October 17, 2017

Dear Colleagues:

Recent years have seen a proliferation of commercial websites that purport to help students study. These “study sites” can have a variety of functions. Some are benign, such as helping students prepare flashcards or make outlines. Others are more problematic, encouraging students to upload course materials such as graded homework assignments, papers, and tests. Many of these sites focus on specific courses at specific universities, including courses at the University of Missouri.

Sites that encourage students to upload course materials like graded assignments and test questions can lead to a number of issues. In particular, they can facilitate cheating and lead students to post material that is legally protected by copyright. The University of Missouri is approaching these challenges from several different angles, and faculty have an important role to play.

As an initial step in addressing this matter, I encourage you to discuss this subject with your students. You can caution them against posting material to study sites and using the material from these sites. Do not assume that students know what is off-limits. These sites may look very official, offer financial incentives for uploading material, and even hire students to be “campus representatives” (these students are actually paid to obtain materials from other students and post it). So be clear about your expectations with respect to your course material – what can be shared/used and what is prohibited. If you do find prohibited material on these websites or discover that students have been using a website to cheat, please report them to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. Information on how to report violations can be found here: [http://oai.missouri.edu]. Finally, you can take common-sense steps such as changing your assignments and test questions from year to year, and safeguarding materials that you wish to reuse.

These websites are not going to disappear any time soon. Our challenge going forward is to be proactive, to help our students discern appropriate uses of study sites, and to make our students aware of the dangers posed by unscrupulous sites. Faculty being proactive in addressing the issue with their students will be an important part of a successful overall strategy.

Sincerely,

Paul Litton
Professor of Law
Director, Office of Student Rights & Responsibilities