

Unveiling Academic Integrity:  
Case Studies of Real-World  
Academic Misconduct

# Unveiling Academic Integrity: Case Studies of Real-World Academic Misconduct

written by the students of EDUC 388:  
Perspectives on Academic Integrity at  
Simon Fraser University

Joel Heng Hartse



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# Introduction

Joel Heng Hartse

## Introduction

When I got my first permanent job as a university faculty member almost ten years ago, I noticed a lot of posters on my campus offering writing and editing services. I had seen ads like this for most of my adult life at the various universities I'd attended, but I started looking more closely at these, because I'd heard whispers among colleagues that there was a lot of cheating happening at my university.

Many of the posters were written in Chinese, and my limited knowledge of the language only left me with more questions – I could tell that some of the posters mentioned writing, or studying, or tutoring, but I didn't know exactly what else.

With the help of some Mandarin-speaking students, I soon learned that a wide spectrum of “services” were on offer, from seemingly innocent tutoring services, to the more grey area of “writing and editing help” to definitely not-at-all-sanctioned ghostwriting and online class-taking services.

This led me to launch a research project about what I came to call “paid/private academic support services” (PASS), and subsequently an undergraduate course, currently called EDUC 388, Perspectives on Academic Integrity. The course is not, as one or two students who enrolled in it assumed, one in which students simply learn the “rules” of academic integrity and how to not engage in

academic misconduct; instead, the goal of the course is to explore theory, research, and practice in academic integrity at a variety of levels, from elementary to secondary to higher education, and from a variety of perspectives, including those of students, teachers, professors, principals, administrators, school district officials, politicians and policymakers, and the general public.

In any given section of the course, about half or more of the students are aspiring educators. Many are education majors or minors, and some plan to enter teacher training after completing bachelors' degrees in other fields. A handful come from disciplines like psychology or criminology which have some overlap with the field of academic integrity; another handful find their way into the course simply because they find the subject matter intriguing. It has been one of my favourite courses to teach, in large part because the students take charge of presenting much of the material through creating and responding to real cases of academic misconduct – cases which you can read in this resource.

## **Teaching academic integrity with case studies**

Cases are probably best known as a teaching resource for business schools, but their use in education about academic integrity is not new. Many universities use cases as cautionary tales to teach beginning undergraduates about the “rules” of academic integrity. Cases involving academic integrity have also been used in teaching about business ethics (Hannah et al., 2019), and ethics in general (Ethics Unwrapped, 2023).

The focus of the case studies presented here, and the course they come from, is a bit different than the traditional “what not to do” cases presented as cautionary tales to

would-be cheaters. They focus on the educator's perspective and are designed to get readers to think about what the various actors – administrators, principals, teachers, and so on – within educational institutions could or should do when put in difficult situations like those depicted in the cases.

Case studies strike me as one of the best possible methods for teaching a course about academic integrity, because there are, by design, no easy answers. I think it's vitally important for aspiring educators to be aware that they are likely to encounter a number of difficult situations across their careers, situations that will require them to think on their feet and make decisions that may not please everyone, doing the best they can in the circumstances they find themselves in.

I give the Education 388 students several resources about creating teaching cases, the most helpful being Gina Vega's *The Case Writing Workbook: A Self-Guided Workshop*. Teaching cases are "about the problems that people in organizations experience" (Vega, 2017, p. 130). When they begin to sift through the sometimes endless media reports, legal documents, and social media posts, I encourage my students to focus on one or more people who had to make a decision, since a good case should concern "at least one major issue that is usually simple to identify but not necessarily easy to resolve" (Farhoomand, 2004, p. 104).

Vega also offers a helpful distinction between "decision cases" (which don't have an "ending"), and "illustrative cases," in which the writer of the case reveals what happens and invites the reader to evaluate the course of action that was taken by the decision-maker in the case. She writes: "If this is a decision case, the protagonist will conclude this section with some kind of request for

assistance. It will be clear to the reader what kind of help the character needs. If this is an illustrative case, the protagonist's actions and, possibly, the outcomes of those actions will be described and will generate a response in the reader" (p.139). The cases we have created are perhaps something between decision and illustrative cases, but the goal is the same: to get readers to think critically about the decisions that were made, and to put themselves in the shoes of one or more decision-makers.

### **About these cases and how to use them**

The cases in the "first edition" of this open educational resource (OER) come from the second and third offerings of EDUC 388, which took place from January to April, then September to December, of 2024, respectively. (The first offering was a 2021 COVID-era online-only course, and due to the vagaries of that time, I wasn't able to get my act together to compile those cases for publication. I can only apologize to those students, because their work was very good!)

There is a possibility that by publishing this OER, we are diminishing the opportunity for future students to write their own cases uninfluenced by those that have already been published. This is always a risk, but we live in a time, as one of the patron saints of our course, Dave Cormier (2024) writes, of "information abundance," and we have to teach that way. Our hope is that others will be inspired by this collection not only to reflect on and respond to these cases, but to continue to find new cases to research and present.

Unlike many teaching cases, those presented here are not fictional nor even fictionalized; they are real cases of academic misconduct, drawn from publicly available

documents such as media reports, legal proceedings, published or leaked reports of private investigations, and/or personal accounts from social media sources. In some cases, the case authors engaged in personal communications with real people involved in the incidents. The fact that we are discussing real events that in some cases had enormous and devastating effects on individuals' lives is not something we take lightly. Every effort is made to treat the people in these stories with respect and dignity while laying out the facts of the cases as best we can.

In our course, before their classmates respond in writing, the students working on the case present it formally, often supplementing the written case with additional background information about the social, historical, and cultural context the case took place in, and usually ending with a kind of “where are they now” section which reveals the aftermath or fallout of the case after the focal decision was made. Invariably, there is a lively debate about what could or should have been done in the case.

You may want to use the cases to prompt written responses and/or in-class or online discussions for education courses. These can focus on the specific discussion questions written by the authors of the cases, or you can solicit a more general response to the question “what would you do if you were in the protagonists' shoes?”

Here are the requirements I gave my students for what I call “case reflections” in 2024:

*The case reflection should include your own views and opinions about the case, but should also be supported by scholarly perspectives (e.g. course readings) as relevant. Reflections will be graded based on: 1) engaging with the material presented, 2) offering your own views on discussion questions from the group or other relevant issues as you*

*see fit, 3) whether/how views and claims you advance are supported by concepts and readings from the course, and 4) whether the reflection generally is insightful and readable (e.g. clear, concise, grammatical).*

I often work together with the case authors to choose a relevant scholarly reading to pair with their case; we have not listed those here, but a great starting point is the *Handbook of Academic Integrity* edited by Sarah Elaine Eaton, which is available as an electronic resource at many university libraries.

As of this writing, we are just finishing up the third and final Special Topics offering of the Perspectives on Academic Integrity Course: now it has to either become regularized or go away forever to Special Topics Heaven. I hope for the former, but if it's the latter, this resource will still exist.

Feel free to contact me by email (which can be found at this link) if you have any questions about this resource, and thanks for checking it out! We hope you find these cases as interesting and worth discussion and debate as we did.

Joel Heng Hartse  
(on behalf of the students of EDUC 388 at SFU)  
Burnaby, BC  
November 2024

## Further Readings on Academic Integrity Case Studies

If you would like more resources on academic integrity cases and/or teaching cases in general, I can recommend the following:

*The Case Writing Workbook: A Self-Guided Workshop* by Gina Vega

*Building Honor in Academics: Case Studies in Academic Integrity* edited by Valerie P. Denney, Camilla J. Roberts

*Scandals in College Sports: Legal, Ethical, and Policy Case Studies* edited by Shaun R. Harper and Jamel K. Donnor

*Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* by Joan Poliner Shapiro and Jacqueline A. Stefkovich

The *Ethics Unwrapped* website by the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin

The *Journal of Case Studies* and the *Journal of Critical Incidents* published by the Society for Case Research

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# 1.

