

**Teaching MPA Students Using a Distance Education Format:  
Techniques to Promote Academic Integrity**

**Paper presented at the  
27<sup>th</sup> National Teaching Public Administration Conference  
February 12-14, 2004  
University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin**

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## ABSTRACT

A principal agent relationship is used to discuss teaching MPA students in a distance education format. In this format, the instructor is conceptualized as the principal and the student as the agent. The syllabus forms the “contract” around which instructor and student efforts are focused. Two problems occur in any agency relationship due to asymmetrical information: moral hazard or the problem of hidden action and adverse selection. Based on the practical experience of the authors, four strategies are presented to lessen the impact of moral hazard along with techniques to lessen the impact of adverse selection.

## INTRODUCTION

Agency relationships within society are widespread and varied. They can be as simple as the individual relationship between patient and doctor, employee and employer, instructor and student or as complex as multi-million dollar agreements between governmental organizations and private sector firms. Whatever the complexity of the agency relationship, the challenge is to structure an agreement (a contract) that motivates the agent to serve the principal's interest when the agent's actions are not observable by the principal (Pratt & Zeckhauser, 1985, p.2). The challenge occurs because the principal cannot monitor the agent's action without incurring costs. This leads to the issues of incentives and sanctions and how they should be addressed in the contractual agreement. Essentially, the principal must devote resources to finding agents who can provide goods or services at the required cost and quality, devise and implement procedures for awarding and monitoring contracts, and provide methods for renegotiating or canceling contracts should the need exist (Prager, 1991, p.85). Since incentive and sanction provisions are not costless, a concern is how to select and oversee an agent while minimizing cost.

How does the principal agent relationship apply to teaching MPA students using a distance education format? The student/instructor relationship can be thought of as an agency relationship in which the instructor is the principal and the student is the agent. The syllabus forms the “contract” around which instructor and student efforts are focused and forms an incentive structure that motivates the student through rewards and sanctions, which help determine student performance. The goal of the instructor is to have the student successfully meet course requirements with academic integrity through adherence to the requirements of the syllabus.

The arms length nature of distance education makes management of the instructor/student relationship especially challenging in terms of maintaining academic integrity. This is not to say that it is not also a challenge using a traditional in class format. The big difference is that in a traditional in class format the instructor has more control over the learning environment and greater ability to judge the quality of each student’s work through direct observation. In the distance education relationship, the instructor gives up substantial control of the learning environment and the behavior of individual students is not directly observable. Given the inherent challenges to maintaining academic integrity in any situation, our purpose in this paper is to discuss practical applications for promoting academic integrity in a distance education environment.

## **DISCUSSION**

The context of this paper is the increase in educational institutions that offer students some form of Internet based course delivery. Use of Internet based course delivery modes can involve a blended learning approach in which some number of classes is completed using an Internet based course delivery mode. It represents use of a

combination of traditional in class sessions and distance learning using web-based resources. The distance-learning component may include a mix of mediums such as simulations, synchronous sessions, asynchronous sessions, and group activities facilitated by the instructor. Another Internet based delivery mode is distance learning. Distance learning is a situation in which all course requirements can be completed using Internet based resources.

Two problems occur in any agency relationship due to asymmetrical information: moral hazard or the problem of hidden action and adverse selection or the problem of hidden information (Arrow, 1985, p.37). Moral hazard occurs because the behavior of the agent (student) is imperfectly controlled as the case with distance education. When behavior is imperfectly controlled, it creates a situation where inappropriate actions by the agent adversely impacts the goals of the principal, which in this case is the instructor's goal of satisfactory performance with academic integrity on the part of the student. Inappropriate action may involve plagiarism or relying on the work of others in completing course assignment.

What are some of the moral hazard pressures on academic integrity? Heberling (2002) argues that the Internet provides a readily available medium for academic dishonesty. Students can use a number of search engines that allow the "writing" of papers using a cut and paste approach. Other Internet sites called Digital Paper Mills or Web Paper Mills specialize in satisfying the demand for student papers (Heberling, 2002). Students may buy a paper that seems to meet the needs of a particular research requirement. While the Internet is an obvious example of a pressure on academic integrity, there are others. There are the problems of who is taking a course assessment or preparing a research paper (the registered student or a surrogate), unauthorized use of

resources (open notes with a closed book exam), unauthorized collaboration on an assessment (relying on others), and technology difficulties such as “my computer crashed” (Olt, 2002).

There are two ways of controlling the moral hazard problem. One approach is to monitor the behavior of the agent (student) through direct observation. This approach is practical for a traditional in class delivery mode, but impractical when the behavior of the agent cannot be observed. A second approach is to offer the right incentives as to align the goals of principal and agent. This approach seems to have the most promise in promoting academic integrity.

