises and convenience of taking courses online), but due to a single strategic insight: Ubiquitous opportunities for ghosting improve profit margins and maximize revenue.

KEYWORDS

Academic integrity – student cheating – higher education – epistemology – institutions – ethics

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> The culture of cheating is not an abstract phenomenon. It is a real part of people's lives. And most of us don't have a clue about how to deal with the tough ethical choices that come our way.
> —David Callahan (2004, 298)

> Ghosting: Taking a quiz, an exam, performing a laboratory exercise or similar evaluation in place of another; having another take a quiz, an exam, or perform an exercise or similar evaluation in place of a student, etc.
> —Penn State University Office of Judicial Affairs (2000)

'Ghosting' or the unethical practice of having someone other than the student registered in the course take the student's exams, complete their assignments and write their essays has become a common method of cheating in today's online higher education learning environment. Internet-based teaching technology and deceit go hand-in-hand because the technology establishes a set of perverse incentives for students to cheat and institutions to either tolerate or encourage this highly unethical form of behavior. In addition, online divisions of major universities and their administrators are highly invested in schemes that incentivize and normalize student cheating, as well as duping external stakeholder into falsely believing that academic dishonesty policies are strictly enforced.

For students, cheating becomes an increasingly attractive option as pre-digital safeguards—for instance, in-person exam proctoring requirements and face-to-face mentoring—are quietly phased out and eventually eliminated altogether. Also, as the punishments for

violating academic integrity policies are relaxed, the temptation to cheat increases accordingly. For institutions, tolerating, normalizing and encouraging one type of student cheating, so-called ghosting, improves the profitability of their online divisions by bolstering student enrollments and retention.

In universities and colleges across the globe, online divisions and programs have become thriving profit centers, not because of the commonly attributed reasons (e.g., student ease, safety during health crises and convenience of taking courses online, rather than face-to-face). Instead, their success is due to a single strategic insight: Ubiquitous opportunities for ghosting in online courses improve an online educational division's profit margin and maximize revenue. Students who would typically pursue trade school or opt out of higher education can potentially pass courses and "earn" degrees that would be nearly impossible, given their capabilities, in a brick-and-mortar, in-person setting.

THREE ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

For the sake of clarity, I have selected three examples of student ghosting, two of which I have been privy to and subsequently written about elsewhere (Ralston 2016a, 2016b and 2017). Each illustrates the complexity of the issue as well as the architecture of incentives nudging students, faculty and administrators towards increasingly perverse behaviors and outcomes. Behavioral economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2008) describe the concept of nudging:

> A nudge [. . .] is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not (6).

These nudges increase the likelihood that individual students will cheat and institutions will either silently acquiesce to the cheating or implicitly support and encourage the unethical behavior. Consistent nudging towards perverse actions and outcomes can, in extreme cases, contribute to the growth of a corrupt organizational culture.

Rather than argue that ghosting is unethical or that absolute moral prohibitions against its practice are justified, I seek to persuade the reader through the accretion of a series of real cases, each demonstrating that the motives and consequences of this form of cheating are so perverse as to shock the conscience of any reasonable person, with the exception of those institutional actors who directly or indirectly profit from it. The relationship between those actors who benefit and lie to protect the practice of ghosting, I suggest, is similar to a code of silence between members of a corrupt or criminal organization—what I refer to as an omertà of institutional liars.

Case 1: Harrisburg Area Community College and Online Plagiarism
Imagine that you are the president of a community college. To justify your institution's existence and your enviable salary, you must convince the board of trustees that the institution is meeting—possibly even exceeding—certain productivity benchmarks: for instance, a threshold number of new enrollments, solid graduation rates and satisfactory retention of students from year to year.

The ethical dilemma you face is whether to maintain academic integrity standards in order to make a principled stand against student cheating or relax those same standards in order to artificially inflate key productivity figures—for instance, graduation and retention rates. Which would you choose? Ever since higher education leaders and executive administrators adopted the business model, the scenario I have described is no longer so outlandish. In fact, it played out at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC), a community college system in Central

Pennsylvania serving over 70,000 students at five campuses and in its online program, led by President John Sygielski. HACC is no stranger to mismanagement and corruption. Poor administrative oversight has led its accreditor to twice issue warnings and temporarily suspend the community college's accreditation. Almost a year ago HACC's Vice President Nancy Rockey embezzled over $200k in school funds. She is now serving a federal prison sentence.