## **When Teachers Cheat: The Atlanta Public Schools cheating scandal of 2009**

Kimia Tavakoli; Taranom Shirbani; Janelle Ho; and P. Bley

*(Note: one additional participant who did not ask to be listed as an author participated in this project.)*

### **Introduction**

Since 2006, Shayla Smith had been teaching fourth-grade at Dobbs Elementary, a poor school in a poor section of Atlanta (Rankin, 2013). By the end of the school year in 2010, a colleague accused her of cheating by giving students the correct exam answers (Bureau of Investigation, 2011). In 2011, a three-volume report was released by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation detailing widespread cheating involving approximately 178 administrators and teachers across 56 Atlanta Public Schools (Coston, 2011). Little did Smith know she would be part of this investigation and would later be terminated in 2012.

### **No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), promoted by the Bush administration, was the federal program of

general education for K-12 in the United States from 2002-2015 (Lee, 2019). The main goal of this act was to provide more academic opportunities for students of colour, in poverty, and with exceptionalities. Under this act, standardized tests called Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) were administered to all students (Lee, 2019). The testing was an attempt to bring all students including students in special education or any disadvantaged groups to the “proficient” level of education (Lee, 2019). After sharing their results with the state, each school received a “report card” called an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which determined the future of not only the schools as a whole, but also the faculty and administrators (Lee, 2019). This act helped to shine light on marginalized students requiring more attention and support, thereby increasing the graduation rate of students with learning disabilities from 57% in 2002 to 86% by 2011 (Lee, 2019). However, it had detrimental effects on the operation of schools that required improvement, like introducing penalties such as firing school staff and even closing schools (Lee, 2019).

## **Atlanta Public Schools**

Atlanta Public Schools were overseen by superintendent Beverly Hall since 1999 (Coston, 2011). Hall ruled with a culture of fear and intimidation, which was exacerbated by the No Child Left Behind policy. If a school met a certain threshold of results under the NCLB Act, educators received roughly an average of \$2,600, and as a superintendent, Hall received more than five times as much bonus pay (Niese, 2013). Under this incentive, Hall mandated annual targets; the failure to meet these would have resulted in termination or threat of termination of

employees (Strauss, 2015). Therefore, to satisfy Hall's annual targets, teachers began to fabricate and alter test results, which ultimately resulted in an inflation of the AYP of a large number of schools in Atlanta (Strauss, 2015). The methods used ranged from giving students exam answers to erasing incorrect responses and altering exams (Coston, 2011). In addition to financial incentive, Hall "protected and rewarded those who achieved targets through cheating" (Strauss, 2015) to maintain the high-test outcomes.

### **Dobbs Elementary**

Hall had influence over Dana Evans, the principal at Dobbs Elementary, where Shayla Smith taught (Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Hall's consistent demand for high test scores ultimately led Evans to influence Dobbs faculty members by implying that they would all be placed on a professional development plan (PDP) – which could lead to their termination – if their students did not excel, as well as terminating those who reported suspected cheating (Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Principals were told to meet this standard by "any means necessary", and failure led to the principals' termination – as evident by the replacement of 90% of APS principals during Hall's tenure (Coston, 2011). This toxic power dynamic was seen across many other Atlanta Public Schools under the Hall's administration. Jacquelyn Parks, a former Venetian Hills elementary school teacher, commented that the cheating environment was "like the mob", as her fear of non-participation stemmed from the threat of punishments and retaliation by Superintendent Hall and her team (Coston, 2011).

Shayla Smith felt the immense pressure that trickled down from the superintendent. Consequently, during the 2007 CRCT, Smith “felt she had no choice” and began providing her students with answers to the multiple-choice questions as well as altering completed student exams which continued for an additional two years (Rankin, 2013). She was able to do this as she and other Dobbs teachers obtained photocopies of the CRCT exam (Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Following her termination, Smith later admitted to her role in the cheating scandal and apologized to her former students and their parents for what she had done, calling it “one of my biggest mistakes and regrets” (Rankin, 2013).

In February of 2009, the efforts executed by Dobbs’ faculty members as well as many other schools in Atlanta, resulted in Hall’s recognition as the national Superintendent of the Year, crediting her for the rise in test scores and graduation rates among APS (AJC, n.d.). The Atlanta Journal Constitution (AJC), however, viewed these statistics as improbable (AJC, n.d.). In addition to AJC’s suspicions, the Governor’s office of Student Achievement also found “suspicious erasure marks on thousands of students’ answer sheets” (AJC, n.d.). With that, in February of 2010, investigation began for the potential cheating among 191 schools statewide, which included 58 schools in Atlanta (AJC, n.d.).

## **Conclusion**

Following the investigation, 178 teachers, principals and administration were reported from 44 Atlanta schools and 82 of those confessed to cheating. Of those who confessed, 38 were principals (AJC, n.d.). The final court ruling allowed 21 educators to return to their jobs due to

inadequate evidence, and about 150 educators either lost their appeals to be reinstated; resigned; or retired (AJC, n.d.). In addition to being terminated, Smith was one of several educators who were also charged with willful neglect and immorality (Contributors, 2012), but she took a plea deal for a single misdemeanor count of obstruction in exchange for testifying against her colleagues (AJC, n.d.).

Beverly Hall herself could have faced upwards of 45 years in prison for racketeering and other offences, and for collecting about \$580,000 in bonuses over 10 years, which predominantly came from her supposed achievement for the improvement in the Adequate Yearly Progress reports of Atlanta schools (Niese, 2013). However, she was not able to attend trial due to her health issues, and she died in 2015 (AJC, n.d.)

## Discussion Questions

1. What could have been done to prevent this scandal from happening?
2. How do you think this scandal relates to government involvement in the education system?
3. Why might some teachers feel they needed to alter the exam answers, while others chose to report the cheating?
4. What were the benefits of altering the exam answers? What were the harms? Do you think teachers' involvement in altering exam answers or otherwise "contaminating" exam results can ever be ethically justifiable? Why or why not?

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## 2.

# Principal Turns a Cheating Scandal into a Sting Operation: The 2012 Stuyvesant High School Cheating Incident

Ishaan Singh Kooner-Basanti; Deepkiran Dhillon; Simra Manzer; Priyanjali Mudaliar; Vivek (Vik) Nand; and Rajan Thind

### Before the incident

Stuyvesant High School is a prestigious school in Lower Manhattan, an upper-class region of New York City. On June 16th, 2012, Stuyvesant Principal Stanley Teitel received an email from Student G, an unidentified female student. Student G mentioned in her email that many students planned to cheat on the upcoming Regents Exam, a state-wide standardized test in New York. She provided Mr. Teitel with a detailed description of the students' plans to cheat, including what would happen during the exam and who would be involved. Student G stated that Student A "received the answers to the physics, US history, and English regents from about four people through messaging. [Student A] then sent out the answers to 50+ people via a mass text" (p.50).

Mr. Teitel held an emergency cabinet meeting with the school's assistant principals the morning before the exam to orchestrate a plan to catch Student A. The plan was to send a strong proctor to the Spanish exam to watch Student

A predominantly. If the student were cheating, he would be caught, and there would be enough evidence of the premeditated mass cheating to proceed with disciplinary action against all participating parties.

During the meeting, Mr. Teitel introduced his plan for a “sting operation”. The plan was to create a scenario in which Student A thought he was in a position where he could successfully cheat using his electronic device. Student A was unaware that Mr. Teitel hired a proctor to monitor the exam and catch the student being academically dishonest. After the meeting, Jennifer Suri, the assistant principal of the Social Studies department, asked Daniel Tillman, a social studies teacher, to proctor Student A’s exams.

### **The day of the exam**

On June 18th, 2012, Mr. Tillman went to the school to act as a proctor to supervise the Spanish Regents Exam. During the exam, at approximately 1:50 pm, Mr. Tillman noticed Student A “remove a cell phone from his pocket, place it on his lap, and [begin] to type. He then placed it back into his pocket” (p. 42). Mr. Tillman then observed Student A take out his phone and take a picture of the test. Shortly after Student A took the picture, Mr. Tillman contacted Mr. Teitel and informed him that Student A was using his phone during the exam. Upon Mr. Teitel’s arrival, he immediately asked Student A if he had a phone on him and instructed him to give it to him. Student A countered by asking him why, to which Mr. Teitel responded, “Because I am the principal.” This altercation resulted in Student A surrendering his phone, and both exited the examination room and proceeded to the principal’s office.

