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As Online Courses Grow, Sites Offering Unauthorized Academic Help Get More Brazen

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Plenty of Web sites offer to write students' papers or complete their assignments for a fee. But they appear to be growing more aggressive in promising to get students good grades for no work; some even promise to take entire online courses for students.

One new site is sure to worry officials embracing massive open online courses, or MOOC's. It's called We Take Your Class, and its marketing text says: "We do it all. Tests, Homework, Discussions, Projects, and More!" After all, the site states, "Life is too short to spend time on courses you have no interest in." Managers of the site could not be reached for comment.

One key concern about the latest moves to embrace online education has been ensuring that students taking the courses are who they say they are. Some new online efforts have formed partnerships with testing centers where students can go to take tests in a place where their identity can be confirmed and proctors can watch for cheating.

Meanwhile, another relatively new Web site actually promises that former professors will be the ones writing term papers for hire. The site, Unemployed Professors, offers a commentary on higher education by purporting to hire disenchanted academics to complete assignments for students.

Leaders of the site, based in Montreal, say that they employ about 30 people qualified to teach at the college level—and that some held prior positions as adjuncts, lecturers, and graduate instructors. Others hold those positions now and work for the site to make money on the side, an employee using the pseudonym "Professor Fishnets" said in an e-mail interview on Thursday.

"This project is all about helping those who have been screwed/hosed/cheated by the academic system earn a living wage," said Professor Fishnets. "The demise of the tenure system, the rise of adjuncts living under the poverty line, and the corporatization of the university are all developments that embody how the latter has screwed an entire generation of often competent academics. This is thus an ironic gesture oriented toward preserving living wages, protesting the over-commoditization of education, and making mad money—of course."

After students register with the site and submit a description of their homework project, Unemployed Professors employees bid against one another for the job. The site lists 22 usernames of paper-writers, and offers reviews, ratings, and profiles so that students can choose their author. The price of a completed assignment depends on the amount of research required and other factors, anywhere from \$20 to \$50 per page once the bidding process ends, the e-mail said.

“Professor-Rogue” tops the list, with 75 reviews. “I write witty stuff all across the humanities and social sciences but won’t touch Art History with a 30 foot pole—no dice there,” Professor-Rogue’s profile says. “I’m quick and my prose has got more steez than there be Indians in Mumbai.” The “professor” claims to hold two Ivy League master’s degrees, in sociology and political science, along with a Ph.D. in political science.

“Words cannot express my gratitude for the extraordinary job by Professor Rogue to compensate for my drama filled life and lack of time management,” one user wrote. “Highly recommended Miracle Worker with words.”

The site—which started in 2011 as a partnership between an adjunct professor and a businessman—is much more brazen about stating its purpose than the typical paper mill. The motto splashed across its home page appeals to the lazy college student, offering the company’s services “so you can play while your papers go away.”

“This is one of the most blatant examples of an essay-writing site I’ve come across,” said Thomas Lancaster, a lecturer in computing at Birmingham City University, in England, who has written on plagiarism, in an e-mail interview. “Many others skirt around what they’re doing by claiming to only provide model essays, but Unemployed Professors is quite open in its advertising copy that students can submit these essays as if they themselves wrote them.” The exception appears in the Terms and Conditions section of the site, which states, “we do not recommend making use of the product to fulfill an academic course requirement.”

The site has established a social-media presence on numerous platforms, and its Facebook page has more than 2,000 likes, with posted requests from interested students. “Is 25 days b4 I have a philosophy paper due long enough ahead of time?” one student posted. The site’s blog covers a number of topics, including employees’ reasons for ghostwriting assignments and tips on “how to sleep with your professor.”

The site could appeal to students because of its casual tone and treatment of academic work as “hollow and meaningless,” said Susan D. Blum, chair of the anthropology department at the University of Notre Dame, who has written a book on plagiarism.

“The most interesting thing to me was the utter cynicism with which they viewed higher education,” she said. “They claimed that the contemporary education system is a scam and a charade, so they are just mercenaries in a war.”