

College students are already trying to hack new anti-cheating 'spyware'



Kashmir Hill

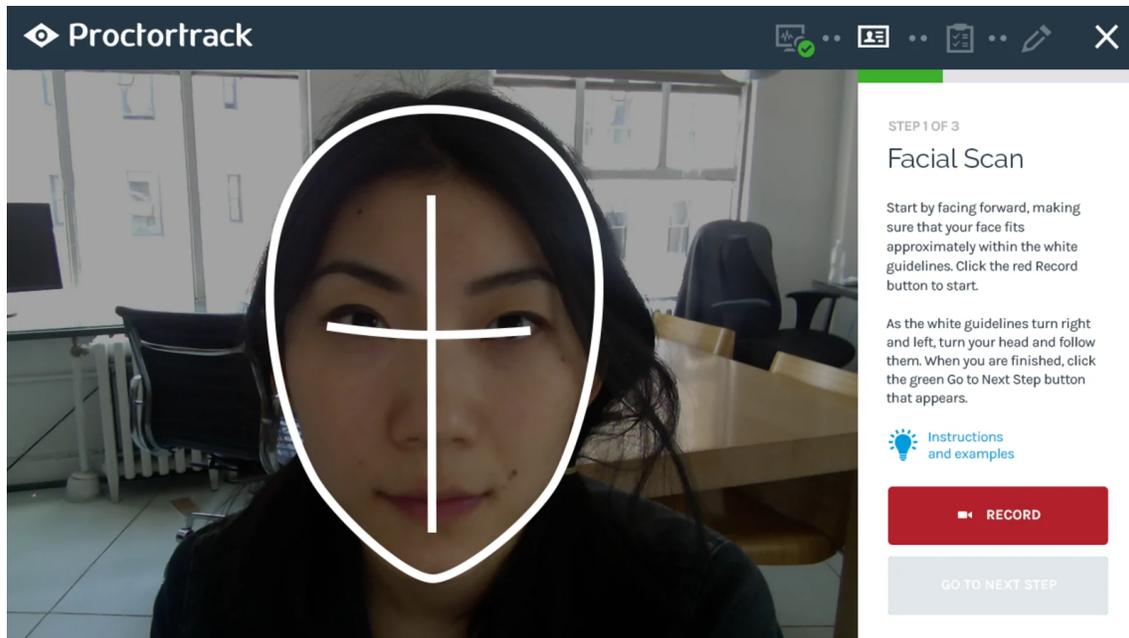
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For years, colleges and universities have used computer programs like TurnItIn to keep students from plagiarizing on papers, and old-school methods like spaced-out seating to keep them from cheating on in-class exams. Now, the online education sector is testing out new, more sophisticated tools to keep remote students from cheating as well—and privacy-minded students are already rebelling.

One popular anti-cheating software program is [Proctortrack](#), which monitors computer activity, collects audio and video from a student's webcam and uses facial and knuckle scanning to make sure an online student isn't looking up answers during an exam. Security specialist Jake Binstein took exception to Proctortrack, which he [called](#) "incredibly invasive" spyware. Recently, Binstein came up with a list of tips for students hoping to undermine the program, in effect allowing them to cheat the anti-cheating software. Instead of simply letting Proctortrack govern their online educations, Binstein suggested that students develop "a hacker mentality that will allow them to bypass ridiculous systems."

Binstein's anti-Proctortrack advice ranges from highly technical (how to intercept Proctortrack's video feed) to analog (how to write answers on Post-It notes stuck to your monitor, where a camera can't see them). "If a student wants to cheat,

they will, and expensive technological solutions only put hurdles in their paths, but will not stop them,” wrote Binstein in [the January blog post](#). “Actual trust of students, or providing them with problems that are worth their time to solve, are real solutions.”