After Student A was removed from the examination room, he was taken to Mr. Teitel's office, and shortly after, Randy Damesek, the Assistant Principal of Organization and Testing Coordinator, arrived. Upon her arrival, she informed Student A that he could finish writing his exam. While Student A was completing the exam, Mr. Teitel and Ms. Damesek attempted to retrieve evidence of Student A's cheating by going through his phone. They found that "he had used his phone to disseminate information to classmates during multiple exams" (p. 5). Once Student A completed the exam, his father was called to retrieve him from the school. While Ms. Damesek continued to retrieve information from Student A's phone, Mr. Teitel informed the father about what had happened.

Mr. Teitel noted they were considering transferring Student A out of the school through a transportation or safety transfer. The transportation transfer would mean that the student would move to another school, and a safety transfer would imply that the student would have to move schools due to safety-related issues. However, Student A had no safety concerns and was unwilling to be transferred to a different school, so he and his father did not approve of either option suggested by Mr. Teitel. Mr. Teitel asked if they could keep the phone to investigate further. Student A and his father agreed; however, after they left the school, the data from his phone was promptly erased.

### **After the exam**

The following day, Student A and his father returned to the school and ran into Ms. Damesek, who told them that Student A would have to "leave the school" (p. 5). Shortly after, Student A's guidance counsellor provided the transportation transfer paperwork to the Assistant Principal

and Pupil Personnel Services, Eleanor Archie. Ms. Archie refused to sign the paperwork, as student A had not relocated or switched residences, nor experienced any safety-related issues at school.

A second meeting was held on Friday, June 22nd, 2012. During this meeting, Mr. Teitel confirmed with the staff that Student A had initiated the cheating, noting that he had sent the answers of the exam to 70 other students. Of the 70 students, 50 responded or otherwise participated in the cheating. During the meeting, Mr. Teitel did not address how the students were directly involved or how to deal with the situation. The other faculty members suggested that an appropriate form of punishment for the students who also participated should be to revoke various privileges such as their lunch privileges, extracurricular activities, and leadership roles. During this meeting, Mr. Teitel informed the staff that he had sent out a letter to the parents of the involved students, alerting them about the course of action yet to be taken. Eventually, fifty-four students engaged in the cheating “were suspended due to their involvement in, or knowledge of, student cheating during the June 2012 Regents exam” (p. 41).

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you think cheating is harder to commit in high school or postsecondary? If so, what experience have you heard of or had that resonates with you?
2. What aspects of the principal’s investigation would you change? For example, was it the right decision to call in a proctor to watch the student commit the act? Why or why not?

3. Why do you think the principal conducted this investigation instead of just contacting the student after receiving the email?
4. Mr. Teitel and Ms. Damasek eventually lost their jobs due to their handling of this incident and were criticized for being slow to investigate and to report the incident to the school board. Do you agree with this assessment and/or punishment?
5. Student A was briefly suspended from Stuyvesant and finished his high school education at another school. Upon graduation, he found employment with a test preparation agency. Would you recommend that students take test prep classes with him? Why or why not?

## References

In lieu of a reference section, please note that all information and quotes in this case come from the report “An Investigation into Cheating and Testing Improprieties at Stuyvesant High School during June 2012” by Dennis Boyles, Kara Hughes, Robert Small, and other anonymous authors, for the New York City Department of Education, published by the Wall Street Journal and accessed at <https://www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/nystuy083013.pdf>. Students’ names are anonymized as in the original report, but Student A’s identity was revealed in media reporting in 2012 and 2013.

### 3.

## **Paper Classes: The University of North Carolina Academic-Athletic Scandal**

**Jeevan Singh Khatra; Aaryan Menon; David McDonald; and Andrew Mitterboeck**

### **Introduction**

A senior football player from the University of North Carolina (UNC) urgently needed to improve his grade point average to be eligible for playing football in the fall season at UNC. By taking easy classes, the player made it over the required GPA of 1.5. However, when the fall semester came around, the player had a schedule of many challenging classes which were required for him to graduate. In the UNC athletic program, many student athletes are advised by the program to take easy classes throughout their semesters to maintain the grade point average to stay eligible.

The university had no problems in accepting athletes who lacked academic ability or exhibited a lack of enthusiasm in attending classes (Smith & Willingham, 2015). In addition, the university provided opportunities for athletes to become eligible for academic programmes, which enabled them to continue competing in their sports. These qualifying routes, which at first caused mild breaches of academic integrity, eventually resulted in overt corruption (Smith & Willingham, 2015). To ensure they

could continue to participate, many of these athletes, especially those in popular sports like basketball and football were guided into fictitious classes (Smith & Willingham, 2015). This case delves into the part played by academic advisers, coaches, and officials at UNC in facilitating fraudulent academic work. It calls into doubt the legitimacy of the university and the decision to put athletic achievement ahead of the integrity of education.

### **“Paper classes”**

Julius Nyang’oro was the chairman of the department of African and Afro-American studies at the University of North Carolina between 1997-2011. One of the first courses introduced by him was Swahili 001. This course met the foreign language requirements of UNC and was able to be completed asynchronously due to the small nature of the class. This class from 1997 was investigated and found to be essentially non-existent, as there were no instructors or lecture meetings (Smith & Willingham, 2015). This and other courses came to be known as “paper classes.” Athletes began to enroll in these classes because of what they had heard about the ease of them as well as being prompted by academic advisors to take them if their GPA was dipping too much. Academic advisors were placing UNC athletes into these classes knowing that they would be meeting their class requirements.

The most prominent example was that of Julius Peppers, who was a student athlete at UNC for football and basketball. Peppers did not have a great GPA and was on the cusp of being ineligible to play for UNC as he was below the 1.5 average needed. Luckily for Peppers, his ability on the basketball court and football field proved good enough to convince Nyang’oro and his academic

counselors to have him put in a multitude of paper classes (Smith & Willingham, 2015). With his boosted GPA letting him be eligible for his respective sport seasons, Peppers lacked almost any stress related to education and could focus primarily on excelling in his sports, especially football, as he was later scouted to go to the NFL.

Peppers' entire time at UNC saw him purposely be put into these "self-directed" classes in order to prevent his GPA from dropping from the actual courses that would have been required for him to graduate (Smith & Willingham, 2015). These self-directed classes were done at the student's own pace and most of the time involved only a few items that were submitted for grading throughout the term; however, the grades were all inflated dramatically by the instructors. Peppers was also involved in a multitude of classes within the African and Afro-American studies department and he even was in a few courses "taught" by Nyang'oro which he did very well in. His GPA would always conveniently grow just before the sport seasons started.

## **Conclusion**

In reaction to the controversy, UNC hired outside assessors and carried out a number of its own investigations to determine the scope of academic dishonesty at the institution. These inquiries uncovered instances in which student-athletes received special consideration and exposed pervasive anomalies in the AFAM division.

Nyang'oro was investigated and hit with a \$12,000 fraud charge for being involved in creating a class for the summer term in 2011 that he did not end up teaching. UNC was satisfied with the amount of information Nyang'oro provided about the special treatment student athletes were

receiving from his courses and the various academic counselors, so they just pushed for him to resign from his position as chairman (Sims & Summers, 2014). This investigation also led to further details concerning the fabrication of non-existent classes for UNC athletes and paved a way for further research to be done into who was working together to ensure athletes had an easier course load than the average student.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that the jury dropping the charges against Nyong'oro was a fair finale to the UNC scandal?
2. What kind of ethical considerations did the academic counselors have to deal with?
3. What measures could universities implement to prevent academic fraud and ensure the academic integrity of student-athletes?
4. Do student athletes owe anything to their universities in terms of graduating? Is there a need to finish their education if they are aiming to go pro in their respective sport?

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## 4.

# The Real Effects of Plagiarism: Chris Spence

Brad Foley; Man-Chak Matthew Choi; Annie Yeung; and Alice Li

*(Note: two additional participants who did not choose to be listed as authors participated in this project.)*

## Introduction

On January 6, 2013, the Toronto District School Board's Director of Education Chris Spence submitted an article, "Without School Sports, Everyone Loses" to the Toronto Star. Within days that the company was contacted to review the article for plagiarism. Under review by one of the editors, it was indeed found that Spence had committed plagiarism and was confronted. Spence admitted to doing so immediately, acknowledging the article pulled from at least five other sources without being credited. Shortly after the scandal came to light, Spence resigned as director of the Toronto Board of Education, expressing remorse for his actions (Ontario College, 2017). However, this did not result in the end of the investigation into plagiarism in Spence's writing and the impacts it would have on his life.