I inquired about the truth of rumors that HACC regularly conducts fake or rigged investigations into alleged violations of its academic integrity policy. I published the results of my inquiry in an article on the site Truth-out.org (Ralston 2016b). In addition, I launched an open records request under Pennsylvania's Right to Know law, asking HACC to disclose the details of one specific investigation to which I was privy. Unsurprisingly, HACC chose to claim an exemption so that it could hide the truth. I appealed the decision to the PA Office of Open Records. While the appeal was eventually defeated, it revealed that HACC's ersatz investigation of student cheating involved merely examining the student's transcripts, not vetting their academic work.

HACC's accreditor, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), investigated the matter. The accreditor sought to know, one, whether the institution failed to enforce its own academic integrity policy and, two, whether it afforded adequate safeguards to prevent student ghosting (someone other than the student taking exams and tests in the student's place, a common practice for cheating in online courses). President John Sygielski was sent a series of questions by MSCHE that he must answer pursuant to a possible third warning and suspension of HACC's accreditation. The outcome of the accreditor's investigation, similar to the right to know request, was a resounding rejection of the basis for the inquiry. How could we

know the truth, except by violating a student's right to privacy? The cover-up was complete. I would also discover that the instructor of the course in which the student successfully ghosted was a graduate of Penn State.

Case 2: Penn State and the In-person Exam Proctoring Requirement

As higher education institutions go, Penn State has suffered through an excessive number of scandals over the past two decades. The Sandusky scandal, Joe Paterno's unpopular banishment (as well as his subsequent death) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association sanctions have scarred the institution's reputation, though perhaps not permanently (Russo and Coyne 2012; CBS News 2020). The Paterno family and the successor to Penn State's president Graham Spanier have sought to recover the good name of the former football coach and Penn State. I worked as a philosophy faculty member at Penn State's Hazleton campus for seven years (2009 to 2017), including the year that the scandal erupted (2011).

When former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky raped boys from his charity, The Second Mile, Penn State administrators covered up the crimes in order to protect the institution's reputation. However, the victims came forward; Sandusky was convicted on 52 counts of child molestation, and Joe Paterno, Graham Spanier and other university officials who failed to report the abuse were ousted. Not surprisingly, Penn State's student enrollment declined sharply soon after the Sandusky scandal became news. Enrolment numbers, especially at the satellite campuses, are still far below what they were prior to the scandal. The only division of Penn State with growing enrolment is World Campus, Penn State's online division (Penn State News 2015).

In 2006, I was recruited to teach courses for World Campus. One of World Campus's academic integrity policies, intended to prevent systemic student cheating, was that the final

exams for all its courses had to be proctored in person by someone approved by the administration. Otherwise, administrators and instructors feared that students would pay someone more knowledgeable than them to take exams in their place. This unethical form of student cheating, called "ghosting," is specifically prohibited in the boilerplate academic integrity policy that is included in almost every Penn State course syllabus (Penn State University Office of Judicial Affairs 2000). For many students, finding a proctor and obtaining World Campus administrator approval were inconveniences. A year later, the policy was largely scrapped in favor of the honor system for most courses in Penn State World Campus's catalogue.[1]

In 2009, I formally protested the disappearance of the proctor requirement. Discovering that no good deed goes unpunished, I soon found myself without courses to teach the following term. In 2015, when I was invited back to World Campus and taught a single course, I complained about poor course design and my suspicion that many students were ghosting. One of the most engaged and industrious students in the course also complained to the Philosophy department chair and academic division dean that the course was poorly designed. I was promptly told that I would never teach another philosophy course for World Campus again. Administrators at Penn State World Campus doled out retaliatory punishment and expulsion swiftly, knowing that an internal whistle-blower could expose the institutionally supported cheating scheme.

