

# INSTITUTIONAL TOOLKIT TO COMBAT CONTRACT CHEATING

International  
Center for  
Academic  
Integrity

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Original drawing by UC San Diego student, Inkan Hertanto (used with permission)



**International Center for Academic Integrity**

[www.academicintegrity.org](http://www.academicintegrity.org)

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# Introduction

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**Academic Integrity is the foundation of the educational enterprise. When students submit assessments that are honest, trustworthy, respectful, responsible and fair representations of their knowledge and abilities at a particular point in time, they are exhibiting the courage to act with integrity<sup>1</sup> even when under the stress and pressure of schooling. And, when students do this, faculty are able to honestly and fairly evaluate the knowledge and abilities of their students, and our educational institutions are able to honestly and fairly certify the students for the good of the knowledge economy. Without academic integrity, then, our educational institutions fail to serve a core purpose of their existence – to prepare students for lives as ethical and knowledge citizens and professionals and to certify this preparation.**

## **Academic Integrity Violations:**

Internationally, violations of academic integrity are common phenomena in our educational institutions. Decades of work by Donald McCabe, Rutgers University, suggest that as many as half of our students are cheating at least once per year<sup>2</sup>. The Josephson Institute, which surveys high school students every other year, suggests that while 50% of students admit to cheating, 93% are “satisfied with their own ethics and character”<sup>3</sup>. Clearly then, we have a situation in which a great number of our students are engaging in their academics with the idea that it is acceptable, and certainly not unethical, to cheat.

Although few would deny that violations of academic integrity are bad for our students, bad for our educational institutions and bad for our society, cheating seems to continue because of

a lack of serious attention to the matter. Thus, the kind of “normal” cheating that has occurred since the beginning of schooling<sup>1</sup> (e.g., copying homework or using “cheat sheets” during an exam), has evolved into something even more insidious and damaging to education in the twenty-first century.

**Contract Cheating:** This toolkit is intended to help institutions, faculty and students, prevent and deal with this new type of cheating - contract cheating. There are many resources available to help institutions deal with other forms of academic integrity violations, but this toolkit is one of the first to compile helpful information for combating contract cheating. The good news is this - **there are things we can do!** This toolkit empowers all of us to take action today.

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# I. What is Contract Cheating?

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**Contract Cheating** is a “form of academic dishonesty where students get academic work completed on their behalf, which they then submit for academic credit [and/or advantage] as if they had created it themselves”<sup>4</sup>. Those who do the academic work for the student, the contract cheating provider (Provider), come in all forms – freelancers, contractors working with companies, online companies and their employees.

For example, students who contract cheat might:

- purchase an assignment from an online site, through Craigslist, or other online platforms
- obtain assistance from someone else that goes beyond mere editing to writing of the assignment or solving of the problem
- participate in unauthorized discussion group or sharing answers to an assignment on file sharing sites or even social media sites like Facebook or WeChat
- post or purchase answers to an exam, assignment, problem or any other assessed work
- pay someone to write a test or exam



**Is a big problem** although the extent of the problem is difficult to measure. After all, neither students nor the contract cheating providers do this anonymously or underground. However, the problem is suspected to be very widespread and growing every year. A Turnitin White Paper (2013) showed 7% of students in the United States report having purchased an assignment, while 23% of students reported their peers having purchased an assignment<sup>5</sup>. The recent report by UK’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) suggests that the problem is sufficient enough to warrant them taking action to ensure the future quality of education in the UK and to encourage all accrediting and quality assurance agencies around the world to join them<sup>6</sup>.