## Plagiarism in published articles

Soon after, Spence was found to have also plagiarized a piece speaking on a Connecticut school shooting tragedy in 2012. This piece told a story similar to one written by Aisha Sultan three days earlier (Centennial College, n.d.). A few example lines that were held under scrutiny are the following lines written on Dec. 14, 2012, by Sultan:

But when I looked at my 7-year-old son, I put on my calmest face. ‘A terrible and sad thing happened today,’ I said. ‘Someone shot a gun at a school.’ He looked at me for a minute, trying to understand what I had said.

Three days later, on Dec. 17, 2012, responding to the same event, Spence wrote:

But when I looked at my 10-year-old son, Jacob, I put on my calmest face. ‘A terrible and sad thing happened today,’ I said. ‘Someone shot a gun at a school.’ He looked at me for a minute, trying to understand what I had said.

Among other articles discovered by the media, it was found that Spence’s cases of plagiarism continued even further into the past. One such article is called “On Time! On Task! On a Mission!” where he copied word for word from an article written in 1996 by the Los Angeles School District. Spence wrote “Students routinely came to school without a pen or pencil or anything on which to write,” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017) while the Los Angeles School Board wrote, “Students who routinely come to school without a pen or pencil or anything on which to write.” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017). Another example found was from an article Spence wrote in 2008 called “The Joys of Teaching Boys.” Spence plagiarized from

another article called “Morphing Literacy: Boys Reshaping Their School-Based Literacy Practices,” by Heather A. Blair and Kathy Sanford. In this article, Spence used the line “These behaviours are viewed as interfering with literacy success, and they skew teachers’ perceptions of boys’ abilities and their willingness to engage in texts,” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017) while Blair and Sanford wrote “These behaviours are viewed as interfering with school literacy success, and they skew teachers’ perceptions of boys’ abilities and willingness to engage in literacy texts.” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017).

### **Further Investigations and Consequences**

As further investigations continued, more possible cases of plagiarism were found throughout his career, and as a result, in 2014, that Spence lost his teaching license. Eventually, he resigned from his role as director of education due to pressure from the Toronto District School Board and Chair. Spence was officially stripped of his teaching certification by the Ontario College of Teachers in 2016 after being found guilty of professional misconduct (2017).

In 2016, Spence was also investigated by the University of Toronto for suspicion of plagiarism and patch-writing in his 1996 doctoral thesis, “The Effects of Sports Participation on the Academic and Career Aspirations of Black Male Student-Athletes in Toronto High Schools”. It was found that within the thesis, Spence had taken many excerpts verbatim or nearly so from at least sixty-seven instances without properly citing them, some being several sentences long (University of Toronto, 2017, p. 2). It was also found by the university that in each section that had been plagiarized, the passages had

been reviewed and altered to fit the paper better, such as localization of words and familiar first-person tones, passing off the work as his own (University of Toronto, 2017, p.3).

During the University of Toronto investigation, Spence asked that many of the hearings be adjourned for reasons such as for health, or work-related issues, delaying the case's closure and outcome by over a year (University of Toronto, 2017). Eventually, the decision was made in light of the evidence that he was indeed guilty of plagiarism and patchwriting. This resulted in the verdict that his doctorate be revoked and the university stated that "...had plagiarism been detected before the former Student received his degree, the degree would never have been conferred." (University of Toronto, 2017, p. 30).

In an interview, Spence claimed to not have knowingly committed plagiarism. He explained, "You are just going through different ideas and you read a lot and you take notes, you're working on something, you go away, you read something, you write it down ... I'm a fairly prolific reader, so sometimes I just read ideas that meshed with my own." (Rushowy & Brown, 2013). After making this statement, Spence disappeared from the public. Six months would pass before he made another public statement on the incident, in which he stated: "There are no excuses for what I did; I didn't give credit where credit was due." (Rushowy & Brown, 2013). Spence later talked about the impacts this continued investigation has had on his life: "Right from the get-go, I've taken full responsibility, I've apologized," he said. "I am on my knees, still. I just want to get back on my feet." (CBC, 2017).

## Discussion Questions

1. Were the consequences received by Chris Spence fair?
2. Do you think Spence was justly punished by society for his actions? Did the punishment match his crimes?
3. Should Spence be allowed to reclaim his reputation and credibility in the education field, and if so, what steps do you believe he should take?
4. Do you believe the public scrutiny and media coverage of Spence's case have influenced perceptions of plagiarism and accountability in the education sector?
5. Do you think the fact that Spence was a Person of Colour in a high-level government position may be related to the amount of media attention that this case attracted?

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## 5.

# Collaboration or Collusion? The Harvard Government 1310 Cheating Incident

Zihe Liu; Xinrui Liu; and Bella Roblero

*(Note: one additional participant who did not ask to be listed as an author participated in this project.)*

## Introduction

One of the world's most prestigious educational institutions, Harvard University, became embroiled in a significant scandal in 2012 following reports of widespread cheating in an undergraduate course. In May 2012, Matthew B. Platt, the instructor of Government 1310: Introduction to Congress, identified similarities in several student exams and reported the matter to Harvard's Administrative Board (Ad Board). In response, the Ad Board launched a comprehensive review of the take-home exams submitted by 279 enrolled students, which led to the discovery that 125 students had potentially engaged in academic misconduct (Wikimedia Foundation, 2024). The allegations revolved around improper collaboration, with some students submitting nearly identical answers. Although the exam was open-book, students were

instructed to complete it independently, yet the lack of proctoring created ambiguities about acceptable conduct.

## **The evolution of the Government 1310 cheating scandal**

According to *The Harvard Crimson*, Dr. Platt identified and reported widespread cheating in his Government 1310 course based on the similarity of students' exam answers. On May 14, 2012, he submitted a letter to John "Jay" L. Ellison, Secretary of the Harvard Ad Board of Regents, detailing how 13 out of 279 submitted exams were suspected of plagiarism. This number later grew to 125 students. Dr. Platt discovered that some students' answers shared identical wording, structures, spelling mistakes, and misunderstandings of course material. These similarities made it clear to him that the responses were not the result of independent work but indicated inappropriate collaboration between students (Cook & Robbins, 2012).

For instance, in a bonus question on the exam, students were asked: "Describe two developments in the history of Congress that ostensibly gave individual members of Congress (MCs) in the House greater freedom and/or control but ultimately centralized power in the hands of party leadership." In the letter, Platt mentioned that some students answered with the same two "somewhat obscure" events: the Cannon Revolt of 1910 and Henry Clay, a long-serving Congressman in the 19th century. In addition, Dr. Platt found identical phrases in some students' answers, such as "Freddie Mac's stealth lobbying campaign" and "22, 500 organizations in 2008." These phrases were identical and contained the same typo—an unnecessary space after the comma in "22, 500" (Cook & Robbins, 2012).

Subsequently, the Ad Board conducted a comprehensive review of over 250 take-home exams and interviewed students involved (Harvard Gazette, 2012). The role of Harvard's Ad Board is to monitor students' academic regulations and social behaviors through fair investigations and solutions (Administrative Board Home Page, n.d.). According to John Harvard's Journal in *Harvard Magazine*, the "Academic Dishonesty" section in the Harvard University Student Handbook states that students must follow the guidelines outlined in the course syllabus and adhere to the cooperation policies established for each course (2012).

Dr. Platt's exam policy for Government 1310 clearly stated "The exam is completely open book, open note, open Internet, etc. However, in all other regards, this should fall under similar guidelines that apply to in-class exams. More specifically, students may not discuss the exam with others—this includes resident tutors, writing centers, etc." (Conway & Yaqhubi, 2013; Robbins, 2012). However, contradictions between Dr. Platt's previous leniency and the stricter actions he took in 2012 seemed to upset students. One student testified that Dr. Platt had told the class he did not care about attendance and had awarded over 120 A's in previous years (Halperin, 2012). To the students' surprise, Dr. Platt introduced a more challenging exam format in the spring of 2012. According to the syllabus for Government 1310, the exams in Spring 2010 and Spring 2011 required students to write a three- to five-page essay responding to one of three prompts. However, in Spring 2012, Platt "replaced the essay question with a short-answer section containing several multi-part questions, many of which had definitive right or wrong answers". This change heightened student anxiety and frustration (Robbins, 2012; Hackett & Robbins, 2012).

