

Academic Integrity and Anti-Black Aspects of Educational Surveillance and E-Proctoring

by Ceceilia Parnter & Sarah Elaine Eaton - June 23, 2021

In this commentary, we address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion as related to academic integrity. We speak specifically to the ways in which Black and other racialized minorities may be over-represented in those who get reported for academic misconduct, compared to their White peers. We further address the ways in which electronic and remote proctoring software (also known as e-proctoring) discriminates against students of darker skin tones. We conclude with a call to action to educational researchers everywhere to pay close attention to how surveillance technologies are used to propagate systemic racism in our learning institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pivot to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in colleges and universities turning to technological services to optimize classroom management with more frequency than ever before. Electronic proctoring technology (also known as e-proctoring or remote invigilation) is one such fast-growing service, with an expected industry valuation estimated to be \$10 Billion by 2026 (Learning Light, 2016). Students and faculty are increasingly concerned about the role e-proctoring technologies play in college exams.

OUR POSITIONALITIES

We come to this work as educators, advocates, and scholars of academic integrity and educational ethics.

Ceceilia's connection to this work lies in her personal and professional identities: "I am a Black, low socioeconomic status, first-generation college graduate and faculty member. The experiences of students who share my identity deeply resonate with me. While I've been fortunate to have support systems that helped me navigate college, I am keenly aware that my experience and opportunities are often the exceptions rather than the norm in a system historically designed to disregard, if not exclude, the experiences of minoritized populations. There were many moments where, in honor of the support I received, my career represents a commitment as an advocate, researcher, and teacher to student success and equitable systems in education."

Sarah's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion stems from experiences as a (White) first-generation student who grew up under the poverty line: "My formative experiences included living in servants' quarters while my single mother worked as a full-time servant to a wealthy British family (see Eaton, 2020). Later, we moved Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we settled in the North End, a section of the city that is home to many Black and Irish Catholic residents. Social and economic disparities propagated by race, social class, and religion impacted my lived experiences from an early age. I now work as a tenured associate professor of education, focusing on ethics and integrity in higher education, taking an advocacy and social justice approach to my research."

OVER-REPRESENTATION OF BLACK AND MINORITY STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT REPORTING

Higher rates of reporting and adjudicated instances of academic misconduct make Black students especially susceptible to cheating accusations. The disproportionality of Black students charged and found responsible for student misconduct is most readily seen in a K-12 context (Fabelo et al., 2011). However, research supports this as a reasonable assertion in the higher education context (Trachtenberg, 2017; Bobrow, 2020), primarily due to implicit bias (Gillo, 2017). In other words, Black and other minoritized students are already starting from a position of disadvantage in terms of being reported for academic misconduct.

The notion of over-representation is important here. Over-representation happens when individuals from a particular sub-group are reported for crimes or misconduct more often than those of the dominant White population. When we extend this notion to academic misconduct, we see evidence that Black students are reported more often than their White peers. This is not indicative that Black students engage in more misconduct behaviors, but rather it is more likely that White students are forgiven or simply not reported for misconduct as often. The group most likely to be forgiven for student conduct issues without ever being reported are White females, leaving non-White males to be among those most frequently reported for misconduct (Fabelo et al., 2011). Assumptions such as these perpetuate a system that views White student behavior as appropriate, unchallenged, normative, and therefore more trustworthy. These issues are of significant concern in an increasingly diverse student environment.

SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY: BUILT-IN BIAS

For Black and other students of color, e-proctoring represents a particular threat to equity in academic integrity. Although technology in and of itself is not racist, a disproportionate impact of consequences experienced by Black students is worthy of further investigation. Many educational administrators have subscribed to the idea that outsourcing test proctoring to a neutral third party is an effective solution. The problem is these ideas are often based on sales pitches, rather than actual data. There is a paucity of data about the effectiveness of e-proctoring technologies in general and even less about its impact on Black and other racialized minority students.

However, there are plenty of reports that show that facial recognition software unfairly discriminates against people with darker skin tones. For example, Robert Julian-Borchak Williams, a Black man from Detroit, was wrongfully accused and arrested on charges of

larceny on the basis of facial recognition software—which, as it turns out, was incorrect (Hill, 2020). Williams described the experience as “humiliating” (Hill, 2020). This example highlights not only the inequities of surveillance technologies, but also the devastating effects the software can have when the system is faulty.

Algorithms often make Whiteness normative, with Blackness then reduced to a measure of disparity. Facial recognition software viewing White as normative is often unable to distinguish phenotypical Black individuals at higher rates than Whites (Hood, 2020). Surveillance of living spaces for authentication creates uncomfortable requirements that are anxiety-inducing and prohibitive.

E-proctoring companies often provide colleges and universities contracts releasing them of culpability while also allowing them to collect biodata. For Black students, biodata collection for unarticulated purposes represents concerns rooted in a history of having Black biological information used in unethical and inappropriate ways (Williams, 2020).

CALL TO ACTION

As educators and researchers specializing in ethics and integrity, we do not view academic integrity research as being objective. Instead, we see academic integrity inquiry as the basis for advocacy and social justice. We conclude with a call to action to educational researchers everywhere to pay close attention to how surveillance technologies are used to propagate systemic racism in our learning institutions. This call should include increased research on the impact of surveillance on student success, examination, and accountability of the consequences of institutional use of and investment in e-proctoring software, and centering of student advocates who challenge e-proctoring.

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: June 23, 2021
<https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 23752, Date Accessed: 2/28/2022 12:12:28 PM

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