**And It Impacts Everyone** because when students commission pieces of work to be completed by others and then submit these pieces for credit toward their academic credential:

- the credentials given by educational institutions are untrustworthy
- it causes reputational damage to educational institutions
- it allows students to purchase their way to a degree, thereby turning all of our educational institutions into diploma mills
- devalues the education of other students who played by the rules
- creates and contributes to a culture of fraud and commercialization of education

## II. Who Can help?

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**Everyone who cares about integrity in education can help. If we want to ensure that the degrees conferred have integrity - that is they honestly represent the knowledge and abilities of an individual student - then all must get involved to counter the contract cheating business.**

**Parents** are critical in combating contract cheating. They must instill in their students the real purpose and value of education and when talking to their students, ask them the right questions that focus on the value and coach the students in the right direction. For example, rather than asking their students about their grades (which focus students on external measures of "success"), parents should ask coaching questions like "how are you doing?", "what are you learning?", "are you trying your best?", "have you sought out help on campus?", and "with what are you struggling?".

**Students** can help by getting involved in the education effort (start a student org!), being responsible for their own work, seeking out help from legitimate sources available on their own campuses.

**Faculty & Instructional Assistants** can help by discussing academic integrity with their students, creating meaningful assessments, getting to know their students (and their writing), and monitoring the assessment environment to ensure integrity.

**Institutional Staff** can support students so they feel fewer temptations to seek out contract cheating providers. This means providing students with academic coaching, mentoring and tutoring, as well as opportunities to develop their writing, study, and time management skills. And preferably, these supports are offered beyond Monday-Friday, 9 am - 5 pm.


**Institutional Leadership** must make integrity and ethics a core aspect of the strategic plan. Leadership must also strongly support integrity initiatives and quality teaching and learning by providing sufficient instructional staffing for the size of the class, creating an academic integrity infrastructure, supporting student success infrastructures, and reward good teaching (that goes beyond student satisfaction surveys).



**Politicians/Legislators** in jurisdictions without laws against contract cheating should quickly work to make contract cheating illegal so that providers cannot operate in their district. Only New Zealand and 17 U.S. states have prohibitions against contract cheating.

**Accreditors/Quality Assurance Agencies** should follow the lead of the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and publically state what they are going to do to help educational institutions counter the growing contract cheating problem.

**Attorney Generals** need to act to enforce anti-contract cheating laws when they exist. This means investigating and prosecuting contract cheating providers.



"We will work with the Government and other agencies to discuss the feasibility and potential efficacy of a range of regulatory and/or legislative solutions, looking at the approach taken in New Zealand for example"

UK Quality Assurance Agency<sup>6</sup>



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NOTE:

We are purposefully not providing advertising to Contract Cheating Providers by listing their names or URLs. We acknowledge that many faculty and institutions may want to see what these sites look like. To do that, you can simply google "homework help" or "write my essay" and you will be gifted with many different examples of these Providers.



# III. What can be Done to Counter a Contract Cheating Culture?

The first step to countering a contract cheating culture on your campus is to focus on academic integrity. Without the academic integrity foundation, combating contract cheating will be like trying to put out fires without water. In addition, our goal is not simply to stop contract cheating, but to develop the next generation of ethical and knowledgeable citizens and professionals.

## 1. Educate Students

If students are going to make good ethical choices in completing their academic work, they must have an awareness of the importance of their own values as well as the values of the institution.

Help students become familiar with the parameters of what is academically acceptable and what is considered to be a violation of academic integrity.

- [The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity](#)
- [Student Academic Integrity Essentials](#)
- [A Reflection: What is Academic Integrity?](#)

Institutions should also help students develop a sense of their mission and vision, to keep them oriented to learning and their professional goals, rather than focusing on grades and immediate outcomes.

- [Writing Your Personal Story](#)
- [Who are you? Creating your mission and vision](#)
- [What is Happening in Your Life?](#)
- [Making Ethical Decisions-Exercise and Role Play](#)

Finally, students need to be given the opportunity to develop skills that will help them avoid feeling the need to engage with a Contract Cheating Provider, such as time management, study strategies and reading and learning skills. These skills will help students develop confidence and enhance their ability to complete their work without seeking assistance from a contract cheating providers.