Jay M. Harris, Dean of the College of Undergraduate Education, who assisted the Ad Board in reviewing the cheating case, stated that evidence of cheating included “answers that look quite alike to answers that appear to have been lifted in their entirety”; showing “clusters of students who seem to have collaborated,” rather than a widespread conspiracy to cheat (John Harvard’s Journal, 2012).

## **The aftermath**

Out of the roughly 125 students accused of cheating, half of them were required to temporarily withdraw from Harvard, while the remaining students were placed on disciplinary probation. A tiny percentage of the students remaining in the course received no punishment. Many students experienced severe doubts about their personal and academic plans due to this occurrence. The dean, Jay M. Harris, decided that he didn’t want to keep this case a secret from the public and wanted to take this event as a learning opportunity for everyone by announcing publicly what had happened and calling it an incident of widespread cheating that was “unprecedented in anyone’s living memory” (Clarida & Fandos, 2013). The following year, Dr. Platt was not promoted after a routine tenure-track review (Clarida & Fandos, 2013).

Additionally, Harvard’s Committee on Academic Integrity suggested the college’s first honor code, professors highlighted collaboration rules in their curricula, and administrators hosted town hall meetings to gather student input on Harvard’s academic culture (Clarida & Fandos, 2013). In 2015, Harvard adopted an honor code for the first time in its history which ends with the following sentence: Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing

or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

## Discussion Questions

1. Did Dr. Platt's exam format encourage cheating, and if so, how should the exam format be adjusted to help professors avoid potential student cheating?
2. What role should the institution (Harvard) play in fostering a culture of academic honesty, and how?
3. Which format is more effective in assessing a student's true abilities, open-book or closed-book exams? If you think it's an open-book exam, how do you define how do you clearly distinguish between "resource sharing," "collaborative learning," and "cheating"◊If you think it's a closed-book exam, how do you balance student stress with quality instruction?
4. In what ways could the instructor have better supported both the students and the institution in understanding and adhering to academic integrity standards?
5. Should students be penalized for misunderstanding or misinterpreting academic integrity guidelines?

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## 6.

### **ID, Please: A Case of SAT Fraud**

Elaine Ngo; Susanne van Beelen; Jyoti Samra; and Parteeek Maroke

#### **Great Neck North High School and Sam Eshagoff**

John L. Miller Great Neck North high school, also known as Great Neck North High School, is a public high school located in Long Island, New York (Bennington Banner, 2011). It is known as a school of high achievers that sends almost all its students to college. The student body is predominantly white (69%), with significant Asian (20%) and Hispanic (7%) populations. About 25% of students are classified as “economically disadvantaged” (New York State Education Department, 2023). Despite some economic diversity, Great Neck is generally known as a wealthy community (Bennington Banner, 2011). Great Neck North’s reputation as a high-achieving school creates an intense academic environment: with most students aiming for top colleges, there is significant pressure to excel academically and on standardized tests like the SAT. Sam Eshagoff, a 2010 graduate of Great Neck North, was a 19-year-old known for being a smart, accomplished student. He also had a reputation for his high SAT scores. In 2011, Sam was enrolled at Emory University in Atlanta after completing his freshman year at the University of Michigan (Solnik, 2011). His stellar academic record

resulted in him running a scheme where he took the SAT for sixteen students over the course of three years.

A struggling student approached Sam, saying “Yo, you’re good on your SATs and I’m not,” and simply asked how much it would take for him to take the SAT on his behalf (CBS News, 2012). After his first attempt he realized how easy it was to cheat the system. For Eshagoff it was a quick and easy way to make money, and this one favor soon turned into a continuous cheating operation.

Eshagoff forged high school IDs by altering the picture with his own and changing the name and date of birth to match his clients. For female students, he would only agree if they had a unisex name, to reduce the risk of getting caught (CBS News, 2012). To avoid any suspicion Eshagoff deliberately went to test centers where he knew he would not be recognized (CBS News, 2012). His clientele expanded through word of mouth and referrals, and he charged between \$1,500 and \$2,500 per test (Solnik, 2011). Eshagoff repeatedly scored in the 97th percentile or higher for his client, and believed that by securing high scores, he was giving these students a “new lease on life”, a path to better universities, new careers, and transformed futures (CBS News, 2012).

## **The SAT**

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is an exam that many universities based in the United States, Australia, Canada, India, and many other countries refer to when determining the acceptance of new students into their institutions. The College Board is responsible for determining the structure, administration, and application of the SAT in the United States, while the Educational Testing Service (ETS) develops, administers, publishes, and scores the exam

(Knox, 2024). The paper-based exam, which is the version that Eshagoff took, consisted of a reading, a writing, and a math section, though at the end of 2023, the paper-based exam was replaced with a digital version of the exam, which has two sections for reading, writing, and math (Manjunath, 2024). Despite the dependence that many universities have on the SAT scores, it has been the target of criticism. Critics state that the SAT does not provide an adequate measurement of a student's success rate in college or university. There is also evidence suggesting a correlation between the income of a student's family and their scores on the exam (The JBHE Foundation, Inc, 2009).

## **Investigations**

Investigations began after Great Neck North teachers heard rumors that there were students paying people to take the SAT for them. After conducting their investigation, teachers discovered that six Great Neck North students had large differences between their previous academic work and their SAT score (Los Angeles Times, 2011). Eshagoff was one of the first individuals charged for the crime (CBS New York, 2012). The investigation led to the conclusion that Eshagoff had taken the SAT exam on behalf of 16 students. The District Attorney prosecuting Eshagoff, Kathleen Rice, took it upon herself to further question the integrity of the exam itself, and why it was easy for him to get away with impersonating test takers. From Rice's perspective this was a huge fraud, with lots of money changing hands, and there were high stakes involved including forgery, and criminal impersonation. Rice believed it was fraud on many different levels, but most importantly against the

kids who play by the rules (CBS News, 2011). One of the first actions Rice took was to challenge the College Board about the security and loopholes the SAT system had. The College Board would not agree to any extra security measures that needed to be taken as they simply believed it was an isolated problem. Rice then had to expand her investigations, and bring proof to the board that this cheating ring was not an isolated incident, that “it was more pervasive than they were claiming it was” (Edelman, 2019). New York state law prevented ETS from telling schools about cases of suspected cheating. ETS said they would, “continue to evaluate and implement test security enhancements that protect the integrity of SAT scores while not discouraging any student or group of students from pursuing their college dreams” (Today Show, 2011). Rice demanded ETS to make other immediate security changes like matching photos and handwriting.

## **Aftermath**

As of December 1, 2011, twenty teenagers throughout five different Long Island high schools were arrested (Anderson, J., et. al, 2011). Five were charged for taking the tests for other students, while the remaining fifteen were accused of paying other students sums of up to \$3,600 to take the exams, and face “misdemeanor charges” (2011). Four students were charged with scheming to defraud, falsifying business records, and criminal impersonation. Eshagoff himself took a plea deal that required community service, including tutoring low-income students on how to take the SAT (CBS News, 2011). ETS agreed to make changes after facing significant media scrutiny. Students taking the SAT exam are now required to submit a photo of themselves prior to taking

the test, which must match the image on their ID. “A copy of the photo will be printed on the admission ticket mailed to each student, and will also appear on the test site roster” (ABC30, 2012). On the exam itself, slight changes were made, including more test questions, an overall ban or collection of cell phones, heightened security protocols at testing centers, and using collected data to continually analyze the testing behaviors of students. Eshagoff himself also provided a suggestion for improving the security of testing centers, stating, “If the College Board required students to take the test at their own respective high schools, it would be a lot more difficult to impersonate people.” (Goldsmith, 2020). District attorney Kathleen Rice pushed for many reforms. One included, “preventing a cheater from retaking the test for a year, and mandatory notification from high schools to applied colleges, when students are caught cheating” (CBS, 2012). This reform was to be implemented across the United States.

## Discussion Questions

1. What should the punishments have been for the students caught paying others to complete the SATs for them?
2. Eshagoff received community service as part of his plea deal and was required to tutor low-income students on SAT exams. Do you believe this was justified?
3. How should educational institutions balance student privacy rights with the need for academic integrity?
4. Should universities rely on standardized test

- scores to determine who gets accepted into their institutions? Why or why not?
5. Do you agree with Eshagoff that he was giving his clients “a new lease on life” and potentially saving their lives?
  6. What are some additional policy changes you would make for standardized test administration?

