

Is a 'Regret Clause' a Good Idea for Cases of Academic Dishonesty?

CAROLINE CROSSON GILPIN . New York Times (Online) , New York: New York Times Company. Jun 1, 2017.

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Should academic dishonesty be treated differently in computer programming classes than in other subjects?

FULL TEXT

To what extent is plagiarism or any form of academic dishonesty common in your school? Have you ever copied someone else's work and turned it in as your own? If so, were you caught in the act?

What are the rules, and the penalties, for academic dishonesty in your school? Do you think those rules and penalties are fair and effective? Why or why not?

In "As Computer Coding Classes Swell, So Does Cheating," Jess Bidgood and Jeremy B. Merrill write:

College students have flooded into computer science courses across the country, recognizing them as an entree to coveted jobs at companies like Facebook and Google, not to mention the big prize: a start-up worth millions.

The exploding interest in these courses, though, has coincided with an undesirable side effect: a spate of high-tech collegiate plagiarism. Students have been caught borrowing computer code from their friends or cribbing it from the internet.

"There's a lot of discussion about it, both inside a department as well as across the field," said Randy H. Katz, a professor in the electrical engineering and computer science department at the University of California, Berkeley, who discovered in one year that about 100 of his roughly 700 students in one class had violated the course policy on collaborating or copying code.

Computer science professors are now delivering stern warnings at the start of each course, and, like colleagues in other subjects, deploy software to flag plagiarism. They have unearthed numerous examples of suspected cheating.

At Brown University, more than half the 49 allegations of academic code violations last year involved cheating in computer science.

At Stanford, the alma mater of the founders of Google, Snapchat and countless other internet wonders, as many as 20 percent of the students in one 2015 computer science course were flagged for possible cheating.

And at Harvard, where Computer Science 50 is practically its own brand, with T-shirts, slickly produced videos and an online audience of thousands, the class distinguished itself last fall in a more dubious way: According to The Harvard Crimson, more than 60 students were referred to the university's honor council, a committee that reviews allegations of academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, and violations of the honor code.

In interviews, professors and students said the causes were not hard to pin down.

To some students drawn to the classes, coding does not come easily. The coursework can be time-consuming.

Troves of code online, on sites like GitHub, may have answers to the very assignment the student is wrestling with, posted by someone who previously took the course.

"You've got kids who were struggling with spending a third of their time on their problem sets with the option to copy from the internet," said Jackson Wagner, who took the Harvard course in 2015 and was not accused of copying. "That's the reason why people cheat."

Complicating matters is the collaborative ethos among programmers, which encourages code-sharing in ways that might not be acceptable in a class. Professors also frequently allow students to discuss problems among themselves, but not to share actual code, a policy that some students say creates confusion about what constitutes cheating.

Students: Read the entire article, then tell us:

—Do you think academic dishonesty should be handled differently in computer programming classes than in other subjects? If so, how? If not, why not?

—Is the Harvard professor David J. Malan’s “regret clause,” which lets students who cheat and admit it within 72 hours receive an unsatisfactory or failing grade on the assignment, and avoid further discipline —unless they do it again —a good idea? Why or why not?

—Would you use the “regret clause” if your teacher offered it after a test, and you needed it? Why or why not?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.

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