The removal of the proctoring safeguard is obviously a sore issue for faculty. We are duty-bond to uphold academic integrity standards. Staff are likewise obligated to report

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[1] Only a handful of Penn State World Campus online courses in math, sciences and sociology still require proctors at Penn State.

violations of academic integrity policies. For executive leaders and administrators, though, dispensing with the proctoring requirement meant one less barrier to increasing enrollments and generating tuition dollars from Penn State's only growing division, World Campus. In this case, Penn State faculty, under threat of retaliation, merely bent to the will of ambitious administrators. The operative advice to World Campus instructors was, "Look the other way or suffer the consequences." Although I stood my ground, most faculty rely heavily on the income from teaching online, and therefore were pressured to acquiesce. Nevertheless, many faculty and staff at Penn State are complicit in the design and maintenance of a system that tolerates and encourages (or nudges) student cheating, specifically ghosting behavior.

Penn State World Campus serves an emerging and largely untapped student population from the corporate and military sectors. These students have limited time. For most, their employers are willing to pay the entire tuition bill or a substantial portion of it. Retaining and graduating these tuition-paying students is a major objective of Penn State. The removal of the exam-proctoring safeguard signalled to students that cheating in online courses was not only tolerated, but to some extent, also encouraged by Penn State. Academic integrity was nothing more than an empty slogan that took up space in the cluttered policies section of a course syllabus.

The decision by Penn State World Campus to scrap the in-person proctoring requirement in most online courses is not on par with the Sandusky scandal cover-up. Nonetheless, the lesson the child sex abuse scandal teaches us is that it is incumbent on bystanders to voice their outrage when higher education leaders try to obscure the truth for private or institutional gain. Former Penn State graduate student and instructor Kristin Rawls (2012) expressed optimism that others

will see the Sandusky scandal as a call for social action and public accountability: "Ultimately, I hope that the Sandusky case will have an important public impact, empowering others like me to speak out and motivating the public to demand answers about just what goes on in State College — even beyond the football stadium."

In the same spirit, it should be asked why World Campus decided to lower its academic integrity standards. Academic integrity advocates ought to demand accountability, including an explanation as to why alternatives to in-person proctoring have never been deployed to prevent ghosting in Penn State's online courses. Penn State's key productivity measures include retention and graduation rates, which help in the recruitment of new cohorts of online students. These students apply, accept places and enroll at Penn State World Campus every year, hoping to eventually graduate and earn a Penn State degree (note: World Campus degrees look identical to in-person degrees). A reputation for lax enforcement of academic integrity policies attracts a certain kind of student: namely, those who would otherwise not be able to pass courses without cheating.

Lowering academic integrity standards and encouraging systemic cheating in online courses have artificially inflated the figures for these output measures. Who says that cheaters never prosper? At Penn State, not only have the student cheaters benefited from the non-enforcement of academic dishonesty policies, but so have the administrators, faculty and staff who look the other way and permit the practice of ghosting to go unchecked—not entirely dissimilar to how administrators protected child sexual predator Jerry Sandusky for 30 years.

Case 3: Harvard University and Syllabus Regret Clauses

In 2012, Harvard University was rocked by a highly publicized cheating scandal. The controversy involved 125 students enrolled in an introductory Government course on congressional politics (Pérez-Peňa & Bidgood 2012). The instructor-of-record assigned the students a take-home exam with the stipulation that they could not collaborate with each other. After a teaching assistant discovered exams with identical answers to questions, the instructor took the matter to the Harvard College Administrative Board, which reviewed the evidence and conducted an investigation. Students, parents and lawyers hired by the students' families defended the practice by referring to the custom or convention at Harvard of collaboratively completing take-home assignments and exams. The scandal and its aftermath, which involved the withdrawal of 70% of the students investigated from the university, was remarkable, not just because it occurred at a flagship Ivy League institution, but because of its "unprecedented scope and magnitude" (Robbins 2012).