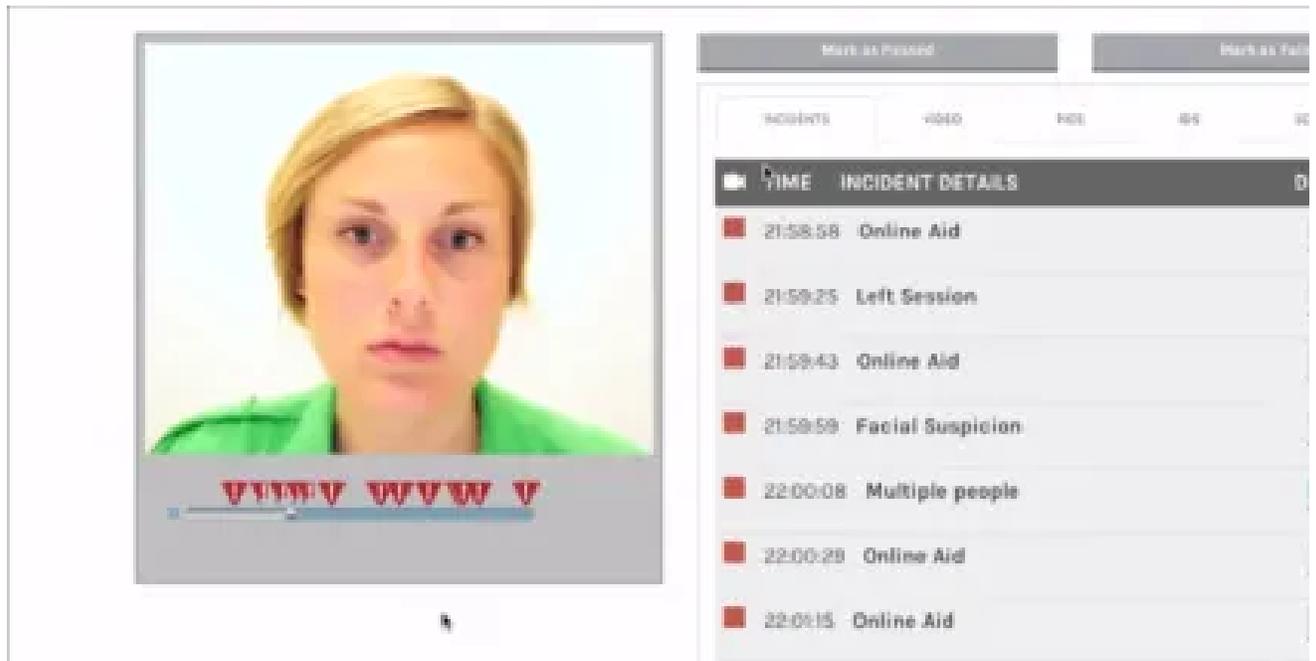
The points of view of both of these webcams (at the top-center of the laptop) are the same.
From Binstein's 'On Knuckle Scanners and Cheating – How to Bypass Proctortrack' post

Tim Dutta, the co-founder of Proctortrack's parent company, Verificent Technologies, scoffed at Binstein's advice. “If you follow that blog post, you're going to get caught. None of it works,” he said in a phone interview this week. “We've been able to see candidates who have read the blog and tried to use it. Those students who choose to do that are identified instantly.”

[Read on The Inventory](#)

Over the last year, Verificent Technologies has rolled out Proctortrack to the computers of 25,000 students, according to Dutta. The program has technological roots in national security surveillance. While at Georgia Tech, Dutta says, Rajnish Kumar, the company's CTO, worked at the school's VentureLab on a TSA project to review surveillance footage to detect “facial anomalies and behavior abnormalities.” Dutta and Kumar met three years ago. Seeing the rise in online education initiatives, the founders realized they could take technology designed to catch potential terrorists and use it to flag exam cheaters.

