

Ensuring academic integrity of online assessments

When we administer final assessments in an online setting, we might feel that we have less ability to manage and control student responses to those assessments. While we might find ourselves responding to this feeling by working to try and ensure that we can monitor students as they take final exams and assessments, this can lead us to unproductive assessment decisions. It's best to first consider *why* students might cheat and then plan assessments that help students make better choices. This means adjusting our assessments and how we communicate about them as well as by using sound online assessment practices.

Some key strategies for helping students make good choices

Understand what motivates cheating.

The research suggests that most students cheat because of anxiety stemming from two factors: their perception of the role the assessment will play in their grade and their sense of their own preparation for the assessment. If your final assessment is worth a large portion of their final grade, students may decide it is safer to cheat than to perform poorly when the stakes are so high. If students don't feel they've had enough preparation for your final assessment, they will be tempted to take shortcuts. Your students are already anxious and stressed because of our current situation and because they may not feel well prepared for online work, so consider some of the strategies below to lower their anxiety and make cheating less likely.

Tell students the purpose and value of the final assessment.

When students are anxious, they stop thinking clearly about assessments and simply see them as difficult hoops to jump through—in any way they can. Take the time to explain to students—in writing—that the final assessment will give them valuable information about what they've learned this semester. Remind them that they can use this information about their learning as they continue their academic work. It is also valuable to help them see the real-world application of the final assessment: students don't always realize that the kinds of challenges we give them will prepare them for new experiences in their own lives. For example, you can help them see that their final essay is similar to the kinds of writing they may need to do in their future career or that the exercises they will complete are a key to success in the fields they are interested in.

Reduce student anxiety by acknowledging that assessments have their limitations.

When students become anxious about the weight and perceived meaning of assessments, they are not only tempted to take shortcuts, they may also underperform due to that anxiety, even if they are not cheating! There are two messages that work well to lower students' anxiety about assessments.

The first message you should send to students is that the final assessment is *one* component of your grading scheme and that they have completed other components that are already built into their grade. This can help them put the final assessment into the larger picture of all their efforts in your course and make it seem less overwhelming. To give this message more meaning, it's worth reviewing the different components that make up final grades with students so that they can contextualize their final assessment as one of several assessments.

The second message you should send to students is that you are aware that any assessment can only measure so much: no assessment is a perfect measure of their abilities. Communicate to students that while you want them to try their best, you realize that the assessment can't show you everything that they know and understand. It can be very calming for students to approach their final as one measure of their learning rather than seeing the final as a definitive diagnosis of their abilities. To give this message more meaning, consider allowing students an opportunity to describe three things they learned in the course that they weren't able to demonstrate on their final assessment so that they have a place to show you their learning in ways that your assessment may not capture.

Use helpful settings on Blackboard for your final exam.

If your final assessment is an exam, Blackboard provides settings that help reduce student anxiety and that can help students feel less tempted to share their exam with other students.

To reduce student anxiety, make your exam available for a span of time that is much longer than the time they will actually spend taking the exam. This allows students to access the exam and take it when they are able. You can still set a time limit for the exam (e.g., 90 minutes or 2 hours): Blackboard allows you to set a timer so that students see the time that they have to complete the exam, but are not timed out if they exceed that time. These two settings give students flexibility within parameters and will lower anxiety. Another way to lower anxiety is to break a longer test into two or three sections and allow students to work on one section at a time.

If you are concerned about students sharing the exam with other students or taking the exam together, there are two helpful options in Blackboard. You can create a pool of questions in Blackboard from which tests can be formed: in this way, each student is taking a different but parallel exam. A simpler version of this approach is to randomize questions when you set up your exam so that students all answer the same questions but in a different order.

Assume students will take online final exams as open-book exams—and plan accordingly.

Given the concerns that students have when they take a high-stakes exam, we can understand that the temptation to reference their textbook and notes is often too strong to resist. It's helpful to recognize that students will likely take any online assessment with these kinds of supports at hand, and it is helpful to recognize that they and we can work with this reality productively. One productive response in this situation is to write exam questions that can't be answered by simply looking in a textbook or at notes: better questions are ones that require students to apply principles and processes they've learned to novel problems and scenarios. Another productive response is to ask students to explain how they arrived at an answer: this ensures that students have to show their thinking even if they used the book or notes (or a classmate!) to choose an answer. Finally, your students may actually end up doing more learning if you tell them to spend some time using their book, their notes, and conversations with classmates to clarify their thinking about a complex problem or an essay prompt: let them prepare ahead of time and then challenge them to synthesize that preparation in their individual response. That kind of preparation ensures that your final assessment requires review and consolidation of learning, which is the value of an open-book exam.