- [Time management 101- how to manage your time](#)
- [Study Strategies](#)
- [Preventing Plagiarism](#)





## 2. Educate Faculty

If faculty are going to help students, they need to understand contract cheating and what they can do to prevent it.

- [How Contract Cheating Works](#)
- [Combating Contract Cheating Preferred Practices](#)

Faculty also need to be empowered to dialogue with students about academic integrity and contract cheating. First, faculty should communicate about academic integrity and attempt to create a shared understanding and buy-into a culture of integrity in the class. At the very least faculty should state what is academic integrity, why it matters, how students can get legitimate help when they're struggling and what the faculty member will do in response to academic integrity violations.

Some tools for communicating academic integrity:

- An Instructor could create a [Class Statement of Values](#) or collaborate with the students to co-create one
- Alternatively, the Instructor could have the students create a code of ethics for the class or for their groups/teams by using this [Class or Team Code of Ethics Template](#)
- Faculty can also have students pledge to, or agree to, commit to academic integrity in the class because research has demonstrated that affirmations of academic integrity work (see [Academic Integrity Agreement Template Tool](#))

Once a culture of integrity has been created, faculty should get specific about contract cheating. Faculty should be specific about what is and isn't cheating in their class, including contract cheating. This means that faculty should make sure that students know the difference between individual and group assignments, what "working with others" means, and what "getting help or assistance" means. Otherwise, students are likely to blur the lines between academic integrity and contract cheating.

## 3. Provide Sufficient Student Academic Success Supports

Providing support for students is essential for them to do get the assistance they need to be successful in their academic endeavors. Such support will also reduce the risk of students searching out dishonest ways to complete their work. Students often need help in their reading, writing and critical thinking skills. Although plagiarism is frequently cited as a cause of misconduct, plagiarism may occur simply because of a lack of understanding about proper methods of citation or referencing. In addition, students may be experiencing stress in their personal lives. They may find difficulties in learning course material which can also cause them stress, particularly at exam time.

### COLLABORATE WITH CAMPUS PARTNERS

Those interested in combating contract cheating should collaborate with campus partners like writing centers, librarians, tutoring centers, success coaches, and other learning support mechanisms. We are stronger together!

## 4. Promote an Academic Integrity Culture

Culture in reference to academic integrity speaks to the values, traditions and priorities of the students, faculty and administration and staff of an institution. Every academic institution has their own unique cultural *ethos* which permeates all activities and dictates what is acceptable or is not acceptable behavior. Ideally, the institution will promote the values for academic integrity identified by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) which include *Trust, Respect Responsibility, Honesty, Fairness and Courage*.

Because of differences in cultural background it should be acknowledged that not all members of the academic institution have the same values or priorities. However, knowledge of and understanding of the institutional values should provide a common ground for discussions about contract cheating. Administration, students and faculty should all be involved in conversations about the risks of contract cheating and how the campus culture can be impacted by the use of such services.

**Step 1. Conduct an Audit.** Assess how campus members perceive academic integrity and in what behaviors students are engaging. Perceptions are perhaps as important as reality because people act according to what they think to be true; changing student perceptions can be highly effective at reducing the behaviors<sup>7</sup>. Also assess the alignment between espoused ethical principles and integrity beliefs and the organizational structures, procedures, and processes. Conducting such an audit also helps remind campus members of the importance of academic integrity. You can use two tools to conduct this audit.

- [Scorecard for Academic Integrity Development \(SAID\)](#)
- [The ICAI Survey](#)

**Step 2. Develop a Strategic Plan.** Sustaining an academic integrity initiative can only occur if it becomes institutionalized (embedded as a critical part of the organization) and strategic (purposeful and planned), so there must be a plan for getting there.