Is the Harvard case an instance of ghosting because it involves a student having someone else (in this case, a fellow student) take an exam in their place? The main difference is that the Harvard case, unlike the Harrisburg and Penn State cases, did not occur within an online environment. Therefore, it invites the question whether ghosting requires an enabling digital or internet technology to count as ghosting. Obviously, the online delivery framework facilitates the easy misrepresentation of exam and essay authorship by the student. Actually, the technological means of cloaking identity need not be digital or internet-based, so long as the objective is to deceitfully pass off another's work as the work of the registered student. In the Harvard case, all the workers happened to be registered students, divvying up the take-home exam into pieces, distributing them to workers, efficiently completing the parts and then

reassembling and submitting the collaborative effort as the work of a single student. If the instructor had not stipulated that collaboration was off the table, the unethical activity of ghosting would not have occurred.

The Harvard cheating scandal was notable not just for the university's swift move to punish the transgressors and the public outrage it inspired, but also for Harvard University's more conciliatory long-term approach to handling individual cases of cheating. In the aftermath of the scandal, Harvard faculty have become innovators in the academic dishonesty space, introducing regret clauses into their course syllabi. According to Lindsay Ellis (2020) of *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* these clauses stipulate that so long as "first-time offenders [of academic integrity rules] come forward and admit what they did within 72 hours, an instructor will give a failing grade on the assignment — but will not refer the case for disciplinary action." Ellis spotlights a Computer Science faculty member, David J. Malan, who adopted the use of syllabus regret clauses, fully knowing that the practice would be controversial. He views cheating behavior as largely excusable, indicating troubles and struggles elsewhere in a student's life. In Malan's words, "Acts of academic dishonesty were a symptom of larger concerns or pressures in their life. [. . .] [The conversations with students about cheating] made it much more real, and much more difficult, because now you are on the front lines, discussing these things with students." Malan documented the number of cases before and after the introduction of the regret clause into his syllabus. To his surprise, the number of cases of academic dishonesty increased. To anyone familiar with how nudging works, this outcome is predictable. Syllabus regret clauses offer students tempted to cheat a legitimate way to escape punishment. It nudges them to cheat by reducing punishment or negating the disincentive. As rational actors, they are more likely to engage in cheating behavior, knowing full well that they have an easy escape route in case the

10

scheme fails. Despite the morally problematic nature of syllabus regret clauses, the practice has gained momentum, as faculty and administrators at other universities look to Harvard as a leader in successfully normalizing student cheating.

THE IT'S-NOT-SO-BAD OBJECTION

A possibly lethal objection to my account is that it is based on thoroughly anecdotal evidence. The primary reason why my argument is susceptible to such an objection is that I rely on the accretion of only a handful of cases, most of which I have intimate details of, but that do not represent the majority of cases out there. In the lingo of social scientists, the conclusions I reach are not externally valid. I call this the 'It's-Not-So-Bad-Objection' since it seeks to minimize the scope and impact of the student ghosting problem by recourse to statistical or experimental data, or by way of a technical objection to approaches, such as my own, which rely on limited numbers of cases.

Christian Miller (2020) deploys a version of this objection in his article titled "Just How Dishonest Are Most Students?" He assures readers that the problem is not so widespread as is often claimed. In addition, Miller insists that it can be easily managed if students were to publicly pledge to abide by honor or academic integrity codes:

> Honor pledges are not only surprisingly effective in curbing cheating; they also promote honesty. Students who abide by them refrain from cheating, not because they can't, but because they choose not to.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Empirical research has repeatedly found that schools that are committed to honor codes have significantly reduced cheating rates compared with schools that are not (Miller 2020).

Miller culls his evidence that the problem is not so severe and that honor pledges are an easy fix from an article by McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001), surveying a decade of research on student cheating. Not only is the article dated, but Trevino holds a faculty position at Pennsylvania State University, an institution that is deeply invested in its own scheme of normalized cheating.

