How Students 'Ghost' Through Online Degree Programs

As a college ethics professor, I try not to give advice to my students about how to cheat—even inadvertently. However, I sometimes slip and mention a loophole that students have been exploiting ever since the advent of online education. Unfortunately, the loophole keeps getting larger. By not closing it, colleges and universities have turned their online divisions into huge profit centers.

In his 2004 book *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, David Callahan chronicles the growing acceptance of dishonest practices in American society. Mort Zuckerman, in a 2006 review of Callahan's book, titled "Our cheating hearts," notes that the "locations" of cheating and scandal have multiplied. Public vice has become all too common. As a result, young people feel increasing pressure to imitate their less-than-righteous role models. In the realm of education, Zuckerman laments the rising frequency of internet-enabled cheating.

'Ghosting' or having others take a student's exams, complete their assignments and write essays for them has become a common method of cheating in online courses and degree programs. Penn State University, where I teach, defines 'ghosting' as "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 the student, etc."

The practice of ghosting has also gained traction in the U.K. Julia Molinari of *The Guardian* exposed online 'proof-reading' businesses that ghost-write papers for paying British students. At the University of Huddersfield in England, administrators have created a set of guidelines to address it,

titled ["Notes on managing allegations of ghosting."](#)

It's not difficult to prevent ghosting in online courses by, for instance, requiring in-person exam proctors, employing [software to check for originality of writing](#) and even using [computer cameras to verify a student's identity](#) during tests. Rather than combat the cheating problem, most universities with online divisions ignore it. Oftentimes their accreditors do the same.

Why? The answer is simple: Online education is a highly profitable business and ghosting improves the margins.

Enrollments in online [education programs are booming](#). So are tuition revenues. Students who would not otherwise pass in-person courses and graduate from brick-and-mortar degree programs are now taking on-line courses and matriculating from online programs with the help of family, friends and even paid consultants who complete their coursework for them.

In a past [*Intellectual Takeout* piece](#) I drew attention to Harrisburg Area Community College's record of tolerating and encouraging student cheating in order to improve retention and graduation rates. After I presented evidence of student cheating (which involved ghosting) to the accreditor, [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#), they refused to take action.

So, what do we do when the Ivory Tower no longer cultivates honesty, integrity and virtue in young people, but instead tolerates and encourages duplicity, fraud and vice? How do we get universities that operate on the business model to stop students from indulging their technology-enabled cheating hearts?