- [ICAI Assessment Guide](#)

### Step 3. Create Academic Integrity Infrastructure.

Building and maintaining a culture of academic integrity can only occur if there are infrastructures to support it. Infrastructure includes people, policies and procedures. The larger the institution, the more help faculty will need – we suggest Academic Integrity Offices that can help create an integrity culture, educate students and faculty, and help faculty prevent and detect contract cheating

- [Academic Integrity Standards Project](#)



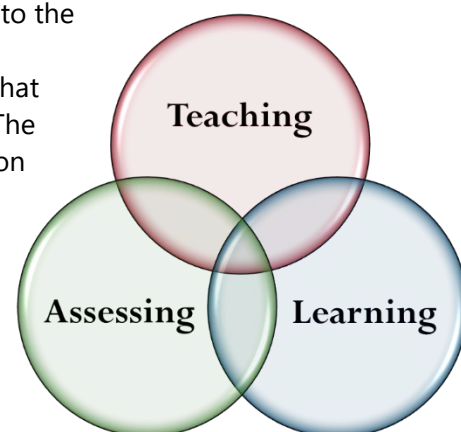
**Step 4. Regularly Communicate about Academic Integrity.** Students and faculty should receive regular communication about academic integrity. Think about initiating a tutorial for new campus members, an annual integrity celebration and other integrity awareness events throughout the year.

## IV. What Can Be Done to Prevent & Detect Contract Cheating?

Beyond a large focus on academic integrity, there are specific things that can be done to prevent contract cheating and detect it when it does occur. We encourage everyone to prioritize assessment design to ensure that questions of good pedagogy are being considered in conjunction with reducing contract cheating. After assessment design has been considered, there are other steps one can take to prevent and detect contract cheating.

### 1. Design Assessments with Integrity

- Require multiple drafts of an assessment. Students are less likely willing to pay someone for multiple iterations of an assignment, and in that case a change in voice/writing style might be noticeable. In addition, having students write and submit drafts is good writing pedagogy.
  - [Teaching Writing as a Process](#)
- Use in-class writing to provide baseline of student voice and writing style
  - An efficient way of setting a baseline for student writing skills is to have a first day, in class writing assignment. Have students write an introduction on themselves, their major and interests, and anything that may be relevant to the class. Later, if an instructor suspects contract cheating, he or she can compare the two assignments for voice, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling.
- More personalized and authentic assignments that are specific to the class
  - As much as possible, avoid using canned assignments that are often provided with textbook publisher's content. The teacher's manual is often easily obtained and released on the internet, leading to entire tests, prompts, and pre-written responses readily available. Contextualize courses to student interests and ideas, focusing on majors and goals. Further, allow students to write on their own subjects, creating interest and engagement with the content and precluding plagiarism.
- Limit non-substantive requirements (e.g., page limits, word limits etc)
  - Word and page minimums and limits often lead to inauthentic writing and "fluffing" of content. Students may feel compelled to fill space rather than engage with the prompt appropriately. Worse, they may feel unable to add more to their writing



when under the minimum and compelled to plagiarize or contract cheat. Minimums incentivize this behavior, so remove the incentive! Inform students that you're looking for them to engage with the content and be thorough without having the pressure of creating unnecessary content.

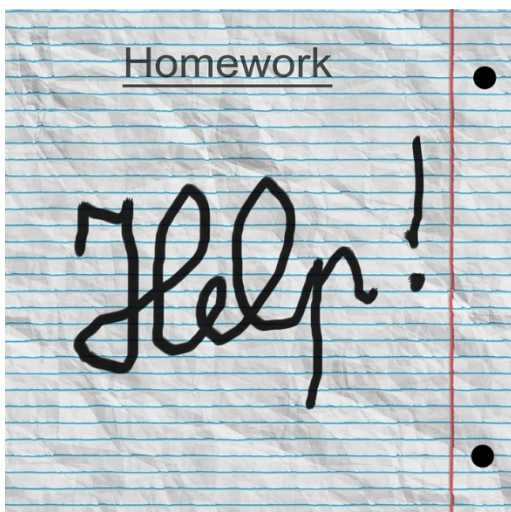
- Allow for late submissions
  - We've all been there: taking four or five classes at the same time and simply procrastinating on assignments. Even worse, the modern student often has much more responsibilities than previous generations. Much more have part-time, and even full-time, jobs. Many have familial responsibilities of taking care of loved ones and have children themselves. Cheating is not often borne from bad character, but much more often desperation or feeling (unjustly!) unable to rise to the intellectual rigor being required of them. A student, with hours to spare until a deadline, will then often resort to cheating. Allowing for late submissions gives breathing room to students in these situations. The argument against this is often that the "real world" doesn't allow late submissions, but save a few professions, this isn't entirely the case. Late penalties can indeed be assessed, but a C is always better than an F and being accused of cheating. Allowing room to fail and learn from mistakes of procrastination and time management is a much better lesson to learn than being a good cheater.