Ignored by Miller are many recent studies reaching the opposite conclusion: namely, that student cheating is widespread because the rewards outweigh the risks. Unlike my own account, these studies rely on larger numbers of cases and demonstrate external validity or representativeness. For instance, in one study, 75% of college alumni surveyed admitted that they cheated at least once during their undergraduate years and 22% admitted to regular cheating, including ghosting and contract cheating (i.e., students paying others to write papers and take exams in their place) (Yardley et al., 2009). In McCabe's (2005) study, surveying over 50,000 undergraduate students, 70% confessed to cheating. Although there is no empirical proof that cheating is more pervasive in online courses and programs as compared to in-person alternatives (e.g., Harris et al., 2020), it is nevertheless widely accepted that the obstacles to cheating are less significant in an online learning environment (Nehls, 2014, 473). King, Guyette and Piotrowski (2009) found that 73.6% of students surveyed believed that it was easier to cheat in online versus traditional courses. In Curran, Middleton and Doherty's (2011) study of undergraduate cheating in online courses, they conclude that online technology not only lowers the barriers to academic dishonesty, but also makes it less likely that the cheater will be caught and punished. Consequently, online students are tempted to commit acts of academic dishonesty when they would not otherwise do so in a brick-and-mortar setting.

The It's-Not-So-Bad objection is part of an overall strategy higher education administrators deploy to minimize external stakeholders' perceptions that cheating is widespread, tolerated and even encouraged by colleges and universities. According to Nehls (2104), "As online college course enrollments continue to grow, academic dishonesty in the computer-mediated environment is going to be an important consideration for institutions of higher education" (475). One of the forces that has emboldened administrators to adopt this strategy is the increasing neoliberalization and corporatization of the modern university, to which we turn next.

THE NEOLIBERAL/CORPORATE UNIVERSITY MACHINE

For the past 40 years, scholarly accounts of the neoliberalizaton of the Academy have been prodigal (Peters and Jandric 2018). The Public University (circa 1960 to 1980), emphasizing education as a human right and a socialization experience in preparation for a more fulfilling life, transformed into the Corporate University (circa 1990 to present), conceiving education as a commodity and a vocational experience in preparation for employment and a financially secure life. Some shocking recent trends exemplify ways in which the modern university is becoming increasingly corporatized, such as the use of false marketing hype (or "innovation theater") to introduce Blockchain technology initiatives and the profit-maximizing shift from offering traditional degrees to selling microcredentials (Ralston 2019, 2020).

In the corporate university, in contrast to the public university, standards of productivity and excellence in scholarship and pedagogy have changed drastically. The lived experience and wisdom of highly educated peers and colleagues were supplanted by budget-connected measures, such as impact, enrollment revenue and return on investment. Human labor is increasingly displaced by digital technologies. According to Henry and Susan Giroux (2012), "The corporate

university is descending more and more into what has been called 'an output fundamentalism,'

prioritizing market mechanisms that emphasize productivity and performance measures that

make a mockery of quality scholarship and diminish effective teaching — scholarly

commitments are increasingly subordinated to bringing in bigger grants to supplement

operational budgets negatively impacted by the withdrawal of governmental funding."

The Neoliberal/Corporate University alters higher education priorities. At the top of its

priority list are quality assurance, process efficiency and managerial outcomes. The Public

University's "quest for truth" and mission to acculturate young people to the demands of

citizenship, preparing them for meaningful participation in a democracy, fall by the wayside.

According to Peter Jandrić and Sarah Hayes (2020), the problem with the corporate shift in

university priorities is that the new reality fosters discontent:

> The Neoliberal University causes different types of discontent. From a student
> perspective, excessive reliance on adjunct work lowers the quality of instruction—
> overworked, underpaid and often without their own offices where they could see students,
> many adjuncts are simply unable to meet student needs (Ginsberg 2010). From a staff
> perspective, adjunct work is associated with poverty, job insecurity, lack of long-term
> career prospects and the lack of tenure protection . . . From a social perspective, the
> Neoliberal University restricts upward mobility and promotes inequality. The
> commodified Neoliberal University sees knowledge and education as goods that can be
> sold and bought, and significantly reduces the public sphere . . . [and] is supported by
> digital technologies, which enable practices such as automated testing and surveillance.
> More importantly, however, the Neoliberal University is based on powerful, rationalist
> logic in policies that might appear convincing, but when scrutinized, the discourse can
> lean towards irrationality . . . [T]he success of educational systems is measured and
> evaluated predominantly though quantitative means—and the use of this or that
> technology is only a symptom of a wider ideological trend of McDonaldization of higher
> education (168).

