

HARVARD SCANDAL REPORT

Prepared by the Business Honors Program Student Ethics Board

Case Summary

On August 30, 2012, Harvard College announced an investigation concerning suspected cheating by 125 students on the final exam of Professor Matthew Platt's course, GOVT 1310: "Introduction to Congress." The class met three times a week during the Spring 2012 semester, and each student in the class was assigned to one of ten discussion sections. Each discussion section held weekly sessions with graduate teaching fellows. The final exam was a take-home test due at 5pm on May 3, 2012. After a teaching fellow noticed peculiar similarities among the students' responses to a bonus short answer question, the investigation was launched. The responses all referenced an obscure historical comparison, indicated the same misinterpretation of the course material, and contained an identical typo. Further investigation revealed additional similarities throughout the exam.

A major issue cited in the investigation is the clarity regarding the exam instructions. Exhibit A, below, highlights the contentious use of the word "etc." in the instructions.

In its nearly 400-year history, Harvard has never adopted an honor code. Verdicts in this ongoing case are due in November 2012.

Exhibit A – Exam Cover Page

Gov 1310 – Final Exam

April 26, 2012

1 Exam Protocol

- Students will submit their exams using the "Exam Dropbox" found on the front page of the course site. Students are responsible for ensuring that their exam has been properly uploaded. Paper copies of the exam are not required. Please place your last name in the file name. For example, "Platt Exam.docx".
- The exam is due by 5pm (eastern standard time) on Thursday, May 3, 2012.
- 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.

Professor's Vulnerabilities

Professor Platt had little incentive to teach the class well because his salary would not be affected by performance. From his perspective, the class was simply a distraction from his research and slowed the progression of his career outside of teaching. On the first day of class, he set the expectations for the course very low: he outright told students that he did not care if they attended and stated, "I gave out 120 A's last year, and I'll give out 120 more." On the due date of the final exam, Professor Platt cancelled his office hours at the last minute, further illustrating his unwillingness to help his students and apathetic attitude toward his students' education.

The instructions on the final exam were ambiguous and open-ended, as illustrated in Exhibit A. Students were confused by the meaning of the instruction that the exam was "open book, open note, open internet, etc." The "etc." left open infinitely many resources for consultation, yet was supposed to fall under "similar guidelines" to in-class tests, even though all tests were take-home. Professor Platt attempted to limit the consultable resources by saying, "students may not discuss the exam with others – this includes resident tutors, writing centers, etc." However, once again, the use of "etc." left the guidelines up to interpretation. The instructions made it difficult and subjective to determine whom or what was consultable while completing the exam.

Many students decided to complete the exam with the help of the teaching fellows. During the investigation, however, the professor stated that he thought this was prohibited in the "etc." Certain teaching fellows helped students answer the exam questions without discussing such action with the professor. This is in line with the poor communication between teaching fellows and the professor, as well as poor communication among teaching fellows – an issue that also led to widely varied grading schemes within the same class.

Overall, the professor needed to realize the potential for academic dishonesty and mitigate the impact before the issues arose. Professor Platt issued a take-home final exam, but did not have any safeguard in place should problems arise, as they inevitably did. He included very ambiguous instructions and then did not make himself available for clarification. With a class of 279 students, the professor needed to provide more exact instructions and guidelines, realize a take-home exam is liable to collaboration, and take preventative measures by either allowing discussion or designing an exam resistant to cheating.

Students' Perspective

Due to the unreliability of the professor and inconsistency of teachings fellows, sharing class notes was common practice for the students. The first three exams were also take-home tests with equal weight as the final exam. Collaboration on the first three was common and completely unquestioned. The final did not appear to be any different from the other exams, and there had been no indication that collaboration was not allowed. Had there been any ethical qualms on the first exam, they were quickly trumped by the groupthink trap that "everyone was doing it, so it must be okay."

Additionally, students had no respect for their professor. Student expectation had been lowered by the first-day statements implying class attendance was unnecessary and A's would be given, not earned. Correspondence with previous students of the course led students to believe the class was easy. After the course ended, however, students posted scathing reviews of the class, stating that it "went from being easy last year to just being plain old confusing." Many students felt the test questions were not representative of the material covered and the questions were designed to trick them.

The ultimate goal, for most students in the course, was to get an A. They did not focus on producing quality work or learning the material. The final grade was all that mattered. As a result, the students interpreted the first “etc.” (concerning resources available for use) liberally and the second “etc.” (regarding who could not be consulted) conservatively to maximize the amount of collaboration justifiable to themselves. The “etc.” statements created a “grey area” prone to cheating, blurring the fine line between acceptable collaboration and unacceptable plagiarism.

Administration’s Ethics

The ethical atmosphere of Harvard at the time was very cloudy. For the first time ever, the Harvard men’s basketball team was ranked in the AP Top 25. Many of the 125 students enrolled in the course and now under investigation participated in various NCAA programs, including basketball. Since the initial announcement of the cheating allegations, Harvard has asked the student-athletes under investigation to voluntarily not enroll for this year. With voluntary withdrawal of enrollment, if suspended, their eligibility to play sports will not be affected. If the student-athletes were suspended while registered for classes, they would lose an entire year of eligibility. The encouragement to escape ineligibility by not enrolling illustrates that Harvard’s administration is more focused on the money and prestige generated by NCAA winnings than fostering an ethical and educational environment.

Suggestions for BHP

In the interest of risk management, the following are the recommendations of the Student Ethics Board for the Business Honors Program at The University of Texas at Austin:

- Discourage assigning take-home exams.
- Eliminate the use of “etc.” on all syllabi, exams, and assignments.
- Encourage specificity and clear wording on all syllabi, exams, and assignments.
- Require professors to clearly define “collaboration” in the scope of their courses.
- Emphasize understanding and learning the course material rather than the final grade.
- Create an open channel of communication between students and professors to discuss any questions over ethical “grey areas.”
- Ensure teaching assistants are well informed and acting in the interest of the professor.

Currently, within BHP, professors are clearly very invested in their students’ learning. If students believe that their professors have a genuine interest in their success, they will be more accountable than they would be to professors who ignore students in favor of personal research. BHP also does a good job of encouraging balance between collaborative group work and individual testing. However, there is room for improvement with more precise guidelines and clearer language.

The above suggestions are intended to strengthen the value of every student’s BHP degree and prevent an ethical crisis akin to Harvard’s from occurring. As long as faculty and staff continue to regularly update standards and learn from other universities’ shortcomings, BHP is certain to maintain its status as one of the strongest business programs in the nation.