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## 7.

# "This is Not Your Language": Plagiarism and Racism at Suffolk University

Rosemary Orenzo; Ethan Pin; Ilksev Akar; and Hao Yang Li

### Tiffany Martínez

Tiffany Martínez was born in New York and moved to Massachusetts, where she studied sociology at Suffolk University starting in 2013 (Martínez, 2016). Martínez is of Latina heritage and is both a first-generation college student and a first-generation U.S. citizen (Martínez, 2016). Academically, she was a dedicated and outstanding student, with the qualifications to back it up. In addition to juggling at least two jobs, she successfully maintained her status as a full-time student and consistently made the Dean's List (Martínez, 2016). By her third year, Martinez had an impressive record of achievements, including presenting at national conferences, writing a piece published in a peer-reviewed journal, and securing federal funding for a research project on female youth empowerment (Martínez, 2016). In 2016, she began sharing her passions in blog posts regarding poetry, art, social justice, and education (Martínez, 2016), and it was a blog post that led to widespread interest in the alleged plagiarism incident at the center of this case.

## **An Accusation of Plagiarism in Front of the Class**

The incident between Tiffany Martinez and her professor occurred directly in the lecture hall. In an interview on the Chronicle.com, (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016), Martinez recounts her story as she vividly remembers the day her academic career changed dramatically. It all began in her sociology senior seminar, a class reserved for students nearing the end of their degree. Martinez had been absent the previous week, therefore receiving her paper a week late; she was one of two individuals receiving their assignment that day.

Martinez recounts that she was called to the front of the class, and then had a discussion with the professor going over her paper. The first comment from the professor was “this is not your language” (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). Another comment on the paper reads, “please go back and indicate where you cut and paste” (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). Martinez’s biggest issue was with the way the professor handled the situation. She stated “I would prefer it to be a one-on-one conversation so we can discuss it and not have it in front of my peers” (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). Feeling abashed by the professor’s decision to hold this discussion within earshot of the whole class, Martinez said she felt the professor handled the situation incorrectly: “perhaps she didn’t understand how much what she was saying affected me”(Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). The embarrassment served to Martinez came as a surprise to her; she defended herself, maintaining that she didn’t plagiarize the paper and that the professor had taken a stab at her identity rather than analyzing her work. From Martinez’s point of view, the professor was biased toward her because of her Latina identity and couldn’t fathom the fact that Martinez did in fact write her own paper.

The word that set the professor off was “hence” (Gagosz, 2016). “Hence” is a fairly common word in the academic world, but according to the professor, this was simply not in Martínez’s vocabulary. This leads to the reason we are actually aware of this case, the blog post turned viral made by Martínez titled “Academia, Love Me Back” (Martínez, 2016).

## Exploring Different Perspectives

Martínez’s blog post instantly became viral, and the hashtag “#hence” started to become a trend. To Martínez, this incident was more than a simple case of potential plagiarism, rather it was a form of racist microaggression that she refused to ignore. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the only instance of racism she had encountered on campus. She recalls an experience from her time as a Resident Assistant when a student confused her for a custodian simply because she was speaking Spanish on the phone with her mother (Gagosz, 2016).

Although she did not set out for the post to go viral, there was a clear reason it resonated so widely. Moreover, Martínez reflects on the sense of defeat she experienced upon realizing that her professor, someone she admired for guidance and support, was so quick to accuse her of something so uncharacteristic, as she states: “It was such a weird moment for me, of just like it finally happened, someone doesn’t believe that I can be this scholarly or I can be an academic” (Lemme tell you somethin’, 2016).

The blog post quickly gained traction, creating an upset within the university, where a newly established group called “Stand Up Suffolk” organized rallies (Gagosz, 2016). The support Martínez received stretched far out of the university as Herman Beavers, a Professor of English

and African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote to acting president Maria Kelly, calling for transparency regarding misconduct, mentioning that “the bigotry of one faculty member in no way diminishes [Martínez’s] accomplishments or her prospects” (Journal, 2016).

The letter, which received more than 277 signatures, also expressed disapproval with how the potential plagiarism incident was handled, describing that the public shaming was both unwarranted and unnecessary (Journal, 2016). On October 28, 2016, an email was sent out from Suffolk’s acting president Marisa Kelly, where stated that a mistake was made and that the university was taking the issue seriously by conducting investigations. The email continued to echo the importance of diversity stating that “Suffolk University is deeply committed to fostering an inclusive environment. Every student and every member of our community should feel respected” (Kelly & Royo, 2016).

Kelly claimed that prejudice is common on college campuses and that faculty and staff need to be supported to understand and respect students’ diversity (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011). Also Kelly emphasized in the Christian Science Monitor (2011), that the Martinez incident was proof of the seriousness of the situation. She stated that there were many events organized at the university that encourage professors and students to respect each other and help reduce discrimination, and that they were working specifically on micro-aggressions and were training faculty members to understand the concerns of minority groups (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011).

The community of supporters began to expand, as students became inspired by Martínez to share their shared experience of racism in academia. Another Suffolk

University student, Sheikh Nasher, also voiced his experience with racism within the University stating: “I actually know Tiffany Martínez, I admire the work she does. The incident that took place with her is not a new thing, it happens everywhere in a campus. I have experienced it myself. There was an incident where I was told to ‘get deported’ [last year]” (Gagosz, 2016).

In her post about the incident, Martínez wrote that “The entire field of academia is broken and erases the narratives of people like me. We all have work to do to fix the lack of diversity and understanding among marginalized communities. We all have work to do” (Martínez, 2016).

The interaction between Martínez and her professor clearly sparked a wave of frustration and a call for change, with many backing her decision to bring her issue to light. However, other reactions raised alternative perspectives on this case. A blog called “Scholars and Rogues” explains the frustration of not knowing what really happened, and that the story is only told from one point of view. Furthermore, the blog points out that when Martínez introduces the story by highlighting the unfair bias faced by students like her, it inherently shapes the perspective and narrative to suggest that the professor was racist, even without her explicitly stating it, leading readers into the idea that this is not a case about false plagiarism, but about racial biases. The blog suggests that Martínez should have let the readers form their own opinion regarding the case, rather than setting it up in such a way. The blog further states that “Martínez [should have] devoted more energy to presenting us with facts we can consider and less time indulging in emotional indignation” (Smith, 2016).

For instance, a significant question that sparked curiosity was why the teacher singled out Martínez among

all the students present. While this detail was not addressed in Martínez's initial blog post, she revealed in an interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that she was absent from the class before, when the professor initially handed the papers back (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). This is important to mention because it suggests that Martínez was not singled out; rather, it was simply due to her absence from the class when the teacher chose to return the papers.

Another perspective to consider is that of the other students. Some students were shocked to read such insinuating claims regarding their professor. One student showed support towards the professor, saying, "I think our professor is a good person. She means well" (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). Another claimed that the class had "talked about Black Lives Matter and the professor seemed in full support of Black lives and the movement so I don't think she's racist" (Gagosz, 2016). Two other students explained in an interview that similarly to Martínez, they received critiques questioning the choice of language in their papers (Gagosz, 2016). Additionally, several students also explained that the professor provided both negative and positive remarks on student writing throughout the class, where Martínez was absent (Gagosz, 2016).

## **Next Steps In Life**

After graduating from Suffolk and earning her MA from Columbia University, Martínez was admitted to New York University's Teaching & Learning PhD program, with a focus on Urban Communities. Her goal has been improving the U.S. public school system to better support marginalized youth. Her research explores race, gender, and language learning with a strong emphasis on inclusive, multilingual education. Combining theory and practice, she

has worked with nonprofits and public schools in Boston and New York City to develop inclusive, culturally responsive curriculum. (NYU Steinhardt, n.d.)

## Discussion Questions

1. How could have the professor better handled the incident after discovering the alleged plagiarism?
2. Some students expressed support for the professor, pointing out that while her grading can be strict, she applies the same standards to all papers. Two other students mentioned that they faced similar criticism about the language in their own paper. Does this justify the professor's approach?
3. What do you think about Martínez's decision to create the blog post? What other methods might she have considered to handle this situation?
4. Do you believe that academic integrity can or should be race-neutral? Why or why not?
5. How can culture and race influence the way a student is treated academically?