However, the neoliberal/corporate shift has been welcomed by some: specifically, those

administrators seeking to maximize student retention, graduation rates and tuition revenue.

Ignoring, permitting and normalizing student cheating schemes means more students who would ordinarily fail out are retained and graduate.

Members of the Neoliberal/Corporate University value productivity outcomes over academic excellence. Among higher education executives, the claim that progress should not be undercut by antiquated ethical standards, such as academic integrity rules, has been gaining wider purchase. Harvard University's move to support Syllabus Regret Clauses is a case in point. HACC's decision to derail individual investigations into student ghosting in hopes of hiding a more extensive scheme that normalizes the activity is also indicative of this corporate attitude. So is Penn State's decision to eliminate the proctoring requirement in its online courses. Why would these institutional actors risk exposure? The McDonaldization of higher education requires that its advocates and enablers achieve increasing levels of productivity no matter what the moral costs.

THE LIES INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS TELL US

A symptom of this push to normalize student ghosting is an omertà of institutional liars, whereby institutional actors—faculty, staff, administrators, executive leaders as well as accreditors— repeat the lie that academic integrity policies are strongly enforced, while the epistemological barriers to exposing the truth climb higher and higher.

An omertà is an unwritten pact or code of silence, typically adopted within corrupt or criminal organizations (such as the mafia). Members of the organization refuse to give evidence of criminal activity to authorities. The evidence here is the true rationale or *mea culpa* for non-enforcement of academic integrity policies: the desire to meet and exceed institutional productivity measures, such as enrollment and graduation figures. Actors sworn to uphold the

15

omertà tell lies to maintain the appearance of legitimacy or law-abidingness, while meanwhile committing criminal acts—in this case, nudging students to cheat. That is the dupery at work in online higher education divisions: Administrators declare that they are committed to academic integrity, while actively incentivizing and normalizing student ghosting behavior.

Lies higher education administrators tell us include statements which we would typically interpret as consistent with rules and policies that prohibit academic dishonesty, as follows:

"There is zero tolerance at this institution for academic dishonesty."

"Cheating is unethical student behavior that merits punishment."

"Having someone else take your exam or complete your essay is unfair because it gives some students, those who ghost, an advantage over those who play by the rules."

The truth behind these statements by institutional liars is instead closer to the following:

"We tolerate cheating and even encourage it insofar as it improves productivity, measured in graduation and retention rates."

"It is prudent to treat cheating as excusable student behavior, claiming that it indicates other challenges in students' lives, when it actually makes our lives (instructors, staff and administrators) easier, since we do not have to enforce academic integrity policies."

"Ghosting is fine, so long as you the student takes every precaution not to get

caught, given that the institutional barriers to such cheating behavior have been

significantly weakened (e.g., by removing proctoring and mentoring requirements

or introducing syllabus regret clauses)."

Normalizing student cheating in academic institutions is roughly similar to normalizing corruption in other complex organizations. According to Ashford and Ana (2003), the three processes integral to the normalization of corruption are (1) institutionalization, (2) rationalization and (3) socialization. *Institutionalization* involves the conversion of corrupt policies, practices and behaviors into patterned routines. The analogue in normalizing student cheating is a pattern of institutional actions that make cheating appear commonplace and acceptable, such as syllabus regret clauses, instructors regularly ignoring clear evidence of cheating and deans who consistently mete out minimal sanctions to students guilty of academic dishonesty. *Rationalization* refers to the capacity institutional actors have for justifying corrupt policies, practices and behaviors. For example, Penn State vindicated its removal of the proctoring requirement on the grounds that it was inconvenient for students and inefficient for faculty and staff to administer. *Socialization* indicates the habituation and transference of corrupt policies, practices and behaviors to new members of the organization through formal and informal mechanisms. Indeed, the danger of normalizing student cheating is that it socializes young people to easily accept and even embrace unethical practices in whatever institution to which they belong (Ralston 2016b). Through institutionalization, rationalization and socialization, student cheating and its official incentivization—similar to organizational corruption—gradually come to appear normal and acceptable.