- Give students more choice and control
  - Canned prompts, while easier to grade, often are boring to students. Allowing students room to expand on their interests and goals engages them with the content and reduces the tendency to cheat because of it.
- Provide at least one proctored assessment
  - It is often a good idea to require at least a single proctored assignment, even with online courses. This determines the authenticity of a student's work and requires it to be of their own volition. Any number of companies now provide effective proctoring tools for a variety of requirements that an institution may need, such as video recording, verification of identity, and prevention of being provided help by the internet or in-person resources.

## 2. Detect when Contract Cheating Has Occurred

- Check properties of paper (including author and time to edit)
  - When an instructor suspects cheating on a paper, the meta-data can be accessed to glean clues to whether the content was plagiarized. If it's a Microsoft Word file, download it, right-click on the icon, and click "Properties" from the drop-down menu. At the top of the new window, click the "Details" tab. From here, you can see a variety of information, such as authors, the number of revisions, when the file was created and last saved, total editing time, among others. However, remember that any potentially incriminating pieces of information can be circumstantial at best. A



student may have genuinely written their paper on a borrowed laptop, resaved the file elsewhere, or simply deleted the metadata. A conversation with the student can easily clear up misunderstandings, or may provide further information on potential plagiarism or contract cheating.

- Look for papers that are “too good to be true” (i.e., the writing is advanced beyond the capabilities of the student).
- Ask student about the words and ideas in their paper, as well as their process for writing

- Use Software
  - While plagiarism checking software has been a boon to catching cheating, its use, and misuse, has been commonly misunderstood among instructors and students alike. Anything highlighted by this software is content that is found elsewhere on either the internet or paper databases. If the content is appropriately cited, however, this is *not* plagiarism and should not be treated as such. Further, even if inappropriately cited, the intent very well may have not been to cheat but a misunderstanding of citation rules and expectations.
  - The report from such software should be the start of a conversation between instructors and students, never the end of one. The number that comes with the reports is the percentage of the paper that shows up in other places, *not* the percentage chance the paper may have been plagiarized. Be sure to not require certain percentages above or below a certain number, as this misuses the report’s intent.
  - Ultimately, if an instructor suspects plagiarism or contract cheating, get a second opinion (with names redacted) with another instructor or administrator. If suspicion is confirmed, make an appointment with the student to discuss the paper one-on-one.
- Use Good Exam Proctoring Practices
  - Monitor Testing Environments. Look for more test takers in the class than you have enrolled students (sometimes exam proxies come in with the enrolled student so the enrolled student can copy from the proxy). Have proctors for large classes.
  - Use Assigned Seating (large classes). This will help proctors identify people who are not supposed to be present. In addition, often the exam proxies will not know where they are supposed to sit.
  - Check IDs against the IDs on Record with the Institution. Most often, the exam proxies have a fake student ID with the enrolled student’s name and student ID # on the card, but the exam proxy’s photo. So, if you are only comparing the photo to the person, this may not stop contract cheating. Instead, check the Photo ID to the Photo on record with the institution. If the photos do not match, ask for another form of ID

or have them sign a statement that they are who they say they are (you can also take a picture of the exam taker).