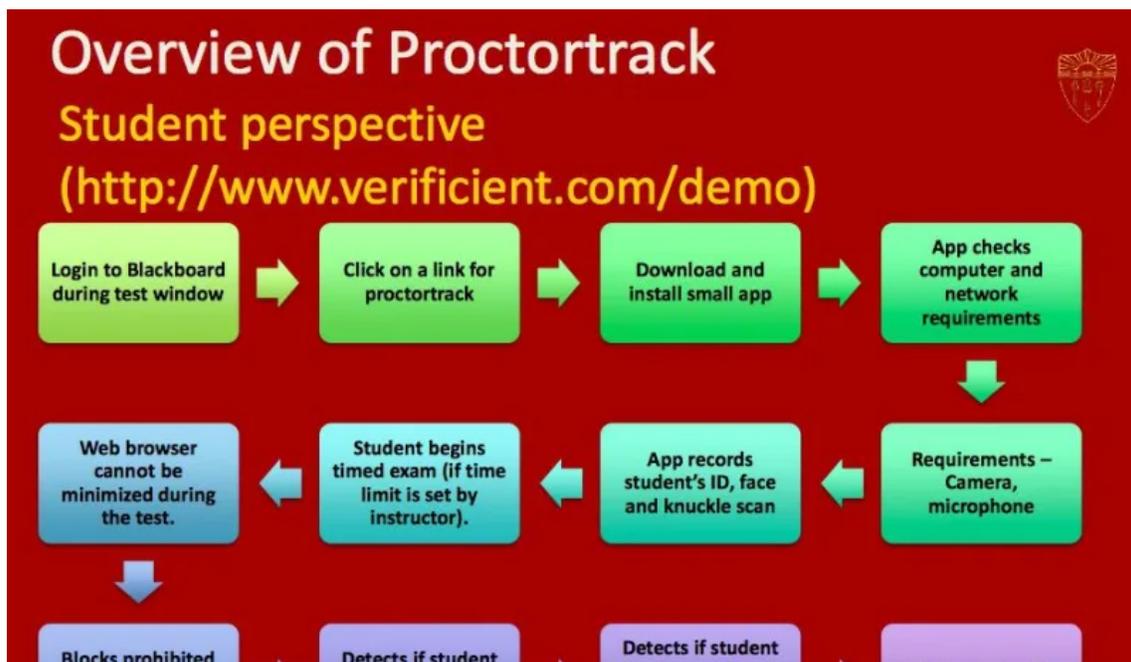
Dutta wouldn't say how many of these students have been caught cheating by Proctortrack, or which techniques they used, although he did show me a demo video in which a student was caught consulting with another person in the same room, and firing up her e-mail, perhaps looking for illicit answers. Both of these activities were flagged by Proctortrack's algorithms. “We know what's going on in her system,” said Dutta.



Via Proctortrack

Proctortrack has been around for over two years, but only started selling its technology to universities last year. Dutta says the company's first customer was St. George's University, a medical school in Grenada. Since then it's rolled out to other schools that specialize in online education programs: University of Southern California, University of South Florida, and Rutgers.

Not all of these rollouts have gone smoothly. In February, Rutgers senior Betsy Chao was informed she had to pay \$32 to download Proctortrack to her computer to ensure she didn't cheat when taking exams for two online classes in which she was enrolled. (Unlike other universities, Rutgers has opted to make students pay the cost of the software.) She started [an online petition](#) calling for a boycott of the intrusive software.





From a USC Powerpoint presentation on Proctortrack

"Making Proctortrack MANDATORY software for all online course students is infuriating. It's unnatural that students are faced with the prospect of compromising their privacy in order to earn a grade," wrote Chao.

Chao petition only has 870 signers, but it has attracted the attention of the media. A local reporter at *New Brunswick Today*, Daniel Munoz, has done a [series of critical reports](#) on Proctortrack, focusing on the lack of adequate disclosure from Rutgers that students would have to pay for and use Proctortrack in order to complete courses they could no longer drop.

In a phone conversation this week, Dutta seemed completely blindsided by the flare-up. He argues that Proctortrack is transparent when it's taping students; that the information it collects is encrypted in transit and while stored on Proctortrack's servers; that it's only gathering data about the computer's operating system not looking at what's in folders; that the student data is deleted within months of collection; and that it allows students to take their exams in a "private, personal space" of their choosing. The larger issue of students being uncomfortable having their own devices enlisted to spy on them on seemed to elude him.

"The local newspaper kept writing and writing about this stupid stuff. And then other news sources copy it," he said, pointing out that 3,000 students at Rutgers have downloaded Proctortrack "smoothly" despite the petition. "Online education is growing and it requires tools like these. We're helping Rutgers go through a period of change."

But it's not just Rutgers, and not just college students going through change. Proctortrack has also gotten at least one employer, payroll company Indiepay, to start using its software for online job applications. Applicants download the software and take a surveilled skills test from the comfort of their own home. "They've had 1,200 candidates go through the process in 7 weeks," says Dutta. "They register on their website and take the test. Indiepay can then take voice or picture samples."

While Verificent Technologies is tiny now, if it has its way, temporary spyware will be required for university students and job hunters. Privacy will be the price of admission.

** This story originally included a slide with a photo of a student from a University of Southern California Powerpoint about a Proctortrack pilot program. Fusion took the slide down after realizing it was a real student and not a demo image. We did not mean to imply she had been flagged as a cheater by the Proctortrack system.*



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