Once academic integrity standards are significantly weakened—as witnessed at HACC, Penn State and Harvard University—productivity goals (e.g., enrollment, retention and graduation rates) are easier to achieve. Students who would ordinarily be incapable of completing a university degree are nudged by cheating-friendly policies to cheat their way through challenging curricula and degree programs. However, the cheaters are not just so-called 'bad apples'—as institutional actors would like to portray them. They are not alone in their unethical behavior. Similar to normalized corruption, normalized cheating sets in through processes of institutionalization, rationalization and socialization. Responsibility is shared with faculty, staff and administrators who passively (e.g., ignore or look the other way) or actively enable the behavior (e.g., proposing or supporting cheating-friendly policies). It would be more apt to say that the whole barrel of apples has turned bad.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE POSTDIGITAL

Too many higher education executives give lip-service to academic integrity, while violating its spirit and letter. They dupe outsiders into holding the false belief that higher education institutions are committed to student honesty, while nudging them to cheat and celebrating the productivity outcomes that this dupery enables. We might wonder why so many higher education insiders, arrayed along the entire ideological spectrum, implicitly accept student cheating, while outsiders explicitly oppose it.   One possible explanation is a phenomenon called 'epistemic factionalizaton'—or, more plainly, groupthink.

Weatherall and O'Connor (2018) describe epistemic factionalization in stark terms: "[W]e so often see beliefs with strange bedfellows, especially in cases where there is profound mistrust of those with different views . . . [or where having] different beliefs [than the out-group] is

sufficient to account for epistemic factionalization" (19). In other words, heavy socialization in the logic of neoliberalization produces an odd faction (strange bedfellows) of institutional actors, each holding the ethically questionable belief that student cheating, especially ghosting, is a necessary evil for online education to generate enrollments and tuition revenue. These strange bedfellows form a cabal of institutional liars, whose ómerta is to hide the true rationale for normalizing academic dishonesty: improved productivity at any costs.

Pre-digital measures to combat student cheating—for instance, in-person exam proctoring requirements and student mentoring—have been progressively eliminated by online higher education divisions, such as at Penn State. From a postdigital perspective, we should insist that digital technology not receive undue privilege relative to non-digital and pre-digital alternatives. In other words, digital pedigree ought not to be the sole criterion in adjudging the value of educational technology (Jandrić 2019). Even though the ghosting did not occur in an online environment, the Harvard case, appreciated from a postdigital perspective, remains just as relevant as the online ghosting cases. Indeed, what we learn from the Harvard case is that higher education administrators, who nudge students towards cheating behavior, will invest significantly in normalizing that behavior through official channels (e.g., by approving syllabus regret clauses or eliminating in-person proctoring requirements). This is what Nehls (2014) calls the "fraud triangle," whereby incentive pressures, opportunity and rationalizing attitudes create the space for student cheating (484). They can also engender the perfect storm of conditions for an institutionally approved cheating scheme.

One way to counter epistemic factionalization is for out-group actors (e.g., politicians, experts, consultants, higher education reformers, community activists), who are critical of student

cheating, to demand that colleges and universities enforce their academic integrity policies. Such

demands might include a mandate to return to pre-digital counter-measures that stymie student

ghosting. A postdigital strategy for addressing student cheating would democratize the academic

integrity space, inviting a multiplicity of approaches and diverse voices into the conversation

about how to promote student honesty and integrity. Such a strategy could, for instance, involve

verifying the identity of students who are at risk of ghosting behavior (Kraglund-Gauthier,

Wendy and Young 2012). Ultimately, a postdigital strategy would reduce student ghosting and

incentivize ethical behavior through the inclusion of out-groups (to reduce epistemic

factionalization) and the leveraging of increased accountability. It might also expose the dupery

committed by institutional actors who seek to incentivize and normalize academic dishonesty.

However, in the Neoliberalized/Corporate University, the barriers to transparency are significant.

Institutional actors are likely to continue nudging students to engage in cheating behavior,

thereby boosting productivity numbers, while insisting that academic integrity policies are strictly

enforced, even at the risk that whistle-blowers and others will expose their lies.

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