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Some online students call monitoring intrusive

By Natasha Singer | NEW YORK TIMES APRIL 06, 2015

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — Before Betsy Chao, a senior at Rutgers University, could take midterm exams in her online courses, her instructors sent out e-mails directing students to download Proctortrack, a new anti-cheating technology.

"You have to put your face up to it, and you put your knuckles up to it," Chao said, explaining how the program uses webcams to scan students' features and verify identities.

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Once her exam started, Chao said, a warning appeared on the screen indicating Proctortrack was monitoring her computer and recording her. To constantly remind her, the program showed a live image of her in miniature on her screen.

Even for an undergraduate raised in a culture of selfies, Chao found the system intrusive — "sort of excessive."

As colleges expand their online offerings, many administrators are introducing technologies to deter cheating. The oversight, they say, is crucial to demonstrating the legitimacy of an online degree to students and prospective employers.

Some software prevents students from opening apps or Web browsers during exams. Or live proctors monitor students remotely over webcams.

But the rise of Proctortrack and automated services like it raises questions about where to draw the line. The University of North Texas, for instance, is part way through a two-year test of Proctortrack with 160 students in its online public health master's program.

"If you are going to offer online learning, you need to find ways to ensure the integrity of the course, the test-taking, and the degree," said Jeff Carlton, a university spokesman. "For us, this is high-stakes."

Schools are not simply trying to protect their academic integrity. They are seeking to stay competitive in a rapidly expanding industry. The market for online higher education could reach $32 billion in the United States this year, estimates Eduventures, a research firm in Boston.

The college experience is already analyzed more than ever. More than 3,500 institutions use an automated plagiarism-detection system called Turnitin, which scans papers for copied passages. Utah Valley University developed its own early-warning system, Stoplight, which uses academic and demographic details about students to predict their likelihood of passing courses; professors get lists that color-code each student as green, yellow, or red.

Proctortrack works along similar lines. Developed by Verificient Technologies, it is marketed as "the world's first automated remote-proctoring solution." Some schools are still evaluating Proctortrack, but Rutgers has deployed it among several thousand students.

Chief executive Tim Dutta sid Verificient's chief technology officer came up with the idea for the service after he worked on a Transportation Security Administration project that involved scanning airport security video footage for abnormal facial expressions. Proctortrack uses algorithms to detect unusual student behavior — like talking to someone off-screen — and categorizes a student as having high or low "integrity."

Dutta said the program is not so much intended to identify cheaters as to authenticate identities. But Proctortrack seems to impose more onerous strictures than a live proctor would. Among other things, it requires students to sit upright and remain directly in front of their webcams at all times.

"Changes in lighting can flag your test for a violation," its guidelines say. "Even stretching, looking away, or leaning down to pick up your pencil could flag your test."

Peter Gambino, a Rutgers sophomore, heard of Proctortrack after he enrolled in an online course; students would have to pay $37 for it. "It would be a much different thing," he said, "if this surveillance was being imposed on anyone other than the students . . . I'm pretty sure that teachers would quit outright if they had to grade papers in the privacy of their own homes and be monitored and be forced to pay for it out of their own pocket."

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