In the adverse selection problem, the agent (student) may have some information that is not shared with the principal (instructor) and which has an impact on the agent’s ability to perform. For example, principals want agents to enroll in a course who are suited to a blended or distance learning format; but, agents will know more about their qualifications than the principal. Therefore, the principal will be uncertain whether appropriate agents have been selected and flaws in the relationship are likely to surface over time (Kettl, 1993). The adverse selection problem can be controlled through screening procedures for faculty and students. For example, screening can weed out students not suited for a distance education delivery mode and thus reduce the pressure to engage in academic dishonesty. Faculty can also be screened to ensure their background and style is appropriate for distance education.

The concern of each principal and agent relationship is the design of an incentive structure to lessen the problems associated with moral hazard and adverse selection (Moe, 1984). In the case of distance education and the agency relationship between

instructor and the student, the appropriate incentive structure is contained within a course syllabus.

### **PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

With the previous background as a context, we now address practical techniques to lessen the impact of moral hazard. Since distance education students do not come into face-to-face contact with the instructor, it can be argued that a climate is created which increases the likelihood of moral hazard problems such as using the work of others to meet course requirements. What can instructors do to ensure that work completed by a student is his or her work and not the work of someone else? We also address issues of adverse selection. Is there some systematic difference between a distance education student and a student who enrolls in a traditional course delivery format? What can be done to mitigate the adverse selection problem of students entering distance or blended learning courses that do not have the skill necessary for success?

The practical techniques are based on the experience of the authors in teaching MPA courses in blended and distance learning delivery modes over two academic years (2001/2002 and 2002/2003) for Christopher Newport University and Troy State University. The practical techniques for moral hazard are presented in the context of four strategies (Olt, 2002), which we interpret as general approaches to lessen the impact of the moral hazard problem. We then provide practical applications that address the problem of adverse selection.

#### **Strategy 1 - Overcome the inherent disadvantages associated with online education.**

Particular problems that need to be overcome is confirming who is actually taking an online assessment, how to control unauthorized use of resources in completing

assignments, how to prevent student collaboration in taking an assessment and overcoming technical difficulties (Olt, 2002).

**Who is actually taking an on line assessment?** Without the ability to observe your students, it is possible for someone other than the registered student to complete on line assessments. Several course management systems, such as WebCT and Blackboard require a user login and password for each student; however, that does not preclude students from sharing that information with others. By structuring the assessments so that numerous short quizzes and tests are given at various times throughout the semester, it would be difficult for a student to get consistent help. You can also include a graded dialogue session each week that requires frequent interaction among students. At Christopher Newport University, weekly dialogues account for a third of a student's grade. These assignments consist of a series of discussion questions posed by the instructor and based on the weekly readings. Depending on the course, students are required to post four to five responses that demonstrate their knowledge of the course material. The messages are evaluated on 1) how well the student is familiar with the assigned readings; 2) their understanding of the concepts; and 3) their ability to apply the material in a dialogue with colleagues in relation to discussion threads. During a normal 15-week semester, students will compose, at a minimum, 48 discussion messages. This decreases the chance that someone other than the registered student is completing the required work.

Including a proctored examination requirement is another strategy for ensuring that the registered student is taking an assessment and that unauthorized materials are not used. However, the process involved in selecting proctors can pose a challenge. One approach is for the student to select a proctor in accordance with guidelines provided by

the university and college. However, when the student selects the proctor, there is likelihood that the proctor will be more interested in meeting the needs of the student than the academic integrity concerns of the university. For example, once an assessment is completed the student can compromise the control of the exam providing an opportunity for modification. Another approach is for the university to select proctors for students. For example, an organization such as Sylvan Learning Centers could be hired to provide proctoring services. Since the proctor is working for and is paid by the university, there is a greater likelihood that exam procedures are followed and the exam is not compromised in any way. Although problems of process must be overcome, under either scenario a proctored exam provides an opportunity for at least one controlled student assessment.

A final idea in this area is to require during the first week of class a writing sample. This should be a short, formal narrative on something personal to the student that can be kept and used for comparison purposes later in the course. While the instructor should be involved in guiding the weekly dialogue sessions, separate emails to each student concerning some aspect of their response provides an additional opportunity to gauge a student's ability to write informally.

**Strategy 2 - Design effective online assessments: What kind of assessments is conducive to the distance education environment?**

Another approach that supports academic integrity is development of assessments that have a substantive approach and writing assignments with specific goals and instructions. An example of the substantive approach is case analysis in which the process by which the student analyzes the case is as important as the result of the analysis. At Troy State University, students taking the capstone course in the MPA

program use a structured case analysis approach for the final course assessment. The case chosen is complex, has many actors, numerous external and internal problems, and variation in how the main problem of the case can be conceptualized. Completing the assessment requires the student to be creative in developing potential solutions and demonstrate in depth knowledge of the MPA curriculum by applying theory and concepts to support a specific solution to the case. Since each solution is unique, unauthorized collaboration is readily apparent. When coupled with use of a proctor the approach provides a very good assessment tool. When a proctor is not employed use of a time constraint is a practical way to replicate the controls associated with a proctor.