- [Ensuring Integrity in Testing Preferred Practices](#)
- Use external companies for online exams
  - [Trusted Seal](#)
- See the [Combating Contract Cheating Preferred Practices](#) and [Ensuring Integrity in Testing Preferred Practices](#) for more ideas

### 3. Making Sure Contract Cheating is Clearly Prohibited

- Ensure the Academic Integrity Policy is up-to-date
  - Many policies don't cover contract cheating adequately. For example, they cover students cheating, but not students cheating for other students. Many policies might also inaccurately treat this behavior as plagiarism or exam cheating, rather than Fraud.
- Work with local legislators re: legal approach
  - Make it illegal! Students mistakenly conflate legal with ethical, so one step in helping them understand the severity of this behavior is to ensure it is illegal
    - For more help on how to do this, check out:
      - our [Legislative Template](#)
      - [existing U.S. Statutes and Limitations](#)



#### NOTE:

We created this Toolkit for the 1st International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating, October 19th, 2016. It is not perfect, but it is a start. We look forward to continuing to develop and evolve this Toolkit, and welcome the ideas and suggestions by others - we are trying to tackle an international problem, so we must have an international solution! If you have ideas or suggestions for the Toolkit, please [send them to us](#).

## V. Additional Resources

### Websites on Contract Cheating

- [www.contractcheating.com](http://www.contractcheating.com)
- <http://contractcheating.weebly.com>

### Websites on Academic Integrity

- [www.academicintegrity.org](http://www.academicintegrity.org)
- <http://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu>
- <http://undergrad.fiu.edu/academic-integrity/index.html>

### Published Pieces on Contract Cheating

- [Plagiarism in Higher Education Report - UK Quality Assurance Agency](#)
- [Response to Shadow Scholars and the Rise of the Dissertation Service Industry - Tricia Bertram Gallant](#)
- [Shadow Scholars and the Rise of Dissertation Service Industry - Jeffry White](#)
- [The New Cheating Economy - Brad Wolverton](#)
- [Write My Essay Please! - Atlantic Monthly](#)

### Published Pieces on Academic Integrity or Academics

- [Academic Integrity in the Twenty-First Century - Tricia Bertram Gallant](#)
- [Academically Adrift –Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa](#)
- [Cheating in School: What We Know & What We Can Do - Stephen Davis, Patrick Drinan & Tricia Bertram Gallant](#)
- [Cheating Lessons-James M. Lang](#)
- [Creating the Ethical Academy: A Systems Approach to Understanding Misconduct & Empowering Change in Higher Education - Tricia Bertram Gallant](#)
- [Handbook of Academic Integrity - Tracey Bretag](#)
- [My Word, Plagiarism and College Culture - Susan Blum](#)
- [The Blindspot- Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald](#)



# EndNotes

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<sup>1</sup> This is how the International Center for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity – honesty, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness and courage are the fundamental values, without which there can be no integrity.

<sup>2</sup> McCabe, D.L. (2005). Cheating Among College and University Students: A North American Perspective. *The International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 1 (1), 1-11

<sup>3</sup> Josephson Institute Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth (2012). Retrieved October 15, 2016 from <https://charactercounts.org/national-report-card/2012-report-card/>

<sup>4</sup> [www.contractcheating.com](http://www.contractcheating.com)

<sup>5</sup> Newton, P. & Lang, C. (2016). Custom essay writers, freelancers and other paid third parties. In T. Bretag (Ed) *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (pp 249-271). Singapore: Springer.

<sup>6</sup> QAA (2016). Plagiarism in higher education: Custom essay writing services. An exploration and next steps for UK higher education sector. Retrieved October 15, 2016 from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Plagiarism-in-Higher-Education-2016.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See the report by Michael P. Haines (1996). A social norms approach to preventing binge drinking at colleges and universities, a publication of The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention.

## Images

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