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## 8.

# The Grammarly Girl: A Case of "Unintentional Cheating"

Alexandria Mobilio; Bhavneet Nijjar; Catarina Parrotta; and Jasmine Burmanmore

## Introduction

In October 2023, Marley Stevens, a student at the University of North Georgia (UNG), received a zero on a two page paper she wrote about recidivism rates for her criminal justice class. After she submitted the paper the professor informed her that the use of AI was detected through the submission website Turnitin (Forrester, 2024). Stevens claims she only used the tool Grammarly to simply review her grammar, something she had always done for all her papers (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th, 2024). In a moment of frustration and in an attempt to warn others about what she saw as the possibility of being unfairly accused of cheating, Stevens uploaded a video to the social media platform Tiktok to explain her story (Forrester, 2024). Stevens mentioned how she felt the university had no intention of addressing her situation until her Tiktok video started gaining public attention, which resulted in the professor reporting Stevens to the student integrity committee. It was then that Stevens was required to attend a disciplinary hearing; however, despite her efforts to defend herself, the university reported Stevens

for unintentional cheating, revoked her scholarship and required her to attend academic integrity workshops (Menezes, 2024).

## **University of North Georgia**

Stated in the university's student code of conduct policy, plagiarism is defined as "the use of another person or agency (to include artificial intelligence) ideas or expressions without acknowledging the source"(UNG, 2024). In essence, all work must be authentic to the student with no help from other individuals or resources, including the use of AI. In this regard, the use of Grammarly was deemed as plagiarism; however, on one UNG webpage, Grammarly is listed as a recommended resource for promoting "grammar and style" (UNG, 2024).

Stevens claims that her professor stated in the class syllabus that AI is not to be used, clarifying in person that when writing assignments, the use of AI is prohibited (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th, 2024). After this incident, and Stevens' TikTok video, Stevens mentions that the university's Office of Academic Integrity sent a mass email to all students informing them that papers turned in using grammar checkers such as Grammarly are being flagged for containing AI.

## **Grammarly and Turnitin**

Grammarly and Turnitin are key players in Stevens' experience. Grammarly started out as a tool used to review spelling, grammar and punctuation in writing; however, it has transformed into an artificial intelligence writing tool. Grammarly now markets itself as "free AI writing

assistance,” that uses “responsible AI to ensure your writing and reputation shine” (Grammarly, 2024). Grammarly currently has three different versions: free, pro and enterprise. All versions are able to generate text using AI prompts, with pro and enterprise versions providing assistance in writing full sentences, adjusting tone, and screening for plagiarism. Over 3,000 institutions have signed up for Grammarly institutional accounts, suggesting its use to students; Stanford University, for example, is one of many institutions displayed on the Grammarly website (Grammarly, 2024).

Turnitin, on the other hand, is a plagiarism detection software which aims to promote academic integrity, deter plagiarism and make grading and feedback efficient. The software scans student work and compares it to a massive database of content to find similarities. A similarity report is produced as a percentage and students or educators can look into details to see what similarities exist and how similar writing is (Smith, 2022). Turnitin also has tools for detecting AI writing tool use within submissions.

According to Turnitin, Stevens’ entire report was positive for AI use. Grammarly has stated that its suggestions for spelling, grammar, clarity, and tone are not powered by generative AI, but highlight that some tools can flag this as AI generated content (Settembre, 2024). Jenny Maxwell, Grammarly’s head of education, claims that AI detectors can often be inaccurate (Young, 2024), and indeed, flaws in AI detection are even recognised by Turnitin. Turnitin has stated that its AI detection tool is not always reliable as inconsistencies with false positives in AI detection and unflagged bot-written text may still remain (Chechitelli, 2023).

## Conclusion

Stevens mentions that she did receive a hearing, but claims that the university had no intention of helping her until she took her story to social media. Stevens is not allowed to appeal her case, since she was not expelled, suspended or removed from her program (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th, 2024). However, Stevens did in fact fail the class, resulting in the loss of both her scholarship and grant, and was placed on academic probation until February 16th, 2025 (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th, 2024). Despite all of this, Stevens has not given up with her studies, and as of Fall 2024 was taking five classes at UNG, interning, and working (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th 2024).

Stevens also explained that Grammarly has recently launched a program called Authorship (M. Stevens, personal communication, October 16th, 2024). Authorship is connected through the browser and Google Docs, it is designed to differentiate text that is typed or pasted through known or unknown sources. Authorship can also detect text that has been generated from AI and modified from features used from non-generative such as grammar correction; all text sources are viewable to the user and composed in the body of the google doc (Grammarly support, 2024). The initiative was developed in response to what happened to Stevens, and to prevent further cases. Finally, Stevens was invited to speak with Grammarly at the yearly conference of Educause, an American nonprofit organization that promotes technology in higher education, which she saw as a significant personal milestone.

## Discussion Questions

1. Has this case altered your own personal views and opinions on Grammarly or other “AI tools” for correcting grammar or writing?
2. Do you think bringing the situation to TikTok helped or worsened Stevens’ case?
3. How would you have dealt with this situation if you were in her position?
4. Stevens was told she was “unintentionally cheating”. What is unintentional cheating? Do you think she should have been penalized to this extent if it was unintentional? If any, what consequence(s) do you think appropriate for unintentionally cheating?
5. Based on your own experience, do you believe Turnitin is a valid source to detect plagiarism?

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## 9.

# Things Fall Apart at Alamo Heights High School

Ahmed Shokralla; Amyra Bains; Esha Toor; and Guramrit Klair

## Introduction

In November 2016, leading up to Thanksgiving, Alamo Heights, a prestigious and wealthy high school in San Antonio, Texas faced a large-scale academic dishonesty scandal (McNeel, 2016) in two different classes. Three English teachers noticed identical answers submitted by a class of freshmen who had been assigned some analytical questions from the book *Things Fall Apart*. The similarity and sophistication of students' answers raised suspicion, and it was later discovered that sample essays from a teacher's English resource guide had been circulating online, containing answers to the assignment. The PDF guide was created and uploaded by someone who had used the same curriculum guides purchased by the Alamo Heights English department, though there's no information on who exactly this person is.

An investigation was launched, revealing that over 90 students had been involved in using the guide, allegedly copying wording and phrasing from the sample essays. In addition, 38 students in a third-year U.S. History class were found to have copied from Wikipedia on a take-home assignment. Assistant Superintendent for Administrative

Services at the Alamo Heights School District, Dr. Frank Alfaro, put out a statement claiming that the evidence used to accuse these students contained similarities in terminology, similarities in words, and sentences that high school students wouldn't normally use (Sridhar 2016). The students who were involved faced no "disciplinary consequences", but rather classroom consequences which were decided by individual teachers – this included "not counting" the English assignment and giving the history students the option to redo their assignment for "half credit.". A statement from Alamo Heights' principal informed parents that the incident would not influence a student's transcript or permanent record. Some parents viewed the response as an inconsequential "slap on the wrist," with one parent saying "A lot gets swept under the rug and a lot of people get away with a lot of things at Alamo Heights because of the money." (Sridhar 2016).

### **The Principal's Letter to Parents**

The school's principal, Dr. Cordell Jones, sent out a letter addressing the incident. However, the letter provided information about everything except the incident itself. He addressed the school's 24-hour code, which is a code that states students can face consequences in their extracurricular involvements for any incidents that happen outside of a school setting (McNeel, 2016). The letter left parents with unanswered questions, as it failed to clarify what exactly happened; what the consequences would be, if any; and what action the school planned on taking moving forward. The lack of clear communication between parents and the administration led to more frustration and confusion. Dr. Alfaro admitted that the poor communication of the letter was due to issues in how it

was delivered through digital platforms, leading to misunderstandings (Sridhar, 2016).

## **Consequences**

In the weeks that followed the letter, the school announced the consequences the students would face. Those who voluntarily admitted to cheating received a 2-week suspension from extracurricular activities, while those who failed to come forward faced a stricter 3-week suspension from their extracurricular activities. (Sridhar 2016). Dr. Alfaro emphasized that the concern was on the scale of the incident. He went on to state “It’s important to note that there were no disciplinary consequences per se. There were classroom consequences which were up to the teachers” (Sridhar, 2016). Disciplinary consequences are harsher than classroom consequences, resulting in a notation of misconduct in the student’s academic record, affecting their future educational careers. Classroom consequences are less severe and do not involve future harm for the student’s academic career, such as loss of privileges. He also stated that technology makes it much more difficult to control the spread of answers.