In addition, writing assignments with specific deadlines for topics, outlines, and rough drafts encourages early participation by the student, helps to avoid procrastination-motivated plagiarism, and allows an opportunity to become familiar with the student's writing style.

An example of a writing assignment that works well in the distance education environment is a Meta-Analysis Research Paper. The paper is a flexible approach that can be applied in a variety of courses. Within the MPA curriculum, it has been used for such courses as public personnel management, organization theory, survey of public administration, and economics for public managers. Students are provided detailed instructions in the syllabus on proper development of the paper. The paper consists of four sections: an introduction, a literature review, an integrated summary of the literature, and a conclusion. The introduction states a research question and provides a context for the question. Completion of the literature review requires students to locate and summarize articles from academic journals that are "relevant" to the research question. This provides a nice way to get students involved with using academic

resources from on line databases and exposing them to the appropriate literature. The integrated summary requires them to synthesize information from the literature review and to discuss what is known about the research question using a thematic approach. The conclusion section completes the paper by discussing the extent to which the research question has been answered. This approach is conducive to the distance learning environment because use of a specific format and the uniqueness of the content for each paper. Collaboration among students can be easily identified and the transaction cost associated with buying such a paper from a “Digital Paper Mill” is high.

Essay questions that require the student to integrate material from different parts of assigned textbooks are also an effective assessment technique. The key is to develop questions that require thought, understanding, and the integration of materials on the part of the student. For example, a theme in any MPA curriculum is competing values. Public managers are asked to do many things, and cannot place equal emphasis on values such as neutral competence, political responsiveness, efficiency, management flexibility, and individual rights. An essay question such as the following written by Dr. Art Johnson of the University of Maryland – Baltimore County is an effective way of probing the understanding a student has of competing values.

Discuss the various values that a public manager must contend with. How does the maximization of each value benefit public management? How does the minimization of each value do harm to public management? Discuss the role that the legislative and executive branches have played in determining which values shall be dominant in personnel administration?

In terms of overcoming technological difficulties on line, final exams at Christopher Newport University usually consist of open book, essay-type questions with a specific timeframe for completion. Included in both the syllabus and in the directions for the test

is a statement that provides students with multiple methods of delivering their final exam should they encounter computer problems. This includes faxing or personal delivery.

### **Strategy 3 - Rotate the curriculum**

By rotating the curriculum, students are less apt to be able to incorporate shared material from prior classes. This can be accomplished without substantially altering the course by including current events in the development of weekly assignments, assigning different case studies, using alternative supplemental texts or course material, and maintaining a test bank of essay questions.

### **Strategy 4 - Provide students with an academic integrity/honesty policy**

Academic integrity is a topic that is addressed substantially in the syllabus and through posted course material on plagiarism, use of reference manuals, and citation examples. The syllabus outlines the CNU honor code and the fact that the instructor “AGGRESSIVELY” enforces it, how to access the CNU writing center, and a supplement which contains information on “When to Cite the Work of Others in Your Academic Paper”. Links are provided in WebCT to various on line style manuals that provide information on how and when to cite sources. Students are also made aware of the use of EVE 4.2 (Essay Verification System) and Turnitin.com as a means of identifying instances of plagiarism.

### **Approaches to the Adverse Selection Problem**

There are several self-assessment surveys that instructors can take to determine if they possess the skills and ability to teach in an on line environment, such as the one offered by OnLine Learning at

<http://www.onlinelearning.net/InstructorCommunity/selfevaluation.html>.

Another example of a tool to address instructor preparation for distance education is a program used by Troy State University – Montgomery called Equipping Quality University Instructors Program (EQUIP). Its purpose is to train instructors for the on line-learning environment. The program consists of technical skills and software training, policy and procedures, and instructional design/adult education theory components. Staff members at Christopher Newport University have identified strategies for teaching on line in an article titled “Teaching ONLINE, Computer-Managed Conferencing,” which includes the program’s pedagogical practices (Williams, Teschner & Miller, 1994).

There are also several self-screening surveys for students to determine if distance learning is right for them. Examples are:

<http://www.polk.edu/INSTRUCT/success.htm>

<http://www.petersons.com/dlwizard/code/default.asp>

<http://www.ion.illinois.edu/IONresources/onlineLearning/selfeval.asp>

<http://www.idahoe-campus.state.id.us/tools/foryou.html>

Instructors can provide links to these sites for students who are new to distance education. These surveys can provide both the student and instructor with information on where, and what type of additional help may be needed to increase a student’s ability to complete the course.

## **CONCLUSION**

Maintaining academic integrity is a tough challenge in any teaching environment. Thinking of the activity between instructor and student as an agency relationship provides a useful framework for identifying ways to overcome the many threats to academic

integrity when teaching at a distance. The practical techniques discussed in the paper are easy to adopt and protect academic integrity.

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