

Austin Horne

News Editor

Title: Students Ask Professors to Reconsider Anti-Cheat Software



PC: [Darwin Laganzin](#)

Camera on, room scanned, screen captured and keyboard recorded — students across the country prepared for their first distanced exams last semester. This semester at UNCG, students are hoping these digital exams will be their last.

Many students are dreading any time they have to interact with UNCG's anti-cheat system of choice, Respondus LockDown Browser. RLB has been lampooned on the App Store, where it has a 1.2 star rating, because of privacy concerns and bugs that are causing grades to plummet.

The software, along with its webcam watching expansion Respondus Monitor, is used to track students while they take digital tests. It makes use of a suite of tools to look at your computer's information, watch you through your webcam, watch your screen, log what keys you're pressing and monitor the room for any signs of another person helping you.

Over the past month, I've searched campus looking for students and faculty to weigh in on the use of RLB and the privacy concerns students have faced in this pandemic.

Nick is a computer science major who's been raising awareness about the use of RLB on our campus. He cautions students not to run the program on their computers, "I will never ever install this software on my computer."

Instead, he borrows a laptop from the library whenever he needs to use RLB, which is all the time in computer science. He understands that this isn't an option for everybody though, and pointed out that low-income students are disproportionately affected by invasive anti-cheat software.

"Its goal is to spy on you — that's in the product description."

Christian Villanueva, a computer science student who left the program to pursue a business degree, told me that in one class his professor discontinued it entirely “due to technical difficulties.” Many other students told me their professors didn’t care about RLB’s bugs.

His professor, Dr. Sugawara said, “it turned out to be pretty complicated for some of them to figure out — or so they said. Anyway, in the end I decided not to add any more technical hurdles to those my students and I were already having to jump over.”

Nick is calling for more professors to cut students some slack in one of the most difficult years in modern memory. “Teachers have this assumption that students are cheating, but there are other options besides surveillance.”

He’s pointing professors to Marcia Firmani’s “[Guidelines to Reduce the Risk of Cheating in Online Examinations](#).” Firmani is the Medical Laboratory Sciences Program Director at George Washington University, and uses this resource to educate her own faculty.

Some students remain skeptical that their teachers will change. Zack Fisher, a junior in media studies, said, “Teachers and faculty should put a little more faith in their students and not pressure them so much by employing lockdown browsers, but if I had to guess, that’s not going to change soon.”

The problems with RLB have varied from student to student. Sometimes the program flags innocuous activity, like drinking water, as cheating. Other times it goes even further, like when it

kicked Villanueva out of a test and reported him directly for cheating when he tried to set his keyboard to type in Japanese for a Japanese 201 exam.

Part of the reason it's so difficult to know all the problems with RLD is that it is classified as proprietary software; meaning it is legally prohibited to inspect the software deeply to see what it's doing.

Even students who haven't had to use RLD before remain wary of it because of its reputation. Sarah Smith, a senior in the drama department, said, "I've been really lucky, most of my classes during the pandemic have been in the arts and humanities departments that don't require lockdown browsers."

Sage Mohan, who is pursuing her MFA, told me, "There's a breakdown of boundaries between your personal life and your school life and work life." Being a creative writer, she hasn't had to use RLD, but extended sympathy for the students who do.

No matter who I talked to, everyone agreed that privacy is an emergent issue that we need to consider in digital classrooms. Director of the Digital ACT Studio, Dr. Vaughn Stewart, told me about his relationship with digital privacy as a professor.

"In education as a whole, we often do not privilege having good, firm boundaries between school and our personal lives — both for educators and students. . . I do feel a bit privileged in a way that most students aren't in that I have a dedicated laptop for work, so I'm not required to install

software on or screen share from personal devices, which feels even more intrusive to me than having my home in the background of a Zoom meeting.”

I interviewed Anthony Miracola and Dalisha Kirk, who are in an in-person class with me, and they both shared the same sentiments. In response to me asking what virtual school has been like, Miracola immediately said, “Sucks!”

He elaborated with, “When you get up, and you move your body through space and time to get to a classroom your body is remembering ‘Okay this assignment is due for this class.’ But, when you’re on a computer in your home that you never leave, everything gets jumbled up, so there’s no distinction between the classes. It’s gotta do something to our brains.”

Kirk felt similarly, “There’s no separation between, ‘Okay this is my outside life okay this is my school life.’ It becomes jumbled! And, you start to become more complacent.”

Every student and faculty member I spoke with had one definitive shared experience — this is hard for all of us. Many students continue to ask professors for empathy in their decision making when choosing how to prevent online cheating.

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