

Their Professors Caught Them Cheating. They Used A.I. to Apologize.

Two professors at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign said they grew suspicious after receiving identical apologies from dozens of students they had accused of academic dishonesty.



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By Neil Vigdor and Hannah Ziegler

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Confronted with allegations that they had cheated in an introductory data science course and fudged their attendance, dozens of undergraduates at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign recently sent two professors a mea culpa via email.

But there was one problem, a glaring one: They had not written the emails. Artificial intelligence had, according to the professors, Karle Flanagan and Wade Fagen-Ulmschneider, an academic pair known to their students and social media followers as the Data Science Duo.

The students got their comeuppance in a large lecture hall on Oct. 17, when the professors read aloud their identical, less-than-genuine apologies from a projector screen, video from that class showed. Busted. The professors posted about it on social media, where the gotcha moment drew widespread attention.

“They said, ‘Dear Professor Flanagan, I want to sincerely apologize,’” Professor Flanagan said. “And I was like, Thank you. They’re owning up to it. They’re apologizing. And then I got another email, the second email, and then the third. And then everybody sort of sincerely apologizing, and suddenly it became a little less sincere.”

At a time when educational institutions are grappling with the intrusion of machine learning into classrooms and homework assignments, the professors said they decided to use the episode to teach a lesson in academic integrity. They did not take disciplinary

action against the students.

“You can hear the students laugh in the background of the video,” Professor Fagen-Ulmschneider said. “They knew that it was something that they could see themselves doing.”

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Allison Copenbarger Vance, a deputy associate chancellor, said in an email that the students would not be punished.

“At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, it is the discretion of faculty to clearly define the boundaries in their syllabi for using A.I. in student work,” she said. Referring to Professor Flanagan, she added, “In this case, the students’ behavior didn’t violate the policies outlined in her syllabus, so no disciplinary action was warranted.”

About 1,200 students take the course, which is divided into two sections that meet on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Attendance and participation in the lectures count for 4 percent of the final grade in the

class, which is primarily taken by first-year students.

To track the engagement of the class, the professors created an application known as the Data Science Clicker that requires students to log in on their phones or computers and, when prompted by a QR code, answer a multiple-choice question in certain amount of time, usually about 90 seconds.

But in early October, the professors said they began to grow suspicious when dozens of students who were absent from class were still answering the questions. So the teachers said they started checking how many times students refreshed the site and the IP addresses of their devices, and began reviewing server logs.

“Sometimes on Fridays, some students will go up to Chicago,” said Professor Fagen-Ulmschneider, 40, a teaching professor in the Siebel School of Computing and Data Science.

It appeared that the students had been tipped off about the questions and when they had to respond, according to the professors, who sent emails to more than 100 students telling them that the ruse was up.

“We take academic integrity very seriously here, so we wanted to make sure to give them a warning,” said Professor Flanagan, 36, a teaching associate professor in the Department of Statistics.

Alex Von Holten, 20, a sophomore who took the class in the spring semester this year, said he wasn’t surprised to learn that some students had been “sleepwalking” through it. The format, a large lecture with introductory material, might lead some people to slack off, he said.

“It’s really hard not to get an A in that class,” Mr. Von Holten said. To do worse, he added, “you have to genuinely just not show up and not care.”

Vinayak Bagdi, 21, who graduated in May with a degree in statistics, took the class as a freshman to fulfill his academic requirements. Four years later, he said, the professors’ dedication to demystifying statistics had stuck with him.

He said he never felt bombarded with information or too lost to keep up with assignments in the class, and he described the professors as being heavily invested in the success of students.

That made it especially disheartening that some students had used A.I., Mr. Bagdi said.

“You’re not even coming to the class, and then you can’t even send a sincere email to the

professor saying, ‘I apologize’?” he said. “Out of any class at the university, why skip that one?”

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