The school’s community was divided in response to the level of punishment. Some people felt the disciplinary actions were not severe enough. A parent of a former student of Alamo Heights voiced frustration, saying, “I think if you do the crime, you should do the time”(Sridhar, 2016).

## Petition

Following the incident, 437 people signed a petition arguing that the standards for enforcing the academic integrity policy at Alamo Heights were not well established and arbitrarily applied (Veritas 2016). They expressed concern that ever since the 24-hour code and the academic integrity policy were introduced, the number of infractions occurring at Alamo Heights went up (Veritas 2016). Parents were concerned that there was an inequitable environment at Alamo Heights, causing fear and confusion among students and parents. They clarified that they were not against the existence of the policy, but rather were concerned about the administration's enforcement, wanting to revise the code with input from the community after what they believed was a disastrous enforcement in the preceding scandal.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that cheating on a large scale implicates a failure in the education system, the students, or both?
2. Do you think Alamo Heights being a “wealthy” and “prestigious” school influenced the outcome of this case?
3. What do you make of the distinction between “disciplinary” and “classroom” consequences in the way the school’s academic integrity policy was enforced?
4. Do you think the consequences the students faced were fair? What would you have done

differently if you were the principal?

5. What do you think of the application of the “24-hour code” in this case?

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## 10.

# “Yours Truly, Mike”: Cheating on an Online Math Exam During COVID

Kevin C. Apdal; Jazmine Kennedy; Amir Khan; and Shane Wong  
Too Yuen

### Introduction

On May 11th, 2020, then-president of the University of British Columbia (UBC), Santa J. Ono, announced via email that UBC would “primarily offer larger classes online with selected smaller classes conducted in-person” for the fall semester (University of British Columbia, 2020). During this unprecedented semester Jordan Smith was a first-year student enrolled in one of these large online classes—Math 100, which had approximately 1,500 students. Following the course’s second midterm, Smith and all of his peers received a strongly-worded email from Professor Mike Bennett. The message stated in part: “I am extremely disappointed to tell you [...] there were over 100 cases of cheating” (R/UBC, 2020a). The email went on to indicate that an investigation was underway, and students found guilty would receive a zero for the course, and that Bennett would recommend their expulsion (R/UBC, 2020a). Smith, aware that he was one of many self-admitted cheaters, nervously awaited a follow up email.

Following professor Bennett’s email, a variety of opinions emerged from both students and external

observers across various social media platforms, including Reddit, Facebook and TikTok. One such voice was UBC's student society, the Alma Mater Society (AMS). AMS-affiliated students expressed disapproval of the professor's decision to send an accusatory email to the entire class (Green, 2020). Social media discussions reflected a range of views, with some arguing that the students deserved the consequences of their actions, while others felt the professor's response was excessive given the introductory level of the course. Reddit users argued that expulsion was too harsh a penalty (R/UBC, 2020b).

## **UBC's Academic Integrity Policy**

At UBC, students are expected to “inform themselves of the applicable standards for academic integrity... [and] In no case should... submit an assignment if... [they are] not clear on the relevant standard of academic integrity” (University of British Columbia, Discipline for Academic Misconduct, section 1.2., n.d)

UBC defines cheating as “any conduct by which a student gains or attempts to gain an unfair academic advantage or benefit thereby compromising the integrity of the academic process, or helping or attempting to help another person commit an act of academic misconduct or gain, or attempt to gain, an unfair academic advantage” (University of British Columbia, Discipline for Academic Misconduct, section 3.2, n.d). If academic misconduct does occur within a UBC credit course, the instructor “will usually be the first to review the facts of the allegations” (and if they conclude that it has occurred), “the instructor must report the allegations in accordance with the procedures established by the Dean of the Faculty in which the course was offered” (University of British Columbia,

n.d). A further escalation may happen if the dean reports the incident to the registrar and the President's committee (University of British Columbia, n.d).

## **A High-Stakes Online Exam**

For many UBC students, including Jordan Smith, Math 100 was and remains a compulsory prerequisite for all first-year prospective engineering and physics students. Smith states that the course is notorious for its difficulty and for its design to 'weed out' students not ready to commit to the workload. When the course was delivered online in the fall of 2020 due to COVID-19, students were given the unprecedented opportunity to take their exams outside of a conventional, proctored environment resulting in allegations of "a large majority of students" cheating. Further, as an adaptation to COVID-19, the course was asynchronous. Lectures were held through optional live conference calls and were posted online following the scheduled class (J. Smith, personal communication, October 5, 2024).

Smith said that for him making the decision to cheat was a no brainer. Smith knew he was placed in highly competitive circumstances designed to assess students' abilities, and believed cheating was his only option if he wanted to pass the course. Smith further explains that "within first year [engineering], your specialty isn't clear. Your placements for said specialty is given to you by grades. You can get placed into a certain [specialty] and be forced to stick with that [...] Cheating on this test could be the difference between your wanted speciality or getting something you don't want" (J. Smith, personal communication, October 5, 2024).

Smith said that the online exam was open-book, limiting students to course materials (such as online lectures, professor notes, textbook, etc) and personal notes during the test (J. Smith, personal communication, October 5, 2024). The use of any sources outside class material such as the internet, and collusion were strictly prohibited. Students were mainly required to solve questions through specified, unconventional methods and were limited to an hour to complete their tests. Since it was open-book, Smith also states that he was “under the impression that tests were made to be harder” (J. Smith, personal communication, October 5, 2024) than previous years. Smith states that the only method of monitoring students was, “exams had to be taken through conference calls, with their assigned instructor in attendance.” (J. Smith, personal communication, November 16, 2024).

Smith confesses that he made use of third-party websites and programs such as online calculators to aid him. At the end of the interview, when asked the question “would you have said you learned from cheating?” He answered by stating that “doing well in a course does not correspond to how well you know things; it matters on what you take away. Using this [third party application], it was used [...] to do well in the course. Cheating doesn’t mean I’m incapable of doing [the work]” (J. Smith, personal communication, November 2, 2024).

## **Aftermath**

Though Bennett noted that an investigation was underway, UBC never delivered a formal statement about the incident, leaving students wondering if any investigation was actually conducted. Multiple redditors made posts such as *Did those 100 first-years who used Chegg to cheat on*

*a Math 100 exam a few months ago ever get expelled?* (R/UBC, 2020b) and *Anyone know what happened?* (R/UBC, 2020a), but only speculations were made. Jordan Smith had his own speculation: “it honestly sounds [like] they just swept the investigation under the rug with the lack of information that’s public” (J. Smith, personal communications, November 16, 2024).

Some speculated that the cheating was detected through Chegg, believing that it could share student data, such as usernames, emails, and IP addresses, with academic institutions, potentially identifying those involved. UBC, however, denied these allegations, and Chegg stated that the use of an alleged ‘Chegg trap’ in which a professor uploads fake solutions in order to entrap cheaters was “factually impossible” (Green, 2020), suggesting that there was no sting operation..

Bennett faced scrutiny from students and the UBC AMS, who argued that the stress caused by his email caused harm to students’ mental health (Green, 2020). Despite his initial message, Bennett later expressed that “Students have a right to privacy and, in all cases, we work under the presumption of innocence, until we have irrefutable proof to the contrary,” (Green, 2020). But given the lack of information about the outcome of the case, it remains difficult to know what exactly was true, what was even investigated, and whether there were any consequences.

*Note: “Jordan Smith” is a pseudonym for a real student in the Math 100 course.*

## Discussion Questions

1. How did the university’s shift to remote learning

- complicate prevention, detection, and response to academic misconduct in this case?
2. What factors do you think influenced students' decisions to cheat (or not) in Math 100 and/or similar courses?
  3. How do you think an instructor should communicate about cheating incidents in very large classes? What, if anything, would you have done differently?
  4. Do you think this incident could have been mitigated by the use of different e-proctoring methods?
  5. To what extent does the difference between in-person and online exams affect the (perceived) fairness of the assessment process?
  6. If the same event happened today, do you think the outcome would have been different? Why?

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