



Respondus LockDown Browser: Balancing Rigor, Equity, and Learning

As you seek options to [preserve learning](#) in the age of AI, you may be considering administering in-class exams and essays with the university's licensed secure testing tool, Respondus LockDown Browser. The software, downloaded by students on their own devices, secures students' computers during exams by blocking access to web browsers and restricting them from exiting the exam interface. Many faculty find LockDown Browser to be a helpful way to preserve academic rigor when administering exams in the Blackboard LMS. For others, it raises important questions about trust and student well-being. In this edition of *Vitality*, we will highlight some considerations to assist you in making informed, intentional choices about using the Respondus LockDown Browser.

Transparency and Purpose

Clear communication about why we use LockDown Browser matters. Students may perceive its use as an indication of distrust, but when we explain that its purpose is to support fair and consistent evaluation, we clarify its usefulness in giving every student an equitable opportunity to demonstrate what they know.

Communication might also include logistical details: what LockDown Browser does and does not do, how students access it, and where they can go for technical support. Providing this information well in advance, and making space for students to ask questions, reduces uncertainty and helps students prepare both technically and mentally for the assessment. For technical guidance, University Technology Services offers [guides](#) for both faculty and students on using Respondus Lockdown Browser in Blackboard.

Build Confidence with a Practice Test

Should you decide to use the Lockdown Browser, plan to administer a practice test at least one week before your first in-class graded exam. Such a practice test is helpful to both students and faculty. It conveys to students that your goal is to minimize unnecessary barriers and reduce stress. It helps students to download the software, confirm it works on their device, and experience the testing environment without the added pressure of an assessment.

It helps faculty gain insight into common issues that might arise when using the tool and how you might troubleshoot any issues. Encourage students to attempt to leave the exam, access other web pages, and otherwise "break" the tool. That way, you all get to experience what the monitored assessment process will be like, address questions/concerns, and prepare accordingly.

Provide Alternative Options

Even with clear instructions and a practice test, technical issues might occur. Keep in mind that the Lockdown Browser tends to drain a laptop's battery. Plan for alternatives in advance and communicate those options to your students.

As Anna Moreland, Honors Director and Professor, Humanities notes, flexibility can be key to a smooth assessment experience. She describes using Respondus LockDown Browser for her midterm while also having blue books and printed exams available for students whose laptops are not charged or who encounter technical difficulties. This approach allows the assessment to proceed without disruption and helps keep both faculty and students calm. Importantly, she emphasizes that instructor comfort matters: when faculty are confident and prepared, that confidence tends to carry over to students.

Consider Legitimate Concerns

It is important to acknowledge that the use of the LockDown Browser carries some pertinent concerns. One concern is that its use may unintentionally signal distrust of students, thus undermining the value of relational pedagogy and student-centered learning.

As Wittney Hammeke, VITAL Graduate Assistant, '27 MA in Communication, notes, high-stakes exams are already anxiety-inducing, and additional technological constraints can compound that stress.

Philosophical concerns suggest that assessing students' learning in a monitored process falls short of educating them about learning with integrity in the age of AI.

Student privacy is an additional consideration. Some view the need for students to download this software onto their personal devices as overly invasive. Reviewing the Respondus privacy policy and sharing it with students ensures that their questions regarding privacy are answered accurately, and providing a handwritten option, as stated above, may be an effective alternative.



The Right Choice for Your Course Context

Consider how alternate assessment approaches that do not require monitoring might align with your instructional goals. For example, authentic assessments, such as case studies, applied research or design projects, reflective portfolios, or problem-based tasks that ask students to use course concepts in context emphasize application, reflection, and process, which are important measures of learning in action. While not every course will lend itself to these alternative assessment approaches, they offer additional pathways for assessing student learning without the need for a locked-down testing environment.

Ultimately, whether Respondus LockDown Browser aligns with your instructional goals depends on a variety of factors: nature of the course, learning goals, student enrollment, disciplinary expectations, assessment type, to name a few. It is a tool that can assist with the execution of the assessment process; it fulfills this role well within the instructional context when its use is supported by clear communication, alternative options, and recursive practice.

*Authored by Hetal Thaker, Assistant Director for Instructional Technologies Integration, February 2026.
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